

Every baptism preaches a sermon to children, researcher insists

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BOERNE—Pastors, the children are listening. And watching.

While parents remain the primary influences in bringing children to faith, a new Dallas Baptist University study found pastors have a larger impact than previously believed. Faith is introduced most commonly in conversations between children and parents, but children view pastors as spiritual authorities and intimate friends—even when they've never met the minister.

Boys and girls are listening to what the pastor says and what the pastor does.

Children seem to connect with pastors even if they don't know the pastor's name, said Tommy Sanders, director of the master of arts in [Christian education/childhood ministry program](#) at Dallas Baptist University and leader of the research effort.

"The role of the pastor was pretty significant as well," he said. "Children looked up to the pastor, what the pastor said."

With that in mind, the act of baptism and the words said during the ordinance take on heightened importance for children, Sanders' research found. By seeing others being baptized, children seem to begin to grasp what the act means.

"When boys and girls saw people baptized, ... that created a compelling interest for boys and girls to want to become a Christian and be baptized,"

Sanders said during the Preschool/Children's Minister Retreat sponsored by the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#).

Because children are figuring out what the ordinance means while witnessing it, Sanders believes pastors must be particularly clear in the language they use to describe the act. Symbolic language can lead children to believe the baptismal water literally is washing away people's sins.

"Boys and girls are listening to what the pastor says and what the pastor does," he said.

"So, when the pastor is talking about baptism and he may be using phrases or words that are abstract, the children are listening to those and may not be getting the true meaning of those."

Baptisms and sermons may heighten children's interest in making a profession of faith and becoming baptized, but Sanders noted family members remain the primary faith influence on children. Young people turn to family members, Sunday school teachers and preschool ministers to process through faith decisions.

Many times, exposure to the gospel takes place through conversations, said Laura Edmonson, minister to children at [First Baptist Church in Waxahachie](#). It happens while talking about how beautiful God made the sky or how God created each person.

Children pick up on those references and often imitate them, Edmonson said. They may not fully grasp the concepts in their early years, but they can learn that God loves them, other people love them and church is a place where people care about them.

Diane Lane, BGCT preschool/children's ministry specialist, encourages parents to pray with their children before meals and going to bed. Giving a child a Bible and urging them to flip through it can help them develop an

interest in faith matters.

When children begin asking questions about faith, they often begin by asking their parents, Lane said, making it important that churches help parents become comfortable responding to questions.

Ideally, parents are working in conjunction with Sunday school teachers and preschool ministers to nurture children's faith. Through positive experiences with Sunday school and church leaders, children learn to trust them and turn to them when they have questions. Through these interactions, discipleship will take place.

"I think it's that personal relationship, that personal touch with adults that really makes the difference," Lane said.

Although Sanders' research indicates what appears to influence children about faith issues, children's ministers agree there is no set formula for how to get a child to embrace Christ. It will happen in a variety of ways, Edmonson said.

"When you look at children, view them through the eyes of God as much as you can," she said. "We are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. As you view a child and you view the potential that they have and you view the challenges that they have, then you need to remember they made each child unique."

Ultimately, children make professions of faith like adults do, said Tedye Schuehler, minister of preschool education at [First Baptist Church in Richardson](#).

"Children come to faith the same way each of come to faith—that is, coming to a point of understanding of God's love for them, their need to be close to him and that something separates them from being able to be close to him, which is their sin, and understanding that God demonstrated his love for us

by sending Jesus to die on the cross for their sin.”