

HELPER HANDBOOK



Marvel at Jesus, Live for His Glory

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Helper Handbook

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For more information, write:

Answers in Genesis

PO Box 510, Hebron, KY 41048

Project Coordinator: Stacia McKeever

Writers: Randy & Barb Witt, Amy Quinn

Editors: Linda Moore and Sarah Zornes

Cover Design & Interior Layout: Diane King

Illustrations: Paul Agner

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YEE-HAW!

Howdy, partners!

Look to your left—do you see the cattle over yonder stampeding across the plains? Look to your right—can your eyes make out the sun-covered buttes of the desert? Look behind you—the brand-new transcontinental railroad is rumbling along the tracks! From the Badlands of South Dakota to the high peaks of the Rockies, there is wonder to be discovered everywhere we turn in the Old West!

Join us as we gallop through the wonder-filled West, where our friends at Wonder Junction will teach us about the grandest wonder of all—Jesus Christ. Each day, we'll dig deeper into who this awe-inspiring Jesus is, answering questions such as:

- What amazing things happened surrounding Jesus' birth?
- What was Jesus like as a child and teen?
- What wonders occurred during Jesus' ministry years?
- How were Jesus' death and resurrection like no other?
- What should we be doing as we wait for Jesus' return?

Wonder and amazement await us each day at Wonder Junction, where kids will gather at the **All Aboard Assembly**, a high-energy beginning that includes wacky intros, lively songs, a mission moment, and prayer.

Then we're off to rotate through five fun sites:

High Point Bible Time, where God's Word is taught in creative, hands-on ways.

Carpenter Joe's Science and Crafts, where kids get their hands dirty as

they make crafts and explore God's world through science experiments.

Sweet Sadie's Snacks, where kids munch on some downright tasty home-cooked vittles.

Gallopin' Gabe's Games, the ram-bunctious rec time where kids might just get plumb tuckered out.

Miss Millie's Missions, Music, and Memory Verses, where kids sing songs, learn their memory verses, or go in-depth with the mission moment featuring Children's Hunger Fund.

Finally, everyone is rounded up to head back to the **All Aboard Assembly** for the closing, where there's more singing, contest results, and the highly anticipated daily drama that highlights the shenanigans of two bumbling bandits who are transformed after learning about the *wonderful* life of Jesus Christ.

So dust off your boots, grab your bandana, and get ready for a rootin' tootin' good ol' time at Wonder Junction!

Our Goal

We are so thankful for how God has chosen to use the Answers VBS programs over the past years! But why did we decide to embark on such an undertaking in the first place, and why are we still at it, by God's grace?

Our primary goal has always been to bring God glory by boldly and unashamedly proclaiming him to a strategic group—young people. From both a biblical and statistical point of view, young people are a big deal. They're not only awesome—we love 'em!—but they're also dearly cherished by our Lord and tend to be

softhearted toward spiritual things. Researchers generally agree most people become Christians when they're children, so it's apparent this age group is a huge mission field!

Children are loved by their Creator, and Jesus said to let them come to him (Luke 18:16). We want children to come to Christ and not be hindered in any way from doing so. To that end, we combine a biblically rich VBS with off-the-chart, irresistible fun. In a day and age when content sometimes suffers, we don't want to sacrifice rich teaching. But it's also crucial that the most exciting book in the world not come across as boring or irrelevant. We want to reflect our creative,

inspiring, joy-giving God who made laughter and fun.

So why do we do it? We want kids around the world to hear about and personally meet our awesome God and understand how they can receive eternal life through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus. We believe VBS is a great way to introduce them to God, as it is one of the biggest outreaches of the year for most churches.

We pray you will find that every prayer prayed, every minute invested, every dollar spent, and every word spoken will bring God glory as you reach kids for Christ. Just remember—VBS is worth it. May God richly bless your VBS. We're praying for you!

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The content of *Wonder Junction* may be new to you. For a list of helpful articles on the topics covered in this VBS program, please visit AnswersVBS.com/wonderfaq.

TERMS TO KNOW

Throughout the VBS curriculum, various terms will be used. Here is a list of some of the most common terms to know.

Partners (as in, "Howdy, partners!"): Groups of children (individual classes) named after Old West people, such as Miners, Ranchers, Blacksmiths, and Homesteaders.

Group Guides: Group leaders who guide the partners from place to place during VBS. No teaching is required of this position.

High Point Bible Time: Bible and apologetics lesson time happening at the High Point Chapel.

Truth Teachers: Teachers of the High Point Bible Time.

Carpenter Joe's Science and Crafts: Rotation site where crafts are made and science experiments are explored.

Sweet Sadie's Snacks: Indoor or outdoor location where snacks are served.

Gallopin' Gabe's Games: Indoor or outdoor site (outdoor is preferred) for recreation time.

Miss Millie's Missions, Music, and Memory Verses: Rotation site where kids can spend additional time learning songs and memory verses and hearing about missions.

Gold Mine Memory Time: Time to learn and practice the daily Bible verse.

Animal Pals: Our friendly animal mascots that remind us of the main themes of each day.

Toddlers: 2–4-year-olds.

Pre-Primaries: 4–6-year-olds or children ages 4 through those who have completed kindergarten.

Primaries: 6–9-year-olds or children who have completed grades 1–3.

Juniors: 9–12-year-olds or children who have completed grades 4–6.

For multi-age K–6 travel groups, we recommend using the material for the Primaries.

STAFF DEVOTIONS

DEVOTION 1: TREASURE JESUS

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

Imagine your young daughter comes to you one day after finishing her chores and making the daily bread. She says, "Dear parents, as you know, our people have been promised a savior for hundreds of years. Even from the beginning, Yahweh has promised that he would send one to save his people from their sins. Today, an angel told me I would bear the Promised One! Mom, Dad—our Savior is coming! And it's true what our prophet Isaiah said over 700 years ago—I have known no man, yet I am with child."

Would you think she was crazy? Would you call to mind all the promises from the Law and the Prophets you've been taught since your childhood, mulling over each one, waiting to see if more than this one spoken by Isaiah would come to pass through your daughter and her child? Would you tick each one off your mental checklist?

- He was the child of a woman (Genesis 3:15). Check.
- Micah said he would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Check.
- Solomon said kings would worship him (Psalm 72:10–11). Check.
- Hosea said he would be called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1). Check.

Is it really possible that one child could fulfill all these promises? Was your daughter telling the truth those many months ago? Could this child,

whose name means "the Lord saves," really be the promised one?

Those shepherds who came to visit the baby, wanting to see the Savior that had been born to us, Christ the Lord—did they really know what they were talking about? Is it our Savior? . . . This is our Savior!

As you read the passages revealing the events surrounding the birth of Christ for the umpteenth time, meditate on the events that set his birth apart from all others—the fulfillment of prophecy, the worship of shepherds and kings, the lowly manger cradling the King of kings. As you share the good news of the Creator who stepped into history as a baby, make sure your children know that this was no ordinary baby. This is Immanuel, God with us.

May we pray as the Puritans did:

O God, take me in spirit to the watchful shepherds, and enlarge my mind;

Let me hear good tidings of great joy, and hearing, believe, rejoice, praise, adore,

My conscience bathed in an ocean of repose, my eyes uplifted to a reconciled Father;

Place me with ox, ass, camel, goat, to look with them upon my redeemer's face,

And in him account myself delivered from sin;

Let me with Simeon clasp the newborn child to my heart, embrace

him with undying faith, exulting
that he is mine and I am his.
In him thou hast given me so much
that heaven can give no more.

—Arthur Bennett, *The Valley
of Vision*
(The Banner of Truth Trust,
2005), 16.

DEVOTION 2: FOLLOW JESUS

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 1 Peter 2:21

Imagine being a young boy and having a friend whose dad was a carpenter. He helped his dad around his shop and invited you in for a meal after a day of tending your sheep. Indeed, your father had encouraged you to befriend the carpenter's son. Apparently, your dad had been there the night of his birth and had experienced something indescribable.

In your teen years, your eyes couldn't help but roll every time your dad asked you to gather the sheep *again*. But your friend always obeyed his parents right away—all the way—cheerfully without complaining. While you got hangry, he never did. He also calmed you down when you were "righteously angry" at the latest injustices experienced by your people.

This young man seemed to make friends with the animals he fitted for yokes. And his tears flowed when his beloved pet donkey died. He enjoyed a good joke—but never at someone's expense. He seemed to know things that no one else knew. Everyone gravitated toward the serious young man who taught even the teachers.

After you married and began having kids, he celebrated birthdays and anniversaries with you, bringing children presents that he had made in his wood shop. Strangely enough, his own birthday never seemed

important to him—he always seemed older than he was anyway.

Later, you watched as a crowd gathered around to listen to your friend teach. His teachings were astounding—to turn the other cheek when the Roman oppressors struck? To give them all you had when they asked? To love them after years of ingrained hatred? Perfection was the standard set by God in order to gain heaven? The kingdom of God was near?

And then you both attended the wedding of a mutual friend, and somehow, he changed the water you'd just sipped into the best wine you'd ever tasted. Surely, no ordinary man could do that!

Could this man, your lifelong friend, really be the one? The Messiah who had been promised for hundreds of years? Has your Deliverer come?

... Yes, the Deliverer has come!

As you study the passages about Jesus' childhood, scant though they are, meditate on the differences between the children you know and the child he was. Think about what other religions teach and claim. *Superior* doesn't even begin to describe Jesus compared to everyone else. And yet, this Creator-Redeemer has called us to learn from him, to imitate him, and to follow him.

As you share with the children today, try to convey the sense of wonder and awe that he inspires in

what he teaches and does, encouraging them to follow after this God-Man, Jesus Christ.

May we pray as the Puritans prayed:

I bless thee that thou hast made me capable of knowing thee, the author of all being,
Of resembling thee, the perfection of all excellency,
Of enjoying thee, the source of all happiness.

Let my religion be more obvious to my conscience, more perceptible to those around.

While Jesus is representing me in heaven, may I reflect him on earth,

While he pleads my cause, may I show forth his praise.

Continue the gentleness of thy goodness towards me,
And whether I wake or sleep, let thy presence go with me, thy blessing attend me.

Thou hast led me on and I have found thy promises true.

Thy vows are ever upon me, and I praise thee, O God.

—Arthur Bennett, *The Valley of Vision*
(The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 11.

DEVOTION 3: WORSHIP JESUS

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

Imagine meeting a man who claimed to be God. What would you think?

Crazy nut?

Now imagine this man claimed to be the fulfillment of statements written hundreds of years before. Sure, sure, weirdo.

Now imagine if the little boy down the street, who had died, was running around again. The man who claimed to be God had raised him from the dead. It was no trick—you had seen the boy after he died, and he was now playing with your kids.

Makes you think, doesn't it? Could this man really be who he claimed to be? This is our Savior.

Even though today, we would (and should) scoff at someone staking a claim to deity, Jesus Christ was the real deal. He was the Creator incarnate, the God-man, the one who came to save his people from their sins,

fulfilling the promises God had made since the beginning of time.

As you study your Bible this week, put aside the genteel storybook notions that cloud the truth about the Messiah. And read the gospel accounts as if for the first time.

Marvel at the astounding claims Jesus made like, “before Abraham was, I AM”; the awesome demonstrations of his power over nature, sin, and death; the amazing fact that he rose from the dead; and the astonishing change in the lives of those he touched.

Of all the people who have ever lived, ever led a religion, ever claimed to be a deity, only Jesus has the credentials to deserve our worship and following. And the only way we can know the truth about him is through his inspired Word, the Bible.

As you prepare to meet Jesus with your students today, let's meditate

on this Puritan prayer about the
Rock of Ages.

Thou Great I AM,
Fill my mind with elevation
and grandeur at the thought
of a Being

With whom one day is as a
thousand years, and a thousand
years as one day.

A mighty God who, amidst the lapse
of the worlds, and the revolutions
of empires,

Feels no variableness but is
glorious in immortality.

May I rejoice that, while men die,
the Lord lives;

That, while all creatures are broken
reeds, empty cisterns, fading
flowers, withering grass,

He is the Rock of Ages, the fountain
of Living Waters.

—Arthur Bennett, *The Valley
of Vision*
(The Banner of Truth Trust,
2005), 104.

DEVOTION 4: BELIEVE JESUS

*He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see
the place where he lay. Matthew 28:6*

Imagine following the political career
of a most unusual man for several
years. He was said to be the one for
whom the people had waited. The
one who would save the people from
the persecution suffered for hundreds
of years.

He was certainly different than
anyone who had come before. He
taught with such authority and knew
the holy Scriptures so thoroughly, it
was no wonder many were attracted
to him. His power was undeniable—
he had healed your friend from a
bleeding problem that no doctor
had been able to help with and had
made the evil spirits tormenting
you go away.

One of the more significant differ-
ences was his lifestyle—he seemed to
live a blameless life. Even his mother,
a friend of yours, claimed he was an
obedient child who cared for others.
It was difficult to imagine any man as
the personification of perfection, but
if there was one, he would be it.

Imagine your grief and despair
when he died and especially at the

way in which he died—a horrible
death reserved for the worst of crim-
inals. Indeed, he was hung on a tree
between two thieves. The strange
thing about this man was that he had
seemed to hint that his death was
near. But why? Why would the one
God sent need to die? Didn't he come
to bring life and freedom?

Now imagine that heart-stopping
moment when you went to honor
his memory and the man at the tomb
said, "He is not here; for he has risen,
as he said." Imagine the momentary
panic at the missing body. Rise again
... did he say he would rise from the
dead? His body isn't there ... is it
possible he's really alive? He's alive!
Imagine seeing the risen Savior.

As you study the chapters pertain-
ing to Christ's death and resurrection,
meditate on the gravity of what our
sin brought about—the death of the
Creator of the universe. And rejoice in
his resurrection that secured eternal
life for you!

As you share with the children
today, make sure they know that the

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is anchored in history. He really died, and he really rose again. And he was seen by hundreds of witnesses after his resurrection. Make sure they know that they can receive the eternal life he offers to those who believe.

May we pray as the Puritans did:

Blessed Lord Jesus,
Before thy cross I kneel and see the
heinousness of my sin, my iniquity
that caused thee to be "made a
curse," the evil that excited the
severity of divine wrath.

Show me the enormity of my
guilt by the crown of thorns,
the pierced hands and feet, the
bruised body, the dying cries.

Thy blood is the blood of incarnate
God, its worth infinite, its value
beyond all thought.

Infinite must be the evil and guilt
that demands such a price.

Yet thy compassions yearn over me,
thy heart hastens to my rescue,
thy love endured my curse, thy
mercy bore my deserved stripes.

Let me walk humbly in the lowest
depths of humiliation, bathed in
thy blood, triumphing gloriously
as an heir of salvation.

—Arthur Bennett, *The Valley
of Vision*
(The Banner of Truth Trust,
2005), 41.

DEVOTION 5: SHARE JESUS

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come
upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all
Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Acts 1:8*

Imagine being part of the crowd
chanting for the death of the one
standing before the governor. You
weren't sure what he had done
wrong, but the religious leaders were
calling for his death, so he must have
been deserving of it.

You followed the crowd as they
surged toward the place of the skull,
where the crucifixions took place,
taunting the man all the way.

Imagine watching as the man was
lifted up and drew his last breath. If
he was who he claimed to be, surely
he could have saved himself.

Imagine, months later, carrying
your friend, lame from birth, to the
temple gates as you had hundreds
of times before and entering into the
temple to pray. Imagine your disbelief
as, moments later, the man you knew
was unable to walk, ran into the place

of prayer. What happened to him?
Who were these men he was follow-
ing around?

Wait—was that the fisherman who
was a student of the man they cruci-
fied several months ago? One of the
ones who had deserted the Teacher
at his arrest? Hadn't the Teacher's
followers gone into hiding after
his death?

Imagine your shock as the fisher-
man boldly accused you of murdering
the . . . Prince of Life? Who had risen
from the dead? And been seen by the
fisherman? That man was alive, and
in his name, your friend was healed?

Imagine the hope as the fisherman
called the entire crowd to repent of
their sins and receive the sacrifice
the Prince of Life had made on behalf
of sinners. Surely, the one who had
given the fisherman the power to

preach, who had healed your friend, who had raised himself from the dead—surely, he was the one about whom the prophets had preached and for whom you had waited.

The Redeemer had come? The Redeemer had come!

And he would be coming again some day!

Think about what happened after Jesus rose from the dead and marvel at the transformation that took place in the lives of those who believed in the Son of God. The amazing power of God to transform sinners into the image of the invisible Christ is evident throughout the rest of the New Testament—and should be evident in our lives as children of God.

As you share with your students today, emphasize that it is God who saves us and calls us to be his witnesses. We have a precious treasure—the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus—that we must share with

those around us while we wait for his return.

May we pray as the Puritans did:

Father of Jesus,

May my words and works allure
others to the highest walks of
faith and love!

May worldlings be won to delight in
acquaintance with thee!

May the timid and irresolute be
warned of coming doom by my
zeal for Jesus!

Cause me to be a mirror of thy
grace; to show

others the joy of thy service,
Help me to walk as Jesus walked,
my only Savior

and perfect model, his mind my
inward guest, his meekness my
covering garb.

—Arthur Bennett, *The Valley
of Vision*
(The Banner of Truth Trust,
2005), 136.

TOP 20 TIPS WHEN WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 19:13-14

1. **Show love.** All children, regardless of age or appearance, need to be loved. Greet them warmly each day and always be ready with smiles, giggles, encouraging words, and appropriate hugs. (Be aware of your church's appropriate touching policies.)
2. **Learn names.** It makes children feel important and loved to be called by their name. Make sure a visible name tag is always on each child.
3. **Keep it moving.** Children have short attention spans.
4. **Use active learning.** The more children can be actively involved in the learning process, the more they will retain.
5. **Be all there!** During VBS, determine to leave behind whatever is currently going on in your life and focus your attention on the children under your care. Listen to them and care for them.
6. **Eliminate downtime.** Find activities to do when you have a few free minutes so all time is being used in a fun and productive way. Practice memory verses, share Terrific Trivia Tidbits and Knee-Slappin' Sillies from this book, play impromptu review games, or ask fun conversation starters. Check the Two-Minute Tips page at the back of this guide for specific ideas.
7. **Think safety.** Read the Child Safety Precautions page. Ensure there are always at least two unrelated adults with the children at all times.
8. **Be thematic.** Get the children enthused and excited about participating in the daily contests. Children love costumes, fun cheers, songs, and anything that goes with the theme.
9. **Walk worthy.** Be an example in both word and deed. Children need to see authentic Christianity, so make sure you are walking the walk and not just talking the talk.
10. **Notice the good.** Children want attention and will sometimes act up in an effort to receive even negative attention. Be proactive by noticing and praising the things they do right. Be an encourager.
11. **Be aware of age-level characteristics.** With younger children, activities need to be hands-on, concrete, short, and simple. Older children love to talk and are processing and questioning information. Be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you.
12. **Challenge them.** Children generally rise to the level expected of them, so challenge them to learn their memory verses and song lyrics. At the same time, encourage in them a true love for the Lord and his Word.
13. **Pray.** Before, during, and after VBS, be a faithful prayer warrior for the children in your care.

14. **Be organized.** Read through all training information, ask questions, and faithfully prepare any materials for which you are responsible.
15. **Be a team player.** Children do not need to hear negative words from their leaders. If you are frustrated or upset, take it to the Lord, but do not complain or get angry in front of the children.
16. **Remember to take bathroom breaks.** The younger the children, the more important this is!
17. **Maintain order.** Children like order! Think through potential trouble spots in your day and decide on a firm, loving discipline strategy. Ask for help from experienced individuals.
18. **Build team spirit.** Work as a team rather than allowing cliques to develop. Everyone should be an important member of the team.
19. **Use guided conversation.** Be alert and ready to turn conversations to spiritual matters. Build upon what the children are learning throughout the VBS day.
20. **Be prepared to lead a child to Christ.** Attend the Gospel Workshop to be equipped should God give you the awesome opportunity to talk with a child about Christ.

AGE-LEVEL CHARACTERISTICS

Kids are awesome! Each one is unique and is a special creation from the hand of our amazing Creator. With all their uniqueness, however, they also share some common characteristics. That doesn't mean every child always exhibits the following characteristics at the corresponding age, but these guidelines can be a benchmark to use when looking at

characteristics of children as a whole. It can be helpful to see how God has wired children as they develop, enabling us to be more effective in teaching and interacting with them.

First, you'll see characteristics of children in general and then characteristics broken down by the four age groups we use with Answers VBS.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

- Children are born sinners.
- God has given each a conscience, and they (generally) want good to win over evil.
- God has shown himself to all children through his creation, making it obvious to all that there is a Creator.
- Children enjoy active learning by moving around; seeing, touching, smelling, and hearing things; and being involved.
- Children need to be loved, encouraged, and praised.
- Children are rapidly growing and changing.
- Children trust the adults who are responsible for them.
- Children can get discouraged by criticism and failure.
- Children are eager to learn and are curious about the world and about God.

TODDLERS (2-4 YEARS OLD)

Physical Characteristics

Toddlers are active! They're on the move, running, climbing, and exploring. Some are beginning to perform simple tasks like using scissors. They can easily get hurt as they are rapidly developing physical skills but don't have wisdom to know when to stop running, climbing, etc.

Takeaways for Us

- Keep toddlers moving. Engage them actively as much as possible. Have them do motions to songs and actions to Bible accounts.
- Supervise them carefully.

- Provide chunky, nontoxic supplies.
- Intersperse periods of sitting with something active.

Emotional/Social Characteristics

Toddlers want to do things by themselves, such as picking out their clothes and dressing themselves. They like imaginative, dramatic play. They're testing their powers and saying "no" a lot. They often want to please adults and try to mimic their behaviors. They're affectionate toward others. Toddlers are fearful of things that are loud and out of the ordinary.

Takeaways for Us

- Let toddlers be helpers. Give them simple one-step jobs to do and have them help pick up things and straighten the room at the end of the lesson. Let them know they've done a good job.
- Be consistently present all week; establish routines and stick with them.
- Be consistent in discipline. Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no."
- Give them opportunities to dress up and play imaginatively.
- Don't dress in elaborate costumes that may seem unfamiliar and scary.
- Be careful to walk worthy—act and speak in godly ways. Little eyes are watching and will want to imitate you!

Spiritual/Mental Characteristics

Toddlers are curious and want to touch, smell, feel, see, and experience

their world. They have short attention spans and learn/communicate in short sentences. They understand short and simple directions. They believe what you say. Their attitude toward God and others is in the process of being formed during these years.

Takeaways for Us

- Involve toddlers' senses in learning! The more they can touch, smell, see, taste, and feel, the better!
- Give clear, simple directions.
- Keep activities and lessons short. Toddlers' attention spans are only a few minutes long before they need to switch to something new, so keep it moving!
- Be careful to speak accurately and truthfully.
- Show care and respect for your Bible and help them see your love for it and for the Lord.

PRE-PRIMARIES (4–6 YEARS OLD)

Physical Characteristics

Pre-Primaries are active and more confident in physical activities like jumping, hopping on one foot, and walking backward. They love to be moving. They're improving in hand-eye coordination.

Takeaways for Us

Pre-Primaries like to play hard, so keep them moving with short, simple games and activities. They may need to sit and rest for a brief time after active play.

Emotional/Social Characteristics

Pre-Primaries are less fearful than Toddlers but still often exhibit common fears, such as fear of dogs and the dark. They can have emotional extremes and are testing others to see who can be controlled. They want to please adults and want praise. They will often mimic adults' behaviors. They like imaginative play. Pre-Primaries can handle small tasks and levels of responsibility.

Takeaways for Us

- Let them be helpers. Give them simple jobs to do, and have them

help pick up things and straighten the room at the end of the lesson. Let them know they've done a good job.

- Give them opportunities to dress up and play imaginatively.
- Be consistent in discipline. Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no."
- Be careful to walk worthy—act and speak in godly ways. Little eyes are watching and will want to imitate you!

Spiritual/Mental Characteristics

Pre-Primaries talk a lot and ask a lot of questions, including questions about God. They understand that sin is disobeying God. They need a lot of guidance in tasks but can also follow a simple series of directions. They have an attention span of approximately five minutes. They enjoy doing new things and hearing stories and songs. They're not always able to tell the difference between reality and fantasy. They're developing attitudes toward right and wrong and can do basic memory work.

Takeaways for Us

- In downtime, give them time to ask questions and be ready to patiently answer. But while you are teaching, be careful you don't get so wrapped up in letting them talk that the lesson doesn't happen!
- Vary activities often. The longer an activity goes, the more wiggly they'll become!
- When engaged in pretend activities, name them as such (e.g., "Let's pretend to be explorers!"). At the same time, point out often that God's Word is not pretend but true!
- Repetition in songs and stories works great and is enjoyed by Pre-Primaries.
- Sing the memory verse songs with them. They will be able to learn at least parts of the verses by the end of the week.
- Use visuals.
- Teach them about sin and asking God for forgiveness.
- Show interest in each child, helping them know you care.
- Be careful to speak accurately and truthfully.
- Show care and respect for your Bible and help them see your love for it and for the Lord.

PRIMARIES (6—9 YEARS OLD)

Physical Characteristics

Primaries love games and competitions, but it can be hard for them to lose. They are continuing to grow and improve in hand-eye coordination and fine and gross motor skills. They need to have opportunities for movement.

Takeaways for Us

- Use games to teach! Primaries love any kind of games, whether active or learning-type games.
- Help them learn to take turns and to be good winners and good losers! Both winning and losing well are important in God's sight.
- Use boy vs. girl competitions to get them revved up! As long as you

keep it light and fun, they will enjoy these times.

Emotional/Social Characteristics

Primaries are becoming more independent and confident in their ability to do things. Girls play most often with girls and boys with boys, but there is some mixing of girl and boy friends. They like to have a best friend and enjoy pretend play. Primaries enjoy jokes and are gaining a sense of humor. They care about being accepted by the team and want adult/teacher approval.

Takeaways for Us

- Give Primaries plenty of opportunities to work in groups or with partners.
- Use humor with Primaries. The sillier, the better!
- Be careful to walk worthy—act and speak in godly ways.

Spiritual/Mental Characteristics

Primaries like to talk and ask questions. They understand simple concepts and sentences and are concrete in their thinking, rather than being able to understand abstract or symbolic thinking. They're learning to read. They need active learning. Their attention span is growing. They understand the consequences of their actions. They can tell the difference between reality and fantasy.

They often have a strict sense of right and wrong.

Takeaways for Us

- Be concrete in what you say. Don't use abstract or symbolic language. For example, regarding salvation, don't ask if they have Jesus in their hearts. They will take that literally. More concrete ways to express this concept are "becoming a child of God" or "being in God's family." Kids will understand what it means to be part of a family.
- Activities can stretch for a longer time, but it's still good to vary activities and involve Primaries with movement as much as possible.
- Some children read better than others. Be careful about asking children to read out loud. Try asking for volunteers.
- Small print can be a challenge, so use larger print when possible.
- Encourage memorization.
- Use visuals.
- Show interest in each child, helping them sense your care and interest in them.
- Be careful to speak accurately and truthfully. Explain Bible words and concepts.
- Remember that you are a role model.
- Show care and respect for your Bible and help them see your love for it and for the Lord.

JUNIORS (9–12 YEARS OLD)

Physical Characteristics

Juniors can vary widely as they grow, with some having a growth spurt that launches them into puberty. (This can make them get tired easily.) Height, weight, and physical maturity can be

all across the board. They're continuing to grow in physical abilities. Some are becoming known for athletic abilities. Juniors enjoy going places and doing interesting things. They enjoy games and competitions.

Takeaways for Us

- Don't comment on physical appearance, such as how tall someone is. Juniors can feel sensitive and awkward about their bodies.
- Make sure to help each child realize how special and uniquely created by God he or she is. Some have gifts/talents physically, some musically, some academically, etc. They need to be assured that they are God's masterpiece, created exactly as they are for a special purpose.
- Some love being active, and some don't. But it's good to keep them involved and moving.

Emotional/Social Characteristics

Juniors can't wait to grow up. They look up to teenagers/young adults. They like challenges and may develop interests and hobbies, although they're self-conscious about their abilities and failures. They're becoming more independent and can handle responsibilities. They enjoy small group discussion with peers and close friends. They're greatly influenced by their friends and want to be accepted. They look to friends for information and advice on issues. They like humor and jokes but may use sarcasm. As they head into puberty, they may experience mood swings.

Takeaways for Us

- Make sure the teens and young adults in their VBS world are good role models.
- Don't tear down Juniors or resort to sarcasm. Be an encourager and a good listener and be patient with them.
- Incorporate small group discussion into learning and do things that allow groups or pairings.

- Be careful to walk worthy—act and speak in godly ways.

Spiritual/Mental Characteristics

Juniors are beginning to think abstractly and are asking many questions, which they want good answers for. They have a much longer attention span than younger children. Their reading and memorization skills are improving. They're developing their views on current issues and often want to associate themselves with their parents' belief system. They spot inconsistencies in what people do versus what they say. Juniors enjoy serving and caring for others.

Takeaways for Us

- Ask thought-provoking spiritual questions. Juniors are thinking and like to talk. Be there for them as a safe person to bounce thoughts and ideas off of.
- Listen well and pray with them.
- Some children read better than others. Be careful about asking children to read out loud unless they volunteer or you know they can read well.
- Allow them to sometimes act out lessons. Most Juniors enjoy this active involvement.
- Give them opportunities to be involved in missions/serving projects.
- Challenge them to ask God to help them grow in their love for God and his Word. Help them set up Bible reading plans and encourage them to memorize passages of Scripture.
- Make sure to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. Kids can spot inconsistencies, so it's important to walk worthy.

- Show interest in each child, helping them sense your care and interest in them.
- Be careful to speak accurately and truthfully, show care and respect for your Bible, and help them see your love for it and for the Lord.

TIPS FOR MANAGING A GROUP OF KIDS

Kids are fun, and kids have energy! Whether you are a group guide, a classroom teacher, or an assistant, be prepared to confidently lead them using some strategies that follow.

Attention Getters

Call and Response—Teach the kids that when a teacher says something, they should reply with something else. Practice the following ideas so kids know your expectations for responding:

- **Teacher:** Gotta go
Kids: Buffalo
- **Teacher:** Better shake
Kids: Rattlesnake
- **Teacher:** Chugga, chugga, chugga, chugga
Kids: Choo choo
- **Teacher:** Crisscross (as they sit and cross legs)
Kids: Big trail boss
- **Teacher:** Jesus loves me
Kids: This I know
Teacher: For the Bible
Kids: Tells me so!

Train's a Comin'!—Make the sound of an oncoming train. Start softly and slowly with the sound (chugga-chugga-choo-choo) while making circles with your arms as wheels. Gradually get louder and faster as the train approaches, then reverse the motions and sounds to finish with everyone sitting quietly.

Horse Gallop—Check online for how to use finger snaps and claps to make it sound like a horse galloping. Do it slow and then get faster.

Rhythm Claps—The teacher claps a little rhythm, and the kids try to clap the exact rhythm back. Vary the clapping patterns.

Countdown—Hold up five fingers and start to count down from five to one. By the count of one, kids should be completely quiet.

Soft Talk—Start talking about something important very softly or in a whisper. Kids will often get quiet to hear what you are saying. Or say, "If you can hear me, clap once." Continue softly with other commands.

Flash the Lights—This is a good signal to listen up.

Lining Up and Walking Through the Building

If You . . .—For lining up, call out fun categories, such as the following:

- "If you are wearing green like a cactus, line up. Now, if you're wearing brown like a grizzly bear, line up."
- "If your birthday is during the summer, line up. Now, if your birthday is during the school year, line up."
- "If you have a dog, line up. Now, if you have a cat, line up. Now, if you have no pets, line up."
- "If you are quiet, line up."

Let's Be . . .—When you are leaving a room, encourage good behavior in the hallway by making a game out of it. This works well with younger kids.

- “Let’s be mice and walk as quietly as we can.”
- “Let’s be robots. No talking—just stiff movements.”

Proactive Tips

Be Prepared—One of the best ways to ward off discipline problems is to be prepared. Think through and organize your day, leaving no downtime. Keep things moving! This takes more effort on your part, but it’s worth it.

Active Participation—Keeping kids actively engaged in the lesson is perhaps the best thing you can do to keep the class from getting rowdy. The lessons are written to be creative, fun, and full of active participation. Play the games, act out the Bible accounts, and do the other ideas listed. Occupy kids’ minds and attention with good stuff!

Helpers—Involve the kids. Let them be helpers. Some kids just want to feel needed, so giving them a responsibility is a way to show you trust them. Try putting them in charge of a simple task, such as helping others learn memory verses, passing out papers, or holding a poster for the teacher. Sometimes a simple task can keep them busy and make them feel important!

Pray—Some kids may never have had anyone pray for them. Pray not only about behavior situations but also about their eternal souls.

Notice the Good—Sometimes a poor behavior is an attention-seeking device, so be proactive and give attention to that child so she doesn’t feel the need to act out negatively. Negative behaviors can be a cry for love and attention.

Use Humor—Kids of all ages love to laugh! Have fun together. If you see

a situation is getting tense or a child is getting upset for some reason, try thinking of a way to lighten the mood with humor.

Distraction—When young kids are dropped off or start to cry, distracting them is a good technique to try. Ask them to tell you about something on their clothes (“Oh, what’s that on your T-shirt?”), get them talking about some of their favorites, or show them an intriguing toy or puppet.

Keep Them Busy—If there is any downtime, fill it with something productive! This could occur while waiting for the next rotation or the assembly to begin or if craft time ends a few minutes early. Use the time to practice team cheers, ask questions, or go over memory verses in fun ways (make up motions, make them into a rap, etc.). You may also want to play a quick game, such as one of these.

- **Stone Face**—Have a competition to see which child can hold a frown the longest without cracking a smile.
- **I Spy**—Look for Western things to spy out.
- **Simon Says**—Simon can say Bible-themed things, like read your Bible (hands in front of you making a book), pray (praying hands), share the gospel (cup hands around mouth), go to church (make a church with a steeple out of your interlocked hands), etc.
- **Quiet Mouse**—Have a competition to see who is the quietest in line.
- **Follow the Leader**—Play the normal version or an Old West version with actions, such as the following:

- » Lasso like a cowboy.
- » Crouch like a cougar.
- » Pan for gold like a miner.
- » Swim like a catfish.
- » Run like a horse.
- » Slither like a rattlesnake.
- » Growl like a bear.
- » Swing your partner like a square dancer.
- » Chop wood like a rancher.
- » Flip flapjacks like a cook.
- » Howl like a wolf pup.

Calming Rowdiness

Don't Yell—Kids may respond at first if someone yells, but they eventually dismiss it. Try some of these other ideas instead.

Separate Kids—Separate kids who misbehave around each other, but also encourage problem-solving when possible. “What are some things we could do to help you and ___ get along?”

Give Choices—Avoid power struggles by giving choices. If a child is resistant to doing something you’ve asked of her, try your command another way. “You can either sit with the rest of the group and listen to the teacher or sit with ___ (leader’s name) at the back of the room.”

Praise in Public, Correct in Private—If someone does need correction, be careful not to embarrass him in front of his peers. If you need to talk to a child about a misbehavior, pull him aside at a time when the rest of the group is distracted. Kids will be less defensive if they don’t feel they have to “save face” in front of their peers—and if they feel you really care and aren’t just coming down on them.

Know Church Policies—Know your church’s policy for severe behavior issues. Do you take the child to your VBS director? Do you alert the child’s parents? Do you involve other staff members? Be prepared.

CHILD SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Keeping children safe during VBS is an important responsibility of all VBS workers that requires both prayerful and practical steps. Begin with prayer, praying before and during VBS for God's protection over each child, worker, and visitor. Also, pray for everything to run smoothly with the facility itself. Prayer is a critically important step in your safety plan and should not be taken for granted! Then plan and execute practical steps, such as the following:

- Thoroughly check all areas for cleanliness and safety each day before VBS begins. Remove hazardous or toxic items, cover outlets, put away heavy or dangerous objects, tape down cords, and make sure everything is in good working order. Check both inside and outside the facility.
- Make sure all workers have had background checks.
- Children should be signed in and out of VBS by their caregivers, following your church's check-in/checkout procedures. Release the children only to authorized individuals.
- Always have at least two unrelated adults (18 and above) with children, including trips to the bathroom. Children must be well-supervised at all times and never be left alone with just one adult or teen.
- Always pair responsible teens with adults.
- Count children every time you move to a different station.
- Enlist qualified members of the church with medical experience to be at the facility during VBS hours. Outline a procedure to quickly find and alert them of any situation needing attention. Make sure an accident report is filled out after any incident.
- Be well aware of which children have which allergies and make sure precautions are taken to protect them.
- Keep ice packs in the freezer for minor bumps.
- Keep adequate first-aid kits in safe and handy spots around the facility and make sure the VBS staffers are aware of their locations. Note: Volunteers can give out adhesive bandages or ice packs, but anything more major should be handled by trained personnel or 911 calls.
- Be aware of what the protocol is in case of emergencies.
- One test church has enlisted some additional precautions, including the following:
 - » No men changing diapers.
 - » No sitting in leaders' laps.
 - » No piggyback rides.
 - » No front hugs—side hugs, high fives, and fist bumps instead.
 - » No photos taken or shared on social media of others' kids.
 - » Police officer on-site during VBS hours.
- Continue to brainstorm and implement precautions for your situation, asking God to keep you alert, aware, and wise regarding these issues.

LEADING A CHILD TO CHRIST

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Romans 1:16

VBS presents an ideal opportunity to share the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ with all attending. Every leader and team member should be ready to clearly present the gospel and counsel those wanting to learn more. Children are usually softhearted toward things of the Lord, and some will be interested in becoming a follower of Christ. Be ready, because eternal matters matter most!

Before

- **Pray.** Salvation is God's work, not ours. We cannot bring about salvation for anyone. We need to ask God to prepare the children and open their hearts to him.
- **Be prepared.** Learn more about presenting the gospel and counseling a child about salvation.

During

The gospel will be presented during the lesson time. Opportunities may arise, however, to share with a child one-on-one or with a small group of children. If so, keep the following in mind:

- Becoming a child of God involves repenting of one's sin and having faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance involves understanding what sin is (disobeying God's commands) and desiring to turn from that sin.
- You can use the booklet *How Can I Become a Child of God?* along with your Bible to explain the plan of salvation. Children need to see and hear God's Word, so have your Bible

opened and marked ahead of time with the appropriate scriptures.

- Avoid abstract phrases like "asking Jesus into your heart." Instead, use terminology like "becoming a child of God." Most children still think in concrete terms and need examples that are easy to understand.
- If a child indicates an interest to know more after hearing the gospel presentation, ask questions (such as the following) that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer:
 - » What do you want to talk to me about?
 - » Do you know what sin is?
 - » Can you think of a specific sin (wrong) you have done?
 - » Are you bothered by your sin?

These questions are important.

A child who cannot verbalize a sin or does not seem to be repentant about being a sinner may not fully understand his need for a Savior. In this situation, you might list some child-oriented examples of sin and ask him to notice any time he catches himself sinning over the next few days. Give him the *How Can I Become a Child of God?* booklet. Pray with him, then send him on his way. Check back a day or two later, if possible.

- If the child does seem to be sincerely sorry for his sins, you can proceed with more questions like the following:
 - » Why did Jesus come to earth? Why did Jesus need to die? Why did Jesus rise again?

- » Why do you want Jesus to be your Savior?
- » Why should God let you into his family? (Make sure the child understands that salvation is not based on what he does but is a gracious gift of God through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.)
- Pray for discernment while listening to a child's answers.
- When a child seems to have a basic understanding of salvation (belief in Jesus' death and resurrection, admission of and repentance from sin, and a desire to follow the Lord), encourage him to talk to his parents about what it means to become a child of God (if they are followers of Christ). Encourage a child who comes from a non-Christian home to verbalize his understanding to the Lord through prayer. There is no one prayer that should be prayed. Encourage him to ask the Lord to forgive him and help him know he is a child of God.
- Let him see in your words and your face that you are excited that he wants to become a child of God! Read Luke 15:10 to him.
- Some children may not want to make decisions but may want to learn more, to be assured of salvation, or to confess sin. Read Romans 10:9-10 and John 10:28-29 with children who are seeking assurance of their salvation. Encourage them to ask the Lord to help them know they are his children. If a child wants to confess sin, read 1 John 1:9 with him and encourage him to ask the Lord to help him know he is forgiven when he repents.

After

- Review what it means to be a child of God.
 - » How long does God keep his children? (Hebrews 13:5; John 10:28-29)
 - » Can anything separate God from his children? (Romans 8:38-39)
 - » What happens when God's children sin? (1 John 1:9)
 - » What do children of God believe? (Romans 10:9)
- Explain that Jesus loves his children and wants to spend time with them. Discuss practical ways to grow as a child of God. Provide him with the *Growing Up in God's Family* booklet and share the following:
 - » Read your Bible and obey what you read. You can start your Bible reading with the short Bible study book you will receive the last day of VBS. (Provide a Bible if he doesn't have one. Be sure to fill out the presentation page.)
 - » Pray every day. Prayer is talking to God.
 - » Go to a church that believes and teaches the Bible as the Word of God.
 - » Tell others about Jesus. Tell your friends, family, and neighbors how they can become children of God.
- Fill out a Decision Card and turn it in to the VBS director.
- Stay in touch with the child through postcards, visits, or phone calls. Invite him to upcoming church events.

Day 1 Overview

The Wonder of His Birth

Lesson Focus		Bible Passages	
The baby King's birth was a wonder. What amazing happenings surrounded it?		Matthew 1-2; Luke 2	
Animal Pal	Apologetics Focus		
Tiny the Cougar Kitten	Is Jesus the most important person ever born?		
Crafts	Snacks	Memory Verse	
Christmas Crèche Ticket to Ride Ornament	Gold Nuggets Biscuit Baby	John 1:14	
		Games	
		Nativity Stations Catch the Caboose	
		Cool Contest	
		Guess the Gold Coins	
		Experiments	
		Star of Wonder Cone in a Cornfield	

DAY 2 OVERVIEW

The Wonder of His Childhood

Lesson Focus		Bible Passage
The young King's childhood was a wonder. What was he like as a child and teen?		Luke 2:39–52
Animal Pal	Apologetics Focus	
Junior the Wolf Pup	Is Jesus God or man—or both?	
Crafts	Snacks	Memory Verse
Covered Wagon Conversations Mini Horseshoes Game 	Carpenter Scraps Wolf Puppy Chow 	Luke 2:52
		Games
		Tough Trials Obstacle Course Annie, Annie Over
		Cool Contest
		Spirit of the West Day
		Experiments
		Lasso Lesson Layers upon Layers

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DAY 3 OVERVIEW

The Wonder of His Ministry Years

Lesson Focus		Bible Passages
The adult King's ministry years were a wonder. What astonishing things occurred?		Selections from the book of Mark
Animal Pal	Apologetics Focus	
Mighty the Bison	Has anyone else had the power to raise himself from the dead?	
Crafts	Snacks	Memory Verse
 Praise Journal Names of Jesus Print	 Mini Flapjacks Loaves & Fish	John 21:25
		Games
		Mercantile Mania Name Above All Names Scavenger Hunt
		Cool Contest
		Old West Dress-Up Day
		Experiments
		Weather the Storm Power Play

Day 4 Overview

The Wonder of His Death and Resurrection

Lesson Focus		Bible Passages	
The risen King's death and resurrection were a wonder. How were they like no other?		Select verses; Matthew 27–28	
Animal Pal	Apologetics Focus		
Champ the Grizzly Bear	Was Jesus completely dead?		
Crafts	Snacks	Memory Verse	
Spikes Cross Necklace or Magnet Sunset Silhouette	Light & Dark Breadstick Rattler	John 20:31	
		Games	
		Safecracker Make Your Claim	
		Cool Contest	
		Names of Jesus Challenge	
		Experiments	
		Riding the Rails Pushy Plates	

DAY 5 OVERVIEW

The Wonder of His Return

Lesson Focus		Bible Passages
The return of the King of kings will be a wonder. What should we be doing in the meantime?		Select verses; Matthew 25:14–29
Animal Pal	Apologetics Focus	
Mission the Horse	How will Jesus return?	
Crafts	Snacks	Memory Verse
 Money Pouch / Wonder Junction Bank	Pizza Wheels Apple Wheels  	Matthew 6:10
		Games
		Wild West Relays Sheriff's Coming
		Cool Contest
		Mission Money Mania
		Experiments
		Spread the Word Marvelous Magnetism

ESV MEMORY VERSES

Junior and Primary

Day 1: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Day 2: And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. Luke 2:52

Day 3: Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. John 21:25

Day 4: But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:31

Day 5: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10

Pre-Primary and Toddler

Day 1: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:14

Day 2: And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor. Luke 2:52

Day 3: Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. John 21:25

Day 4: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John 20:31

Day 5: Your kingdom come, your will be done. Matthew 6:10

Theme Verse: From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised! Psalm 113:3

Bonus: Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:12-17

KJV MEMORY VERSES

Junior and Primary

Day 1: And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory . . .) full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Day 2: And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. Luke 2:52

Day 3: And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. John 21:25

Day 4: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. John 20:31

Day 5: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10

Pre-Primary and Toddler

Day 1: And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. John 1:14

Day 2: And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour. Luke 2:52

Day 3: And there are also many other things which Jesus did. John 21:25

Day 4: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John 20:31

Day 5: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. Matthew 6:10

Theme Verse: From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the LORD's name is to be praised. Psalm 113:3

Bonus: Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. Colossians 3:12-17

TERRIFIC TRIVIA TIDBITS

Stagecoaches. Cowboys. Boomtowns. Wild animals. Life in the Old West was a time of discovery and adventure. Folks from all over the world flocked to the buttes and plains of the American West in search of a better life, leaving legacies of opportunity, curiosity, and adventure in their wake.

Use these fun facts to start thinking about our fun theme—the Old West. These trivia tidbits can be shared during the week of VBS with the kids. Use them at arrival and dismissal times or during any downtime between rotations.

Part 1: General Information

- The US essentially doubled in size when Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Over time, there were more reasons for people to move away from eastern cities to the wide-open West.
- Talk about an unusual pet! Meriwether Lewis sent President Jefferson a live black-tailed prairie dog as a souvenir of his expedition exploring the West.
- Native hunters could bring down an adult bison with one arrow while riding a horse at full gallop! Wouldn't you like to see that in action?
- Saddle your . . . camels? Camels roamed the Southwest at one time. Originally brought from Asia and Africa in the 1850s, the US Army used them to help settle the West. They were eventually abandoned and left to roam in the deserts for years.
- In 1848, James Marshall found a few gold pebbles in a California stream. When news of his discovery spread, thousands of people who wanted to strike it rich moved to California. They were called 49ers because so many people moved west in 1849 to find gold.
- Trail mix recipe: grind up grasshoppers, mix with water and cornmeal, then pan fry. Ground grasshopper cakes—yum!
- Strange but true: There was rush hour traffic even on the way out West. So many people were traveling westward, everyone wanted to be at the front of the line because those in the back ended up eating dust that the other wagons kicked up.
- What are bison chips? They sure don't taste like potato chips. And they sure don't smell good. That's because they are the droppings from bison. Travelers on the trail used them instead of firewood since they couldn't find wood on the prairies.
- Ooh-la-la! Pioneer boys would rub butter in their hair to prepare for Saturday night dances.
- Because there weren't many trees, pioneers built sod houses—houses made from grass and mud. Sounds cozy, right?
- Who doesn't love a good steak dinner? As eastern city people developed a love for beef, demand for cattle grew. The West was the perfect place to raise cattle since it had millions of wide-open acres.

- One out of every four people in Iceland moved to the Great Plains for virtually free land.
- Ouch! Doctors and dentists were few and far between in the Old West, and many weren't trained, so lots of emergencies were handled the same way—hold 'em down and yank hard.
- The real MVP: Cowboy hats had many uses to the cowboy—protect from the sun, keep the head warm, fan campfire flames, carry water, and even feed a horse.
- Don't try this at home! Cowboys wore wool long johns at almost all times. The long johns kept them warm in winter and helped soak up sweat in the summer. They rarely took them off.
- Hold your nose! Cowboys often just burned their clothes after weeks of working and sleeping in them because of how stinky they were.
- That's a different kind of cookie! Food on the range was made by a cook called "cookie" who used a "chuck wagon" (a wagon which was made to carry water and cooking supplies).
- Talk about eerie! The West's Mojave Desert has such an unusual landscape that it was used to film scenes in *Star Trek* and *Planet of the Apes*.
- Grab your sunscreen! The Mojave Desert's Death Valley is generally thought to be the hottest place on earth, reaching temperatures of up to 134° F in the summer.
- One distinctive tree of the West is known as the Joshua tree. Legend has it that settlers named it after Joshua from the Old Testament. Would you like to have a tree named after you?
- A slow starter: The saguaro cactus generally grows just one inch tall in the first decade of its life. Despite this, it eventually grows to be among the tallest of cacti, with the largest recorded saguaro reaching 78 feet tall!
- Arizona's Monument Valley is home to iconic (easily recognized) rock formations that were popularized by Western movies of the 1930s. The valley boasts buttes that reach up to 1,000 feet above the desert floor. Rock climbing, anyone?
- Ever wanted to time travel? The city of Tombstone, Arizona, is like an Old West town frozen in time, boasting attractions such as stagecoach rides, a gold mine, gunfight reenactments, and plenty of Old West hotels and restaurants to enjoy.
- Heard the phrase "get out of Dodge"? Dodge City, Kansas, was known for being a dangerous place to live in the late 1800s. The phrase "get out of Dodge" was popularized in the Western show *Guns, Smoke, and Mirrors*, in which a lawman told outlaws to move on or "get out of Dodge."
- Giddyup! The pony express began in 1860 and carried mail between Missouri and California—that's about 2,000 miles! Riders worked in a relay and rode over 75 miles each day by changing horses every 15 miles.
- In the short 19 months that the pony express was in business, it carried about 35,000 pieces of mail and only lost one bag of mail. That's a pretty good record!
- Would you apply for the job? Pony express riders had to be really light so that horses could travel faster. Often, young teens (even as young as 11 years old) were hired.

- Why did the pony express end after just 19 months? The transcontinental telegraph line was completed. Now people could send messages that would immediately be received.
- The transcontinental railroad was built by two companies, one working from east to west and the other working from west to east. They met in the middle and completed the rail line by nailing a final golden spike into the railway. Ta-da!
- Building the railroad was dangerous work. Workers had to use dynamite to make tunnels, build high bridges, work in mountains with snow and cold, and bake in the heat of deserts.
- What a relief: the transcontinental railway allowed the journey west, which took six months by wagon, to take only four days!
- Do you like horses, adventure, and sharing the good news of Jesus? You could have been a circuit rider in the Old West, although it wasn't easy. Preachers traveled many miles on horseback from town to town and back (a "circuit"), battling illness, animal attacks, and unfriendly encounters.
- Out with the old and in with the new! There were three main factors that ended the Old West way of life: the telegraph, which made communication easier; the transcontinental railroad, which made traveling easier; and barbed wire, which made less wide-open space to roam and a tamer "Wild West."
- Watch out! A cougar can jump up to 18 feet vertically (up) from a sitting position.
- Wolves have scent glands between their toes that give out a unique smell. If a wolf goes missing from a pack, other wolves can sniff out the missing wolf's unique scent to find it. How . . . sweet?
- Aroooo! A wolf can hear a pack's howl from up to 10 miles away.
- Did you know the American bison is the largest land mammal on the North American continent? A full-grown male can weigh over 2,000 pounds, stand over 6 feet tall at its shoulders, and can be nearly 12 feet long from head to tail.
- Hunting frenzy! Early American settlers nearly drove the bison into extinction, taking its population from over 50 million to about 500. After being put on the endangered species list, the bison population has grown to over 500,000 today.
- How . . . talented? A grizzly bear can smell a dead animal up to 18 miles away.
- Mama grizzlies are extremely protective of their babies. They've been known to attack with unbelievable speed and power when their babies are threatened, even sacrificing their lives to save their cubs.
- If all else fails, run! When threatened, a horse's primary way to protect itself is by running away. Yet a single kick from a horse can kill a cougar. That's why cougars ambush herds of horses.
- Nimble-footed: God gave horses special feet that, despite their size, give horses an extraordinary ability to make their way over steep, rocky ground.

Part 2: Animals of the West

- Cougars don't roar but actually scream. Yikes!

- The Gila monster has one of the most painful bites known to humans. When it bites, the Gila monster tends to latch on and chew as it releases more venom through grooves in its teeth. Ouch!
- Stand guard! Prairie dog burrows are ingeniously built with mounds at each entrance to prevent flooding; listening chambers near each exit so predators can be heard; and many exits for a quick escape in case a rattlesnake enters the burrow. Prairie dogs even station lookouts throughout the day to watch for enemies above ground.
- The largest recorded prairie dog burrow covered 25,000 square miles. That's bigger than the state of West Virginia!
- During the winter months, rattlesnakes group together to keep warm. Dens containing roughly 1,000 rattlesnakes have been discovered. Would you want to be the person to discover that den?
- Beep! Beep! Roadrunners aren't great at flying (they tire easily), but they can run fast—for a bird. They dash up to 20 miles per hour, compared to the average man who can run about 8 miles per hour.
- Watch out! The Texas longhorn, a breed of cattle, has horns that can span more than 10 feet across!
- Smelly business: great horned owls have a terrible sense of smell, which allows them to hunt and eat skunks without a problem.
- Scorpions are venomous and can be dangerous, but they also glow in the dark under ultraviolet light. Now that's a sight to see.

KNEE-SLAPPIN' SILLIES

Animal Pal Jokes and Riddles

Day 1 Animal Pal Jokes—Cougar Kitten

- Why did the cougar kitten want a piano for Christmas?
It wanted to make some mewsic.
- What did the cougar kitten say when his team lost the game? *"This is a cat-astrophe!"*
- Where did the cougar kitten keep all her personal belongings? *In her purrrse.*
- What did the chef say to the cougar kitten who was scrambling eggs for breakfast? *"You're a really good whisker!"*

Day 2 Animal Pal Jokes—Wolf Pup

- What did the wolves say to greet each other? *"Howl are you?"*
- What do you call a wolf who is freezing? *A chili dog.*
- What's in a wolf's favorite salad? *Aroo-gula.*
- What do you call a wolf who's self-conscious? *Aware-wolf.*

Day 3 Animal Pal Jokes—Bison

- What did the mama buffalo say when her son left for college? *"Bison."*
- What did the bison say to the waiter at the restaurant when his family was ready to leave? *"We're ready for our buffalo bill."*
- What's a bison's favorite restaurant? *Buffalo Wild Wings.*
- Why do bison always pay with credit cards? *They like to charge everything.*

Day 4 Animal Pal Jokes—Grizzly Bear

- What do you call a grizzly bear who is toothless? *A gummy bear.*
- Why don't grizzly bears wear socks?
Because they prefer to walk on their bear feet.
- What is a grizzly bear's favorite drink? *A root bear float.*
- Why did they take the remote away from the grizzly bear? *Because he was always hitting the paws button.*

Day 5 Animal Pal Jokes—Horse

- What are horses' favorite kinds of stories to tell? *Tales of WHOA!*
- What did the horse say to the friend next door? *"Hey, neighhhh-bor!"*
- Why did the baby horse wake up crying? *Because he had a nightmare.*
- What did the horse say when he called 911? *"I've fallen, and I can't giddyup!"*

Miscellaneous Jokes and Riddles

- Why did the doctor take the miner's temperature? *He thought he had gold fever.*
- Why was the cowboy always happy? *Because he was a jolly rancher.*
- What's a rancher's favorite car? *A cattle-lac.*
- What do you call a pioneer who teaches acting classes? *A stagecoach.*

Knock Knock Jokes

- Knock knock. *Who's there?*
Dwayne. *Dwayne who?*
Dwayne the pan and see if there's
any gold in there!

- Knock knock. *Who's there?*
Icy. *Icy who?*
Icy a rattlesnake coming
toward us! Run!

- Knock knock. *Who's there?*
Anita. *Anita who?*
Anita more flour to make these
flapjacks.

- Knock knock. *Who's there?*
Dime. *Dime who?*
Dime to head west!

- Knock knock. *Who's there?*
Diss. *Diss who?*
Diss cactus spine got stuck in my
finger. Help!

Tongue Twisters

- Manly miners ride mad mules.
- Desert heat can't be beat.
- Cowgirls corral cattle.
- Many merchants mumble
about money.

TWO-MINUTE TIPS

VBS comes only once a year, so make every minute count and use any down-time to build relationships. Try any of the following ideas if you find yourself with a few extra minutes while kids are waiting for VBS to begin, eating snacks, or waiting to be picked up.

- Practice and recite memory verses.
- Have children update their attendance charts.
- Quietly practice cheers together.
- Color or work on activity sheets.
- Share trivia or jokes found in this handbook.
- Get to know each other with conversation starters, such as the following:
 - » If you could time travel back to the Old West, would you?
 - » If you went to the mountains or deserts of the Old West, what's one animal you would want to see? What's one animal you wouldn't want to see?
 - » Would you rather ride in a stagecoach or take a train to the Old West?
 - » What job would you want to have in the Old West?
 - » Would you rather play with your family in the mountains or the desert?
- Play a quick game like the following:
 - » Trip to the Old West: The first person says he's going on a trip to the Old West, and he's going to take _____. He fills in the blank with something that starts with the letter A. The next person repeats that sentence and adds something that starts with the letter B. Continue on, adding letters with each new person.
 - » Add to the Story: The first child says four words to get it started—"once upon a time." Each child then adds four more words until the story is completed.
 - » Rock, Paper, Scissors: Play this fun game in pairs. Check online for directions.
 - » I Spy: Play I Spy, picking western-themed objects around the room as the item to spy.



Howdy, partners! Welcome to Wonder Junction, where we marvel at Jesus and live for his glory. From the minute your kids step off the train, they'll be encouraged to discover more about who this awe-inspiring Jesus is and what he's done for us. Grab your bandanas, dust off your boots, and get ready for a grand old time in the Wild West!

This handbook contains what every VBS helper needs to know to make your VBS program successful: an overview of *Wonder Junction*, daily devotionals, tips for working with children, memory verse reference sheets, and more!