

UU Religious Education and Your Child

Finding the right religious education program for your child involves asking a lot of questions. This pamphlet is intended to help you learn if a Unitarian Universalist Sunday school is the answer.

What kinds of things will my child learn?

Parents seeking a religious education program are often looking for a community of shared values in which to raise their children. These values are the most important things we teach, but we also give children building blocks with which to form their own beliefs. Most congregations offer a balanced program including Unitarian Universalist identity, Jewish and Christian heritage, other world religions, and social action/justice.

How can you teach without doctrine?

The notable nineteenth-century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing wrote, “The great end of religious instruction is not to stamp our minds irresistibly upon the young but to stir up their own . . . to touch inward springs.” We have a strong faith in the inherent spirituality of children and see it as our task to nurture, not to indoctrinate. Our respect for the children teaches them respect—for themselves, for others, and for this fragile interdependent web of which we are all a part.

How do the children learn?

We begin with the understanding that children learn in different ways. That means that we must offer multiple approaches that engage the child’s body, spirit, imagination, and sense of curiosity. Stories, discussion, games, art projects, drama, and music are just some of the means we use to help children explore their world and gain new knowledge and insights.

What will my child learn about big religious questions?

They will learn that all big questions have many answers, and that it is their duty to search responsibly for their own answers. But we also give children a foundation on which to build their own values. You can expect your child to learn that

- there are as many ideas about God as there are people;
- we hold Jesus in the tradition of the great prophets and teachers, and we learn from the example of his life;
- death is a mystery that is inseparable from life, and the only immortality we can know for sure is that which lives on in the hearts and minds of those whose lives we touch; therefore, how we lead our lives each day is of the utmost importance.

Do the children have time for worship?

We hope to help children develop an understanding of the importance of taking time for dedication, introspection, thanksgiving, and celebration. Most congregations have mornings when children attend part or all of the service with their parents. Sometimes worship is conducted especially for children, or children and their teachers might worship together as a group. Many classes also have weekly rituals such as chalice lightings.

Will our family be accepted?

This is probably the most crucial question many families ask, and we hope that you find the answer to be yes. Unitarian Universalist congregations are deliberate in their welcoming of all kinds of families; we feel that diversity is a treasure that enriches us all. And many of our curricula for children encourage them to see that differences in factors like race, ethnicity, abilities, gender identity, and sexual orientation are part of the fullness of our world.

What can interfaith families expect to find here?

In many Unitarian Universalist congregations, they can expect to find that they are far from alone! We are often the “right fit” for interfaith families. Many congregations honor major Jewish, Christian, and other religious holidays. A Seder might be held days before an Easter service, for instance. Both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, along with the sacred writings and thought of many other religions, form the basis of many of our curricula. We know there is value in all of them.

How should my child dress for religious education classes?

While some children enjoy wearing their “Sunday best,” most come prepared to play outside, sit on the floor, and participate in potentially messy activities. Comfortable, washable school clothing is appropriate.

How often should my child attend?

Children enjoy religious education more if they have the opportunity to make friends and know what’s going on. For that reason, regular attendance is important. Of course, circumstances like shared custody can make one family’s “regular” different from another’s. Sports and other activities can also create conflicts with religious education. In these cases, parents must decide what their priorities are for their children.

What are my responsibilities as a parent?

Children learn values from their parents. You can help your own child learn the importance of religious education by facilitating regular attendance, showing an interest in what happens each week, and volunteering your own time to the program. Additionally, just as the entire congregation supports religious education, so your support—in terms of both service and financial assistance—is needed by the entire congregation. You, in fact, become a part of that congregation (although not a “member” in the formal sense) when you register your child in the religious education program.

Who’s in charge of the religious education program?

Although our headquarters, the Unitarian Universalist Association, offers curricula and programming guidance, we are an association of free congregations and each congregation determines the specifics of its own religious education program. The program is usually the immediate responsibility of a religious education committee. A lay director of religious education or a minister of religious education commonly provides professional leadership.

Do you offer religious education for me too?

Religious education is a lifelong endeavor! Most congregations offer a variety of programs, which might include classes for new members, book or study groups, or social justice initiatives. Some

congregations also offer weekly “forums” on an array of topics.

How can I find out more?

The religious educator or a member of the religious education committee of your prospective congregation will be glad to meet you and your family and answer specific questions. Many congregations also have informative websites. We welcome your inquiries as you search for a religious home for your family!

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For Further Reading

These books and packs of this pamphlet are available from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210-1409, 1-800-215-9076, uua.org/bookstore

Pamela Baxter. *A Cup of Light: All About the Flaming Chalice*. Skinner House Books, 2010.

Jennifer Dant. *Everybody Is Important: A Kids' Guide to Our Seven Principles*. Skinner House Books, 2011.

Patricia Frevert, ed. *Sunday and Every Day: My Little Book of Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2010.

Susan Lawrence. *Creating Justice Together: Service Projects for Families and Multigenerational Groups*. Unitarian Universalist Association, 2014.

Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network. *Come Sing a Song with Me: A Songbook for All Ages*. Skinner House Books, 2008.

Tapestry of Faith is a collection of Unitarian Universalist Association religious education curricula for all ages. You can browse through them at uua.org/re/tapestry