



Little Steps Big Faith

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Welcome!

This discussion guide is designed for readers to go deeper into this book's ideas and suggestions. It is written in language directed at parents but can be adapted for anyone who cares for young children:

- Extended family, like grandparents, aunts, uncles, and godparents
- Church leaders
- Children's ministry volunteers
- Nannies, day care providers, and other caregivers
- Early childhood educators in faith-based schools and centers
- Anyone who wants to learn more about how to help young children grow in faith from the start

This guide provides content you can explore over four meetings using several questions provided for each chapter. Choose the ones that best fit your interests, time, and context.

Meeting 1: Chapters 1, 2, and 3 on Introductions, Brains, and Attachment

Meeting 2: Chapters 4, 5, and 6 on Language, Literacy, and Music

Meeting 3: Chapters 7 and 8 on Whole Body Parenting and Routines/Rituals

Meeting 4: Chapters 9 and 10 on Church Communities and What's Next

If you can only meet once, have people read the book beforehand and use the single-session guide on the last page of this PDF.



CHAPTER 1

Child Development + Faith: An Introduction

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point in the last week? What was a low point?
- The six-word story is a storytelling form that invites the writer to distill an important idea into just six words. (Search online for millions of great examples!) Write a six-word story about your earliest experience with God.

The Story of Brad

- This book opens with the story of Brad. What did you recognize in the story about Brad?
- What do you think about this parallel drawn between sports fans and faithful families?

Exploring the Science

- Before you started reading this book, what did you already know about brain development in young children?
- What types of child development information (books, blogs, podcasts, articles, classes) did you seek out before you first held your child in your arms?

Making Faith Connections

- How was your own faith affected as you waited for this precious child to arrive?
- How easy or difficult is it to talk about your child's faith formation with others who care about you and your family?

CHAPTER 2

Brain Development: Experiences Shape Pathways

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- What is a skill you have learned to do that is so automatic that you don't even have to think about it?

The Story of Skydiving and Walking around Coffee Tables

- Tell a story about how your child has recently acquired a new skill and you saw it happen before your very eyes.
- When was a time you learned a new skill and felt clumsy and out of step at first? Did you ever think about how your brain was making new connections as you were learning?

Exploring the Science

- Imagine for a moment 85 billion of anything. Think of your child's brain with that many cells at birth. What comes to mind?
- The book uses botanical language to describe how dendrites form new connections (arborization) and when connections are trimmed away (synaptic pruning). Think about the last week with your child. What experiences might have led to the formation of new brain connections? (Some ideas: a new toy, song, or story; a physical milestone that gave them a new skill; or spending more time with someone.)
- Psalm 139 describes prenatal development in riveting terms: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." What connections could you make between the scientific knitting together of your young child and the God of all creation? (Bonus points if you use the words fear and wonder in your answer to this question!)

Making Faith Connections

- Who do you trust when it comes to research findings about children who are your child's age? Who do you trust when it comes to the faith formation of your child? Where do you go when you have questions about either of these areas?
- What experiences have already provided opportunities for your child to begin forming faith?

Little Steps

- The end of the chapter lists several types of interactions with your child. Name all the ones you've done in the last 48 hours. Which of these activities do you often love doing with your child? Which activities are lower on your list?
- As you review this list, do you see any times where you are already introducing faith rituals to your child?

CHAPTER 3

Attachment Schemas: Your Love Shows God's Love

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- Does your family tell you a story of something you did that you have no memory of? What is it like to be part of a story that others tell about you?

The Story of Bert's Return

(First I'm gonna give you a minute to get a tissue and wipe away those tears, because who does not cry at that story?)

- Who do you wish your child could meet face to face but you have to tell them stories about instead?
- How do you help your child know who to trust?

Exploring the Science

- Attachment relationships are the focus of many studies because they are so important to humans—and animals too! What did you know about attachment relationships before you read this chapter?
- Parents who have adopted their children often wonder about what type of attachment relationships their child formed before they were adopted. How do you think the research on brain plasticity in the first years of life helps address these kinds of questions?

Making Faith Connections

- Do you view your relationship with God as a parent-child one or as another type of relationship?
- Unpack this statement from the book: "When your child experiences the ways that you love, care for, and protect them, they are also witnessing what God's love, care, and protection are like." What does it mean to you that your love for your child is modeling God's love?

Little Steps

- The fourth Little Step invites you to look to Scripture (like the fruit of the Spirit) for examples of parenting qualities that will support positive relationships. Name the fruit that seems most doable at the stage of parenting you're in right now: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- Is there a Little Step on the list you are already doing with your child? What other ones seem doable in your busy life right now?

CHAPTER 4

Language: What We Say Matters

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- Finish this statement: The words I heard during childhood that I can still hear in my head are...

The Story of the Goodnight Moon Balloon

- Have you ever had someone else witness your child's exciting milestone before you did? What was that like?
- What is something about your child's language development that amazes you?

Exploring the Science

- On a typical day, where is your child exposed to most of the words they'll hear in a typical day? Who are the people speaking most of these words?
- Infants respond to parentese, a distinctive way of talking to young children that slows down the pace and livens up the tone of language. Amazingly, even older children pick up on this unique way of speaking to little ones. If a language research team observed you in your home, what would they hear you saying, and how would you be saying it?

Making Faith Connections

- Imagine those language researchers from the previous question were going to code the words they heard you say. What words would they place in the "words about faith/belief/religion" category?
- Look at the words used to describe God and Jesus on pages 48-50. Which ones have you used with your child? Which ones do you think you might start using?

Little Steps

- Think fast! If you were headed straight to a "Paint your favorite faith words on reclaimed pallet wood" workshop right after this meeting, what words would you choose?
- Do you say prayers with your child? If so, what words do you use? If not, when could you give prayer a try?

CHAPTER 5

Literacy: Introducing Stories of Faith

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- What is a book someone read to you as a child? What memories do you have about this reading time?

The Story of the Nearly Unopenable Bible

- Do you have an early memory of having your own Bible or seeing one in your family's possessions? Did this book invite you into its stories, or did it give off a "Don't Touch!" vibe?
- What do you want your child to learn about what a Bible is?

Exploring the Science

Skim the list of early literacy skills on pages 58-59.

- If you have a toddler or preschooler: What do these skills look and sound like in action when you spend time with your young child?
- If you have an infant: Can you already imagine what these skills will look and sound like in action with your young child during your time together?

Making Faith Connections

- What are a few important ideas about the Bible itself (not just specific stories or verses) that you want your child to start learning?
- What Bible verses or Bible stories are very meaningful to you?

Little Steps

- What does Bible time with your little one look and sound like right now? If you haven't spent time reading Bible stories with your child, what could you try?
- If you had to write a 10-words-or-less family creed about your beliefs right now, what would it say?

CHAPTER 6

Music: Your Playlist Makes a Difference

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- What is the earliest song you can remember hearing, singing, or dancing to?

The Story of the Junior Wedding Singer

- Have you witnessed your own child singing or dancing along to music at a celebration? What was it like to watch them?
- Music is one of the ways that we connect to others, like the little boy who sang along with everyone else. When have you seen your child connecting to someone else through music?

Exploring the Science

- This chapter describes research findings that support early musical preferences and abilities in young children. When did you read a finding and think, “Well, I could have told you that”? What findings surprised you?
- With today’s streaming options, the number of songs you could play for your little one is almost endless! But the songs you sing to your child capture their attention in powerful, brain-shaping ways. What do you see happening (physically, socially, emotionally) when you sing to your child?

Making Faith Connections

- What are the songs of faith you sing with your child? How do you learn new ones?
- Scan pages 72-73 for some ways that scripture includes music. Choose one of these examples to explore a little further.

Little Steps

- Sometimes a family’s most memorable personal songs are created in the moment. Try writing a simple song right here and now around a common activity with your child or a faith word. (Ideas: waking your child up in the morning, eating a snack together, singing about blessings, thanking God for family.)
- Next time it’s prayer time with your child, try singing your prayer.

CHAPTER 7

Whole-Body Parenting: Caring with Touch and Movement

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- Describe what you remember about someone’s loving touch to you during early childhood.

The Story of Izzy and Rachel

- In your group, people may have a personal story or may know someone whose little one was born prematurely and needed specialized care for weeks or months after birth. Do you have a story to share about kangaroo care?
- In this story, Rachel credits this skin-to-skin contact with helping her bond with her daughter. How has physical contact helped you connect with your little one?

Science

- When have you heard the phrase “Use the breath!” (or one like it)? What happens when you breathe deeply? What have you noticed about your child’s breathing?
- Many studies show the importance of physical touch, not just with humans but in other species like rats and worms. How have you seen the power of touch at work around you?

Faith Connections

- What types of daily touch are part of your child’s caregiving needs? What types are “just because” touches (also called non-contingent touch) to show your love and care for your child? How could you weave faith into these times of touch?
- The three topics in this chapter—breath, touch, and movement—are mentioned throughout scripture. Some examples are listed on pages 86-91. Which examples made you wonder? Which ones could you connect to your own parenting practices?

Little Steps

- In what ways do you parent with your whole body? Draw the diagram described on page 92.
- How could you start using breath, touch, and movement with your child when you pray together?

CHAPTER 8

Routines and Rituals: Do It, Then Do It Again

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- What routines and rituals do you remember from your childhood?

The Story of Tera's Cross Blessing

- Share about any nighttime routines and rituals you do with your child.
- Do you have any friends like Tera who are full of great parenting ideas? Have you ever considered that you might be a Tera to someone else?

Science + Faith Connections

- This chapter pairs scripture passages with findings from research on human memory. Which finding did you think was surprising or inspiring?
- Which words of faith do you recite most often to your children?

Little Steps

- Tell a story about something in your home that shows and tells anyone walking through its doors that you are a family of faith.
- What happens during your typical naptime and bedtime routines? How could you weave words of faith into this time together?

CHAPTER 9

Community: Why Churches Are Rich Contexts

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- What is an early memory you have about a church?

The Story of Paavo's Invitation

- If you are part of a church now, how have you seen young children claim their role as part of the community?
- What would you do if an older child invited your child to be part of something you thought they were too young for?

Exploring the Science

- This chapter reports on research supporting church as a rich neurological context and applies findings from previous chapters to church: attachment, language, literacy, music, whole-body parenting, and routines and rituals. Which of these areas does your church support? Which areas seem weaker or missing?
- Do scientific findings about early childhood development belong in a conversation about church?

Making Faith Connections

- This chapter describes four identities that new parents may claim. Review each type and report on whether you identify with one or more of them: the Returner, the Switcher, the New Joiner, and the Good Fit.
- How has your family chosen a church community? If you do not have one or you are looking for a new one, what qualities do you yearn for?

Little Steps

- Does your child recognize your church building and its people and music? What do you think your little one likes best about church, and how could you weave that part of church into your daily faith life?
- The last bullet point in this chapter says this: "Open yourself up to the idea that church is a place where you can share your child with the community." Unpack that statement. Who connects with your child? How does this relationship show the body of Christ in action?

CHAPTER 10

Now What? How to Live It

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point since you last met/in the last week? What was a low point?
- Have you had an experience while reading this book when you could make a “Something like that just happened!” connection?

The Story of Ballet Recitals

- Have you witnessed a dance recital, sporting event, or other gathering where young children are just getting started with learning something new? What did you notice about the children during that experience? What about the teachers?

Seven Suggestions

Rather than following the structure of the discussion guide for past chapters, these questions ask you to explore each suggestion, starting on page 131.

Dare to State Hopes: What do you think about this quote? “We [practicing Christians] used to be the home team. Now we’re the visiting one.”

Align with Your Partner: (If you have a parenting partner) How do you see gender influencing who does what in the faith life of your child? (If you are parenting solo) Who else helps you raising your child in faith so the responsibility does not fall entirely on your shoulders?

Keep Learning: Check out the list on page 134. Which of these ways to learn more about brain development is most appealing to you?

Find Opportunities: Sometimes there are no places that host age-appropriate faith experiences for young children and their caregivers. What if you started one?

Do an Audit: What faithful words or images does your child see each day?

Turn to Prayer: What is your prayer for your child’s life of faith?

Be Open to Change: How has your faith changed during the time you’ve become a parent?

Close your time of discussion by blessing each other. Make the sign of the cross on your neighbor’s forehead as you say their name and these words: You are a beloved child of God. You are never alone on your parenting journey. God will bless and protect you and your precious little one. Amen.



Single-Session Guide

Use this guide with parents and other caregivers of young children. Make sure everyone has access to the book before you gather to talk through the questions.

Get Started by Telling Your Story

- If you are in a group, start your time together by sharing highs and lows. What was a high point in the last week? What was a low point?
- What is a vivid memory from your childhood when you experienced God's presence in a powerful way?
- Tell a story from your childhood about someone who lived out their faith in a way that you remember even now.
- What led you to read about a book about child development and faith formation?

Reflecting on the Stories

- Each chapter begins with a story about young children and those who care for them. Which of these stories did you connect with most deeply? Which story do you want to talk about some more?
- The stories about our children that we tell over and over have power. They tell us something about our children, ourselves, and the season of life when the story first happened. What stories do you think you will tell your child about themselves as they grow older?

Exploring the Science

- Where do you go and who do you trust for information about your child's physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development? What have you read or learned about spiritual development in the first years of life?
- Which of the scientific findings had you heard about before reading this book? What research findings do you want to explore a little bit more?
- What early childhood research described in the book made an impression on you?

Making Faith Connections

- As you read the book, did you have any a-ha! moments of realizing you were nurturing faith in your child without realizing it at the time?
- What are your hopes for your child's faith formation in the first years of life? How could you help nurture this faith? Who could you ask to help you?
- What is your biggest takeaway from this book about your child's faith formation?

Little Steps

- Which little steps did you want to try right away?
- Did some of the little steps seem overwhelming or not your style?
- Do you have your own ideas about what little steps you could try?

Close your time of discussion by blessing each other. Make the sign of the cross on your neighbor's forehead as you say their name and these words: You are a beloved child of God. You are never alone on your parenting journey. God will bless and protect you and your precious little one. Amen