



“HOW DO I TALK TO MY CHILDREN ABOUT THE FAITH?”

Explore these answers to frequently asked questions to help you nurture your family

BY BILL HUEBSCH

What does it mean that I'm the “primary religious educator” of my children? What are my responsibilities and how do they intersect with that of Catholic schoolteachers or religious education teachers?

Church documents (varying from the “Rite of Baptism” to the recent “General Directory for Catechesis”) have continually reminded parents that you are, in fact, the ones who form your own children in faith. You are form-

see your faith. You don’t need a college degree to do that! If they see you engaged in parish life and building a prayerful, Catholic home, they will follow suit. There are certain elements of our faith that must indeed be taught, but

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ing your children whether you practice your own faith or not. If you are active in your faith, your children see faith in you and see in that a hidden message that faith is important and that we are responding to God’s call when we respond in faith. If you are not active, your children see a hidden message that faith is not very important in daily life and that it is optional.

I don’t feel as qualified as a priest or religious education teacher to teach my children. Won’t I just mess it up?

Don’t worry about your qualifications. The key role you play is to create a real household of faith! It is to let your children

your parish is not abandoning you. The parish will continue to offer religion classes, but you are also being asked to play your proper role as the primary one forming your own child.

I didn’t grow up in an especially pious household, and I’m not all that well versed in my faith. I’m not sure how to begin teaching my children. Any advice?

Ask your parish leaders for help. Ask them to coach you, to provide you with suitable resources, and to support you. Their role is primarily to reinforce the work you do. And again, your main task is to create a household of faith — shared meals, sacred

WORLD YOUTH DAY 2011 Bringing youth closer to the Church

When he met with 70,000 young people in March to help celebrate the 25th anniversary of World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI took a few moments to offer some fatherly advice:

“In every sport and every profession, in every artistic expression, the art of being human requires self-denial, real self-denial, which helps us not to fall into the abyss of drugs and alcohol, or the slavery of sex and money, or laziness,” the pope told the youth gathered in St. Peter’s Square, urging them to overcome these obstacles by living a life close to God.

Preparations are under way in Madrid to host the 2 million youth who are expected to travel there for World Youth Day in August 2011. Initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985 as a way to bring young people closer to the Church, WYD activities will include special Masses, concerts, museum tours, parades, and more. For information, visit www.madridwyd2011.com.



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music or books, and participation in parish life. As one parent recently shared with me, helping her child see that treating others fairly and speaking up when they see something wrong is very much a part of providing “faith formation” for her two children.

I haven’t really done much in the way of educating my kids in the faith. They’re no longer little, but still living at home. How do I begin trying to teach my kids the faith this late in the game?

I hate to sound like a broken record here, but once again, they will learn from what you say and do — more than what you try to teach them. If they’re young adults, you may be able to share adult experiences of faith together, such as retreats or workshops.

There are so many important life moments in which I feel like I should talk to my kids about God, about the Bible, about faith — births, deaths, illnesses and tragedy, divorces and annulments, etc. How do

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I break the ice? I also want to bring God up in the everyday life moments — when we're out in nature, watching a TV show, etc. — but am not sure where to begin.

Go slowly at first. You don't want to overwhelm your children. If you don't have much God-talk in your home, then you can begin by introducing God talk into everyday conversation once in a while. For example, one dad I know often draws his two teenagers into a conversation about social ethics using the daily news as his jumping-off point. He always starts with a question such as, "I see they found another person on death row to be innocent after all. What do you think is the most just way to punish a criminal?" Then he'd help his sons think through this from the point of view of justice and Catholic teaching, which opposes the death penalty, partly for this very reason.

The key is to ask the right questions. For example, my friend Mona often helped her daughter reflect on forgiveness by ask-

ing her what she hoped to gain by holding a grudge or taking revenge. "Which will feel better?" Mona would ask her. "To get even or to forgive?" As her young daughter thought about this, she told Mona that she really did want to get even, but could readily see what an "empty victory" that would be. This daughter also saw Mona forgiving others, and Mona's example taught more than all her words. Such "faith talk" and "faith example" form a key part of the parental role in faith formation. No teacher or parish catechist can do this.

My spouse and I disagree on certain aspects of the Catholic faith. How do we teach our children about these issues without confusing them?

Here's a norm for you: Try to keep your opinions out of what you teach your children. We all have opinions about religion, but a child has a right to see the faith unfiltered. It's important for children to be given an unbiased

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view of Catholicism. I suggest you follow a plan like my friends Dick and Fran did with their children. They used a resource that presented Catholic teaching in a rather pure form, unbiased by them. But they also invited their three children to ask questions and talk with them about anything at all. The resource they used was "in plain English" and included discussion questions to prime the pump for them.

My kids think Catholicism is uncool. Do you have any suggestions for ways to show them that their faith can be just as exciting and engaging as what they like in popular culture?

All children go through a phase where anything embraced by their parents is uncool. You can't force a child to change his or her mind, and many times, their friends live in homes where there is no religious talk at all. But here's a hint: Help your children see that daily life is filled with "Catholic practices." Back to my

friend Mona. Throughout the "growing up years," she and her husband invited their children to see how family meals, recycling garbage, giving to the poor in Guatemala, showing forgiveness, welcoming people to their home, caring for Mona's aging dad, and so forth, were part of their own faith response. She used the same line with them throughout all of these years. "We do this," she'd tell them, "because we believe it's what God wants people to do."

I have a hard time talking about religion and faith and God to other people; it feels very private to me. But I know it's important that I address these questions with my children. Do you have any advice?

First of all, being Catholic is a very personal decision, and much of what happens in your faith life may be quite private for you. You don't have to discuss your faith in any ways that feel inappropriate to you. But the Gospels do include a demand that

we “spread the Good News!” So if you can muster the ability to speak of values, virtues, and right living, you are talking about faith without calling it that. Start there and let your faith-talk grow.

My spouse and I have tried everything to engage our teens in the faith and nothing is working. Our son even wants to stop going to church and is considering converting to a different religion. What can we do?

My dad always used to tell us kids that when we were unable to convince someone else about something, we should just “keep fishing.” Even if the fish aren’t biting, he’d tell us, if you keep your line in the water, sooner or later that fish will come along. But if you pull in your line, you’ll never catch anything. Your situation with your child is like that. Faith is a gift from the Holy

Spirit, which moves us in ways and at times we cannot always predict. I counsel you to have patience with your son. Avoid using shame or nagging him. But do “keep your line in the water,” watching for a nibble. At the right moment as he grows older, the Spirit will touch his heart with faith, and thanks to the gentle seeds you’ve planted, he may respond. In the end, as your children grow into adulthood, faith is a matter between them and God. You do your part now and hope the seeds you plant during childhood will mature into adult faith. **CD**

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PATERNAL PRIORITIES

A father is someone who carries pictures where his money used to be.

A TWICE-BLESSED FAMILY DINNER

A 5-year-old boy was sitting down to eat leftovers when his mother asked him to pray before his meal.

“Mom, do we have to?” the hungry boy asked. “We already prayed over this last night.”

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

At the Boeing Museum of Flight in Seattle, there is a full-size mockup of an F/A-18 fighter. A ramp allows visitors to climb into the cockpit and get a sense of what the pilot sees and feels. A guide at the top of the ramp points out the various controls and gauges in the cockpit and gives information about the aircraft’s capabilities to each visitor who gets in. When my 2-year-old grandson sat down

in the plane, he seemed fascinated by all he saw and heard. Then, he looked out at us and said, “Gramma, could I have a quarter?”



A MISCOMMUNICATION

About a year ago, my sister, who lives in Mississippi, was talking with her 4-year-old son. He was asking her why all their relatives from Wisconsin talk funny. “Actually, they think we have an accent,” she laughed.

“But they have an accent, right?” he asked. “They’re the ones who talk funny!”

“Everybody talks in different ways,” she tried to explain. “To them, we sound like we talk very slow and all our words are d-r-a-w-n out.”

His eyes got big, and he whispered seriously, “Wow, you mean they hear funny too?”

