



## Innovations with Children

# *Let Those Who Have Ears to Hear, Listen*

### Practicing Silence with Young Children

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**W**hen I volunteered to be half of an alternating set of teachers working with a five and six year old church school class, I also saw an opportunity to test for myself a practice I had only witnessed before as a spectator: developing a regular practice of silence with young children. Quaker schools engage in this practice with persons of all ages, and my oldest child was lamenting the loss of weekly silent meetings for worship after moving away from such a school in the seventh grade. But like many non-Quaker parents, I wondered how such a practice might transfer to a different setting, especially given the fine line between teaching children silence and telling children to “be quiet” as a means of controlling their behavior.

Conventional wisdom claims that noisiness and activeness are basic traits of early childhood and signs of healthy development. Parents notice when children at play become quiet, as it often means they are up to mischief that they don’t want mom or dad to discover. Teachers work to “draw out” quiet children, although they also often label such children “easy” or “obedient” or “good students” because of their non-disruptive behavior. Silence among children is suspect, except when it is deemed necessary for crowd control or attention to particular tasks (e.g. schoolwork or congregational worship). We have low expectations for childhood silence, especially among boys, who have an even greater reputation for boisterousness than girls. What does it mean, then, to invite young children to cultivate silence as a spiritually useful practice for their lives?

In talking with my church school teaching partner about this question, I discovered that she felt quite anxious about implementing a practice with which she had no personal experience, so we agreed that on the weeks she taught the class, she would simply use the printed curriculum provided without any special attention to silence. On the weeks I taught, I would teach the story for the day outlined in the curriculum, but also gather the children in a

practice of silence for the last 10-15 minutes of the class session. We would evaluate the effects of this semi-regular engagement in silent prayer and contemplation midway through the year and decide whether to proceed in the same fashion or revise our approach.

The first Sunday of the church school year began with an intergenerational kick-off event, so my partner and I only had 30 minutes with the children once the festivities ended. We used the first 20 minutes to get acquainted with one another and the room. The last 10 minutes we shifted from tables to a quilt I had spread on the floor. I had drawn a circle with tape on the quilt and invited each child to sit along the outline. Children’s Bibles were also scattered around the circle—enough for all—and in the center was a large pillar candle. I encouraged the children to take a Bible and look for a picture they liked or that told a Bible story that they already knew. When each child had found a picture, I asked them to sit quietly and look at the picture. After a minute of silence, I said, “Sometimes God says something to us when we sit quietly, and sometimes God just sits with us without saying anything. As you look at your picture, listen for anything that God might want to say to you.” We continued our time of contemplation for about four more minutes. Some children gazed intently at their chosen pictures, others watched the flickering candle flame, and a few stared into space. I then said, “Would anyone like to share what God said or did while you were sitting quietly?” In soft voices, the children responded, a few with words that they felt God had said and others with their experiences of God just being quiet, too. Not one of them seemed to find our actions or my questions odd or incomprehensible. They seemed to take for granted that God was present and a potential voice in their lives.

Every time we practiced silence, we sat in a circle on the same quilt, but our ways into silence varied. I purchased modeling clay—harder than play dough but softer than potter’s clay—and invited the children to

roll and squeeze the clay while they sat quietly and listened for God's words or felt God's presence. In conversations with Quaker teachers and a child psychologist, I had learned that relaxing one's hands relaxes the entire body, which makes holding one's body and mind still easier. Working clay tenses and releases hand muscles, moving one more quickly toward full body relaxation. Most children liked the feel of the clay, but for those who did not, I placed the clay in a small baggie so they could squeeze without getting residue on their hands. We would sit quietly for up to ten minutes working our balls of clay, and then I would invite the children to share their experiences with God in the silence.

Occasionally a child would show something she or he had fashioned from the clay that God had helped make or for which God had given them the idea. More often, children would simply say that God had felt near to them or share a few words they had heard whispered in their minds. The messages they heard were sometimes words of comfort ("Mommy will feel better soon"), sometimes words of advice ("If you are nice to your brother, he will share his new toy with you") and sometimes divine exclamations ("Aren't butterflies beautiful?!" and "I love baseball, too!"). It was clear the children were experiencing God as an active participant in their world, and interpreting that participation through the lenses of their everyday anxieties and activities.

One Sunday, I set a large group of votive candles in the center of the quilt. I told the children that sometimes Christians light candles to remember people they love who have died or to share special thoughts with God. I then helped each child light a candle, saying, "This is Jackson's candle for remembering people he loves and sharing with God." I invited the children to watch their candle flame flicker and let God be with them, reminding them of loved ones or listening to their hopes and dreams. We sat quietly for another five minutes before I asked if anyone wished to share. Anna looked from her candle to me and said, "God said he is taking care of my grandma, so I shouldn't be sad. He says he loves her." The children around her nodded, as if they understood exactly what she meant. I later learned (from Anna's mother) that Anna's grandmother had died several months earlier and no one realized that Anna was still thinking about her grandma until Anna asked if the family could light a candle at home—as she'd done in church school—to remember.

Saint Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (I.1). What Anna, Jackson and the other young children in this group discovered through their practice of silence was space and means to rest in God. In the

midst of noisy lives filled with cartoons, electronic toys, parental admonishments to hurry, and information-packed lessons at school and afterschool, these kindergarteners and first graders settled easily and happily into a time of structured contemplation. Parents dropped by the classroom to ask us about this practice because their children were asking for silent times at home. We received one report of a child sharing silence as his "show and tell" at school. My co-teacher began ending her sessions with silence at the children's request. The children showed us that the ability to sit quietly with God and listen for God's guidance is not only within their grasp but something they desire.

The challenge, then, is for adults unfamiliar with the practice of silence to humble themselves and learn alongside children the means and benefits of listening for God. One resource for the journey is *The Way of the Child*, a curriculum for children ages 6-11 that focuses on cultivating spiritual practices. Another is *Real Kids, Real Faith*, my book for parents trying to cultivate spiritual practices in the home. A third can be found in the session plans of the two-volume set, *Parent-Child Retreats*, which incorporate Mary Terese Donze's concept of the "heart room" within persons where children can "visualize their friend Jesus, listen to him, speak to him, and sit with him in silence" (Pike et al., 15). Local Quaker schools and communities can also provide assistance and inspiration.

Beginning a practice of silence with young children is an opportunity to begin a practice of silence for ourselves. It need not be complicated and success can be measured in increments of a minute or two. Shutting out the noisiness of life to listen for God is the Sabbath rest all people need to remain fit for work in God's realm. Children are drawn to quiet as a blessing. As Christ's disciples, may we welcome all God's children to sit at Jesus' feet and listen.

#### Works Cited

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