

Do Our Children Know Enough About Quakerism to Play Quaker?

Beth Collea

Dover Friends Meeting & QREC Steering Circle



There's a new family at Quaker Meeting.



We have a mix of intentional exploration and unstructured play.

Children learn through play. They play school, they play house, they even play COVID, giving everyone shots. Do our children know enough about being Quaker to play Quaker? Children are fully spiritual beings. Meeting life needs to be as open and comprehensible to them as possible. Play is one important way in, especially for younger Friends.

Dover (NH) Friends Children's Meeting (First Day School or Sunday School) made a Quaker meeting dollhouse as a vehicle to explore our identity as Friends. The life of our meeting is our curriculum. We call it "What Quakers Do." This idea rose when Mary Anna Feitler, Indiana, asked for help to find "I Am A Friend," a vintage Quaker curriculum. The approach was wonderful but needed some updating and reimagining.

Each week, we explore something from our inward journey and some aspect of our outward journey. We name the spiritual grounding of our actions. Holding it all lightly, we connect the inward and the outward, the personal and the gathered. The dollhouse is a delightful, concrete way to explore aspects of our Quaker life and journey that are abstract. Can we play our way to a foundation for Quaker faith formation?

For the inward journey, we use spiritual practices for children and families found in the [Faith at Home](#) section on QREC's website. Our mantra is, "it all starts with stopping." We work on stilling ourselves so we can open ourselves to Divine Love. We use finger labyrinths with mindful snack eating, a Tibetan prayer bowl, a body prayer, and more. Quakerism is an experiential religion. We gently and intentionally set the stage for children having that experience of a living Presence.

For the outward journey, we open themes rising in our meeting and explore activities of our life together. We are a Sanctuary Meeting and the impetus for the dollhouse was a desire to make that discernment and commitment tangible and real to the children. Along the way, we have explored elements of our meeting life: our Song Circle before meeting each Sunday, welcoming a stranger, accepting difference, being patterns and examples and witnessing, vigiling for racial justice, traveling in the ministry, offering pastoral care, and more.



Guiding principles for our shared journey include:

- Let the children really engage and play with the materials
- Let the children speak for themselves, not leading them toward “right answers.”
- Linger in moments when the children begin to wonder
- Reveal something of our own experience with God and the faithful life

We formed the community of dolls using [Habe Toys’ Happy Family](#) sets. They come six to a box in three racial identities—white, black, and Asian. Each box has grandparents, parents, and children. We opened the white and black family boxes and mixed them up to imitate real life in our meeting. We reserved the Asian family for an exploration of Sanctuary. We began by introducing the new family to the children and all of Dover Friends Meeting. Taking a leaf out of Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, we document our explorations with pictures of our work in our meeting space. This is one way we both honor the children’s work and open our Children’s Meeting journey to the rest of the Friends.

We formed the meetinghouse from boxes that are 24” x 16” x 10”. (They can be purchased at Staples.) We started simply with only one of the three floors of our meetinghouse. The children, ages 3-5, engage in hands on ways as much as possible. The dollhouse is a pedagogical tool and we accept that it might not survive rough use and we might have to rebuild it.

We began with the basic framework of the dollhouse and brainstormed what furniture Dover Dollhouse Friends Meeting would need. Unprompted, the children decided the first thing Friends need are benches for the worship space. The second thing the Friends needed was a table for coffee hour. It had to have a tablecloth because they always see the adults set the table that way. We made food out of Sculpy. It was fun to see how aware the children were of pictures on the wall in the social room.





Our meetinghouse was built in 1768 with dividers separating areas for men's and women's business meetings. We worship on one side and have coffee hour on the other. The children noticed that half of the meeting house is for worship and half is for social time. It felt natural to add, "In one half we listen for God and in the other half we listen to each other!" We plant the seed of that idea and move on, circling back to it gently from time to time. There is a comfortable, organic feeling to proceeding this way.

As further example of our organic process, on October 30, we learned that a Friend from Portland (ME) Friends was heading to our sister meeting in Holguin Cuba on a Friends United Meeting trip two weeks later. We explored traveling in the ministry and having a Travel Minute as a way to begin a friendship with a personal introduction and to carry the love and greetings of the home meeting/church. The conversation naturally opened to the need for a companion to travel along as a support and for accompaniment. We wrote a simple Travel Minute and another Dover Friend translated it into Spanish. Our Portland Friend is delighted to carry the dolls and their Travel Minute to Holguin Friends! We also heard of a Friend struggling with a serious health concern in a nearby meeting. It felt natural to extend our conversation into other times when Friends travel closer to home to cheer up and to bring spiritual support to someone who is facing a difficult health situation. The children were clear to send another member of Dover Dollhouse Friends Meeting to take our love and greetings to the Friend in the hospital.



The curriculum is as generative as it is joyful! It would work beautifully in a home setting, too. It is especially important to extend these conversations into homelife. Each week, we report to our whole meeting after worship about our adventure in Children's Meeting. Several times, our theme and the flow of our exploration matched very closely with the messages that rose in vocal ministry among the adult Friends. One Spirit is flowing through the whole circle of Dover Friends. We are so grateful for the times we can palpably feel God at work among us, even on different floors of the meetinghouse.

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