



Parents as Helpers with Faith Formation

What You Can Do to Nurture Your Child's Religious Education

To a large extent, the success of your child's formal religious education depends on you, the parent, and what you do at home. Compare the time your child spends in a formal religious education session (roughly an hour a week) with the amount of time spent under your influence! Clearly, the finest programs at church cannot succeed if a child returns to a vacuum, a household where the faith is not taken seriously and cherished.

The Parents' Role

We must recognize that parents are the first and foremost teachers of their children. They teach informally but powerfully by example and instruction. Parents nurture faith in their children by showing them the richness and beauty of lived faith.

Therefore, in a certain sense nothing replaces family faith formation, especially for its positive and receptive environment, for the example of adults, and for its first explicit experience and practice of the faith. Within the home, the child receives the foundations for the life of faith: a sense of trust, freedom and joy.

The Two-Sided Coin

Don't worry that you must somehow teach your children Christian doctrine forgotten somewhere around eighth grade. Look at this as an activity shared with your child, from which you will both benefit. Consider faith in two ways:

- ◆ a loving, lifelong personal relationship with God and Jesus
- ◆ the content of the Christian message: the gospels, social justice teachings, etc.

The distinction may seem somewhat arbitrary, since the two aspects progress together. Yet, it may be helpful to distinguish the two and clarify your role.

The first aspect of faith leads naturally to the second: usually the love which one person has for another causes that person to wish to know the other all the more. The first area is most clearly nourished at home, beginning in early childhood. If a trust-relationship with Jesus isn't

established then, why would a person want to learn more about him?

The role of the parent, then, is not to teach an advanced course in theology. The way a parent touches a child, speaks to a child, holds, bathes and diapers a child conveys volumes about the tender concern of God for this child.

The parent's response to a child's vulnerable cry establishes a trust in humanity which forms the basis for all later relationships with other people and with God. The negative side—the sad stories of abused and neglected children—underscores the fact that the parental influence is irreplaceable.

In many ways, your home is holy, but few parents fully appreciate this. Before you ever go to church or enroll in religious education, God touches you in the most ordinary moments of household living. Sharing a joke or a meal, forgiving after a quarrel, delighting in a child's growth, making new discoveries together are all ways that faith is communicated through the household routines.

While it may not always be apparent, your child is constantly modeling your attitudes, behaviors and beliefs. If you treasure your relationship with Christ, try to pray and follow the gospel, and have your heart set on God's reign, you are communicating a lesson more powerful than any put in words.

Using Living the Good News

While the faith formation resource **Living the Good News** is based on the Bible, using it does not require you to be a scripture scholar. It includes art projects, music and dramatizations that should be fun to do with your child.

At the Nursery and Preschool/Kindergarten levels, take-home papers include a section called "To Parents" which provides parenting tips and discussion-starters each week. A "With Your Family" section (at the Primary level) provides opportunities for child-led explorations that take advantage of first- through third-graders emerging leadership skills. These sections suggest activities to do together that will follow up on the session at church and extend the learning into your home. Going



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over the take-home paper together is an excellent way to start a conversation with your child. It can give even those who are hesitant about faith-sharing a clear topic in language appropriate for your child's age. If you start talking about faith and celebrating simple rituals with your child when he or she is young, it makes it much easier to continue such discussions and rituals in the pre-teen and teenage years.

At the Young Teen and High School levels, learners have also discussed the same scriptures you heard at Mass (and explored in your own **Living the Good News** adult session, if you've attended). This is your opportunity to open up additional dialogue with your teens: What did you hear in today's readings? This is what they mean to me...What do they mean to you?

*“In ordinary conversation,
many people assume
that teaching consists of
big people telling little people
what to believe.
If this is assumed to be
the whole meaning of ‘to teach,’
then it is almost certain
to corrupt the relation
between teacher and student.
The root meaning of ‘to teach’
is ‘to show how.’
The gift of teaching is
what complex beings do
when they show someone
how to do something.”*

—Gabriel Moran
*Religious Education
As A Second Language*