

INTRODUCTION

A child was lost in wonder in a grassy field when his mother said, "It's time to go." The youngster replied, "I can't." His mom asked, "Why?" He pensively answered, "Because there are still blades I haven't paid attention to."

Think of all the gifts and mysteries of our faith—so many to pay attention to! And families can provide the time and places to be lost in wonder to reflectively ponder and deepen an understanding and appreciation of our journey of faith.

Conversation—especially within the family—is one of the best gifts we can give our children (and ourselves). This booklet is designed to help you, as parents, engage in conversation with your child(ren) as you—by your conversations and your life—continually draw attention to God's presence in their lives. Here are a few hints about the suggested questions for family conversations you will find in this booklet:

- Even though the questions could be helpful during the years of preparation for the sacraments, this booklet is for all the days and moments of life, since we both celebrate Eucharist and reconciliation in the sacraments and live Eucharist and reconciliation in our daily lives.
- The questions are written so they can be used more than once—since, for instance, our reconciliation living might be different two years from now than it is today.
- Some of the questions are more suited to different ages; use the most appropriate questions for the time and then let them grow with your children (and you).

- Some questions might seem repetitive; yet, asking things in a different way—on a different day—might elicit very different responses and experiences.
- Quite a few questions are suggested here, but use your own, depending on what’s happening in your child’s life, their questions and responses, and so on.

It is in our homes—within our families, our everyday lives—that most people experience God and all the realities of our faith life. Scripture reminds us: “Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6–7).

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Why Have Faith Conversations?

A dad and his son were hiking the back trails. As the youngster inspected a medium-sized boulder that was partially obstructing the trail, he asked, “Dad, do you think I can move that rock?”

The father replied, “Yes, if you use all your strength, you can move that rock.” The boy pushed and struggled with all his might; the rock didn’t budge.

“Well, Dad, you were wrong. I can’t move that rock.”

“No, son, I wasn’t wrong. I said that if you used all your strength, you could move that rock. But you didn’t use all your strength—because you didn’t ask me for help.”

The significance of parents!

Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk’s *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on the Next Generation* features broad research based on interviews with Americans churchgoers from various religions. In our culture today, nearly everyone agrees that parents are primarily responsible for passing on religious faith and practice. One’s church, mosque, or synagogue is always secondary, playing a supportive role (page 31).

At the same time, various types of studies reveal the efficacy of conversations with the younger generation, which influence their educational and emotional development. Research tells us this is also true for faith development and the journey of spirituality.

Smith and Adamczyk point to the outsized importance of this simple act: parents talking with teenagers (and children) about religious matters at home during the week. The parents’ personal religious beliefs matter; the frequency of participating in worship matters also. But in

terms of influence, talking about the faith on a regular basis at home matters most (page 53).

Why are faith conversations at home so crucial?

- They help family members grow closer to each other and allow parents to see their children's character, virtues, and spirituality grow and deepen.
- Studies show that the more open and continuous dialogue with our children, the better their skills are of compassion, problem solving, and living a life of faith.
- Conversations send “a powerful signal to children of religion's personal importance” since “people usually talk about what they care about” (Smith and Adamczyk, page 83).
- Discussing religion with children during the week pushes back against our society's tendency to compartmentalize, such as the view that religion happens on Sunday and the rest of the week is about work, school, and play. Family conversations throughout the week make our faith a natural part of life (Smith and Adamczyk, page 84).
- Regularly talking with children about things that matter creates a dynamic in which they're more likely to come to their parents when they have something important on their minds.
- Children have powerful insights! Parents have the awesome task of nudging children toward thoughtful conversations, which continue to nurture the kindhearted instincts children possess.

Building Blocks for Faith Conversations

One time when I was at my sister's home, my niece was sitting on my lap, jabbering away. While I was listening to her, I was also talking to my sister. My niece put her hands on my face and turned my head to look directly at her. Another time, she said to me, "Please listen to me. But this time, with your eyes."

It is said that there is an art to conversation. There is a commitment too. Conversation is wholehearted attention to and focus on the other.

Here are a few building blocks for faith conversations (you're probably already doing many of them!):

- Be yourself. You don't need a theology degree to talk with your children about faith. You're living your faith: share what you've experienced, what you think, what you wonder about.
- Don't limit your faith conversations to Sunday or right after faith formation sessions. Those might be opportune times, but don't compartmentalize your faithful living to specific days or times. Model that spirituality is important in life all the time.
- Look for natural opportunities for conversations. Many such moments will surface as your children watch you live life. How do you, for example, live your faith when someone cuts you off on the road? Perhaps this provides the time for a conversation on revenge or forgiveness. Likewise, you don't need to "sit down so we can have a conversation." Your best talks may happen while your children are busy drawing, or you're in the car, or you're walking through the park.
- Have whole-family conversations too. Don't miss one-on-one opportunities, but look for whole-family conversations. We learn so much from one another.

■ Remember to avoid having a question-and-answer period. Don't suggest a question and presume that your child (children) is the only one who will answer it. You are the role model. If you ask your child whether they noticed someone struggling today, be prepared to share something you observed during your day. When our children realize we are speaking with them, as opposed to questioning or testing them, they are more comfortable. It's always about talking *with* your child, not just *to* or *at* your child.

■ Pay attention to the timing. Even the best conversation starter can be irritating to a sleepy, hungry, or grumpy child.

■ Specific questions are better than general ones. Often children draw a blank when met with a broad question. (Think about the answer you probably usually get when you ask, "How was school today?") Specific questions (such as "If you could ask God one question right now, what would it be?" or "If God's love was a color, what color would it be and why?") are concrete ones for children (and adults) to answer.

■ Don't be afraid of silence or pauses. Pose a question, then listen. Offer your own response and ask for their thoughts. If the conversation falls flat, let it go. There's always another day.

■ Remember the basics of successful conversations:

- » Listen. Don't think about what you're going to say next.
- » Listen. Don't interrupt.
- » Listen. Hear the feelings behind the words.
- » Listen. Remember that each of your children—and their insights and experiences—is different from their siblings.
- » Listen. Show that you are listening intently to what they have to say by asking them additional questions.
- » Listen. Act like a mirror: repeat back what they say to you using different words. This leaves room for them to share their feelings without judgment.
- » Keep in mind the words of my niece: "Please listen to me. But this time, with your eyes."