

Identity Workshop

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Identity Received

Children, young people and the God who names them

When a child asks, “Who am I?”, the Christian answer begins with God.

Workshop exercise

Take two minutes to write down three identity words or phrases that are often spoken over children in your setting, whether they sound positive, negative, or harmless.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What does that word teach the child about who they are?

Does it attach their identity to achievement, behaviour, personality, diagnosis, family background or usefulness?

Remember

We catechise children about identity through formal teaching, but also through the way we speak to them, correct them, welcome them, react to them and pray with them.

Our assumptions really matter too, because they shape whether a child is treated as a problem to manage, a project to fix, or a person to know and disciple before God.

1. God speaks before the child speaks, and knows before the child explains

Genesis 1:26

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.’”

What we need to hold clearly

- Every child bears the image of God.
- Every child needs Christ.
- Union with Christ belongs to those who are his by faith.

Psalm 139:1

“You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.”

Psalm 139:4

“Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.”

Psalm 139:13

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

✎ Workshop exercise

Here is the sentence expressive individualism gives to a child:

“I need to search myself until I can explain who I really am.”

Now rewrite that sentence in light of Psalm 139.

What would this sound like for a ten-year-old?

What would it sound like for a sixteen-year-old?

What would it sound like in an actual conversation with a child who says, “Nobody understands me. I don’t even understand myself”?

2. Identity is gift before it is experience

John 1:12

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Galatians 4:4–5

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son... that we might receive adoption to sonship.”

Galatians 4:6

“Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

❖ Pastoral reflection

A young person says:

“I don’t feel like God’s child.”

What might it look like to listen carefully before bringing God’s word to bear?

Identity Formed

How children and young people grow into what God says is true

There is often a painful gap between what a child has heard and what a child lives from.

Ephesians 3:16–19

Paul prays that believers would be strengthened by the Spirit and would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Biblical formation

Biblical formation is the Spirit's work of making God's truth liveable in the heart of a child, so that under pressure they learn to return to Christ rather than to achievement, approval, control, hiding or despair.

❖ Workshop reflection

Think of one child or young person who knows Christian truth, or at least knows the language of it.

What do they seem to know?

What do they seem to agree with?

When pressure comes, what do they seem to trust?

When life gets hard and messy, what seems to become their refuge? Do they turn towards Christ, prayer, confession and help, or do they slip back towards proving and protecting themselves, pleasing people, taking control, disappearing, numbing out, defending themselves or giving up?

1. Formation happens in ordinary life

Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Deuteronomy 6:6–7

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children.”

Workshop exercise

Take one ordinary life rhythm:

An arrival time, the car journey, bedtime, the first five minutes of youth group, the walk from the church hall to the car park, or the moment after the talk when everyone starts moving.

What is that moment currently forming in children?

What is it teaching them about God, repentance, belonging or prayer?

Where could it carry truth more faithfully?

2. Formation gives a true story and exposes the false one

Psalm 78:4

“We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.”

Children are already narrating their personal story. Scripture gives a larger and truer story, with God at the centre and Christ as its fulfilment.

Veneered in biblical Christianity

A child can be veneered in biblical Christianity while being formed, underneath, by an entirely different story.

What might this look like in a child or young person you know?

Workshop audit

Take one setting:

Home, youth group, children’s group, church service, school gate, youth small group, dinner time.

- What story are children absorbing here?
- What false story is our culture, or our church culture, quietly reinforcing?
- What ordinary rhythm could help the true story become more liveable?

Identity Tested

Helping children and young people meet Christ when life exposes what they fear, trust and hide

When a child's sense of self comes under pressure, what is being revealed, and how does Christ meet them there?

Pressure is a revealer

Pressure shows what a child trusts, fears, loves, hides, serves and hopes in.

Workshop reflection

Think of one ordinary moment where a child or young person's identity is being tested.

It might be a friendship upset, a disappointing result, a sports team selection, being corrected, being praised, being left out, being useful, being ignored, being laughed at, being compared, or being caught doing something wrong.

- What seems to be happening on the surface?
- What might be happening in the heart?
- What might this child be trusting, fearing, loving, hiding, craving, protecting or trying to control?

1. Shame and the hiding self

Genesis 3:7

"The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked."

Genesis 3:9

"Where are you?"

Shame and guilt

Guilt says, "I did wrong."

Shame says, "I am wrong."

The pastoral question

What is this child trying to cover?

❖ Remember

Bringing something into the light must always include protecting the child in it.

Shame and careful light

2. Suffering, weakness and the child who is held

Romans 8:1

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 8:15–16

“The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’... we are God’s children.”

Romans 8:38–39

“Neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The thing being tested is not the thing that holds!

Hebrews 4:15

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses.”

❖ Pastoral reflection

Do I tend towards thin reassurance or emotional drowning?

What would it look like to sit low enough to hear the child’s sorrow, while keeping Scripture open enough to offer more than my own feelings?

3. So what kind of testing is this?

- Is this ordinary pressure exposing a deeper refuge: achievement, approval, control, being funny, being needed, being admired, or disappearing?
- Is this shame that needs gentle finding?
- Is this guilt that needs confession and forgiveness?
- Is this suffering that needs presence, lament and hope?
- Is this fear or confusion that needs patient truth?
- Is this harm done to them that needs protection, justice, tenderness and the assurance that God sees?
- Is this temptation, success, praise or usefulness exposing what they love, crave or serve?

Guilt and harm

Psalm 32:1

“Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”

If a child has no category for guilt, shame swallows everything.

Isaiah 43:1

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”

Workshop exercise

Choose one of these and ask what kind of care would be faithful as a first step.

1. A twelve-year-old says, “It doesn’t matter,” after being left out by friends again, then spends the rest of the evening making jokes at someone else’s expense.
2. A child says, “I’m bad,” after hurting another child.
3. A young person says, “My anxiety is just who I am.”
4. A young person says, “I don’t think God would want me after what happened.”

For your chosen child, work through:

- What kind of pressure or pain is presenting: shame, guilt, suffering, fear, confusion, harm, temptation?
- What would be an unhelpful first response?
- What would be a faithful first sentence?
- What truth might this child need to hear, slowly, over several months?
- What practical protection, support or follow-up might be needed?

Identity Practised

Homes and churches where children learn to belong to Christ

Identity is practised

- Theology becomes culture.

A truer safe place

The church should be the kind of safe place the world can't finally offer: safe enough for sin to be named without a young person being crushed, shame to be brought into the light without careless exposure or gossip, suffering to be held wisely, questions to be asked without everyone quietly panicking, repentance to become normal, and Christ to speak a truer word than the self could ever speak over itself.

Workshop reflection

Think of one child or young person in your home, group or church.

What are they learning about belonging from the culture around them?

Who gets noticed?

Who gets praised?

Who gets corrected?

Who gets overlooked?

Who quietly learns they are hard work?

Write one sentence:

“The culture they are absorbing is teaching them that...”

1. Children and young people in the church

1 Corinthians 12:27

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

Pastoral reflection questions

- Do children know older Christians by name, and do those older Christians know them?
- Do young people have a place to serve that is not a performance?
- Do we only notice young people when they are useful, talented, or in crisis?
- Have we built a parallel world children eventually have to graduate from?

- Does a child with additional needs know they are wanted in the body, or merely accommodated by the programme?
- Does a young person who is awkward, doubting or difficult still have a place among us?
- Do children and young people have relationships with adults who know enough of their actual lives to help them practise faith in the world they inhabit?

2. Practices that teach children how to live from grace

Children practise identity through repeated patterns.

Ordinary practices

- Scripture
- Prayer
- Singing
- Repentance
- Forgiveness
- Thankfulness
- Correction
- Belonging
- Service
- Being known

❖ Reflection

Which ordinary practice in your home, group or church is forming children's hearts well?

Which ordinary practice may be quietly forming them badly?

Practising identity in the world

Homes and churches practise identity well when they help children walk into the world knowing who they are before God.

Correction

Titus 2:11–12

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness.”

Grace trains.

3. Adults who practise what they commend

What identity script do I carry into my nurture and discipleship of children (parenting and service in the church)?

❖ Reflection

- My worth comes from how my children turn out.
- My worth comes from whether young people like me.
- My worth comes from running an impressive ministry.
- My worth comes from being needed.
- Which one most tempts me?
- What might it be causing me to avoid, force, fear or control?

Workshop action!

One practice we should keep is...

One practice we should change is...

One adult habit I need to repent of or strengthen is...

The one child or young person I will pray for by name is...

Ephesians 3:16–17

“...that he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”