

Welcome Facilitators!

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est
(Where charity and love are, there is God)

We could spend our entire lives arguing about who and what God is. In fact, some people do! Or, we could make it really simple and acknowledge that wherever there is love, peace, compassion, tolerance, acceptance, and understanding, the Divine is present. That is the single-sentence, theological foundation of this curriculum.

At Faith Seeker Kids, we believe that each child should be allowed to discern his/her own faith path. Each child must find ways to articulate who/what the Divine is; to ascertain preferred methods for accessing the Divine presence; and to discover methods for stay connected to God, to the earth, and to humanity. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *Faith and Belief: The Difference between Them* (One World Publications, 1998), said this:

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.

Our goal is not to produce “happy kids” or mini-religious scholars. Our goal is to provide kids with the tools they need to walk their faith path – whatever that looks like and wherever it might lead.

Thanks for being part of the journey!

OVERALL APPROACH

This Peace unit consists of 15 lesson plans: an Introductory lesson, one Old Testament/Hebrew Bible lesson, five New Testament/Christian Bible lessons, and eight lessons from other cultures/traditions (Native American, Islamic, Hasidic, Sikh, Sufi, Hindu/Vedic, Buddhist, and Sub-Saharan African).

This edition is designed for faith communities, so background information for each tradition focuses on simple, age-appropriate aspects of religious practice. Our overall goal is to provide kids with some understanding about how humans – from around the world and over the course of history – have tried to address life's big questions about who we are, how we might lovingly live with one another, and how we might verbalize and access that which is Sacred.

Leaders in all faith traditions and communities advocate for peace. Sometimes, one finds uncanny similarities in the way that occurs; other times, one finds glaring differences. And even young kids will sometimes disagree. One of my favorite stories comes from our Preschool-Kindergarten class. The facilitator was reading about Moses' adventure on Mount Sinai. The question posed to the kids was this: What does God look like to you? A mild argument ensued as three kids each tried to convince the others of their viewpoints. 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.”

This curriculum provides numerous and various age-appropriate opportunities for that type of reflection and discussion. Not all children will be this articulate, but we have amassed plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that at least some kids are pondering these issues, and they enjoy opportunities to share their musings.

You, as the facilitator, are not required to have all the answers. You don't need a degree in religious studies, and you don't need to pronounce all the words correctly. You don't even need to be strong in your own faith. You just need to be willing to explore. Kids are amazingly open-hearted and open-minded when thinking about concepts like "peace" and "God." Kids do not think of these concepts as unmanageable or controversial; they are just interesting topics to wonder about. Being a facilitator is both as simple and utterly complex as that: embracing the wonder.

Use of Narratives

This curriculum rests heavily on the rich narratives found in the various religions/cultures of the world. These stories have, in some cases, been shared with children for centuries – passed down from generation to generation orally, eventually put into writing, and eventually translated into English. We have the tales of the Panchatantra (from the Hindu/Vedic tradition); folk stories from indigenous traditions; the Jataka Tales (from the Buddhist tradition); stories from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles; and legends about the Sufi masters, the Hasidic rabbis, the Prophet Muhammad (from the Islamic tradition), and the 10 living Gurus (from the Sikh tradition).

Narratives such as these whisk us away to distant times and faraway places, allowing us to connect both with our ancestors and with our contemporaries around the globe. Narratives also help us avoid many elements – like creeds, doctrines, tenets, and within-tradition differences – that impede religious discussions among adults. We are not in the business of producing pint-sized academics. Instead, we have gleaned wisdom from parents and caregivers who teach in the various traditions represented in our curriculum. Interestingly, they use methods with their kids that are similar to those of Christians: celebration of holy days, age-appropriate participation in common rituals, and the sharing of stories about important personalities/prophets/deities.

We have written our own versions of the narratives. The Bible stories are based on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation; the remaining narratives are based on stories found in published books and on web sites. In nearly all cases, we were able to find at least two different versions to compare/contrast; in some cases, we were able to find numerous versions. The narratives for the Preschool-Kindergarten age group are about 1,000-1,200 words long with questions interspersed after every 100 words or so. Some of the questions focus on story content, some help the kids apply story events to their own lives, and some are just for fun. All are designed to keep the kids engaged in the story, its characters, and its teachable moments. An illustration is also included for each story. The illustration can be shown whenever you feel it's appropriate: before, during, or after reading the text.

Creative Responses and Activities

In all the different faith traditions, kids acquire knowledge through experience. Our curriculum, like most other Christian Education curriculums, makes use of crafts (which we call Creative Responses) and activities. In our case, many of these experiential learning opportunities were informed by other faith communities, including Buddhist sanghas, Jewish synagogues, Hindu/Vedic craft web sites, Islamic centers, and Neo-Pagan/Wiccan gatherings. Time and again, our overall sense was one of fellowship and camaraderie. That is, despite all the faith-related differences, the education of kids in all traditions looks incredibly similar to a typical Christian Education class.

Our crafts and activities also use inexpensive, readily-available supplies. Most everything can be bought at your local craft store. Where appropriate, we also suggest the use of recycled/recyclable materials or items from nature.

We know that classroom facilitators are amazingly good at adapting curricula for their groups, but to assist you a bit, variations and modifications are also included. You know your kids best. The more crafty kids will spend lots of time cutting carefully, coloring every available space, and adding their own unique touches. Other kids will finish the craft as quickly as possible, so they can run around. Either way, we have offered suggestions for adapting the lesson plans to your range of ages and to the unique set of personalities that might appear in your classroom on any given day.

Most importantly, we view these experiential learning techniques as a way for kids to be co-creators with the Divine. We want them to be innovative and resourceful. We want them to use their imaginations. And we want them to be inspired, not just by their own creations, but by the creations of their friends and peers, as well.

MAINTAINING THE THEME

Across our curriculum, we try to maintain the theme throughout the lesson plan. For the Peace unit, we have drawn heavily from our colleagues in the mindfulness movement. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

Opening/Closing Ritual

Beginning/ending your class session with a brief (2-3 minute) ritual is an excellent way to teach peace. Many of us either participate in, or lead, rituals for adults. Yet, Americans often bemoan the lack of ritual in our society. If we want ritual to be a vibrant thread in our cultural fabric, we need to offer ritual more often and in more ways. And we need to start with our kids. Below, you will find some general guidelines for creating your own opening/closing ritual, as well as a ready-to-use example of a peace ritual for this age group.

Guidelines for Creating Your Own Ritual

Step 1: Indicate the start of the ritual with a special sound or phrase.

Step 2: Create a ritual space by gathering everyone together. The group can circle up around an object, the kids can sit or stand, and you can provide any necessary instructions.

Step 3: Focus attention and bring awareness to the body/breath.

Step 4: Offer your chosen ritual activity. This could be asking each child to contribute a thought/feeling/reflection, coloring an image/mandala, journaling, or sharing a special object.

Step 5: Bring awareness back to the body/breath.

Step 6: Indicate the end of the ritual with a closing sound or phrase.

Sample Age-Appropriate Peace Ritual

Step 1: Ring a bell, sound a Buddhist bowl, or use a pleasant alarm sound from your cell phone (e.g., chirping birds)

Step 2: Have the kids sit in a circle around a candle. After a few weeks, they will know to sit around the candle as soon as they hear the opening sound.

Step 3: Light the candle and have everyone take a big breath in and a big breath out.

Step 4: Offer the following body prayer/activity. The facilitator says one line at a time as the kids repeat it.

I want peace
for my family
and my friends.

(Open up your arms and hold them out from your body a bit with palms up.)

I want peace
for all the animals
that live in our world.

(Pretend to pet a dog/cat.)

I want peace
on this beautiful day.

(Stretch arms out above you in a big circle shape.)

I want peace
for my teachers
and helpers.

(Place arms in front of you in a big circle shape.)

I want peace
for the countries
of the world.

(Make a “sunburst” with arms/hands by moving them up and out above your head.)

I want peace
for myself.

(Give yourself a big hug.)

Step 5: Invite everyone to take one final big breath in and big breath out.

Step 6: Blow out the candle (or let one of the kids do it). End with an appropriate closing word/phrase (e.g., amen, oh yeah, aho, aahhh) or sound (e.g., bell, Buddhist bowl).

Framing

Techniques that help kids participate fully in the different parts of the lesson plan – the story, the Creative Response, and the activity – can also be used to maintain the Peace theme. A colleague in the mindfulness movement describes this as “framing”: when we have something special to hang on the wall, we frame it, which sets it off from the wall, and everything else on it. Here are some of the “framing” techniques we have used successfully.

Set-Up

Prepare the kids for the next phase of the lesson. For example, when you are ready to read the Bible story, ask the kids to put on their listening ears, “get their sillies out,” or imagine themselves sitting outside listening to someone tell a story. You can also ask them to think about all the other children from around the world who have heard this story.

Similarly, when you are ready to begin the Creative Response, remind the kids that they are co-creators with the Divine. Talk about what it means to make a craft peacefully – perhaps by

sharing supplies, helping one another, or offering ideas if someone gets stuck. When you are ready to begin the activity, ask the kids to imagine performing the activity in a peaceful way. How would they complete a relay peacefully? How would they tag someone peacefully? How would they behave peacefully whether they win or lose?

Processing Afterwards

The same types of discussions and reminders can happen after the various parts of the lesson plan. Ask the kids if they noticed anyone exhibiting peacefulness while doing the craft. Or, ask the kids if they saw anyone behaving especially peacefully during the activity or story time.

Ritual and framing are important aspects of our curriculum for two reasons. First, they help the kids apply the thematic concept – peace, in this case – immediately and in a safe space. Second, they provide experiences that are unique, special, and different from what normally happens in traditional school classrooms. For these reasons, ritual and framing may be the most powerful things we offer. Often, it’s not what we are doing that is so important, it’s how we are doing it.

A LITTLE ON LOGISTICS

A few practical details probably deserve mention.

Timing

The lesson plans are designed to take about one hour, but they are easily adapted to 45-minute or 75-minute time slots.

Previews

Each lesson plan consists of slightly different subsections. The Preview, at the beginning of each lesson plan, will give you a sense of what’s included for that particular lesson. In all cases, there is a Review section, a Background section, a Story/Lesson, a Creative Response, and an Activity. Sometimes, more than one craft or activity is provided. The Review sections also vary widely, depending on where they fall in the unit.

Sequencing

There is some method to the sequencing of the lessons, but they are not chronological in any sense. The Review and Background sections will be most affected by presenting the lessons out of sequence. In contrast, the Story/Lesson, Creative Responses, and Activities are designed to stand on their own.

Pronunciation

One aspect of interfaith education that makes adults nervous is pronunciation, so we’ve included easy-to-interpret pronunciation guides (rather than using the more official International Phonetic Alphabet).

However, we cannot stress this point enough: do not worry about pronunciation! Mispronunciations are not considered crimes in any faith tradition. Moreover, in many cases, we have simply suggested pronunciations that seem most common in our experience. Even within traditions, pronunciations vary widely across sect, denomination, country, and region of the world. Here’s an example from “Hinduism,” a term that refers, rather loosely, to the religious and cultural practices of India. While many Hindus share common sacred texts and rituals, there is no governing body or agreed-upon religious authority. Major holy days vary from country to country, and even from region to region within a country. Even popular deities, like Ganesh, are known by different names (e.g., Ganesha, Ganapati, Vinayaka, Binyak). Given such variability, it’s easy to imagine the wide range of possible pronunciations. Multi-syllabic words, especially in the Asian traditions, are also frequently said with no clearly-accented syllable, which is difficult for native English speakers to imitate.

The variability observed in pronunciation is also reflected in how words are spelled. In Islam, “dhikr,” the practice of repeatedly reciting short prayers or the names of God, can also be written as “zikr.” Similarly, in the Neo-Pagan/Wiccan tradition, the goddess of sacred wells and the hearth can be written as Brigid or Brigit. In nearly all cases, we have chosen to use the Wikipedia spelling. This is partly to make it easier to investigate topics on your own.

Please remember: the content is significantly more important than pronunciations/spellings. Do the best you can, and maintain your sense of adventure!

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Ajahn Chah, a much-loved Buddhist teacher and founder of the Thai Forest Tradition, often said, “If you can’t practice in the city, you can’t practice in the forest.” For him, faithful living was an ongoing endeavor that transcended time, place, and circumstance. Similar views are found in Christianity (as reflected in a disdain for “Sunday morning Christians”), as well as the other major world religions. Here are a few suggestions for embodying peace while transcending the classroom walls.

Take-Home Opportunities

At the end of each lesson, we provide at least one way for kids and families to acknowledge, remember, or practice some aspect of peace during the week. For the Preschool-Kindergarten age group, we do not ask them to report back during the next class time, but that is an option, depending on the cognitive abilities of the kids in your particular group.

Guest Speakers

Inviting members of other cultures/religions to visit your classroom is a great way to connect with your community. Encourage guest speakers to bring ritual items or articles of clothing as “props.” They can also read, or tell, a favorite story from their tradition.

Community Service

We also encourage pairing at least one community service project with the unit. There are numerous ways to bring peace to the world, even for young children, and community service projects are certainly one way to do that. Here are some projects to consider.

Do something kind for animals, like facilitating a pet-food drive or making DIY pet toys. This pairs well with Lesson 4: The Rebbe and the Thieves, Lesson 9: Isaiah Imagines a Peaceful Kingdom, or Lesson 14: Elephant and Hippopotamus Refuse to Fight.

Collect spare change and decide, as a class, where to donate the money. This pairs well with Lesson 8: Hatim Ta’i Risks His Life for His Kingdom.

Collect gently-used clothing, toys, books or stuffed animals and donate them to other kids. This pairs well with Lesson 10: Jesus and His Mission of Peace.

Pick up trash around your neighborhood. This pairs well with Lesson 11: Varaha Saves the World or Lesson 15: Worrying Less.

Make get-well cards to share with sick people in the community. This pairs well with Lesson 13: Sick Woman Who Found Peace.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept called “Yiddishkeit,” which is translated as “Jewishness.” Despite the relatively simple translation, the underlying meaning is both varied and complex. For some Jews, Yiddishkeit involves adhering to a rather strict set of ritual practices. For some Jews,

it signifies the cultural separation of men and women. For the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe, it refers to the culture, food, and music of the region. And for still other Jews, Yiddishkeit encompasses all the different ways in which Jews have retained their Jewish identity despite years of persecution. At its core, however, Yiddishkeit is about how Jews live into their faith on a daily basis. Community service opportunities are a great way to help kids live into peace both in and out of the classroom.

LET'S GET STARTED!

This curriculum offers a glimpse into how kids from around the world might live into peace from their faith perspectives. What stories do they hear? What games do they play? What sacred texts do they read? How do they talk about the Great Mystery? And how do they honor the Sacred in their lives? Hopefully, our curriculum will serve as a small step toward a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of faiths found across the globe and in our own neighborhoods.

Thank you again for being a fellow pilgrim! Please visit FaithSeekerKids.com for more information on our theology/pedagogy, to read our blog/tweets, to view other available products, or to offer feedback. We're always interested in hearing about what worked, what didn't work, and how we might improve.

Shalom, Salaam, Li-k'ei, Shanti, Namaste, Peace!