



Praying with Children

Experienced parents offer advice

From the syndicated column "The Prayerful Heart"
By Julie McCarty

October is "settling in" time. The mad dash of school beginnings is over. Children, parents, and teachers are beginning to adjust to the new routine, and the holiday crunch has not yet begun.

Autumn is a good time to inventory the prayer life of our children. Do we pray with our kids? How often? Why or why not?

Unlike soccer or scouting, prayer is more than an extracurricular activity. Just as nutritious food, sleep, and fresh air are essential for our children's physical development, prayer is essential for growing healthy souls.

There are many ways to nurture the prayer life of children. Here are tips from three families:

Talk about God in positive ways. Granite Bay, California resident, Mary Wurster, mother of four, suggests bringing up Jesus in ordinary conversation. For example, a parent can ask a young child, "Did you know that Jesus had a mommy and daddy just like you?" Jesus, she observes, is easier for most children to comprehend than the vaguer notion of God.

Start simple. A father of four children, ages 9-16, Bart Tesoriero of Phoenix, Arizona advises parents to start simply: "Don't try to pray a whole rosary with you children or take them to an hour of Adoration. Depending on their ages, pray simply." Gradually build from one Hail Mary to one decade of the rosary per night.

Use the five senses. Catholics like to pray using sacramentals, that is, objects like candles, holy water, sacred images, and music. Lita Friesen of Minneapolis, mother of two young children, told me that using the "hands on" approach is especially important. Lita and her husband, Mickey, have various seasonal prayer activities for their family. Each night during Advent, when the children are in their pajamas, they light a candle and cuddle while listening to the song "Night of Silence." (The parents seemed a little tired of this, but not the kids!) On Holy Thursday, they wash each other's feet, including the dog's paws. In the autumn, they write their hopes for the future on leaves, bury them, and plant bulbs that will appear in the spring.

Make prayer part of the daily routine. Mealtime and bedtime seem to be the best times for families to pray together. Wurster recounts that she sang a simple blessing song to her infants just before lying them down in their cribs. This made bedtime a natural time for prayer as the children grew older.

Give them “wobble room.” Although you want to teach your children attitudes proper to prayer, it is also important to remember that they are still learning. Better to have them “hang over a couch or lie down on the floor and pray, than to kneel up straight and resist [the genuine spirit of] prayer—especially in the teen years,” suggests Tesoriero.

Allowing for wobble room may boost the child’s creativity in prayer, too. One day, Mickey Friesen walked into a room and saw his young daughter, Chloe, dancing. When he asked her why she was dancing, she responded enthusiastically, “That’s the way I pray!”

Take advantage of “prayerful moments.” The parents I consulted encouraged spontaneous prayers in the midst of everyday living. Wurster mentioned praying together briefly when the family hears an ambulance, or praying for a child who is scared (so he or she will realize that Jesus is with them when mom or dad can’t be). Tesoriero told of praying “over their little owies” each time they put on a bandaid.

Mickey Friesen said parents can comment aloud “What a beautiful day—thank you, God!” while walking a child outdoors. Include prayer in sad times, too, when you visit a grandparent’s grave, see someone hurt on TV, or discover a dead rabbit in the backyard. This helps children realize that God is with them even in hard times.

Nurture the right kind of quiet and solitude. Parents agreed that children need a bit of quiet and solitude in order to develop spiritually. This is not easy to foster in a culture that values noise and constant activity. Additionally, there is the legitimate concern that children might confuse healthy silence with the “silent treatment” or with being punished (as in “time-out”).

Parents suggested turning off the media, using candles, soft music, or quiet spiritual reading together as ways to develop pre-skills for solitude. Keeping “time-out” places in the house separate from prayer places is another way to keep the two types of silence distinct, notes Wurster.

Pray yourself. “Like the apostles who watched Jesus pray, our children learn from our example. Don’t pray to be noticed, but do pray,” insists Tesoriero. When your kids see you going to mass, reading Scripture on the couch, or asking God for forgiveness, they will naturally gravitate towards praying on their own.



Notes:

To read more about praying with children:

“Praying with Your Children: A Guide for Families” by Pat Fosarelli (Resource Publications, 2003, magazine-size paper edition with perforated pages, \$4.95).

To order, visit <http://www.rpinet.com/products/pyc.html> or www.rpinet.com.