

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Honoring Children's Full Humanity: Berryman's Sacred Gift, Our Shared Calling

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Keywords: Jerome W. Berryman, children, childhood, theology, Godly Play, child-attentive, liberation theologies, childhood studies

<https://doi.org/10.65045/001c.158968>

Journal of Childhood and Religion

Vol. Special Issue, 2026

One of Jerome W. Berryman's greatest gifts was his genuine respect for children. Although respecting children might sound simple, doing so requires our ongoing attention. Our world is often adult-centered, and children are disrespected or dismissed in a host of subtle and overt ways. Given these challenges, the aim of this article is to draw wisdom from Berryman's life and work so that we might strengthen our respect for children and honor their full humanity. The article claims that we can become more child-attentive by carrying out three important and related tasks found in Berryman's work: 1) noticing and naming narrow assumptions about children and listening to their voices and concerns; 2) discovering insights about children from multiple disciplines and developing robust conceptions of children that honor their full humanity; and 3) reforming and revising our practices, beliefs, and policies in the light of respect for children. In addition to illustrating how taking up these tasks can strengthen our respect for and relationships with children, the article highlights the various sources and methods that informed Berryman's theology and practice, inspiring us to discover new resources for and creative approaches to strengthening respect for children in our own contexts. By emphasizing children's full humanity, the article also invites people across worldviews to shift their perspectives from adult-oriented to child-attentive and to collaborate across many lines of difference to help children, adults, and our planet thrive.

One of Jerome W. Berryman's greatest gifts to the church and the world was his genuine respect for children. He honored their full humanity. He viewed them as complex human beings with ideas and questions of their own. He wondered with them, laughed with them, shared meaningful stories with them, and learned from them. His gift of respecting children is powerful and profound. By honoring children's full humanity, he offered the church a robust understanding of children and created Godly Play, one of the most highly respected approaches to faith formation in the world. He also provided an example to the church and the academy of the importance of connecting theory and practice as well as bringing together scholars and practitioners across disciplines. In these ways and more, his respect for children and their full humanity has been a gift to children, families, scholars, and faith leaders worldwide.

Berryman's life and work also remind the world that respecting children is an urgent task and a shared calling. Although respecting children might sound simple or self-evident, doing so requires our ongoing attention. Even though children make up a third of the human population, our world is often adult-centered, and children are disrespected or dismissed in a host of subtle and overt ways. Whether in families or communities, adults can easily neglect to listen to children or to take their questions and ideas seriously. Furthermore, although children are among the most vulnerable people on the planet, countries rich and poor do not consistently provide children with their basic needs. Child maltreatment is also a worldwide problem, and children have been abused and neglected in schools, faith communities, sports facilities, expensive homes, and refugee camps. Regardless of our context or roles, we can all give examples of how adults, including ourselves, can easily become adult-centered and disrespect children.

Given these challenges, the aim of this article is to draw wisdom from Berryman's life and work so that we might strengthen our respect for children and more intentionally carry out this shared calling. This article claims that individuals and communities can become more child-attentive by carrying out three important and related tasks that Berryman carried out in his life and work:

1. Noticing and naming narrow assumptions about children and listening to their voices and concerns.
2. Discovering insights about children from multiple disciplines and developing robust conceptions of children that honor their full humanity.
3. Reforming and revising our practices, beliefs, and policies in the light of respect for children.

The article is divided into three parts that describe the three tasks, provide examples of how Berryman and others have lived them out, and raise questions for reflection. Although these tasks are outlined in three separate sections, it is important to remember, as we learn from Berryman's own work, that carrying them out is not a rigid or burdensome procedure but rather a creative and circular process. Furthermore, taking up even one of the three tasks can empower us to respect children and honor their full humanity more intentionally, thereby deepening our relationships with children and strengthening our families, communities, and societies.

By highlighting these three tasks, the article also deepens our understanding of the sources and methods that informed Berryman's theology and practice, inspiring us to discover new resources for and creative approaches to strengthening respect for children in our own contexts. Throughout his life, Berryman creatively carried out these three tasks. He closely examined

narrow assumptions about children in the past and today, mined wisdom from an extraordinary number of sources to propose a “more unified, fully conscious, and constructive doctrine of children as a means of grace,” and provided suggestions for revising Christian doctrines and spiritual practices.¹ In addition, Berryman described elements of the dynamic and playful flow of these three tasks whenever he discussed various stages of the creative process. In one passage, for example, he expresses how creativity starts with wonder and curiosity, moves to scanning, begins to develop insights that spark delight and a sense of “careful caring,” then promotes justice that rolls down for all, ends with a soft closure, and begins again—all the while, and amid life’s challenges and joys, finding integrity, courage, and a home in God’s expansive grace and creative energy.²

Although this article is primarily addressed to Christian individuals and communities, it invites readers across worldviews to strengthen their respect for children and to notice how doing so has many positive implications for children and people of all ages. For those within the church, for example, the article illustrates the benefits of respecting children for strengthening not only the church’s child-related programs but also its theologies, spiritual practices, and justice-related work in the world. Even though contemporary theologians and faith leaders have contributed much to the church by carrying out these three tasks in light of the needs and strengths of the marginalized, they have paid little attention to children. For instance, feminist, womanist, Black, Latino, and Dalit theologians have critiqued narrow views of marginalized and discriminated groups, emphasized their equality and full humanity, and revised doctrines, practices, and advocacy efforts that support the marginalized and strengthen the whole church. However, even those liberating and justice-related theologies are often adult-centered and focus little on the diverse needs and contributions of children. By becoming more child-attentive and taking seriously the complexity and full humanity of children, Christians can strengthen not only their interactions with children but also, as we see with all robust theologies, the church as a whole and its work in the world.

By emphasizing children’s full humanity, the article also invites people across worldviews to shift their perspectives from adult-oriented to child-attentive. People of all religious or secular traditions can carry out the three tasks outlined here by building on their own core values, practices, and sources of wisdom. Whatever our worldview, we can all learn from Berryman’s great respect for children and strengthen our understanding of and commitments to them. In addition, by building on the best of our worldviews and multiple

1 Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 5.

2 Here I loosely highlight a few aspects of Berryman’s rich and substantive reflections on creativity, play, and God’s grace, building on a passage in which he describes the creative process to parents. See Jerome W. Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 146–149.

sources, including our own experiences of childhood and interactions with children today, we can all more fully appreciate our shared humanity and collaborate across many lines of difference to help children, adults, and our planet thrive.

Task One: Notice and Name

One important task in becoming more child-attentive is to notice and name the experiences of children and how adults perceive and treat them. This task involves staying curious while “scanning” the scene and “taking a closer look” at children’s strengths, vulnerabilities, and challenges as well as adult conceptions of and commitments to children. We can build this awareness by becoming more curious about children’s lives and asking a range of questions such as: What do you notice about children’s thoughts and actions? What do children themselves tell you about their joys, struggles, or challenges? What are adults saying or assuming about children? How do they treat children? How are they treated in our faith communities, schools, and the wider culture?

As Berryman noticed and as we can see around us, children are often disrespected or narrowly perceived. Becoming more child-attentive means noticing when we are puzzled or disturbed by how children are viewed and treated, whether in our daily lives, faith communities, or the wider culture. Being child-attentive also means reflecting more intentionally on our own assumptions and treatment of children and listening more carefully to children themselves. As Berryman also showed, cultivating a deeper awareness of children’s complexity can also involve reflecting on our own childhoods and noticing when we felt loved and comforted and when we did not. This kind of awareness and self-reflection can help us be more sensitive to children in our midst and cultivate more life-giving interactions with them.

As we see in Berryman’s life and work, he constantly scanned the landscape and looked closely at the experiences of children and our interactions with them. He noticed and took seriously children’s questions, fears, and joys. He also noticed narrow views of and disrespectful behaviors toward children around us—in the church, the academy, the culture, and our own lives. For example, already in graduate school he noticed a gap in attention to children in Christian theology. He was even asked to drop one ministry class because he was asking too many questions about children and child education. In his writings about the history of Christian thought, he paid attention to the assumptions about children in the work of various theologians, and he discovered that although some honored children and treated them with respect, the attitude toward children of many other theologians was indifference, ambivalence, or ambiguity.

A central problem that he highlighted throughout his work is that adults (including theologians and child-focused researchers) in the past and still today are generally indifferent to children's spiritual lives. As he said, "Sometimes adults greatly underestimate children's experience of God" and their capacity for theological thought.³ They fail to see that children know God and need to be respected for it. He noticed this problem not only in the church but also among child-focused researchers such as Jean Piaget, who assumed "that adult thinking is the norm, so the thinking of childhood is viewed as underdeveloped adult thinking."⁴ Informed by this assumption, other influential thinkers, such as Ronald Goldman, concluded that the period of early childhood is "pre-religious."⁵

Berryman's attention to this problem coupled with his own deep respect for children and their spiritual lives sparked the development of *Godly Play*. He also drew insights from his experience and the work of other thinkers—such as Sophia Cavalletti, Maria Montessori, David Hay, and Rebecca Nye—to help support his claims that "the religious life of the child is to be respected."⁶ His efforts have also inspired many faith leaders and theologians to shift their perspectives and actions from being primarily adult-centered to becoming more child-aware and child-attentive.

In my own life, for example, his work was a spiritual gift and sparked a major shift in my own scholarship. I studied theology at the University of Chicago and in Tübingen, Germany. Throughout my graduate studies, we never talked about or studied children. Then and often today, the subject of children is considered marginal, a subject perhaps for religious educators but beneath serious theologians. But my research dramatically shifted twenty-nine years ago when my son was three years old and I was asked to teach his Sunday school class. I thought it would be a breeze. How hard can it be for a college professor to teach preschoolers? But I quickly found that most of the lessons were not age appropriate, and most of the crafts had no integrity. One lesson was even about the biblical story of the sufferings of Job, and the craft was to give the children two paper plates and have them draw a happy face on one plate and a sad face on the other and hold them up as they heard about Job's various joys and sufferings.

3 Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 5.

4 Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 139.

5 Berryman, *Godly Play*, 139.

6 Berryman, *Godly Play*, 143; Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992); Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, trans. Claude A. Claremont (New York: Henry Holt, 1967); David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006); and Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

I was puzzled and disturbed. How could these educational materials lack so much creativity and respect for children? This experience meant I devoted most Saturdays to revising the planned lessons and crafts or creating new ones, and it launched my frantic search for a curriculum that respected children, was theologically sound, and had playful and meaningful lessons and activities. That is when I discovered Godly Play. I was thrilled to find an approach to faith formation that respected children and treated them with dignity.

Discovering Godly Play not only enriched my interactions with my son and the children in my Sunday school class but also shifted the course of my research to be much more child-attentive. I wondered what in the world the church had been thinking about children, so I gathered together other scholars to pursue this question and published my first child-related book, *The Child in Christian Thought*, which explores what Christian theologians across the centuries have said about children and our obligations to them.⁷ By mining these resources, my collaborators and I discovered that children and childhood are not marginal topics in theology. Since then I have continued to explore religious understandings of children and childhood in the Bible, Christianity, and other world religions.⁸

Noticing and naming narrow conceptions of children and their maltreatment and marginalization is still an urgent and important task in theology, religious studies, and our daily lives. We can all provide examples of narrow assumptions of children and child-related injustices that we notice in our own contexts, volunteer work, and professions. In my own work as a scholar and theologian, for example, I notice that children are still absent in many areas of theology and in theological education more broadly. Seminaries that once required courses on youth and family ministry or religious education for all students seeking leadership roles in the church often now offer these courses only as electives. In addition, little attention is given “across the curriculum” to the needs and contributions of children, even though courses in biblical studies, the history of church, liturgical studies, and pastoral care and counseling can and should include attention to children. After all, they are members of our shared humanity, and they play a role in biblical texts, the history of the church, and faith communities today.

⁷ Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁸ See Marcia J. Bunge, Terence Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021); Marcia J. Bunge, Reidar Aasgaard, and Merethe Roos, eds., *Nordic Childhoods 1750–1960: From Folk Beliefs to Pippi Longstocking* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Don Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, eds., *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

Furthermore, even though many contemporary theologians champion human equality and human rights, they can easily slip into focusing primarily on adults and neglect to include the equal worth and dignity of children. We see this lack of attention to children even in the work of contemporary theologians who seek to articulate a robust understanding of human nature (i.e., theological anthropologies). Even though they address a range of human strengths and vulnerabilities and emphasize the inherent dignity and equal worth of all people, their work is highly adult-centered. Some publications do not mention children at all. Others might contain passages about children, yet the words *child*, *children*, and *childhood* are absent in the index.⁹ Still others might include attention to “childlikeness” yet say little about living children and slip easily into discussing how adults might become “like children” or experience a second naivete. We see this slippage even among theologians who use the biblical term *children of God* to refer to all people yet tend to skim over living children—children per se—and focus primarily on adults. Even theological discussions of human rights often neglect to mention growing attention worldwide to children’s rights and responsibilities, which has been prompted by several initiatives, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Such gaps in theology and theological education are puzzling and disturbing for a host of reasons. As Berryman illustrated throughout his work, theologians have many reasons and a wealth of resources for paying more attention to children. After all, the suffering of children is real and apparent to all. In countries rich and poor, many suffer from poverty, malnutrition, and lack of access to healthcare, are victims of neglect and abuse, or struggle with depression and anxiety. Furthermore, many biblical texts and Jesus’s own teaching and example pay attention to children, and many biblical scholars are now paying more attention to children. They remind us that the Bible pays attention to the whole lifespan and all members of the community—not just able-bodied adults. As Claus Westermann states about the Hebrew Bible, “The individual human is always seen in the context of an existence that spans birth and death. Every age group has its particular and necessary function, and only a community which includes both children and elderly can be called intact.”¹⁰

Furthermore, as Berryman showed the church, theologians can learn much about children’s capacities and vulnerabilities from scholars across disciplines—ranging from history, literature, and philosophy to psychology,

⁹ See, for example, the indexes of two respected volumes in the field: Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jenson, eds., *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 418 (here the index terms go from *chemistry* to *choice*); and Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 453 (terms go from *Carter* to *Church*).

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, “The Human in the Old Testament,” *Word and World* 9, no. 4 (1989): 321. Originally published as *Der Mensch im Alten Testament*, Schriften des Evangelischen Arbeitskreises für kulturelle Fragen (Bremen, Germany: B. C. Heye, 1961), this work was translated and edited by Frederick J. Gaiser for *Word and World*.

sociology, and neuroscience—and from the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. Berryman continually learned about children not only by being with them and walking alongside them but also by mining resources from an amazing range of disciplines. He critically studied and drew insights from biblical scholars and theologians as well as child psychologists and medical specialists. He also learned much from his experiences as a father and spouse; a chaplain, teacher, and coach for teenage boys at Culver Academies in Indiana (1965–1968); his intensive Montessori training in Italy (1968–1972); and his pastoral training and work in various pediatric medical settings in Texas (1972–1984).

Wondering Together

Whatever our responsibilities, roles, or contexts, we can strengthen our relation to children by listening to them and by noticing and naming some of the narrow assumptions about them—whether in our families, faith communities, schools, medical facilities, nations, or daily lives. We can follow Berryman's lead by scanning and closely examining common attitudes and behaviors toward children that we see around us. We can begin to expose some of the ways adults, including ourselves, disrespect children or treat them as less than human beings by asking simple and related questions such as these:

- In your context, what narrow assumptions of children do you notice? Do you see ways children are disrespected? Dismissed? Maltreated? What injustices do they face? What are children around you saying?
- What working conceptions or assumptions about children do you notice in your own life, community, or society? How are children viewed?
- What commitments or behaviors toward children do you notice in your life, your community, or society? How are children treated?

Our conceptions of and commitments to children are interrelated. The two go hand in hand. Thus, it is important to reflect on questions that help us notice, name, and examine them.

Task Two: Discover and Develop

A second important task in becoming child-attentive is to develop robust theologies of childhood. If we seek to honor and respect children, then we cannot stop with the task of noticing and naming narrow views of children or the various injustices and challenges they experience. Rather, we must broaden our perspectives and develop informed and robust theologies of childhood that honor children's full humanity.

Theologies of childhood are systematic understandings of children and obligations to them that deepen our respect for them. Like other theologies, theologies of childhood build on four primary sources: (1) the Bible; (2) Christian thought and practice (often termed *tradition*); (3) insights from other disciplines, including the sciences, arts, and humanities (sometimes called *reason*); and (4) the experience of individuals and communities. Robust theologies of childhood help us check our own narrow assumptions about children, and they provide a framework or lens for us to respect children, build more meaningful relationships with them, and honor their full humanity.¹¹

Even if we do not have children or are not paid to work directly with children, developing and articulating our working theologies of childhood is important for all of us. Whatever our contexts or interactions with children, robust theologies of childhood help us strengthen our commitments to children, whether in our families, faith communities, professions, or public life. By cultivating strong and informed theologies of childhood, we can better appreciate children's complexity and take seriously their

- strengths as well as their vulnerabilities;
- agency and positive contributions as well as their need for guidance and protection; and
- development, needs, and unique intersectional identities as well as their dignity, equality, and integrity.

Such multifaceted views of children honor their full humanity and help us all more proactively listen to, respect, and help children thrive. Cultivating strong theologies of childhood is an important task that differs from but can positively inform many other vital tasks in the church, such as offering inclusive and welcoming worship services, providing meaningful religious education programs, developing and enforcing child-protection policies, serving children and families in need, and advocating for public policies that support them.

Berryman's theological perspectives on childhood have been inspirational and influential for people across denominations and around the world because he cultivated a rich, multifaceted, and complex view of children that respected children and honored their full humanity.¹² He understood the importance of protecting and guiding children as well as listening to and learning from

11 For an introduction to the specific task of child-attentive theologies, including theologies of childhood and child liberation theologies, see Marcia J. Bunge and Megan Eide, "Strengthening Theology by Honoring Children," in Bunge, *Child Theology*, xiii–xxv.

12 Berryman's theological reflections on childhood are woven throughout his major works. For a collection of Berryman's essays focused on his cultivation of a theology of childhood, see Jerome W. Berryman, *The Search for a Theology of Childhood: Essays by Jerome W. Berryman from 1978 to 2009*, ed. Brendan Hyde (Brisbane, Australia: Connor Court Publishing, 2013).

them. He drew attention to their physical, emotional, and intellectual development as well as their spiritual questions, experiences, and insights. At a time when “play” was generally understood as insignificant or “kids’ stuff,” he articulated the importance of play, storytelling, and creativity for both children and adults. He walked alongside children and delighted in them.

Berryman’s powerful and influential theological vision of children’s dignity and complexity was certainly sparked by his heart for children. However, his vision was not full-blown in graduate school. He developed this vision by mining insights from the four common sources of theology much more widely and deeply than most theologians. Throughout his career he was a voracious reader and alert observer who remained curious and committed, always wanting to learn more from and about children. By doing so he not only strengthened his theology of childhood and created *Godly Play* but also helped bridge common gaps we often see today, such as between practitioners and theologians, lay and ordained, the church and the academy, or science and religion.

Although most of us might not read as widely or observe children as astutely as Berryman, we can all deepen and develop our own theologies of childhood not only by reading his work but also by following his example of openness, curiosity, and eagerness to learn more from and about children. Following are some of the ways Berryman expanded and deepened his theology of childhood, with ideas for how we might do the same by taking a more child-attentive approach to the four common sources of theology.

For example, in searching for insights from the Bible about children, many theologians might look at passages directly about children, but Berryman dug deeper. Certainly, like most theologians, he explored and cited famous biblical passages directly about responsibilities to children, such as biblical imperatives to teach children God’s commands (Deuteronomy 6) or to protect and seek justice for the orphan. Like others, Berryman also highlighted Jesus’s engagement with children, such as when Jesus takes children in his arms or welcomes, heals, or blesses them. Berryman also stressed how Jesus identifies himself with children and lifts them up as paradigms of receiving the reign of God, saying, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:13–16 [cf. Luke 18:15–17]; Matthew 19:13–15). However, building on his own close reading of the Bible and the work of a host of biblical scholars, Berryman explored these and other passages more deeply. He also noticed unnamed children who are part of community gatherings, crowds, and rituals or who play pivotal or unexpected roles in biblical stories. In addition, in what might seem evident to some, but what many adult-oriented theologians fail to express, Berryman emphasized that many central biblical concepts, such as the “image of God,” the “body of Christ,” “love of neighbor,” or God’s Spirit being “poured out on all flesh,” also apply to children.

Like other theologians, Berryman also drew insights from theologians past and present. However, unlike theologians who primarily focus on theologians who have informed their work or faith community, Berryman gathered wisdom from a wide range of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant thinkers. He explored and evaluated central ideas of theologians across centuries and contexts, from Cyprian to Karl Rahner, and the various ways that they viewed and treated children, mining lessons for today. He also paid attention to theologians' own spiritual practices and approaches to faith formation, wondering what those practices reveal about their views of children or how we might incorporate their most life-giving practices into the church today. Unlike many others, Berryman was also interested in the childhoods, stories, and experiences of Christian theologians, seeking to learn more about what might have informed their understandings of children and prompting readers to reflect on what life experiences might be shaping their own views and treatment of children. Berryman treated ancient and contemporary theologians as conversation partners, gathering lessons both to avoid distorted and dangerous ideas and to cultivate informed and life-giving conceptions of and commitments to children.

Although most theologians also gather wisdom from disciplines outside theology, Berryman stands out as a theologian who gathered insights from an amazing array of disciplines and all corners of the academy. Like many other theologians, he turned to philosophers, ethicists, and historians to strengthen his ideas. He also respected and incorporated important insights from the social and natural sciences, such as we see in the work of theologians who are addressing social, economic, and environmental injustices that affect people and our planet. Yet Berryman cast a much wider net. For example, he drew wisdom from philosophies of play, flow, and creativity as well as theories of moral and spiritual development, thereby expanding his ideas of both children and adults. Berryman strengthened his understanding of storytelling not only by telling, listening to, and reading stories but also by tapping into psychological, sociological, and literary studies of the power of narrative. He drew not only from well-known philosophers in theology but also from philosophers and psychologists who were studying young children's philosophical and ethical questions, insights, and capacities. He also incorporated poetry, novels, music, and the visual arts into his theological reflections on children. For example, Berryman claimed that the poet and novelist Hermann Hesse significantly influenced his book *Children and the Theologians*, and the first chapter begins with an image of Bohdan Piasecki's moving painting of the Last Supper, which depicts Jesus surrounded not just by his male disciples but also women and children.¹³ Throughout his career,

¹³ Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 2, 5.

Berryman also incorporated lessons from research directly about children and education and both learned from and contributed to the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of childhood studies.

Finally, like other theologians, Berryman paid close attention to the experiences of individuals and communities across many lines of difference, such as gender, class, ethnicity, or nationality. However, unlike some theologians, he also paid attention to children. His work is filled with observations and stories about children's behaviors, feelings, thoughts, questions, challenges, and insights. He respected children's ideas and actions as an important source of theological reflection. Like Gianna Gobbi, Berryman also emphasized that children are not empty vessels or theological "beginners" but already participate in authentic forms of theological reflection through their exposure to Scripture and rituals, their own relationship with God, and other experiences.¹⁴ Thus, we need to listen to them, take their ideas seriously, and learn from them. Finally, he recognized that our own experiences of childhood can be an important source of theological reflection.

Building on such varied sources, Berryman developed a robust and multifaceted theology of childhood that honors children's complexity and full humanity, and his work inspires and empowers us all to stay alert and curious, always ready to deepen and expand our engagement with and appreciation of children. Over the past twenty years, although they might not have Berryman's vast experience with children or his familiarity with such a diverse array of sources, several theologians have been developing their own theologies of childhood.¹⁵

For example, I have developed a theology of childhood that has greatly helped me navigate and strengthen my relationships with students and my own children, my work in the areas of vocational discernment and spiritual formation, and my spiritual life and advocacy efforts. Over the course of my career, the theology of childhood that I have cultivated highlights six central and biblically based perspectives of children and our obligations to them, and I claim that by holding them in tension (rather than in isolation) we can strengthen our conceptions of and commitments to children in daily life, families, and all areas of the church.¹⁶ Although these six conceptions

14 See, for example, Gianna Gobbi, "Listening to God with Children," in *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Barbara Surprenant (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2010), 45–58; and Gobbi, "The Child as Theologian," *NAMTA Journal* 28, no. 3 (2003): 25–41.

15 Theologies of childhood are being developed around the world. See, for example, David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); and Jan Grobbelaar and Gert Breed, eds., *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa* (Durbanville, South Africa: AOSIS, 2016); and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

16 For these and other perspectives on theologies of childhood, see Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 549–578; Bunge, "Beyond Children as Agents or Victims: Reexamining Children's Paradoxical Strengths and Vulnerabilities with Resources from

of children and their corresponding commitments to children are not exhaustive, they are life-giving for children and adults alike. They help us view children and our corresponding responsibilities to them in a fresh light:

1. Children are gifts of God and sources of joy. Delight in and be grateful for them.
2. Children are made in the image of God and thus possess inherent dignity and equal worth. Treat them with dignity and respect.
3. Children are vulnerable neighbors. Provide for, protect, and seek justice for all children.
4. Children are developing beings. Instruct, guide, and bring them up in the faith, helping them to love God and their neighbors.
5. Children are social and moral agents with growing capacities and responsibilities. Cultivate with them practices of mutual confession, forgiveness, and renewal.
6. Children are Spirit-filled and models of faith who are endowed with unique strengths to contribute to the common good now and in the future. Listen to and learn from them. Honor their current relation to God, their contributions, and their vocations. Provide them with a strong education.

Together these six perspectives help us respect and appreciate children's complexity and full humanity, thereby promoting mutually rewarding and flourishing adult-child relationships.

By holding together even just these six perspectives, we can strengthen our relationships and commitments to children. We can check our narrow assumptions and see children paradoxically as

- fully human and made in the image of God yet also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance;

Christian Theologies of Childhood and Child Theologies," in *The Given Child: The Religions' Contribution to Children's Citizenship*, ed. Trygve Wyller and Usha S. Nayar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 27–50; Bunge, "Conceptions of and Commitments to Children: Biblical Wisdom for Families, Congregations, and the Worldwide Church," in *Faith Forward: Launching a Revolution through Ministry with Children, Youth, and Families*, vol. 3, ed. David M. Csinos (Lake Country, BC: Wood Lake, 2018), 94–112; and Bunge, "The Vocation of the Child: Theological Perspectives on the Particular and Paradoxical Roles and Responsibilities of Children," in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 31–52. For articles that draw attention the significance of theologies of children for debates about the corporal punishment of children, see, for example, Marcia J. Bunge, "Christianity, Child Well-Being, and Corporal Punishment," in *Faith in Law, Law in Faith: Reflecting on the Work of John Witte Jr.*, ed. Rafael Domingo, Gary S. Hauk, and Timothy P. Jackson (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2024), 540–567.

- gifts of God and sources of joy yet also moral and social agents with growing capacities and responsibilities; and
- vulnerable neighbors in need of protection yet also strong and insightful models of faith who are endowed with unique gifts and talents to contribute to the common good.

However, as we see over the centuries and still today, individual adults and our faith communities sometimes focus more heavily on one or more of these six conceptions, and when we do, our view of children can become too narrow and our treatment of them can become dismissive, distorted, and even dangerous. For example, if we view children primarily as gifts of God and sources of joy, then we might delight in them but neglect to teach and guide them. If we view them primarily as developing, then although we might guide them, we might neglect to learn from and delight in them. If we view children primarily as vulnerable or victims, then we might strive to protect and seek justice for them but might neglect to listen to them or recognize their strengths and agency. As we see in the history of the church and still today, if we focus too much on instructing them, or if we assume they are ignorant or willful, then we might even physically punish or abuse them. In general, if we neglect to see children as complex human beings who are made in the image of God, our vision can become too adult-centered, and we might prioritize the needs and reputations of adults over the needs and safety of children. Such perspectives, as we see throughout history and in the news every day, can lead to neglecting children and even covering up crimes of adults who have abused, exploited, or even murdered children.

By cultivating robust and multidimensional theologies of childhood, Christian individuals and communities can avoid these and other types of narrow assumptions about children and greatly strengthen their relationships with and commitments to children. They can protect and provide for children as well as accompany and be inspired by them; guide them as well as learn from them; and educate them as well as delight in them. Christians can take seriously children's physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual development even as they honor their equal worth, rights, responsibilities, and current contributions to families and communities.

Wondering Together

We are all called to examine our assumptions of children and to take up the task of articulating and living out informed, multidimensional, and substantive theologies of childhood that honor children's full humanity. We can do so by continually walking alongside children and asking ourselves the following:

- What are the central elements of my own working theology of childhood or the working theology of my faith community? What are my current conceptions of and commitments to children?
- What primary sources influence my relationship to children, my own working theology, and the working theology of my faith community?
- How might my faith community and I expand our perspectives and strengthen our commitments and relationships to children by digging deeper into the four sources of theological reflection, including the sciences and other disciplines? What new and life-giving insights might we discover?

Task Three: Revise and Reform

A third task in becoming more child-attentive is to revise the church's spiritual practices, doctrines, and work in the world in the light of children. By cultivating robust theologies of childhood, we are empowered not only to strengthen our relationships with children and nurture their spiritual lives but also to rethink and revise a range of doctrines and spiritual practices in the light of children for the sake of the whole church and its justice-related activities. Many robust and liberating forms of theology, including Berryman's, take up this third task. Feminist theologians, for example, did not just offer informed perspectives of women's full humanity but took the next step of challenging, revising, and reforming a range of doctrines and practices, thereby strengthening the whole church and its justice-related work. In the same way, child-attentive theologians are called to reexamine and revise doctrines, spiritual practices, and advocacy efforts in the light of children's full humanity, thereby strengthening the whole church and its efforts to help all people and our planet flourish.

Berryman's interactions with and theological reflections on children informed his creation of Godly Play, which revised and reformed common notions of religious education and faith formation. He provided a new vision of spiritual guidance, thereby enriching the lives of both adults and children. He challenged top-down approaches that underestimate children's capacities and spiritual experiences, redefining spiritual guidance as mutually enhancing. His work and the ongoing work of the Godly Play Foundation have continued to inspire many creative, meaningful, child-attentive approaches to spiritual formation, worship, prayer, the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, and other spiritual practices that adults and children enjoy together. By helping the church understand that we are all made in the image of God

and are playing in God's grace, Godly Play revised common notions of faith formation, thereby strengthening families, congregations, and the whole church.¹⁷

In the light of Berryman's rich theological understanding of children, Berryman and the Godly Play Foundation have also been enhancing the church's understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parents and caregivers. Through their efforts and resources, they have helped parents across the world more intentionally worship, pray, and talk about their faith and values with their children both at home and at church. By acknowledging children's complex lives, including their questions, ideas, joys, sufferings, and fears, Godly Play opens the door for adults and children to speak more openly and meaningfully about shared concerns, ethical quandaries, and some of life's harsh realities, thereby promoting moral and spiritual growth that is mutually life-giving for children and adults. In these ways and more, adults and children grow together spiritually, giving children a meaningful religious language and a "deep but open and flexible grounding" in their religious tradition.¹⁸

Several practical theologians and faith leaders are following Berryman's lead and also greatly enriching religious education programs, corporate worship, and intergenerational relationships for children, families, and entire congregations.¹⁹ Although the church has long taken seriously the duty of parents and faith leaders to teach children about the faith, contemporary practical theologians and educators are more intentionally promoting forms of worship and religious education that welcome children and honor their humanity, voices, and active participation. In these ways and more, faith leaders are more effectively engaging children and their caregivers, strengthening the spiritual life of the whole church, and promoting stronger adult-child relationships.

Theologians, practitioners, and activists in many other areas of the church are also revising and reforming the church's beliefs, spiritual practices, and congregational life in the light of attention to children and childhood. For example, ethicists are strengthening the fields of bioethics, medical ethics, and theological anthropology by becoming more child-attentive and challenging adult-centered notions of rights and autonomy. One illustration of this shift can be found in the work of Jessica Bratt Carle. Building on insights from

¹⁷ See, for example, Jerome W. Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013); Berryman, *Stories of God at Home*; and Sonja Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman, *Young Children and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Berryman, *Godly Play*, 154.

¹⁹ See, for example, Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005); Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009); and David M. Csinos and Ivy Beckwith, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus: Formation-Focused Resources for Faith (and Life) with Children* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

theology, childhood studies, and her own experience as a pediatric chaplain, she challenges dominant yet adult-centered notions of autonomy and agency in bioethics, which tend to relegate children to the margins by perceiving them as lacking autonomy.²⁰ Drawing on resources from theology and the sciences, Carle proposes a nuanced view of children's agency that includes attending not only to their voices and experiences but also to nonverbal forms of expression. She also claims that dependence and vulnerability are conditions that do not apply only to children but that are part of the human experience at any age. In these and other ways, Carle offers a more complex understanding of human beings, including children, and a more inclusive moral framework for respecting, connecting with, and caring for both children and adults. Her work illustrates for readers from all worldviews how building on our religious traditions and developing what she calls "a posture of deep attentiveness and responsiveness to hospitalized children" can expand our care of and respect for all human beings.²¹

Several constructive theologians around the world are also undertaking this third task and understand its importance not only for children but also for the church's theology and its work in the world. Thus, they are reexamining a range of doctrines—such as God, creation, the priesthood of all believers, sin, and salvation—in the light of children and childhood for the sake of children and the whole church.²² For example, by placing children in the center of theological reflection, African theologian and Jesuit A. E. Orobator has articulated a fuller notion of the church, and Brazilian eco-feminist and Catholic nun Ivone Gebara has expanded her view of sin and evil.²³ Roman Catholic feminist theologian Jennifer Erin Beste has revised Karl Rahner's notions of grace and freedom and Christian understandings of God and humanity in response to experiences of sexual abuse and other traumas, including those of children.²⁴ Other theologians and faith leaders, such as Craig Nesson, Keith White, and Haddon Willmer, have also been encouraging child-related reforms in church doctrine and practice by championing what they variously call child liberation theologies, child theologies, or childist theologies.²⁵ In a similar vein, ethicist John Walls articulates the power of robust understandings of children and their rights not only for children but also for the field of ethics and for positive social

20 Jessica Bratt Carle, *Children, Theology, and Bioethics: Beyond Autonomy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2025).

21 Carle, *Children, Theology, and Bioethics*, 4.

22 For an introduction to this third task and the various ways it has been defined in contrast to theologies of childhood, see Bunge and Eide, "Strengthening Theology by Honoring Children," xiii–xxv.

23 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "Placing Ethics and Children at the Heart of Ecclesiology," in Bunge, ed., *Child Theology*, 129–149; Ivone Gebara, "Children's Experiences of Evil in Their Multiple Worlds," in Bunge, ed., *Child Theology*, 52–71.

24 See Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

25 See, for example, Craig Nesson, "Attending to the Cries of Children in Liberation Theologies," in Bunge, ed., *Child Theology*, 1–20; Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013); and R. L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).

change. He calls for rethinking ethics in light of childhood—an approach he calls “childism.” For Wall, childism not only honors children’s rights but also responds more self-critically to children’s particular experiences “by transforming understanding and practices for all.”²⁶

Many other faith leaders and advocates are revising and strengthening the church’s justice-related work by paying more attention to the strengths and vulnerabilities of children. For example, child-attentive faith leaders are strengthening the church’s eco-justice and disaster relief efforts by paying more attention to environmental issues that affect some communities and age groups more than others. The World Council of Churches and other faith-based organizations have recognized that air pollution and malnutrition have more damaging health effects on children than on adults, which has strengthened their efforts in addressing immediate needs of children as well as systemic injustices that affect their long-term health and well-being. By honoring children’s ideas, agency, and rights, many faith-based organizations are also doing more to listen to and collaborate with children and young people who are creatively addressing various injustices that affect people of all ages and nations, such as gun violence and climate change. Faith-based organizations are also collaborating with secular and interreligious organizations. Such efforts are important for the church and society. As Nelson Mandela said, “There can be no keener revelation of society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

Other faith leaders are addressing cases of child sexual abuse and attempts of adults to cover up their crimes. These cases are taking place not just in the Roman Catholic Church, which is most often in the news, but rather across religious communities, families rich and poor, sports facilities, and any place there are children. As they seek to respond to these cases, faith leaders also strive to prevent child abuse in the church by reexamining theological understandings of parental authority, corporal punishment, the priesthood, and ordained ministry. Faith leaders such as Victor Vieth—a lawyer, theologian, and program officer for Zero-Abuse Project (an international child protection organization)—are also calling the church to revise and strengthen its policies, teachings, and seminary courses on trauma and abuse to include more attention to children so that the church can more proactively prevent and more faithfully respond to the abuse of both

²⁶ John Wall, *Ethics in the Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 3.

adults and children.²⁷ In the light of child abuse within the church, some denominations are also crafting statements, teaching documents, and churchwide policies on child protection.²⁸

These and other revisions of Christian doctrines, spiritual practices, and justice-related and advocacy efforts that take children into account are creating many positive shifts throughout the church and society for promoting the well-being of our planet and people of all ages.

Wondering Together

Regardless of our specific roles, responsibilities, or professions, all of us are called to take up this third task. We can do so in a host of large and small ways by starting to reflect on and discuss questions such as these:

- What specific doctrines or spiritual practices in my faith community or theology might need rethinking in the light of attention to children?
- How might child-attentive theologies assist me and my faith community in helping families, communities, and all children to thrive?
- How can we ensure that our congregations, schools, seminaries, and faith-based organizations are child-attentive and trauma-informed?
- By better understanding children's strengths and vulnerabilities, how might we enlarge the church's advocacy efforts to address systemic injustices and advance the church's social, economic, and environmental justice efforts?

Conclusion

Whatever our worldviews or specific callings and responsibilities in life, children are part of our families and communities, and, as Berryman reminds us, we are all called to treat them with dignity and respect. Even though this article provides examples and resources for Christian individuals and communities, we can all become more child-attentive in the three ways outlined above by building on our core values and diverse sources of wisdom.

²⁷ See, for example, Victor Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Works of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018); Vieth, *What the Bible Says to Abuse Survivors and Those Who Hurt Them* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2017); Craig L. Nesson and Victor I. Vieth, eds., *Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025); and the Zero Abuse Project website.

²⁸ See, for example, the United Methodist Church, *Safe Sanctuaries: Policy for Ministry with Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults* (Nashville: Discipleship Ministries, 2023); Church of England, *Safeguarding Learning and Development Framework* (London: Church of England, 2024); United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *2023 Annual Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2024); and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A Social Message on Child Protection* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2025).

This calling is important for readers of all worldviews. After all, every person on the planet was once or currently is a child, and children are members of our shared humanity. Carrying out even one of the three tasks can empower us to respect children and honor their full humanity more intentionally, thereby enriching our own lives and strengthening our families, communities, and societies. Pursuing this calling does not always require funding. All we need is curiosity and a heart for children, and even small steps can make a big difference. Furthermore, by respecting children and honoring their full humanity, we will all be more prepared and eager to collaborate across many lines of difference and to work together more effectively and creatively to help children, adults, and our planet thrive.

Submitted: February 28, 2026 EDT. Accepted: March 06, 2026 EDT. Published: May 01, 2026 EDT.



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