



Child Discipleship and Spiritual Formation

“Disciple” means “learner.” To be a disciple of Jesus means to commit ourselves to Jesus, to learn from him, and to do the things he is doing. Jesus called his original followers to learn from him, and he calls us to learn from him today as well. When we seek to learn from Jesus, he will teach us in the same way he taught his first disciples - in a way that requires our constant, lifelong participation. While this type of learning includes knowledge, it also goes far beyond and always results in life-changing engagement.

Discipleship of a child is a lifelong process in which the Holy Spirit works through one or more intentional believers, in the context of Christ-centered community, to transform the child into Christlikeness, resulting in God being glorified, the child enjoying life with God, and others being blessed.

Jesus often reminded his disciples of their continual need to learn, perhaps nowhere more clearly than the day he invited them to be more like children (Luke 18). Only a humble, childlike relationship and a desire to learn from Jesus would lead them to a place of spiritual maturity.

Being a disciple is not simply a part of our lives, but the essence of our identity. It is an identity that requires community. Disciples are called to learn together (Acts 2), to love one another (John 13), and to continually partner with God in the discipleship of all who are walking with Jesus and those who need to be (Matthew 28).

KidZ at Heart defines child discipleship in this way:

Discipleship of a child is a lifelong process in which the Holy Spirit works through one or more intentional believers, in the context of Christ-centered community, to transform the child into Christlikeness, resulting in God being glorified, the child enjoying abundant life with God, and others being blessed.

KidZ at Heart shares the Apostle Paul’s urgent desire for “Christ to be formed” in every child (Galatians 4:19). We understand Christian spiritual formation (see definition below) to be the outcome of meaningful discipleship. **This is not a result of our effort, rather that of the work of the Holy Spirit.** While both must be willing participants in the process, spiritual formation can be accomplished neither by the child being disciplined, nor by the people disciplining him or her.

KidZ at Heart trains leaders, teachers, parents, and grandparents to create intentional space for God to work in the lives of children and for children to encounter God within this space. We acknowledge that God forms us through many different actions we undertake, including reading and hearing God’s Word, praying, worshiping, and listening to the Holy Spirit. We, therefore, encourage those who seek to disciple a child to integrate these practices into their own lives and their discipleship strategy, so both leader and learner enjoy their own deepening, ongoing, and transformational relationship with God.



KidZ at Heart defines Christian spiritual formation for children in this way:

Christian spiritual formation for children is the lifelong process by which the Holy Spirit serves as the child’s teacher, deepening the child’s relationship with God, transforming the child into Christlikeness from the inside, and generating an overflow of love toward God, self, and others (Romans 8:27-29, Mark 12:28-31).

Q: If God can form us spiritually, why do we need to be disciplined in community?

A: Scripture repeatedly points us to a communal experience of God, not as a substitute for time alone with God, but as an essential way to grow as participants in the Kingdom of God. Jesus chose twelve very different people to be his students and said to them, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35). His words reveal not only his desire for his followers to be in community, but also that such communities would be catalysts for discipleship as the very context where spiritual growth happens through the encouragement of one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25).

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Q: What kinds of things facilitate discipleship of children?

A: First, we must become disciples in order to make disciples. Leaders who continue to grow in their own relationship with God are disciples of Jesus. Their commitment to their own ongoing journey of spiritual formation will naturally flow over into all their relationships, including the life they live with and work they do with children. Second, while incorporating child-friendly educational principles, we craft environments and experiences that nurture a desire to be with God and give

children the space to do so. We frame the exploration of Scripture as an exciting adventure of discovery, not of facts and knowledge, but of relationship with Jesus. We pray and worship in creative and natural ways and with full awareness of God’s presence. We mobilize the full faith community, so that children are impacted by the lives of multiple adults. And we purposefully provide opportunities for the children themselves to live missionally and be engaged in the discipleship of their peers or younger children.

Q: What is the most significant difference between traditional and transformational approaches to child discipleship?

A: Traditional children’s discipleship, whether at home or church, focuses heavily on the adult teaching the child knowledge about the Bible and God and expecting the child’s behavior to change as a result. In a variety of ways (whether tangible reward or simply approval of an adult), the child is encouraged to change his behavior out of external motivation. In its most extreme forms, this is simply behavior modification or moralism.

Transformational discipleship connects the child to God personally, allowing the Holy Spirit to teach and mold the child on the schedule best suited for the child. Behavioral changes are a result of the internal transformation taking place. The child cooperates with God’s work as intrinsic motivation continues to grow in a heart falling deeply in love with Jesus.