

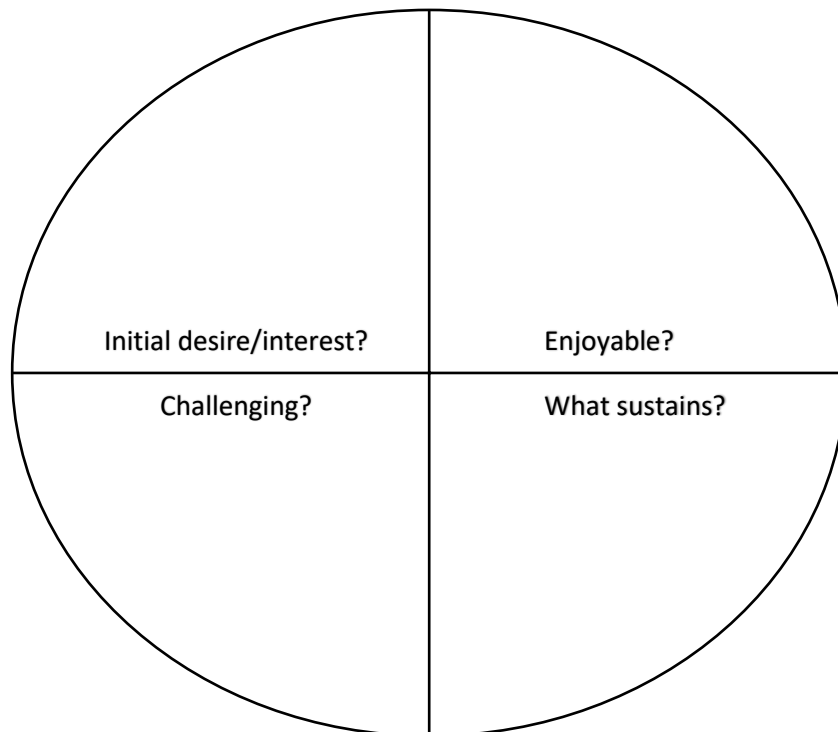
In our work with preschoolers, how can we encourage them to learn and to go on learning?

Sarah McQuaker (Christ Church, Haywards Heath) at 'Purely Preschoolers' 23/6/18

Sources : 'How Children Learn' Nancy Steward, 2011; Bible Gateway NIV search on: consider, reflect, think, wonder, ponder, attention



learning is
NOT
a spectator
sport.
so let's
PLAY!



The way we're made

Genesis 1 v 26-31 – in God's image, under His authority, very good, made to rule, made for relationship with God and others, speaking and understanding...

But fallen... believe lies rather than Truth, reject God's authority, broken relationships, frustrated work and communication, under judgment – yet God accepts true worship, is in relationship with some, promises redemption, speaks and intervenes (Gen 3-11)

Constant call to know, fear, revere, worship, obey the LORD; to persevere and not turn away; to encourage each other; to be holy; to realign thinking and expectations in the light of who God is and what He has done or said; witness to others...

'Key to understanding a child's drive to learn is that it grows from innate, inborn desires. Theorists have described inborn human psychological needs such as:

- To be competent
- To make sense of what they experience – an explanatory drive
- To have autonomy or control
- To be related to others

... Research on the behaviour of infants and children has provided developmental theorists with evidence of inherent drives which appear to be built into our genetic make-up, and are part of the unique learning ability of humans.’ (Stewart p 15,16)

So, how do little children (and adults) learn?

A. By engaging with life!

Through all their experiences -

- everyday activities
- stories and talking about pictures in books
- structured activities with specific learning intentions
- being told about things from people they trust
- being shown how to do things
- playing alone and with others



‘The baby who is driven to reach, to taste, to find out about *what an object is* soon grows to the toddler who is driven to manipulate an object to find out *what can it do*, and then into the child who experiments to find out *what can I do with it?*’ (Steward p24)

Children need to practice abstract, ‘What if?’ thinking, so that we ‘develop as thinkers who don’t jump to conclusions which might appear obvious, but instead are prepared to suspend judgment and think things through, considering other ways of looking at a problem and being aware of the different consequences that arise from different starting points’ (Stewart p33)

B. By being Motivated

‘Learning is not something that is done to someone, but is achieved through active involvement of the learner. ... Learning is strongest when the learner also commits real energy, focuses towards a goal and demonstrates the tenacity to reach it.’ (Stewart p 52)



Need both the **goal** and the **drive** to keep going through challenges, boredom and temptation

‘Extrinsic’ motivation (and performance goals)–

(‘Learned helplessness’)

‘Intrinsic’ motivation (and mastery goals) –

Aim for children (and adults!) to move...

- from complying because of a threat of punishment or promise of reward
- to feeling they ought to do something, in order to avoid guilt or win approval
- to choosing to act because they see that the activity has value in its own right, in helping to reach their goals

... which is to *personalise* extrinsic motivation and make it part of our intrinsic motivation.

Compare ‘I have to...; I should...; I need to...’ with ‘I choose to...; I could...; I want to...’ - see Galatians 5 verse 13-26, Hebrews 11...

‘Learning at a deep level...requires a willingness to encounter and explore the uncertainty of something new, with the goal of making sense of the experience’ (Stewart p55)

‘Belonging to a community is also important in children moving from their own personal goals which could be seen as a limiting, selfish perspective to adopt and identify with the values and goals of their society.’ (Stewart p65)

And we also need **self-control / self-moderation!**

The marshmallow experiment ‘...forces kids to find a way to make the situation work for them... We can’t control the world, but we can control how we think about it.’ (Walter Mischell, 1972, quoted in Stewart p71)

If we know our goals and learn how to stick with them, we will learn to delay gratification and persevere... As in Hebrews 11.



C. By Thinking - creating and thinking critically

'Effective learners KNOW about what they know and about how they learn and solve problems, and can CONTROL the way they think and learn by applying the skills and strategies they know. These form the core of being not only willing but also ABLE to learn.' (Stewart p93)

Language – we need to know the words to explain and understand concepts such as emotions, how we think and spiritual things

Learning to have ideas – this is imagination in action! Understanding that the world can be seen in more than one way, there is more than one possible future outcome. Being open to ambiguity and uncertainty, able to suspend judgment while considering possibilities...

Learning to respond to and cope with the emotions of learning – excitement, uncertainty, boredom, frustration...

Learning to think about WHY to do/not do something (considering range of implications and outcomes)

Needs helpful stimulation – but also needs space to think, reflect, assess.

Needs freedom and security to consider options, reject ideas, ask odd questions...

Needs support but not control - 'Helping [children] learn better is not the same as helping them become better learners. Effective support can create dependency, unless the teacher is constantly looking for opportunities to dismantle the scaffolding and build students' disposition to do their own supporting.' (Guy Claxton, quoted in Stewart p70)

How can we help?

Prayerfully, in dependence on the Lord and recognising the work of the word of God and His Spirit ...

- Learn to be learners, ourselves –
 - Are we ourselves paying attention/considering/reflecting on/thinking about the word of the Lord?
 - Do we engage with tough questions and are we learning to wrestle with uncertainties, growing deeper in our knowledge, understanding, love and obedience?
 - Are we moving from 'ought to' to 'want to'...?
 - Are we actively part of the church family – the fellowship of God's people?
- Think about our teaching ...
 - Grabbing and sustaining attention
 - Questions which encourage thinking and reflection
 - Chat which helps transfer knowledge from one area of life to another
 - Modelling excitement, curiosity, looking in the Bible, reflecting...
 - Using vocabulary which explains, stimulates, is accurate
 - Allowing for points of tension and wondering/working things out
 - Model speaking aloud about why we are doing things/making decisions/wondering...
- Think about our activities -
 - Encouraging curiosity/exploration/working out how things work and what can be done with them
 - Encouraging role-play and imagination play ('what if...?' thinking)
 - Encouraging perseverance and strategies for how to do things
 - Playing games with rules (even peek-a-boo), and role-play games with others help with learning to self-regulate.
 - Allowing for risk and challenge...
 - Books and pictures to chat about together
 - Is there order or chaos?!
 - Is there any way to encourage chat between adults and children?
- Observe our children so we can plan and pray well!
- Learn to support in a way which allows the child to be responsible and helps them to learn to turn to the Lord and his people for help. Support in a way which takes sin seriously but rejoices in grace and encourages repentance, not just 'saying sorry'
- Think about how to help parents with this



The next step in your learning journey...?!

There are so many examples through Scripture of these principles being encouraged!
As you read, keep an eye open for words and passages to do with thinking, learning and teaching.

Let us keep praying for the Lord to help us to have teachable spirits which hear and pay attention to His voice... and the same for the Little Ones in our care.

Here are a couple of things I've found myself doing this week which you may find helpful...

Read **Hebrews 10:19 to 12:3** (try printing it off so you can highlight things...)

- In Chapters 10 and 12, what is the writer urging his readers to do/not do – what is the goal he is urging them towards?
- In Chapters 10 and 12, what motivations does the writer use that he wants his readers to personalise? – think about negative and positive, immediate and long-term...
- In Chapter 11, what do we learn about the goals of the heroes of Faith? (Look out for what they were aiming for – not what they achieved or did...)
- In Chapter 11, what do we learn about the thought processes of the heroes of Faith? (what did they think about/admit/reason/remember, focus on? How would they have known these things?)
- Now look at what the heroes of Faith achieved in Chapter 11. (The writer has chosen these examples to fit with his purpose of motivating his readers. Can you see how all of the things mentioned were risky/steps of faith?)
- What thinking and action words does the writer use when he's talking to his readers – what does he want them to do?
- Can you find verses which point to the role of the church community in all of this?
- What does this teach you about the Lord and about how to keep going and not give up?
- If you reflect on your life and circumstances, what do you need to put into action, give thanks for, take warning from?

Take it further!

It is very rewarding to use a concordance (or a key word search on Bible Gateway) to look at how the Bible uses these words about learning and thinking: *consider, reflect, think, wonder, ponder, attention*

Read Galatians 5 verse 13-26

Look at how Paul is urging the Galatians to think and be motivated..
In the light of this, as an experiment, try writing 3 sentences which say
I have to...
I should...
I need to...

Now think about our freedom in Christ and all you know of him (whose example is given to us in Philippians 2) and try rewriting as
I choose to...
I could...
I want to...

What difference does it make to approach these things in the light of Gospel freedom and the ability to ask for His help to choose to serve and act? It's interesting to reflect on how even in the things we feel we have to do, we often have a choice which is affected by consequences – we chose to act in line with what our goals are. What difference does it make if we realign our goals with God's word?

(These phrases are cited in Stewart p67, in relation to working with women in prison to help them move from passivity, in a purely secular context)