The ABCs of teaching your kids to read the Bible

What does it mean to be “Bible literate”?

As Catholic parents, part of your “job description” is to equip your children with the essential knowledge and skills required for their lifelong journey of faith. When it comes to the Bible, you want to begin teaching the knowledge and skills that will help them ultimately become biblically literate adults. So let’s start by describing biblically literate adults.

- These people are comfortable in reading and using the Bible.
- They know how the books of the Bible are arranged and how to quickly and easily locate a specific book or passage.
- They have a solid understanding of the biblical story of salvation history.
- They are familiar with key people and events of salvation history and can tell how God’s saving power worked through those people and events.
- These biblically literate adults understand that any book or passage from the Scriptures must be understood in its proper context. When reading the Bible, they consider things like the literary genre, the culture of the time, the original author’s intended message, how this message fits into the bigger picture of salvation history, and how the passage is understood in the Church’s Tradition.

We can help children become such biblically literate adults by

working on these three goals:

A. We should help our children become knowledgeable and comfortable using the Bible.
B. We should help them know and understand the biblical story of salvation history.
C. Our ministry with children should help them understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts.

Goal A is the **Access** goal. Goal B is the **Big Picture** goal. Goal C is the **Context** goal. Taken together we can call them the ABCs of biblical literacy.

Looking for a Bible?

The ABCs of biblical literacy

There is a certain progression with the three goals of biblical literacy. The **Access** goal is the most basic goal; its competencies create a foundation for working on the **Big Picture** and **Context** goals. The **Big Picture** builds on the **Access** competencies and creates greater knowledge that the **Context** competencies can build on. All three goals are closely related; working on any one goal usually reinforces the others.

As a general guideline, with elementary age children, your primary focus should be on the **Access** competencies and introducing some **Big Picture** knowledge. You will probably not focus on the **Context** competencies because they require more abstract reasoning than most young children are capable of. However, you will use specific **Context** skills and knowledge competencies as you teach children about the meaning of specific Bible stories.

Let’s take a closer look at these three goals and how you can help children develop the competencies needed to become

proficient in them.

The access goal: Help children become comfortable in using the Bible

Many children do not know how to use the Bible. They may have heard Bible stories read to them and maybe they were even given a Bible for their First Communion. But they do not know how the Bible is structured or how to find specific passages or stories within it. By focusing on the competencies of the **Access** goal, we can help the children we teach become more familiar and comfortable with the Bible.

The most critical practice for achieving the **Access** goal—a practice so basic that many people overlook it—is simply having the children *use* the Bible. Too often children read Scripture passages as quotations in another book, such as a religion textbook. Or parents or religion teachers may look up a Scripture passage and then hand the opened Bible to a young person to read.

These practices do not encourage children to learn basic biblical literacy skills. If young Catholics are to become comfortable in accessing the Bible, they must use it regularly. Each child should have access to his or her own Bible—and be asked to look up passages in it, and asked to read from it.

To help children become comfortable in using the Bible, here are two important competencies to teach them.

1. Know the Bible's structure

The Bible is not one book; rather it is a collection, or even a small library, of books and letters. These books are organized in a specific and intentional structure, sort of like books might be grouped in sections on a bookshelf.



The Old Testament

The Old Testament is the first major section of the Bible. Its books are primarily about God's relationship with his Chosen People, the Israelites (or the Jews).

- The first part of the Old Testament is called the **Pentateuch**. The stories in these books are the heart of the Old Testament.
- The second part of the Old Testament is called the **historical books**. These books recount how the Chosen People settled in the Promised Land and how they eventually became a kingdom ruled by great and not-so-great kings.
- The third part of the Old Testament is called the **wisdom books**. These books teach some of the collected wisdom of the Israelites.
- The fourth part of the Old Testament is called the **books of the prophets**. These contain the warnings and consolations of some of Israel's prophets.

The New Testament

The New Testament is the second major section of the Bible. Its books tell how God fulfilled the Old Testament promises by sending us the Savior, Jesus Christ.

- The first part of the New Testament is the four **Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles**. The Gospels have the stories about Christ's life and teaching and the Book of Acts tells

us about how the Church spread after Christ's Ascension.
- The second part of the New Testament is the **letters**. Early Church leaders sent these letters, some to specific individuals and others to specific Christian communities.
- The last book of the New Testament is the **Book of Revelation**. It is a unique collection of prophecies and symbolic visions.

Refer to these sections when your children look up passages in the Bible. Say things like "This Bible story is from the Book of Exodus, which is in the Old Testament of the Bible," or "This Bible story is from the Gospel of Mark. The Gospels have stories about the life of Jesus and the things he taught."

2. Locating a passage in the Bible

The system for finding a particular passage in the Bible is simple. After explaining this system to your children, help them develop the skill of locating Bible passages through practice, practice, practice! This skill will take time for children to master but it is a crucial skill for lifelong Bible reading.



The big picture goal: Help children know and understand the biblical story of salvation history

Because of our lectionary-based liturgies, Catholics are often familiar with most of the important people and stories of history. But if liturgies are a person's only contact with the Scriptures, she or he may not see how those individual stories

fit into the overarching biblical story of God's covenantal relationship with the human race, which we also call salvation history. Much of Catholic theology is based on the presumption that we know and understand the overarching story of salvation history.

Salvation history is often organized into different periods to help us understand God's saving work. Here's a brief explanation of the eight periods:

1. **Primeval History.** The Bible begins with figurative stories—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel—that tell how God created everything that exists and how sin and evil entered God's good Creation.
2. **Patriarchs (and Matriarchs)** In this period of salvation history, God began to form a special relationship with a chosen race of people. He made a special promise, called a Covenant, with a patriarch (leader of a tribe) named Abraham. God promised that Abraham and Sarah's descendants would be numerous, that they would inherit a Promised Land, and that their descendants would be a blessing for all nations.
3. **Egypt and the Exodus.** In this period of salvation history, Abraham and Sarah's descendants, now called Israelites, are led out of slavery in Egypt through God's power and the leadership of a prophet named Moses. On their journey God extended the Covenant he made with Abraham and Sarah to all the Israelites, giving them the Ten Commandments to obey as part of their Covenant promises.
4. **Settling the Promised Land.** After Moses's death, God called a new leader, Joshua, to

lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. After many battles, they eventually gained control of the land, and each of the Twelve Tribes of Israel was given its own section to live on.

5. **Kingdoms of Judah and Israel.** When the Israelites wanted their own king. God reluctantly answered their plea. The first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—united the twelve tribes as one nation. After Solomon's death, there was disagreement between the tribes, and the kingdom split in two. Israel was the name of the northern kingdom and Judah was the name of the southern kingdom. When the kings and people of these two kingdoms disobeyed their Covenant with God, he sent prophets to warn them.
6. **Exile and Return.** Despite the prophets' warnings, the people of Israel and Judah continued to turn away from God's Covenant with them. So God let their kingdoms be conquered; Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Because many of the people were taken into captivity, this time period was called the Exile. After fifty years in exile, a new king allowed the people, now called Judeans or Jews, to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.
7. **Life of Jesus Christ.** God never abandoned his Chosen People. When the time was right, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Jesus preached love, justice, and forgiveness, healed many people, and worked miracles as signs of God's power. When he was killed by the Romans—with the approval

of the Jewish leaders—his followers thought all was lost. Instead, after three days, God raised Jesus from the dead.

8. **Early Christian Church.** After his Resurrection, Jesus instructed his closest followers, the Apostles, to go and spread the Good News of salvation to all people. The Holy Spirit gave Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles the courage to tell others about Jesus Christ. They started new Christian communities with the help of newly converted Christians. Soon Christianity spread throughout the whole Roman Empire—even to Rome.

To understand how each biblical book's story fits into this bigger history is the mark of a truly biblically literate person. This kind of knowledge grows with repetition and review, and with young children you can best help them develop this knowledge by exposing them to key people and events in Scripture.

The context goal: Help children understand how to interpret Bible books and passages in their proper contexts

The **Context** goal is more subtle and complex than the **Access** and **Big Picture** goals. This goal requires a level of abstract thinking that young children are not yet capable of. However, parents need to understand this goal in order to teach children the correct interpretation of the biblical stories they read. Moreover, the skills required to achieve this goal can be introduced to older kids and teens.

This quote from the Second Vatican Council document, *Dei Verbum*, describes how to correctly interpret the Bible:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. (no. 12)

The quote states that we must do two things when interpreting a Bible story or teaching. First, we must seek to understand what the original human author intended to communicate. The Church Fathers called this the "literal sense" of the Scriptures.

Second, we must seek to understand what God is revealing through the story or passage. The Church Fathers called this the "fuller sense" or the "spiritual sense" of the Scriptures. Often the literal sense and the spiritual sense of a passage are closely related. But in some Scripture passages, God reveals, through the spiritual sense, a deeper and more universal truth than the human author originally understood or intended. The Church teaches that the Bible teaches, without error, "that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 107). As they begin to develop skills supporting the context goal, you can encourage older kids and teens to focus on this truth—asking, for instance: "What spiritual truth does God want us to teach us in this passage?"

Paragraphs 109–119 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explain how to apply these principles. These paragraphs describe these contexts we must consider when interpreting any particular passage of the Bible, which is why we describe this as the **Context** goal.

- **Historical context.** To understand the full importance or meaning of a certain event, we need to know the larger historical situation the event occurred within.

- **Cultural context.** Sometimes the true meaning of certain actions or words makes sense only when we understand the cultural practices or beliefs of the time.
- **Literary genre.** The Bible is composed of many different types of literature. We must know which type we are reading and realize that each genre has its own rules for interpretation.
- **Unity of the whole Bible.** When taken as a whole, God's revealed truth is presented in the Bible without error. This is the case in many Old Testament passages, whose Christian meaning can be completely and accurately understood only in light of the New Testament revelation.
- **Living Tradition of the Church.** To fully understand some Bible passages, we must take into account how the Magisterium—the official teaching authority of the Church—has interpreted the meaning of those passages.
- **Coherence of the truths of faith.** When it comes to religious or moral truth, the Bible cannot contradict itself or any other revealed truth of our Tradition.

If we do not interpret the Bible using these contexts, we could easily misinterpret God's revelation. This is the danger of biblical fundamentalism, an approach to biblical interpretation that Catholics are cautioned to avoid. In its extreme forms, biblical fundamentalism leads people to false beliefs, such as the belief that God created the universe in six 24-hour days.

Taking it one step at a time

If you are new to the Bible, all of this might seem daunting. But you don't need to be an expert to begin exploring the Bible with your children. In fact, seeing you learn about the Bible offers a valuable example for your kids. You're showing them that growing in faith is a lifelong process, and you're affirming the importance of God's Word in the life of faith.

Having said that, there are many excellent resources for adults who want to learn more about the Bible—so many, in fact, that listing them all would be a big project! But here are a few to consider:

- Use a Catholic bible. Catholic bibles contain material excluded from most Protestant bibles. In addition to the 39 books included in Protestant bibles, Catholic bibles include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch, I and II Maccabees, and additions to Daniel and Esther. There are many Catholic bible translations; the one you hear at Mass in the United States is from the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE). The translation used by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and at Mass in Canada is the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).
- Use a Catholic study bible, or one with good footnotes. The New American Bible Revised Edition contains extensive footnotes, for example.
- Use illustrated collections of children's bible stories for very young children, and age-appropriate bibles. These bibles contain extra resources, including reading plans, maps, explanatory articles, and attractive

artwork designed with kids in mind.

- Get involved in a bible study group at your parish—preferably one led by someone with formal training in the bible.

Access, Big Picture, Context. Keep these three pieces in mind as you begin to read the Bible with your children, and you'll be well on your way to raising biblically literate kids.