



On your mark

Most sessions with children are best started with a simple game. Sometimes energy needs to be burned off, especially if they have had to sit still too long in a service beforehand, but it can also be a way that allows others to join in gradually as they arrive for your session together. There are loads of good books with games of course but here are just a few further suggestions that have links with particular Bible themes, which can be developed later in the session.

Get set

Most of the suggestions below involve little preparation but for each one take note of any props that may be required beforehand.

Go!

1. On the theme of prayer and hearing God's voice

Play a listening game. Record from the radio a series of short five-second bursts of different programmes including music. The simplest way to do this is to turn the tuner to different stations again and again. Include at least 12 different sound bites. Play this now back to the children. At the end ask how many they remember. Did they only remember the ones they enjoyed most or the ones that were about subjects they liked (such as football or pop music)? God's voice often gets mixed up among all the other voices we hear each day. Ask the children how do they think they could hear God's voice better - get more on to God's wavelength?

2. On the theme of making good choices and following God's way

Play a game that asks the children to make choices. Set up the words *Yes* and *No* prominently at either end of your meeting area. The children should stand in the middle of the room and then go towards the 'yes' or 'no' ends, in response to questions from you as leader. Start with simple questions about what they like and what they do not like (do you like... certain sports, foods, music, films, toys etc).

Move on to more demanding questions beginning with 'would you?' For example: would you help someone on the street, who was begging? Would you tidy your room, which is a mess, when it definitely wasn't your fault? Would you report a bully you saw to a teacher?

Finally, begin to link the next questions to the issues in whatever Bible story you will be looking at. Perhaps it is about standing up for what you believe even when that isn't a popular thing to do. For example:

- Would you feel jealous if your friends were being more successful and popular than you?
- Would you stick to what you believed, even if other people laughed at you?

- Would you speak up for what is right, even if it meant others ganging up against you?

3. On the theme of how we might listen more carefully to what God is saying to us

Play a game that picks up on the idea of misunderstanding. Give each child a piece of paper and then as leader go through a set of clear, simple instructions about a shape that you want the children to draw. Each child should work on his/her own. Each instruction should be given only once. Each child must work out what she or he thinks you are saying and draw accordingly.

For example, instruct them exactly where to start on the page, what type of line should be drawn and in which direction etc. You might like to make a particular shape that you are hoping they will work out. At the end compare your original with the children's versions. How easy has it been to hear and understand what they had been told to do? Might it have better to listen in collaboration with others so they could help each other?

4. On the theme of waiting patiently for God's ways and the fulfilment of his promises

Play some waiting games with the children. For example, one in which the children have to guess whether a certain amount of time has elapsed. Have the children sit in a circle and then ask them to stand up when they think a certain number of seconds have passed. Begin with short periods like 15, 20 or 40 seconds and then work up towards one minute or two (for older children). Who was closest each time?

Alternatively, play a game on the lines of 'What's the time, Mr Wolf?'. In this version the person who is the 'wolf' should have the name of whoever is the one waiting in your Bible story (e.g. what's the time Father Abraham? what the time Grandmother Anna? what's the time Cousin John?) The children need to creep up from a baseline towards the person. They call out 'what's the time, ...' and he/she gives various times. But when he/she says it **is** the time for whatever they have been waiting (It's Christmas time; it's time to say sorry; it's time for the child to be born etc.), he/she should try and pick up one the children in his/her arms. Before this happens, the children must try to run back to the baseline where they are safe.

5. On the theme of discovering that God's answers to prayer often come in unexpected and surprising ways

Arrange to hide a series of items around the room in places that are not normal for those objects. For example, put a cup not in the kitchen cupboard but down the back of the piano; a spoon not in the cutlery drawer but balanced on top of a picture on the wall. Each time send off the children to look first of all in the obvious place for the item you mention and then free them to go and look for it in an unusual place.

6. On the theme of travelling with God, who wants us to trust him as we set off into the unknown

Play a version of 'Simon says'. Ask the children to spread out around the room and then set them off



walking (without knocking into each other!) in whichever direction they choose. Every 15 seconds or so the leader should call out a different way in which they should travel, introducing it by the words 'all travellers'. For example: all travellers walk slowly; all travellers wade through a river; all travellers trudge across sand etc. If however the leader does not say 'all travellers', the children shouldn't change the way they are travelling.

Other ways of travel could include:

...ride a camel; ...push a lazy donkey; ...trot on horseback; ...walk on the spot in a sandstorm; ...look up into the sky at the stars as you walk; ...slog uphill; ...slip in the mud; ...tiptoe past dangerous bandits; ...pull along a reluctant camel; ...run towards a waterhole, desperate for a drink etc.

7. On the theme of opening our eyes to God at work in everyday life

The following activity is a version of a game devised for use in schools in relation to PHSE. It revolves around the fact that we tend to notice only those things (attitudes, words, behaviours) to which we have been predisposed and as a result we so easily miss other things that are going on.

Ask the children to concentrate hard and become aware of all the things in the room that are square or rectangular. Give them about a minute for this exercise. At the end of that time ask them to close their eyes and then put this question to them: what things in the room are circular? Because their attention has been channelled in one direction only, it is usually true that the group will struggle to recall many circular things... if any! Make sure of course that you have noted a number of such items, so you can point them out later.

You might also try this exercise with things of a certain colour or made of a particular material. How much of God's love to us do we simply not notice because our attention is fixed on something else, usually negative, about others or ourselves?

You could develop this exercise by talking with the children about how this applies equally to other things in life, such as hearing hurtful words, noticing aggressive behaviour or only seeing people's bad side etc. (The original context for this exercise was helping children to deal with bullying in schools.)

8. On the theme of seeing but not really seeing; of thinking God isn't with us, when in reality he has never gone away

You might like to try your group out with a few simple optical illusions. Some of these you can create yourself. For example: write out the numbers 1-23 in a grid of four across and six down, however repeat the number 12 from the end of the third line at the beginning of the fourth line. Now show this grid to the group for about 15 seconds. Once it is removed, ask them if there was anything unusual about the grid. Most will not have noticed the repeated number. You can do this with a sentence too, in which a little word such as 'of' or 'at' or 'on' is repeated at the end of one line and at the beginning of the next. We tend to skim read so fast that we do not notice the extra word is there.

Alternatively, show some well-known optical illusions and see how long it takes for the group to see



the unexpected extra face or hidden object or the other possible geometric shape that is also in the picture.

9. On the theme of God's surprising gift of peace

Play a simple game that begins by asking each child to select a folded piece of card from a hat or some other container full of cards you have folded earlier - one for each child. On one piece only is the word 'peace'. The child who discovers this should keep quiet about it and with the others replace the cards into the hat. Now ask all the children to walk around the room in an agitated and frightened way. Ask them to pretend to be nervous and on edge, casting suspicious looks at each other. At a signal from the leader, the child who had the word 'peace' should suddenly call out that word and everyone must sit down quickly and remain statue-still with an expression of surprise and shock, looking toward the person who said 'peace'. As they will not know who is the 'peace' card carrier, there should be some element of surprise. Who was the last person to sit down and be still each time? Try this again after there has been a new selection of cards from the hat so that somebody else now is the one to say 'peace'. Link this to the story of the storm on the lake, resurrection evening or Elijah after Carmel

10. On the theme of invisible things that are nevertheless real

Things that are not visible can still be real. To introduce this idea collect together six boxes or containers. Arrange them around the room with a number beside each one. Tell the group that you have brought in a collection of very important things in these different boxes and invite them to go around and inspect them for themselves. Each box appears empty but of course is full of a number of possible unseen things (see below). The group's reaction at first will be that there is nothing in the boxes and they will wonder what sort of exhibition this really is. Insist that there is something in the boxes and get them working together to think what might be in each box

The invisible exhibits in the boxes include of course: air (principally a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen); dust particles; millions of microbes; good and bad bacteria; radio and TV signals; mobile-phone conversations; sound waves; atoms. These things **are** in the boxes and are real but invisible.