

# Children at Meeting

## **What do we teach in LOFM Children's First Day School?**

Note: This document is not meant to be a procedures guide, nor are its contents "written in stone". Rather, it was written to reflect the general approach and practices that we currently strive to follow through the LOFM Children's Religious Education Committee. We envision that new families with children might ask "What is your Children's First Day School program like? What do you teach? What can I expect for my child's experience at LOFM?" We hope this document will give at least an overview in answer to those questions.

## **Introduction/Philosophy**

In the children's program at Live Oak Friends Meeting, our primary desire is to have children and families feel welcome and comfortable in our community, as we believe this feeling of acceptance and belonging becomes an important foundation for learning more about Quakerism and enjoying active participation in the community. We strive to help each child feel known and valued as an individual, and to promote relationships amongst the children and between adults and children that are caring, friendly, and mutually respectful. As First Day School teachers, members of the Children's Religious Education Committee, and other "Friendly Adult Presences", we try to model Quaker values and processes as we interact with the children. These may manifest in how we welcome new children into their classes or childcare activities, how we invite children to share and listen to each other's experiences and perspectives, and how we solve problems or address conflicts that may arise. We hope that over time, children who attend our program will come to learn about Quakerism in an experiential way, through a combination of formal instruction, formal and informal community-building activities, participation in worship with their families and the rest of the community, and development of friendships with other children in the meeting.

## **Selection of Teachers**

Teachers in the LOFM Children's First Day School program are typically adults within the Meeting who have an interest in working with the children and have sufficient experience participating in the Meeting to understand the basic tenets and testimonies of our faith and model these in their work with the children. It is desirable if teachers also have some knowledge of Quaker history and the Quaker world beyond our local meeting, but one does not need to be scholar or expert in order to make a valuable contribution as a First Day School teacher. Indeed, the qualities of warmth, enthusiasm, dependability, resonance with Quaker values, interest in working with children, and willingness to learn are probably most important. We have had wonderful teachers in this program who were young adults, older adults, parents of young children, parents of grown children, and adults without children. Some were raised as Quakers themselves but many were not. Sometimes those who volunteer to teach come with a particular leading to teach

about a specific theme or skill – such as knitting caps for babies in hospitals as a service project, or working on a garden to learn about ecology and stewardship of the earth. Other times those who are teaching feel more comfortable following a set of lessons that provide a readymade structure for the semester or the year. Because we are a small program, there is plenty of opportunity for discussion and support for someone who wants to teach but may not have done so before. While we do not follow a prescribed curriculum each year, the committee offers guidance and assistance to ensure that the teacher’s style and content are a good fit for our Quaker community and for the developmental level of the class.

### **Considering Children’s Developmental Levels**

We recognize that from infancy through high school age, children have very different needs and capabilities. We typically structure our program to meet children’s needs by dividing into groups roughly based on age and grade level. In addition to our nursery, where we provide babysitting for infants and young toddlers, we typically have classes for older toddlers and preschoolers, for elementary children, for middle schoolers, and for high schoolers. Depending on the numbers of children and teens enrolled and the maturity levels of individual children, some levels may be combined or separated to create groups that will work best together.

Teachers working with our youngest group understand that toddlers and preschoolers often have short attention spans and need opportunities for active play and hands-on activities. In this group children may listen to a brief story, enjoy nature outside, express themselves through an art project, or play with developmentally appropriate toys. As they engage in these activities they have opportunities to practice making choices, taking turns, communicating with each other, learning about the natural world, expressing their curiosity and creativity, and being part of a warm, friendly community. They may be introduced to basic concepts such as helping, sharing, taking care of plants and animals, and solving problems peacefully, that begin to prepare them for more formal introduction to Quakerism later on.

Our elementary class(es) often combine activities such as reading stories, playing cooperative games, doing art activities, participating in service projects, and sharing personal experiences related to lesson topics. These children are starting to become familiar with Quaker terminology such as “testimonies”, “that of God”, and “Meeting for Worship”, and are typically introduced to famous historical and current Quakers. They are at an age where they can begin to learn about and discuss what it means to be a Quaker. We also teach that there are many ways to connect with God or the Spirit, rather than just one right way, and that while we have our own traditions and practices, there is wisdom to be found in many other religions, and we respect and affirm people of all faiths.

For middle schoolers and high schoolers, we often have a special focus on making First Day School topics and discussions relevant to the tweens’ and teens’ “real

lives” and everyday situations. Thus, while continuing to teach about Quaker history and practices, or more general religious topics, teachers may include discussion of a Quaker approach to challenging daily life situations at school, home, or in the community. The children might learn about complex current events here in Texas, in the United States, and around the world, and how Quakers are responding or might respond to these real life dilemmas and moral issues. In the past, these age groups have interviewed individual members of the Meeting community who have been involved in social causes or other Quaker activities. They have visited other places of worship to compare the experience to that of a Quaker Meeting for Worship. They have read and discussed books or watched and discussed documentary videos. They have worked on service projects such as fundraising within the community for a cause, planting trees on the property, and collecting and sorting supplies for the homeless. These older groups of children often connect with each other as a group and value time to “hang out” together as part of their social experience of First Day School. We strive to include their input and interests when designing their curriculum for the year.

### **Curriculum:**

At LOFM, we have not chosen a unified curriculum structure for our program. It has been our practice to discuss amongst the teachers and committee members, during the summer months, how the teachers feel led to structure their class’s curriculum for the year. Thus, there is a lot of flexibility and opportunity for teachers to choose a direction which they feel would be of value to their class and for which they have some affinity and desire to pursue. At the same time, there is somewhat of an informal vetting process whereby teachers’ ideas are often shaped and enhanced by group input, brainstorming, and raising of any issues of concern. There are also several core areas that we generally agree to be important to include in children’s experience of First Day School over time. Not all of these will be covered by every class every year, but over several years we expect that children will have exposure to the following broad topic areas.

Quaker History: In order to begin to understand what being a Quaker means, it is valuable for children to learn about where Quakerism comes from, who some of the important historical Quaker figures were and are, and what events in the world shaped the evolution of our various branches over time. Younger children may start this work by learning about George Fox, Margaret Fell, John Woolman, and others who have played an important role in the emergence and spread of Quakerism, as well as challenging the social, political, and religious mores of their times. Older children and teens may go into more depth in studying certain individuals, may focus on a particular time period in Quaker history, or learn about a particular issue associated historically with Quakers such as the abolitionist movement, prison ministry, relations with Native Americans, or Conscientious Objector status within the military.

Quaker Testimonies & Values: In addition to the most basic belief that “There is that of God in everyone”, Quakers traditionally identify 5 (or sometimes 6) core

“testimonies”: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, and Equality (sometimes Stewardship or Sustainability is added). While Quakers do not have a creed that one must affirm or believe as a requirement for membership, these testimonies are often considered to represent common core values with which most Quakers resonate and strive to follow, to the best of our abilities, within the parameters of our lives. These 5 or 6 testimonies provide an abundance of opportunities for First Day School lessons and activities that help children and teens understand the meaning of these values and how they have been espoused and practiced by Quakers over time and in today’s world. We understand that different branches of Quakerism, and individuals within each branch, may interpret the testimonies in somewhat different ways (for example, there are some meetings and individuals that do not affirm acceptance of Gay/Lesbian relationships although some may find this inconsistent with the testimony of Equality; there are some Quakers who have served in the military although some may find this inconsistent with the Peace testimony). At LOFM, many of us are of a socially liberal persuasion and our teachings to the children are generally consistent with an inclusive, affirming, broad-minded approach.

The Bible: We recognize that while Quakerism, as envisioned and founded by George Fox, has a definite Christian basis, individuals and families within our Meeting community may relate to the Bible in different ways. Some may place more emphasis on the New vs. Old Testament, and some may view the Bible as one of a number of important holy books. We may find it meaningful as a source of spiritual comfort, moral guidance, documentation of Judeo-Christian cultural heritage, and/or as a collection of historical and allegorical religious stories that provide a common core of cultural knowledge. Therefore, we do not teach children that there is one correct way to view and use the Bible (i.e., as the direct word of God, or as a collection of moral stories). However, we seem to agree that it is useful and important for our children to develop some familiarity with biblical characters and stories from both the Old and New Testament. Thus, our Children’s First Day School classes often include some coverage of parts of the Bible, often including discussion of how the events, characters, and story have relevance for us as Quakers living in the world today.

Exposure to other Religions: Quakers believe that there is “that of God in everyone”. In practice, this means that we affirm that there are many ways, rather than one right way, to worship and to seek connection to the Spirit. We teach our children that Quakers engage in particular practices (such as silent worship, vocal ministry, not having designated clergy) because these are our preferred ways of seeking spiritual connection and engaging in worship. Other religions within our country and around the world have developed different practices and conventions to express their beliefs and seek connection with a higher power. While we strive to help our children understand the value and spiritual richness of Quakerism that has led us to choose to be Quakers (or to be attenders at a Quaker meeting), we also encourage them to be curious, questioning, and open to learning about other cultures and styles of worship. We recognize that as our children grow into adolescence and young adulthood, it will be up to them to make choices about remaining a part of the LOFM community, seeking out another Quaker meeting,

exploring a different kind of religious community, or not being part of one at all. Sometimes families choose to do this kind of exploration after being part of our LOFM community for a while. Sometimes parents may continue to attend meeting while their children do not, or vice versa. We endeavor to have our Children's First Day School program be a welcoming, consistent presence for children, whether they attend regularly each week or less often. Our approach to other religions may manifest in our curriculum in different ways, such as by taking field trips to visit other places of worship, inviting someone from another religious tradition to come talk to our children's classes, reading stories from other religions and cultures, and talking about how to explain to peers what Quakerism is in comparison to sects more familiar to their classmates. We may also discuss issues of tolerance and intolerance that can arise when religions teach that theirs is the one and only "right" way to believe.

### **Children's Worship**

The Children's Worship aspect of our program is an attempt to bring all the children together and engage them in a brief or extended worship-related activity (as opposed to a curricular lesson or service activity). Part of the goal of these times is to expose children, in a developmentally appropriate way, to Quaker practices of sitting in silence and "centering down", which can be challenging for both adults and children! At times we have used activities that help focus children's attention and promote calmness by engaging the senses – watching glitter settle to the bottom of a water jar, listening for the sounds of nature, or feeling a smooth stone or shell in one's hand. At times we have done a walking meditation, practiced "holding someone in the light", or made drawings on paper in response to music or visual imagery. We have also used Children's Worship as a time for brief personal sharing and community-building as we listen quietly and respectfully to each other. It is challenging to develop activities that "work" for children from preschool age through high school. We continue to seek the best ways to make this a meaningful and enjoyable experience for the children, and consider this aspect of our program to be an ongoing "work in progress".

### **Resources**

Teachers in our Children's First Day School classes have drawn from a variety of sources to plan lessons and activities. Some of these include:

Doctor Seuss for First Day Schools, edited by Barbara Caldwell, Lynne Brick, Donna Sweeney. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1989.

[http://www.quakerbooks.org/doctor\\_seuss\\_for\\_first\\_day\\_schools.php](http://www.quakerbooks.org/doctor_seuss_for_first_day_schools.php)

"Sparklers" or Sparkling Still: A Quaker Curriculum for First Day School or Home Use for Children Ages 3 through 8. FGC Quaker Press:

[http://www.quakerbooks.org/sparkling\\_still\\_pdf.php](http://www.quakerbooks.org/sparkling_still_pdf.php)

