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## Who is the greatest?

*Working in a daycare center made writer Allison Backous wonder: What does it mean to humble yourself like a child?*

by [Allison Backous Troy](#)



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I walk into the Creative Learning Center and the smells and sounds assault me -- milk and diapers, screams and giggles and cries. In the office, I take a seat and watch Lisa, the program director, look over my resume.

"Tell me how you would help a toddler develop help-skills," Lisa asks. I don't have a degree in early childhood education; I don't know what "help-skills" are. I just love children and need a job. Lisa writes my number on a Post-It note.

"I like your attitude. I think you'll be fun," she says.

We leave the office and see a group of boys, 3-year-olds, holding hands in the hallway. Their teacher walks behind them. I smile.

"I really love little boys," I say to my future boss. "I just think that they are so fun."

Lisa catches the young woman's eye. Their laughter is light, but tinged with something that hints away

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from the laughter, something sarcastic. “Wait till you have a whole group of them,” Lisa says, the laughter still light, the words weaving between the screams and cries, the smell of milk, the midday heat. I laugh nervously. It carries above the sounds.

Who is the greatest? At the beginning of Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus this question, and he responds by drawing a child into their crowd. “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven,” Jesus says. But the question is repeated by the rich young ruler, by the disciples, by us.

And the answer stays the same: Whoever humbles themselves will be received into the kingdom. Whoever receives the child receives Jesus. But what does it truly mean to humble oneself? What does it mean to receive, not only a little child, but the Kingdom of God?

The routine at the daycare is exhausting. Each day has the same schedule -- snack, diapers, outside time, gym time, art, lunch, nap, diapers, snack. Each routine is a transition that requires movement, skill, anticipation: Is that piece of banana too big for Cody to eat? Will Ella need a bib? Can Sara drink that much water out of her cup, or do I need to dump some out?

Everything in the room is child-sized, meaning that I have to bend to use the sink and sit in a child-sized chair when we eat lunch. Some of the children slap each other. Others bite. Lisa explains that this is normal for toddlers.

“It’s nerve-wracking, but developmentally appropriate,” she tells me. “Just keep your eye out, and make sure that the kids don’t hurt each other.”

I watch Ben, almost 2, push another child. Ben thinks the child has taken the plastic helicopter he was playing with.

“That is not okay,” I tell Ben. “Use your words.” At this age, it is common for children to use sign language to express their needs or emotions, such as *more*, *please*, *stop*. I make the motion for *stop*, a flat hand cutting across an outstretched palm. “Stop. You use your words.”

Ben stares at the floor. He knows the sign, but he can’t control his rage. He slaps me. I pull his face towards mine again. “You know better,” I tell him, setting him down on the carpet. “Now you are all done with that toy.”

Ben cries. I walk away, sure he will find something else to do. I feel confident, sure that I have handled a conflict properly. But Bobbie, one of the teachers in the room, comes up to me. “Allison, Ben was playing with that toy,” she says. “I saw him with it.”

Now I understand Ben’s rage. I had misread the situation. I wonder: How do you ask for forgiveness? How do you receive it from a child? How do you receive the kingdom? The toy sits abandoned on the carpet. Ben’s cry sharpens into sorrow, echoes out the door. The anger fades. I pick up the toy and sit next to Ben.

“I didn’t know, honey,” I tell him. I make the sign for *sorry*, patting my right hand above my heart. “I’m sorry.”

This happens over and over again throughout the year I spend at the daycare -- more conflicts, more misread situations. Maybe being humbled, being made like a little child, is a more literal act than a figurative one. Maybe we just take our place on the carpet and start over.

I give Ben the helicopter. He spins the propellers, makes it fly across my lap. His laughter squeaks above the noise of the other children, the smell of the diapers in the trash can, the stains and sweat of the morning. And I laugh too, the sounds and smells rising above us.

