

Ideas to help minister to children when you DON'T speak the language!

Often when we minister to children on a mission trip or in a situation where we do not speak the language fluently, we have to use an interpreter, but this has many drawbacks mainly because it makes a barrier between us and the children, hindering the personal relationship so vital to a truly successful children's ministry. Also, because of the children's often limited vocabulary (and heavy use of local words and slang) it's not uncommon that our "regular" children's ministry teaching falls flat and is not understood by them after being translated! Here are a few simple ideas to consider, especially if you plan on ministering in that area (or where the language is the same) for some time. As always, such methods require a lot more preparation, but I believe they are much more effective and well worth the trouble!

1) Acting out bible stories and parables to narration

When we first started ministering in Mexico and our knowledge of Spanish was ZERO, I found the best way was to use simple bible stories and parables that we acted out (often with a few props and in a funny way) while the story was narrated (read) slowly by someone else in the local language. Since I already was familiar with the story in English, I would just learn key words in the other language (Spanish) so that I could recognize where we were in the story and so how to act at that particular moment. Often things would go wrong but the children always laughed and it was a good way to help them remember the story. (Children love to see adults making mistakes for a change since it's usually THEY who make the mistakes!) Afterwards, someone who could speak the language would go on to actually TEACH about the story. Examples of such simple bible stories to act out include: *David and Goliath*; *Jonah*; the *parable of the Sower*; and the *Good Samaritan*.

If you gradually gather together various props and items of clothing and disguise (fake beards, wooden swords, wigs etc) that can be used in a variety of skits, they become even more exciting. As time passed, I began to write skits that were updated versions of the stories or parables, which were then translated into the local language with the help of friends. This then helps the children understand the spiritual principle behind the original parable or story. Some examples of such skits that we have available online are: the *Sheep and Goats* skit; the *Prodigal Son* skit; and the *Phil and the Hippy* skit.

2) Being a clown

Obviously a clown is a wonderful way to attract a crowd and invite children to the meeting, and it is easy because you can "hide" behind the makeup and costume! But remember that in tropical climates it can be VERY hot wearing make-up and a costume, so try to plan something that is simple and DON'T wipe the sweat off when you wear make-up or it will all be wiped across your face! Try to plan the clown segment for just 15-20 minutes so you can leave if you become too hot! You need to act in a very exaggerated way and be able to do a few simple tricks or object lessons that someone else can go on to explain as part of the lesson.

You could simply be a clown that does not speak (such as a mime), or you could also help the children learn the memory verse each week (while learning it in the new language yourself!). You could sit in the front alongside the children and as the main teacher teaches the memory verse you repeat it along with the children, then you are asked to stand up and repeat it alone - of course you will probably make some mistakes, which is GOOD because then the children will laugh and the teacher can ask them to correct you (again, kids LOVE to correct adults and show they know something better!). You can let them make fun of you because you are the clown anyway! Don't take it personally, but instead let YOUR weakness be used to strengthen THEIR knowledge!!

3) Being a special character

Instead of being a typical clown, you could instead dress up as a special character every week – such as an overgrown schoolgirl/boy or someone who is obviously "foreign", wearing distinctive clothing. Such a character can help by asking the teacher "key" questions, the answers to which give further explanation of the lesson. This requires you learning a few short phrases in the foreign language (good for you anyway!) even if you cannot understand the whole answer. This works well if you prepare beforehand with the teacher, who may not have much experience of children's ministry and may in fact be receiving training from you. As you prepare the lesson together, you can introduce the questions at intervals so that the whole teaching is not just a long boring lesson.

Also you can occasionally ask a "stupid" question about the story or teaching – this often makes the children laugh, but in fact where children really have little schooling or bible knowledge, such questions are not really stupid but merely reveal the lack of knowledge of many. As the teacher answers such questions openly and seriously (without making fun of the ignorance) it will encourage children to not be afraid to ask about things they do not understand. Such a special character can also be useful to the teacher to help control the class – watching to see if anyone is misbehaving, and then sitting down next to them and helping them calm down or pay better attention. Also it provides a wonderful opportunity to give all the children a welcome or goodbye hug and show them God's love!