

# 3

## Creating Within God's Creation

*"God created man in his own image . . . God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth.' . . ." Genesis 1:27-28 (NEB)*

How can toys and play help children learn anything about the Christian faith? They can contribute much to faith development. Persons are created human beings in God's own image. God says we are to fill the earth and subdue it. God gave us minds for thinking. God gave persons the ability to take the created elements and make some useful tools or materials from them. I believe that when we use the thinking ability God has given us to combine materials in a new way—to make something new from God's creation—then we participate in creation. In the same way an adult who invents something new participates in God's creation. Children participate as they explore the world and use the uniqueness that is theirs to act upon the creation.

When we see a film or read a book about the future in which all the people are forced to conform and become like machines, we react with horror or dislike. What is missing from such a society? Creativity and new ideas are missing. New ideas may begin with play. They begin with being free to say "what if . . ." even if it is impossible. It can only become possible with the freedom to try it out.

Earlier I said that each child is a unique creation. If this is true,



then learning for a child is not just having knowledge and skill poured into one's head. Learning is also helping the uniqueness of each child develop so that he or she may make a contribution to God's world in a creative way.

In "*A Biblical Culture for Nursery Children*" Paul Irwin says, "It is not overstating it to say that in play and related activities of self-expression the foundations are laid for all subsequent creativity and inventiveness in science, art, politics, government, industry, the helping professions, and in all vocational and avocational life."<sup>11</sup>

How can we know that our children will begin to understand creation in Biblical terms? Will they know they are making religious discoveries as they explore the world? As we allow our children the freedom to play, we also need to permit them to express their questions and experiences. When we can help them interpret their discoveries in terms of God's creation, they will begin to understand creation as God's and themselves as partners with God. The children need to play, but they also need time to reflect and understand. They need parents and teachers ready to listen and help them think further. Young children's understandings will be limited, but their understanding will mature.

Young children need to do as much exploration as possible in these early years. Later they can better understand what it means to praise God. They will know about God's creation and the many reasons they are praising God.

Once children have developed the trust we discussed in chapter two, they can venture out to explore, play, and learn about the world. The process of exploration begins, as does trust, with birth. Infants begin to perceive and explore the world from their first day. They touch their own bodies and eventually come to some conclusion about what things are part of their bodies and what are not. The degree to which children continue to explore the world, however, depends upon how safe they feel in venturing out. When they can trust their parents, and when parents are not fearful or overly concerned with cleanliness, exploring is an exciting activity.

Remember the boy named Lance in the last chapter who was

<sup>11</sup>Paul Irwin "*A Biblical Culture for Nursery Children*" The Nursery Teacher, Fall 1971. Copyright © by Graded Press.

afraid to leave his mother? He didn't feel safe enough to venture into new experiences. Inside he played in the family living center or did manipulative activities, such as stringing beads. Stringing beads is orderly, predictable, and safe. He would sit and watch the other children finger paint, but he could not bring himself to do it. Outside he was concerned about getting his clothes dirty. He spent a lot of time standing beside the teachers. He could not really enjoy all the wonders of God's creation because it was too risky.

Few children are as fearful as Lance. Most can trust others enough to venture out—to explore the world in search of answers to life's three big questions: *Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like?* The way children gain answers to these questions is through play.

#### Play Is Children's Work

Play for children is different than play for adults. Adults turn aside from work to find rest and renewal in recreation which we think of as play. Play for children, however, is their occupation. It is as essential for them as food and rest and even breathing. It is the way their intellectual capacity, their emotional health and their physical abilities are developed. As children play with things, they discover the qualities of those toys and what they can do with them. As they play with other children, they develop social skills and the ability to understand someone else's point of view. Running and climbing as well as small muscle activities such as coloring and puzzles are important for physical development.

The opportunity to play gives children a sense of independence and competence. When they have many experiences in which they can experiment and try out ideas, they develop confidence and skill in learning to think.

Someone has said that children need to be able to "mess-about" with materials or toys. "Messing-about" means using the materials to discover what they are and what they can do without any concern for a finished product. The process is more important than the product. Young children are at a time in their lives when they want and need to "mess-about" with as many materials as possible. Parents should restrain our concern that children always "make something" with art materials,

blocks or other play materials. We cannot always know what children are learning because there is no product, but the learning is there.\*

Young children learn best through their senses. They have difficulty in learning when concepts are only explained or demonstrated. This does not mean that we never explain or demonstrate concepts to young children. They learn best by doing. They learn more when they can handle, take apart, put together, taste, smell, hear as well as see something.

Brad asked, "How does a worm turn into a moth?" His mother explained the process and he had some information about it. Later when he had the opportunity to see, hold and feed some silkworms and to watch them grow through their life cycle, he understood God's plan for growth better.

When we begin to make play dough in the classroom, the children are often surprised that they can do such a thing. They sometimes say, "We buy play dough at the store." I try to help them understand that what they have bought in the store was made in a factory through a similar process. When we cook in class, I like to make things like pudding from basic ingredients so the children can see what the ingredients really are. When a mix is used, all they see is powder from a box.

#### **Toys that Help Children Learn**

Parents can provide toys for our children's play that will encourage exploration, creativity and learning. Toys do not have to be expensive. Some important toys are natural materials or those closely related to natural materials. These enable children to be more creative.

**Water.** Water is a soothing medium that children can manipulate and that offers no resistance. There are many opportunities in the normal course of a day for children to play in water. Washing hands with lots of little soap bubbles is a sensory learning experience rather than just an exercise in cleanliness. Children like to help wash dishes, clothes, windows and cars. They also like to blow bubbles, "paint" with water or just run their hands through it. Children can enjoy washing vegetables, especially greens or spinach. They can enjoy the water as well as

\*Editors note: Do we always have to be learning something? Play can be for fun and relaxation for young children, too. They may be learning feelings, attitudes, and skills as well as facts.

feeling big because they are helping a grown-up. Finding out which objects float and which sink in water is a science lesson which can help children learn the dependability of God's laws.

"Oh, you are so clever," remarked one mother to another. "Christi always comes home from your house with something interesting."

Five-year-old Christi had been playing at Corey's house. When her mother came to get her, the girls were painting. Christi showed her mother the paints she had made.

"I just never think about buying anything like this for my children," Christi's mother went on. "Besides it's awfully messy, isn't it?"

"No," replied Corey's mother. "The children have learned how to get things out and set them up. They always wear paint shirts to protect their clothes. If they spill something, they can clean it up."

Christi's mother doesn't realize how much her children are missing when she fails to provide art experiences. She does not have to be artistic to provide the experiences, and the materials do not have to be expensive.

Through art experiences children explore colors and materials in God's world and what they can do with those colors and materials. The children develop arm and hand muscles needed in writing. They gain practice in thinking how to use materials in various ways, and they have increased confidence in their abilities. They also have fun.

Parents can provide crayons, paper, water-soluble paint, scissors, paste or glue, and throw-away household items. Some of these items have to be purchased, but many art projects may also be recycling projects, such as using egg cartons, milk cartons, meat trays and newspapers.

**Painting** is an activity that requires more preparation and supervision than does coloring, but the children's learning and satisfaction are worth the trouble. Using only red, yellow, or blue paint, the children can learn about color. The first time children mix two colors of paint on the paper, their reaction is usually, "Daddy, look what I did! I made a new color!"

Parents can provide large sheets of paper—even newspaper will do—and tempera paint. An easel can be improvised with a piece of plywood or cardboard propped on a chair. The jars of

paint can sit in a shoebox with holes cut in the lid or in a muffin pan. Each color needs its own brush so that colors won't mix.

When children begin to paint, they experiment with color before they paint "a picture." They need time to "mess about" with paint also. They may first simply cover the paper with color. Later they will paint shapes, and finally they will paint realistic pictures.

*Finger paint* can be made at home with liquid starch, soap flakes or a cooked finger paint. Finger painting is a very satisfying sensory experience that is well worth the trouble of covering the children, the table and the floor. Finger paint helps people—adults as well as children—relax and enjoy the color and feel of the paint. Try it with your children. You might enjoy it!

*Cutting and Pasting.* Tommy's mother came to pick him up at nursery school. When she arrived, Tommy and several children were sitting around a large table cutting and pasting.

"Can he cut?" she exclaimed in surprise. "I won't let him near my scissors." She looked carefully at the blunt scissors he was using. "But the only scissors we have are sharp," she added.

"He's doing a good job with the scissors," Tommy's teacher said. "Maybe you could buy him a pair of blunt scissors of his own."

"That's a good idea," responded his mother.

Three-year-olds are usually ready to learn to use scissors. Using scissors is a rather exacting skill, so they need blunt scissors, paper, and time to practice. You may want to try some of the new four fingered teaching scissors. Give the child construction paper, wrapping paper, or even brown paper sacks, scissors, and a large container to catch cuttings. Sometimes in the classroom, we save cut pieces in a scrap box for pasting later. Sometimes children are so proud of themselves for cutting a piece of paper that they want to take them home. They feel as proud as if they had created a masterpiece—in a way they have.

*Recycled Materials.* David is a very creative boy of nine who spends lots of time inventing costumes and equipment for his "action figure" men. He can take a piece of paper, cardboard or cloth, and make almost anything. How did this skill develop? David does have some natural ability in figuring out how to do things, but his parents gave him junk materials, time, and encouragement in his early years to be able to "mess about" with

various materials and ideas. He has had practice with lots of materials and has learned what he can do with them. He is sometimes frustrated because wire isn't strong enough or the cardboard won't bend like he wants, but he learns even through his frustration.

Parents can provide a marvelous variety of creative materials from the things we throw away every day. Tin cans, sacks, cardboard containers, paper rolls, meat trays, plastic jars and bottles, newspaper, string and cardboard boxes are all things with which children can create. "Throw away" materials can be glued together or cut into shapes to make sculptures. Children can become excited while making a sculpture because they are using these common household materials in a new way. They are using their own ideas and discovering new possibilities. Parents may even get caught up in the excitement of the process and begin to think creatively!

*Clay and Dough.* Materials such as clay and play dough are important because they give the children opportunities to feel with their hands and to use their arm and hand muscles. Play dough can be manipulated and shaped in whatever way the child wants. It can also be hit, squeezed and pounded without being destroyed; so it is a helpful material when children are angry. We will not let them hurt another person or destroy equipment, but clay dough is not destroyed or hurt by hitting.

Scott was angry because he could not play with his older sister and her friends. He began to throw his cars at his bedroom wall. His father went to Scott's bedroom.

"Scott, I know you are angry because you wanted to go with the girls," he began, "but I can't let you throw your cars at the wall. You will break your cars, and you will make ugly marks on the wall."

"I don't care!" Scott pouted. "I'm so mad I want to break something!"

"Well, I'm going to the kitchen and put your play dough on the table. I want you to come and take your feelings out on it instead of throwing cars."

Scott's father left the room and went to the kitchen to put out the play dough as he had said. Then he returned to his task of repairing a toaster. In a few minutes, Scott appeared at the table and began to pound and squeeze the play dough. Soon he had

vented his anger and began to roll and flatten the dough as he usually did.

**Blocks.** An experienced teacher of young children was asked what piece of equipment she would buy for a classroom if she could buy only one. She replied without hesitation that she would buy blocks because they are basic to learning and because a good set of wooden blocks lasts a lifetime. Few of us at home have room or money for a set of wooden blocks but blocks are also very important at home. Small wooden blocks or large cardboard ones are reasonably priced and can last throughout your child's early years.

Block play helps children develop eye-hand coordination and balance. Blocks also help children develop their imaginative skills because blocks can be buildings, people, cars, trees—anything children can imagine. Children's ability to use blocks develops in stages. When children first use blocks they enjoy loading them or carrying them around. Next comes a stage of setting blocks up in a line, then stacking them in towers, and later building more complicated buildings.

**Manipulative Toys.** Manipulative toys have pieces that the children move, such as puzzles, stringing or stacking toys, or sets with pieces from which to make things. They help children develop eye-hand coordination and thinking skills, especially puzzles, when each piece will fit in only one place. Children must decide which piece fits. With a toy such as Tinker Toys or Leggo Blocks, no pattern or model should be offered so that children can at first just "mess about." Later they can think of what to build and how to build it.

Many manipulative toys can be made at home so it is not necessary to spend a lot of money for them. Buttons, washers, or spools can be strung. Tin cans or cardboard boxes can become nesting sets that stack inside or on top of one another. Puzzles can be made by gluing pictures onto cardboard and cutting them into shapes. You can use *your* imagination to think of toys that can be made from household or throw-away materials.

### **Imaginative Play**

Children learn about themselves and others as they use their imaginations to pretend. They may become a family member, a doctor or the mailman or even an animal. We can provide

dress-up clothes or props such as a bag for mail. We can participate with our children when invited.

Three-year-old Andrew appeared in the kitchen wearing his father's old fatigue hat and carrying some small wrenches his father had given him.

"Hello, Mrs.," he said to his mother. "I am a fix-it man. Do you have anything that needs fixing today?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Fix-it," his mother said, joining in the play. "There are some loose knobs on the cabinet doors. Can you fix them for me?"

"Yes, I can," replied Andrew. He set to work with his wrenches and played with the knobs on the doors. Soon he said, "All fixed, Mrs. I have to go now. I have to work on my tricycle." Andrew went to the garage, turned his tricycle upside down and began to "fix-it."

In his imaginative play, Andrew was learning what tools can do and something about the world of work.

We may think of imaginative play in terms of playing house. It is important for children to play out family roles as well as occupational ones. In playing out what they have seen adults do at home, children learn what it is like to be a parent. Boys may sometimes want to be the mother, and girls may pretend to be father. These are normal role reversals because boys and girls are learning about the roles of fathers and mothers. Avoid stereotyped role models. Some fathers enjoy cooking while some mothers like to repair appliances.

If your children have an interest in playing "house," you will want to provide dolls and dishes or whatever props seem necessary. I believe that young children need dolls that are not battery-operated or programmed to do one activity such as crawl or eat or ride a tricycle. Dolls are for holding, dressing, putting to bed, and washing. They should be sturdy so boys and girls can use their imagination. That's what creative play is all about.

### **Books and Reading**

Children's reading skills are a source of great concern to parents and educators in recent years. Adults worry about how to lay a solid foundation for reading. I believe children will learn to read—when they are ready—if the important adults in their lives read and read to them.

- (a) Find a time when you can read to your child—a time that is comfortable and cozy. Enjoy books together, and your children will find reading a pleasurable experience.
- (b) Young children enjoy books with large colorful pictures and a few words. They enjoy books with funny sounds, especially as their ability to use language develops.
- (c) Since children learn by imitation, they regard the skill of reading more highly if they see you doing it.
- (d) Young children “read” with meaning, only things that are within their experience. In the early years, it is important to provide field trips to the grocery, museum, or countryside. Let the children visit persons of other nationalities or vocations. Let them experience a broad segment of life. Then words will have meaning to them as they relate these to previous experiences.
- (e) Buy some good books for your children and take advantage of your public library.

#### **Outdoor Play**

Children need to play outside in the natural world and feel free to get dirty! I am frequently surprised by the number of children in nursery school who do not enjoy playing outside. Some of them don't want to get dirty. Others expect to be entertained by play equipment. Children need to be able to play in sand and dirt. They need a place to dig. Many parents today get so involved in creating a beautifully landscaped lawn that they forget children need a place to play outside. That place may not be attractive to adults, but it is important to children.

Children need something to climb on. It may be a purchased dome climber or something the family has designed and built. A balance beam, an important piece of equipment, helps children learn balance and a sense of left and right motor control. A balance beam can be made from two by four's or it can be a large log.

#### **Children Learn Through Parents**

Researcher Burton White<sup>12</sup> has observed that mothers who let their very young children follow them around as they do their housework, rather than confining them to a play pen or their

<sup>12</sup>Burton White. *The First Three Years of Life*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975.

bedrooms, become more competent. He has discovered that mothers do a great deal of teaching in and through everyday tasks. As adults cook, clean, build, repair, sew, write, or read, young children have the opportunity to observe, acquire skills, and learn about life.

“What are you making?” Kathryn asked as she danced into the room.

“Meatloaf,” her dad replied.

“Oh, goodie! Can I help?”

“Yes, wash your hands and get a chair to stand on,” her dad said.

“Can I break the egg, Dad?” Kathryn asked.

“Yes, you are just in time,” Dad answered with a smile.

Kathryn carefully hit the egg on the side of the bowl and pulled the shell apart.

“There, I did it!” she said with satisfaction. “Now can I mix it?” Her Dad nodded.

“Oh, this is good and yucky!” declared Kathryn as she mixed the meatloaf with her hands.

Kathryn is learning something about cooking, is having a sensory experience, and is gaining confidence in herself as she mixes the meatloaf. She is also really helping her Dad in a small way. She and her Dad might have had a conversation about where the egg, the meat, and the oatmeal came from or about how each ingredient looks, feels, or smells. Children are learning all the time, and we are teaching all the time—whether we know it or not.

#### **Every Errand Is a Field Trip**

Every time you take your children with you to a store or on an errand, it is a field trip to them. You can take advantage of their curiosity and interest by talking to them about the place you are going and what happens there. The grocery store with many kinds of food, the post office with all those square boxes, and the bank where grown-ups get money are all interesting places where children can learn.

A young woman once asked our family to take her to the airport. She was rather embarrassed at having to ask for a favor, so she said that we could just drop her off at the gate and go on home. We insisted that we wanted to stay with her until she

boarded the plane because our children would enjoy the trip to the airport. We did stay with her until the plane took off because we were all fascinated by the train of baggage cars, the restaurant truck that raised its load up to the plane, the gasoline truck, the ramp that extends out from the gate to the airplane—not to mention the metal detecting device everyone had to walk through. We thanked our friend for the interesting field trip that we would not have taken had she not needed a ride to the airport.

When you go somewhere with your children, try to forget how many times you have seen the place. Try to look and touch and smell through the child's senses and be aware of what he/she can learn through this trip. Help children experience God's world and in awe and wonder appreciate God's creation.

#### **Buying Toys for Your Children**

The toys and play materials discussed in this chapter will not be the only ones you will provide for your children. This is not an inclusive list, but a discussion of some basic toys. Adults find ourselves in a toy store looking for the toys the children have seen advertised on television. Take time to question whether it is a good toy rather than accepting the word of the advertiser. Fitzhugh Dodson, in his book *How To Parent*,<sup>13</sup> has a list of five criterion for evaluating toys.

1. *A good toy is safe.* It does not have sharp edges or toxic paint. It is not made out of material that is easily shattered or splintered. It does not have small pieces on which a child can choke.
2. *A good toy is durable.* In general, plastic and tin toys are the least durable; wood and sturdy metal, the most durable.
3. *A good toy needs the child.* The more the child has to do and the less the toy does for him, the more the child develops self-confidence and creativity, and the more the child learns.
4. *A good toy is fun.* A toy may be educational, but if it's not fun, it's not a good toy.
5. *A good toy must be suitable to the age and stage of development of the child.* When you are selecting toys

<sup>13</sup>Fitzhugh Dodson, *How To Parent*, © 1970 by Fitzhugh Dodson. Reprinted by permission of Nash Publishing Corporation.

for a preschooler, remember that the smaller the child, the bigger the toy should be to suit his/her immature stage of development.

#### **Things to Think About**

1. What are your children's favorite toys? How do they help the child develop creatively? What other religious values are possible?
2. What else could you provide for your children's play that would help develop their uniqueness?