

Tips for Interfaith Educators



Several years ago, I began creating a Bible-based, interfaith Sunday school curriculum for [Jubilee! Community](#), a progressive Christian church in Asheville, NC. Although the curriculum is in a constant state of development, my staff and I have learned a lot over the years about offering engaging, affordable, and interactive interfaith education for kids. Here are a few of our major discoveries.

Oops! A kid had fun with a Tibetan sand mandala recently constructed by three Buddhist teachers at Hendrix College in Conway, AK. [Photo: Courtesy of Dorje Lopon Hun Lye of [Urban Dharma](#)]

Kids are Easy

I often tell people that I have the easiest interfaith job in the world. Most kids in our program have very little, if any, religious baggage. They are completely open-minded and open-hearted. Our job is simply to keep it that way. One of my favorite examples comes from our discussions about prayer. When the kids read about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, they also learn about prayer mats, prayer wheels, prayer flags, prayer beads (of various sorts), and meditation or dance as forms of prayer. And what do they think about all of that? Not much. It all sounds good to them! Sarah Ager, an expat. Brit who teaches English in Italy and curates the blog [Interfaith Ramadan](#), recently confirmed what we see every Sunday morning. In her post, “[Back to School: How Children React to Hijab](#),” she shared this, “Thankfully, normalizing the hijab is a piece of cake with most children. It only takes a few minutes of friendly chatter for them to see that I’m just a regular girl in my twenties.” We have found, time and again, that sharing interfaith concepts with kids is the easy part. Often, the more difficult part is moving past our own adult baggage so we can teach them effectively and appropriately.

Kids Learn from Stories

I’m well aware of how awful the Bible can be, partly because of my own traditional Protestant upbringing. The Bible contains numerous stories about drunkenness, animal sacrifice, polygamy, sexism, racism, pillaging, deceit, and treachery. The Rev. Charles Henderson, Presbyterian minister and Executive Director of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life once remarked, “If you believe that exposing your children to violence is a problem, by all means keep them away from the Bible.” But the Bible also contains awe-inspiring stories about compassion, love, courage, hopefulness, gratitude, faith, and peace. Those stories harbor opportunities for kids to connect with their ancestors, to appreciate the range of human emotions, and to receive valuable life lessons. Those positive elements are also found in the sacred stories of other major world religions. From the Islamic tradition, we have the *Qisas al Anbiya* – tales of the lives of the prophets mentioned in the Qur’an.

From the Buddhist tradition, we have the Jataka Tales, an extensive compilation of stories about the previous lives of the Buddha. From the Hindu/Buddhist tradition, we have the Panchatantra, a collection of moral stories often featuring animals as the main characters. All of them can be used with kids, and many of them can be found on the internet in both video and print form. Since most of the stories provide the same basic lessons and warnings about human nature, they highlight profound similarities often found across cultures and religions.

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Many educators struggle when thinking about how to approach interfaith instruction. It's helpful to remember that adults from all the other faith traditions have already figured out how to teach their children about their beliefs and practices! Not surprisingly, we all tend to teach our children in the same ways – by letting them participate in ritual, by celebrating holidays, by reading stories, by making crafts, and by cooking/eating special foods. Kids' books on all the major religious holidays are readily available, and many of them include craft ideas and/or easy recipes. If you prefer internet resources, simply conduct a search on the religion, holiday, or practice you're interested in and add the word "kids" or "children" to the search phrase. You'll find more resources than you can manage. Jewish parents have already figured out how to make kick-butt blintzes with their kids, Buddhist practitioners offer easy-to-understand meditation techniques for squirmy six-year-olds. Hindu moms share on-line outlets that sell all-natural, eco-friendly colored powders used during Holi. Muslim families impart their wisdom on age-appropriate fasting practices during Ramadan. Remember, you are an adult, but there's no need to be a religious scholar. You simply have to be willing to explore and create alongside the kids.

It's OK to Have Fun

As someone who was raised Christian, I know how much kids enjoy Christmas and Easter, but I am somewhat embarrassed to admit my surprise when I discovered that kids in other faith communities have fun, too. Recently, I attended a Sukkot family festival at our local Chabad House, an Orthodox Hasidic Jewish community. The rabbi follows strict observances of the Sabbath, the majority of the services are conducted in Hebrew, and they serve only kosher food. Frankly, it sounded a bit uptight and stodgy to me, but that wasn't the case at all. The Sukkot family festival was all about enjoying a beautiful fall day. There was a bounce house on the premises, they had ordered kosher pizza, the kids made plush stuffed-animal-like Torahs, and everyone participated in a rhyming game about Sukkot. The rabbi even let me shake the lulav and etrog as he used repeat-after-me Hebrew to teach me the blessing. I've seen similar attitudes at our urban Buddhist community. Recently, the center was privileged to host a well-respected Tibetan teacher, [Ontul Rinpoche](#), and his son, Ratna Rinpoche. The elder Rinpoche was officially recognized as the incarnation of the previous Ontul Rinpoche at the age of five. According to legend, he saved his mother's life while still in the womb by shouting a warning when she was about to fall off a steep cliff. He escaped from Tibet after the Chinese invasion and eventually made it to India in 1962. He founded a monastery in the early 1970s and has received empowerments and teachings from the most well-respected lamas of his tradition. So what did he do

with the kids from our local Buddhist community when he visited? He drew pictures with them and let them braid his long hair. These sorts of experiences simply reinforce the idea that kids are kids the world over, and even the most serious religious teachers and scholars know that the path to their hearts and minds is through joy.

Kids Are Not Too Young

Kids as young as three years of age enjoy our interfaith curriculum, and our goal is certainly not to create future theologians. We simply try to foster connections between people who discover the divine in different ways, to help them appreciate rituals that seem unusual, and to reduce any fears they might associate with the religious “other.” One of my favorite interfaith stories happened in our Preschool-Kindergarten room. They were reading about Moses’ ascent to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Lord’s commandments. The text (Exodus 19:16) says that, “there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain...” Based on that, we asked the kids to talk about what they think God looks like and/or where they think God lives. One child said she already knew what God looked like. God was an old man with a white beard and he lived “right over there” as she pointed to a non-descript, but distant, corner of the room. Another child took issue with her claim and asserted that “God is everywhere.” A third child was quick to point out that both classmates were mistaken since “God lives inside you.” People who contend that kids are too young to be taught differing expressions of The Holy are not hanging out with enough kids. In our experience, some kids are already thinking about this stuff, and they are articulating it in different ways! Farrah Kahn, founder of [First Drops](#), an interfaith organization in Irvine, CA, agrees. When asked whether it was [ever too early to teach children interfaith values](#), she emphatically replied, “Absolutely not.”

It Doesn’t Have to be Perfect

We also avoid trying to achieve perfection. Kids don’t always care about details, and our final products are usually a bit rough around the edges. Our recipes generally taste pretty good, but they don’t always look especially delicious. We’ve also been known to mispronounce words, particularly when dealing with something other than English – like Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. Every once in a while, we even get our facts wrong. But it’s OK. Our friends and guest speakers set us straight, and we are grateful for the input. They know we are all in this learning game together, and they appreciate what we are doing and the genuine loving way in which we are doing it. Last week, a Tibetan Buddhist friend of mine experienced just how imperfect things can get when kids are involved, and I learned a valuable lesson from his story. My friend, Dorje Lopon Dr. Hun Lye was one of the Buddhist teachers involved in the creation of the sand mandala shown above. About one hour before the dissolution ceremony, a family from the greater community came by to see the finished product. While no one was watching, the kid wiggled his finger around in the sand, completely smearing one edge of the carefully constructed mandala. The family scurried away, and many who saw the mandala after the fact were horrified that such a desecration had occurred. Upon his return to Asheville, Hun Lye said to me, “The sad thing about it was that the family didn’t tell us.

If they had, we could have reassured them. We could have told them it was OK. Now, they are off somewhere in Arkansas feeling badly for no reason whatsoever.”

As we say here at Jubilee! Community church, “Let’s keep the main thing the main thing.” Interfaith work with kids is about humility. It's about a willingness to be adventurous. It's about forging new connections. It's about fostering a deeper understanding. It's about moving past our own fears to dissolve boundaries. Trust me. If you remember that, you’ll be just fine.