



WHEN

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**ASK**

HARD QUESTIONS

**Faith-filled Responses for Tough Topics**

Edited by  
**BROMLEIGH MCCLENEGHAN  
& KAREN WARE JACKSON**



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# Crafting a Family Culture of Conversation

KAREN WARE JACKSON

“Mommy, remember when you said, ‘Some kids aren’t boys or girls’? What does that mean?”

As I tucked my seven-year-old daughter into bed, I scrambled to gather my thoughts and remember exactly where and in what context I spoke those words. I think it had been almost a year ago, when we were talking about a new friend she met on the playground; but, in a classic kid move, *now*, out of nowhere, my daughter was lobbing a “Big Question” about gender identity at me!

That night, we talked about how all bodies are created good and beautiful by God. I hope I gave her a more expansive understanding of gender, but it can be a hard concept for a child to grasp. (For more on this topic, be sure to check out Becca Girrell’s “That’s What Counts: Navigating Questions about Gender and Identity.”) Growing up in a society that promotes a binary gender worldview with gusto—especially in childhood—kids often attempt to classify not only people but activities, toys, clothing—even feelings—with gender. Their brains are wired to categorize to take in more information, and their world teaches them girl/boy is an appropriate and useful category. I’m sure I had been encouraging her not to worry about the child’s gender, and simply enjoy their friendship. It had worked in the moment, but as her brain and body began to grow and mature, she had more questions.

The truth is, just as this was a continuation of an earlier conversation, we will talk about this again and again as she grows in understanding and experience. I know I don’t need to explain everything in one conversation (that’s impossible) but I want to be sure that whenever we talk, what I say is thoughtful, faithful, and understandable.

The goal of this book to equip you for these tough conversations with the children in your life. Each essay will give you tools to think critically about what you believe, to engage your faith and scripture in the conversation, and to develop language and practices that communicate your values to your kids. Whatever your role in caring for kids—parent, stepparent, grandparent,

## 2 When Kids Ask Hard Questions

aunt/uncle, teacher, or pastor—we know you want to help children navigate these important and complex topics. We can't answer the Big Questions for you, but we can help you be ready to begin the conversations.

First things first: in order to have these conversations, you need to be talking to kids regularly. It seems like a no-brainer, but it can be difficult to create spaces in which children feel safe and free to share their inner lives. The dinner table is the classic locale for family conversations—with the sharing of food and the sharing of stories creating their own familiar rhythm. But, as family life becomes increasingly complex, work, school, activities, travel, and custody issues may make regular family dinners impossible. Still, we need to be intentional about making space to talk about life and faith. It is these daily, often predictable and mundane conversations that open the door to holy, unexpected questions.

A ritual or regular pattern of conversation can help build the foundation for these tough questions. Many families find the car carries a certain conversational magic. Moving from one place to another, locked together for a defined length of time, eyes focused on the road or the landscape, the car becomes its own world where the weighty words become more manageable, less intense. A family walk or hike can have a similar effect on deep conversations. As the fresh air calms our minds and the physical exertion calms our bodies, the open spaces have plenty of room to hold all our big thoughts and feelings.

Scripture reminds us that daily conversations are not just good practice for a healthy family life, but vital to a life of faith. Consider Jesus' command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt. 22:37–39; also Mk. 12:29–31; and affirmed by Jesus in Lk. 10:27–28). Love God and love your neighbor are based on the Hebrew Scriptures. Deuteronomy 6 give us important insight, following the commandment (called "The Shema" in the Jewish faith) with further instruction to, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (vv. 6–7). The way that we write the word of God upon our hearts, and upon the hearts of our children, is through regular and even repetitive conversation. We cannot consign the job of teaching our children about God to Sunday school teachers or pastors. We cannot limit faith conversations to Sunday morning. Our children, and we ourselves, need to be talking about our faith and what matters to us every day.

In my home, we share our faith and lives at bedtime using a simple but powerful practice developed by Faith Inkubators: The FAITH5™



**SHARE** - We begin with sharing our highs and lows of the day. This helps us go beyond “What did you do today?” and focus on what really made an impact. We also love that it’s reciprocal, with the adults sharing about their day along with the kids.

**READ** - We read a story from the Bible—but if your household has multiple faith traditions, you can bring in wisdom from other sacred texts, poetry, or prose.

**TALK** - We talk about what we read and try to connect it to our daily lives. (If this part intimidates you, there are questions at the end of each story in many kids’ Bibles. Start there!)

**PRAY** - We pray for each other’s highs and lows. This helps children learn empathy and helps them put words to their own joys and sorrows as well as others.

**BLESS** - After we ask permission, we give one another a blessing kiss and say, “God loves you, and so do I. Rest well, beloved child of God.” This final step is the most important to us because the children have as much power as the adults to bless and be blessed.

I love that this framework takes the things we already do with our children—such as sharing about our days, reading, and giving goodnight kisses—and seamlessly integrates faith with family life. When we began three years ago, it felt easy and authentic because we didn’t have to add one more thing to an already packed schedule. We just became more intentional about putting words to our faith and practicing mutuality. Even if we skip a few steps for time or simplicity, we never skip the mutual blessing. To bless a child, and then receive that blessing in return, is transformational. In my experience, you do not have to do every step every night.

This FAITH5 ritual helps us create a family culture in which everyone can speak and listen, can teach and learn, can give as well as receive. As we share the mundane details of our lives, we build in the wisdom of our faith and allow space for big questions and fears and pain and joy. Having a ritual also allows us, even when we can’t be there in person, to connect across the miles with video chat or phone conversations. (I can’t tell you how often I’ve given blessing kisses to my kids through my smartphone.)

When I consider the role these rituals of talking and blessing play in our family life, it makes sense that my daughter would choose bedtime to ask me a hard question. This is the time we talk about what really matters to us. We know that bedtime rituals play a vital role in calming children’s bodies and minds, preparing them for sleep. (This is true for adults too!) But, there is an added bonus to bedtime stories and prayers. Brain science tells us that what we think about just before sleep often plays a key role in our dreams and sleep processing.<sup>1</sup> I love that my kids go to sleep with words of blessing ringing in their ears—that, when they dream and process

all the thoughts and emotions of their day, the messages we communicate during that special time take precedence: “You are loved. You are important. You are powerful.”

The world can be a confusing and painful place for children (and adults), but take heart! Your kids are listening to you. We promise. So, get ready: read and think and pray and talk to your village. Then, take a deep breath and speak the truth in love. You can make all the difference.

### **Crafting the Conversation**

As you consider the children in your life, think about how you can create regular space for these important conversations.

- Look for the rituals already present in your life together: bedtime prayers, Saturday morning pancakes, a weekly coffee and cookie date, family movie night, even a nightly video chat. You already carve out time for these activities. How can you be more intentional about weaving deeper conversation, mutuality, and faith into these spaces?
- Develop a list of questions or topics that concern your children. Start with what they have already asked, but you might also look beyond to what they might be seeing and experiencing in the world or in their own bodies. This can be tricky because you do not want to project your own fears and anxieties onto your children, but they may need you to help them find language for their worries. You might say something such as: “I worry about this sometimes. Do you ever worry about it?”
- Take time to think about what you want to say about these topics. That’s what this book is for! Each author offers both practical advice for crafting the conversation, and a list of further reading so you can do a “deep dive” when you need more information.
- When you get a “Big Question” sprung on you with no time to research and soul search, you may need to speak as truthfully and thoughtfully as you can in the moment, but know that you can always ask for more time. “I appreciate your question, and I’m so glad you asked me. I want to think more about how I’m going to answer. Can we talk about this in a few days?” It’s best to be as specific as you can about when you’ll talk again, and to reassure the child that you remember the question. “I want you to know that I’m still thinking about your question and we will talk about it again.”
- Whenever possible, get on the same page with the other important adults in your child’s life. The topics in this book can bring up big emotions for adults too, which can make them controversial. It is ideal if you can come up with the message and language together,

even if you are not together when having the conversation. When you disagree, you may be able to support each other's varying opinions, or disagree about the complexities but agree about the basic message. Still, know that if a child opens up to you about a difficult topic, your thoughts matter, even if they are different from what the child hears from other adults in their life.

### Further Exploration

For more information about FAITH5 and how you might use it in your home:

- *Holding Your Family Together: 5 Simple Steps to Help Bring Your Family Closer to God and Each Other*, Rich Melheim
- [www.faith5.org](http://www.faith5.org), ©Faith Inkubators  
For great rituals, traditions, and touchstones for your family:
- *Faithful Families*, Traci Smith

**KAREN WARE JACKSON** is a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) who is passionate about creating interactive worship and inter-generational community. She and her husband (also a pastor) parent two children who keep them honest, ask fabulous questions, and bless them beyond words.

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<sup>1</sup>Rich Melheim, *Holding Your Family Together: 5 Simple Steps to Help Bring Your Family Closer to God and Each Other* (Ventura, Calif: Regal, 2013), 199–212.