9 activities for family night

Your kids might want to be on iPads and phones and gaming devices all the time. What's a parent to do?

Plan a family night – an evening full of activities that everyone can join in. The activities will vary based on the ages and interests of your children, and on the interests of you, the parents. Family night is supposed to be fun for everyone, and that includes you.

Jerry Windley-Daoust, publisher of Gracewatch, said the bonds forged having fun together pay big dividends as children grow.

"That connection with an adult helps with all sorts of important child-development tasks," said Windley-Daoust, whose five children range in age from 9 to 18. "Kids who have more connections with their parents and siblings are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to engage in positive, pro-social behaviors like volunteering and leadership."

It's especially important when it comes to passing on the Faith. "Kids need role models to know how to grow up," Windley-Daoust said. "And there aren't many adult role models when it comes to faith anymore. Kids who have a faith connection with their parents are more likely to practice the Faith as adults."

Cook something

Jesus said he is the Bread of Life. If you want to try making a simple bread – one that has faith connections, no less – try pretzels, which have long been connected to the observance of Lent. Their crossed shape is said to represent arms folded in prayer. Try this recipe.

The Catholic Icing has recipes for fun foods based on many

holy days and liturgical seasons, from Day of the Dead cookies to strawberry cake to celebrate Pentecost, the Church's birthday.

If you want to make a meal, think simple things, like pancakes. They're tradition for Fat Tuesday, of course, but breakfast for dinner is usually easy – even a preschooler can scramble eggs.

During Lent, check out the meatless recipes provided by Catholic Relief Services by going to crsricebowl.org/recipe. They can also provide a springboard for discussion of how Catholics help people all over the world.

Bonus: Eating together offers the perfect opportunity for conversation, whether about the highs and lows of everyone's day, or giving everyone a chance to tell a story they remember from their life, or even one they made up.

Plan or go on an outing

Find out if there is a special shrine, basilica or other pilgrimage site near you. Check out this Shrine Directory on CatholicShrines.org. While the trip itself might have to be saved for a family day, you can spend some evening time researching the site and planning what you'd like to see. Have your kids help find the answers to questions like:

- Who or what does the site honor?
- Why is that person or event special?
- What features should you look for at the pilgrimage site?
- Are there any specific devotional practices you should know about before you go?

If you want to make an evening excursion, there's no barrier to visiting a perpetual adoration chapel after traditional work hours.

If your parish church doesn't have one, go to therealpresence.org to see if there's a chapel that offers perpetual adoration close to you. Before you go, make sure little ones understand that they will be in the presence of Jesus and that they should behave accordingly.

Go outside at night

Being outside at night can give the kids a thrill – and it's the best time to wonder at the moon and stars. Take your kids stargazing and enjoy the feeling of looking up, side by side. Of course, there's plenty to appreciate in the natural world during daytime too. A trip to a forest preserve or park offers opportunities to contemplate the wonders of God's creation, but there's something about being outside at night that emphasizes the vastness of the universe. Check out this list of Dark Sky places. No Dark Sky place near? Visit a planetarium.

Make something

Some parents are more crafty than others, but almost anyone can find a way to enjoy making something with kids. Crafts need not be complicated or difficult; if you want, you can turn your kids loose with construction paper and glue sticks. If nothing else, they can make a paper chain. Paper chains can decorate a Christmas tree, of course, but they can also count down the days of Advent or Lent (you can use a different color paper for abstinence and fast days). Prayer chains even can be formed into a large family rosary or be made to include a link for each act of kindness your children can remember performing.

One simple craft Windley-Daoust has enjoyed is making a family timeline. Tape or staple a series of sheets of paper together into a long strip. Families can decide what important dates should be included – including faith milestones – then write them in and add pictures. Kids can draw illustrations or you

can use copies of family photographs.

Bonus: Looking through the picture box or digital file of forgotten photos can spark conversations about family history.

Find lots of Catholic crafts here.

Watch a movie

Pop some popcorn and put in a DVD or surf Netflix for a movie the whole family can watch.

Daughter of St. Paul Sister Helena Burns, who has a media literacy ministry, said movies provide myriad opportunities for families to share and discuss their values. Some of her favorites include:

- "Mary Poppins Returns" – If you family didn't catch this movie when it was in theaters, make sure to rent a copy when it comes out on DVD.
- "Incredibles 2" – "This is a family movie in that it's about a family," Sister Helena said. While the kids come to the rescue in the end, the parents are not portrayed as useless.
- "A Wrinkle in Time" – Much of the overt Christian imagery of Madeleine L'Engle's book is absent from the movie adaptation, Sister Helena said, but parents can help tie the values to the movie with discussion.
- "Groundhog Day" – Sister Helena calls this movie "hilarious," especially for older kids who can laugh while they watch the main character learn what is important in his life by living the same day over and over and over again.
- "Moana" – Sister Helena suggested that Moana is a better alternative than other girl-centered animated hits like "Brave" or "Frozen." While Moana defies her father to go to sea, she is working in a framework of family support that includes her mother and grandmother, and she

embraces values such as honesty, courage, empathy and self-sacrifice.

- "A Bronx Tale" – This movie is especially good for older boys who are learning about what it means to be a man and to be a father, Sister Helena said.

Sister Helena has reservations about the Harry Potter movies (Satan is real, and witchcraft can never be used for good, she said), but suggests that parents can emphasize the good while teaching about the bad. "There are amazing lessons to be learned, that you lay down your life for your friends and you love your parents and you fight evil," she said. Here's more help.

That's her approach to many of the not-quite-perfect offerings out there. "The point of it is to talk, talk, talk about the movie," she said. "Not during the movie, but as soon as possible afterward. As Christians, we want to look at it through a Christian lens. Was there a Christ figure? Was good presented as good and evil presented as evil? Did it try to manipulate us to sympathize with the evil character? Are people presented in a dignified way?"

She suggests parents check out Common Sense Media for detailed reviews. She also recommends ClearPlay, a service that allows users to view filtered movies, muting language or action they might find objectionable.

Help someone

Who in your community needs help? Start by asking your children who they think they can help. It could be homeless people they see in their neighborhood, or an elderly neighbor, or children or veterans who are sick and in the hospital.

Then help them figure out what they can do to make things better. Maybe you can spend some of your family time assembling packages with toiletries, socks, gloves and

nonperishable, easy-to-eat food for homeless people. Or draw pictures and make cards for people in the hospital. As for those elderly neighbors, try inviting them over for your next family night.

Play together

If your kids love to play games, there are literally hundreds of card and board games you can choose from.

Some traditional family games are good for people of all ages: Try the dice game Left Center Right or, once kids can count, Mexican train dominoes. Uno and Monopoly come in several versions.

If you want to add an explicit faith component to your gameplay, the Catholic Company (catholiccompany.com) offers several versions of matching games, based on everything from Noah's Ark to the Loaves and Fishes. There are Bible editions of Apples to Apples, Outburst and Scrabble and, for older kids, the Solomon's Temple board game. You can also go online to create your own Bingo game using saints, biblical figures or just about anything else.

Or try these fun online Catholic games from CatholicBrain.com.

Support local Catholic schools or parishes

Friday Night Lights is not just for football in Texas. Is there a Catholic high school in your area? Or even a grammar school? Chances are they have sports and could use an enthusiastic cheering section. Look for girls' volleyball in the fall, basketball in the winter, softball and baseball in the spring. Just remember to cheer for good plays on all sides and appreciate that the athletes, coaches and referees are doing the best they can.

Pray together

Begin or end your family night with a prayer service planned by the kids. (Find prayers here.)

“If they’re young, they might need more guidance, like ‘pick one of these three prayers and one of these three songs,’” Windley-Daoust said. “As they get older, they can do more of that on their own.”

The planning can become easier over the months and years if you include making a family prayer book – one that includes favorite prayers from each member of the family – as a craft project, he said.

Or you can take a cue from the calendar and include

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Windley-Daoust said that one thing his children have enjoyed is including a “prayer dance party” in the service, based on David dancing before ark of the covenant.

“Just maybe don’t do that right before bedtime,” he said.

By Michelle Martin, who writes from Illinois.