The best practices for raising faith-filled kids

Editor's note: *John Roberto is a widely respected expert in Catholic family faith formation. Here, with his permission, we offer an extended excerpt from a longer article in Lifelong Faith in which he summarizes the best research about the faith practices of families—in particular, how integrating faith into family life benefits the whole family, and the best practices of religiously active families. The article was initially written for church professionals; we're reprinting it here because we think many parents will find in it a useful guide and inspiration for their own practice.*

How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family?

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that a family's religious involvement directly benefits children, teens, and adults in a variety of very significant ways. In their survey of the research literature, David Dollahite and Jennifer Thatcher found the following benefits of a family's religious involvement:

- Divorce rates are lower and marital satisfaction and quality scores highest among religiously involved couples.
- Religious practices are linked with family satisfaction, closer father-child relationships, and closer parent-child relationships.
- There is less domestic violence among more religious couples, and religious parents are less likely to abuse or yell at their children.
- Religious involvement promotes involved and responsible fathering and is associated with more involved

mothering.

- Greater religiosity in parents and youth is associated with a variety of protective factors for adolescents. Adolescent religiosity is inversely related with many high-risk behaviors, all of which have potential to greatly influence the adolescents' current and future family relationship.

They conclude, "Since many studies now show the beneficial consequences of religious belief, practice, and community support on health, mental health, and relationships, it appears that one of the most important things parents can do for their children is spiritual and religious experience and community" (Dollahite and Thatcher, 10)

Impact of Family Religiosity

The *Effective Christian Education Study* by the Search Institute found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity.

> Of the two strongest connections to faith maturity, family religiousness is slightly more important than lifetime exposure to Christian education. The particular family experiences that are most tied to greater faith maturity are the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and faith about faith, the frequency of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other people. Each of these family experiences is more powerful than frequency with which an adolescent sees his or her parents engage in religious behavior like church attendance. (Benson and Eklin, 38)

The *Effective Christian Education Study* found that families

that express faith do the following things:

- often talk about religious faith;
- often have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading at home; and
- often have family projects to help other people.

The study also found that youth in families that often express faith do the following things *twice* as often as those families that do not express faith:

- read the Bible and prayer when alone;
- read and study about the Christian faith;
- are spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation; and
- have often felt God's presence in their life.

Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are *three* times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and *twice* as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith. Search Institute surveys of 217,000 sixth- to twelfth- grade youth in public schools (1999-2000) found that youth who say their parents "spent lots of time helping others" are almost *twice* as likely themselves to serve others. Among young people whose parents model helping, 61 percent volunteer at least one hour per week. Among those whose parents do not model helping, only 36 percent volunteer. People who live lives of service, justice, and advocacy often point to early experiences in their family as being normative.

Families that express faith also have an impact on participation in church life and service activities. *Twice* as many youth in families that express faith are involved in a church youth group, go to church programs or events that include children and adults, go to church camp or work camp, and regard a religious faith as a very or most important influence in life. Their attendance at worship services is

almost 20 percent higher than youth from families that never express faith.

It is evident that youth who are most likely to mature in faith are those raised in homes where faith is part of the normal ebb and flow of family life. The *Effective Christian Education Study* provides convincing evidence of the power present in the religious practices of a home. Religious practices in the home virtually *double* the probability of a congregation's youth entering into the life and mission of Christ's church.

Robert Wuthnow's research and analysis confirms the importance of family religiosity.

> With statistical evidence, it is also possible to sort out the kinds of religious socialization that may have the strongest consequences for the behavior of adults. It might be expected that participating in a religious organization as a child would influence attendance at religious services as an adult most strongly, and to some extent this is true. People who were sent to Sunday school as children attend services more often as adults than those who were not sent. Yet it is religious training in the home that appears to matter most: family devotions as a child is the best predictor of adult attendance, followed by seeing one's parents read the Bible at home, and after that, by parents having read the Bible to the child. Saying table grace has a relatively weak effect on adult attendance, as does being sent to Sunday school. (Wuthnow 1996)

James Davidson and his colleagues have conducted research on Catholic generations every six years since 1987. In their 1997 book, *The Search for Common Ground*, they confirmed that the factor with the most impact on Catholics' religious beliefs and practices is childhood religiosity. "By childhood

religiosity we mean the extent to which youngsters are subjectively and behaviorally involved in the Church. Subjective involvement refers to the salience they attach to religion (i.e., religion's importance in their lives). Behavioral involvement points to their participation in devotional activities such as prayer, and public rituals such as attendance at Mass."

Davidson and his colleagues identified the following influences of childhood

- Childhood religiosity affects closeness to God. The more people learn to be religious as children, the more likely they are to report experiences of the holy later in life. In other words, the way young people are raised has long-term effects on their ability to experience God in their adult years.
- Childhood religiosity also fosters commitment to the Church. Catholics who learn to be religious when they are young find it relatively easy to claim their Catholic identity. They also come to appreciate the benefits of being Catholic.
- The more children participate in religious activities and develop a sense that religion isan important part of their lives, the more they are likely to have close personal relationships with God later in life, and the more they are likely to learn about major developments such as Vatican II, both of which foster adherence to Church teaching. Childhood religiosity promotes Catholic identity and investment in the Church, which also make significant contributions to faith and morals. Early childhood religiosity does not guarantee faithfulness later on, but it sure improves the odds.
- The two most important influences on childhood religiosity are having parents who talked about religion and having religious educators and catechists who are effective in ministry. Young people learn how to be

religious when their parents talk with them about religion and when they receive guidance from instructors who know how to nurture religiosity.

It seems that remaining active in one's childhood church is more attractive to those with strong family connections. Davidson and his colleagues conclude that if church leaders want to shape Catholics' views of faith and morals, they need to pay special attention to influences that take place very early in people's lives.

What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens?

One of the most significant and startling findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. Christian Smith writes, "Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important. The fit is not perfect. None of this is guaranteed or determined, and sometimes, in specific instances, things turn out otherwise. But the overall positive association is clean." (Smith, 57)

Specifically NSYR found:

- Of parents who report that their faith is extremely important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is not very or not important in their lives.
- Of parents for whom faith is somewhat important in their daily lives, 61 percent of their teens also report that faith is somewhat or not at all important in their daily

lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is extremely important in their lives.

- Of parents for whom faith is not at all important, 47 percent of their teens also report that religious faith is not at all important or not very important in their lives; only 2 percent report that faith is extremely important in their lives.
- In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb is this: "We'll get what we are" (emphasis added). By normal processes of socialization, and unless other significant forces intervene, more than what parents might say they want as religious outcomes of their children, most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are. (Smith, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear. Smith concludes by saying:

> Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents (emphasis added).
>
> Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives.…the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like. Parents and other adults most likely "will get what they are." This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both.
>
> But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case. (Smith, 261)

The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities (Smith, 267).

How do religious families practice their faith at home?

In his study Growing Up Religious, Robert Wuthnow explored the religious journeys of people who grew up religious and the role of the family.

> Effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community. Compared with these practices, the formal teachings of religious leaders often pale in significance. Yet when such practices are present, formal teachings also become more important. (Wuthnow, xxxi-ii)

The prime source of faith for self-described “religious” people was the way faith permeated the daily life of their family. Time and again the people Wuthnow interviewed pointed to variations on several common family activities. “The daily household routine was marked by rituals of prayer, by conversations about God, and by sacred objects. Holidays provided special occasions for experiencing the warmth of family, friends, and fellow congregants. And going to services became the focal point of arduous preparations and one’s public identity with the assembly of God’s people.” (Wuthnow, xl)

Several common in-home family activities continually surfaced

in his

- eating together, especially the power of Sunday meals and holidays;
- praying: bedtime rituals and prayer, grace before meals, family Seder;
- having family conversations;
- displaying sacred objects and religious images, especially the Bible;
- celebrating holidays;
- providing moral instruction; and
- engaging in family devotions and reading the Bible.

Wuthnow found that spiritual practices were woven into the very fiber of people's being; it was a total immersion. For these people, being religious was a way of life. "The daily round of family activities must somehow be brought into the presence of God. Parents praying, families eating together, conversations focusing on what is proper and improper, and sacred artifacts are all important ways in which family space is sacralized. They come together, forming an almost imperceptible mirage of experience." (Wuthnow, 8)

David Dollahite and Loren Marks have developed a research-based conceptual model that focuses on the processes at work in highly religious families as they strive to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their faith. Their model is based on an analysis of research studies and on their own ongoing research with 60 highly religious Jewish, Christian, and Muslim families. They discovered eight processes that families engage in as they seek to fulfill their sacred purposes by:

1. Turning to God for support, guidance and strength.
2. Sanctifying the family by living religion at home.
3. Resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.
4. Serving others in the family and faith community.
5. Overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith.

6. Abstaining from proscribed activities and substances.
7. Sacrificing time, money, comfort, and convenience for religious reasons.
8. Nurturing spiritual growth through example, teaching, and discussion, and encouraging spiritual development by teaching religious values. “Research, including our own, shows that parent teaching, example, and dialogue about religious matters are important predictors of whether children come to endorse the faith of their parents, a major sacred objective for most highly religious parents” (Dollahite and Marks, 537).

Diana R. Garland and Pamela A. Yankeelov conducted a research study on the family life of active Protestant church attenders by surveying 1977 people in 32 congregations in four denominations: National Baptists, Presbyterians (USA), Southern Baptists (SBC), and United Methodists. One part of the study examined faith practices, both individual and family. People were asked if the practice was important and if they actually lived the practice. The most important family faith activities were 1) caring for nature with the family, 2) daily chores and routines of family life, and 3) caring with the family for persons in need.

Garland and Yankeelov summarize their findings about family faith practice:

> These church-attending families indicated that the worship and study experiences provided by the congregation and through private devotional lives are more central to their faith life than such experiences in the family. Nevertheless, three family activities ranked in the top seven as practices significant to the faith life of these respondents: “caring for nature with my family,” “daily routines and chores of family life,” and “caring with my family for persons in need.” These families appear to be saying that the daily activities of family life are the canvas for experiencing and sharing

> their faith life with one another, and that activities that call them as a family beyond their own boundaries are also significant—the care of nature and care of others in need. (Garland and Yankeelov, 44)

Using the Church Census questionnaire, Diana R. Garland and Jo A. Edmonds surveyed 15 Baptist congregations with 3,393 attenders participating in the surveys and identified several key findings about family practice.

- The four most common activities engaged in on a daily basis with family were: 1) eat (74%), 2) prayer (54%), 3) forgive others (42%), and 4) encourage others (41%).
- The four most common activities engaged in on a weekly basis for families were: 1) worship (78%), 2) give money to church or charity (48%), 3) observe the Sabbath (56%), 4) do chores (31%), and 5) talk and listen to one another about deepest thoughts (32%).
- The four activities that families are most likely never to do together are: 1) study Christian doctrine (48%), 2) share the Christian story (29%), 3) study the Bible (26%), and 4) confess sins (24%).

What are the core family faith practices?

Research and pastoral practice point to a number of significant family faith practices that, consistently acted upon at home and nurtured and supported by congregations, would contribute to building families of faithful Christians and strengthening faith in daily life. In our review of research studies, we have seen a number of recurring themes. While each study used different language, there are a number of core family faith practices that appear in each study.

David Anderson and Paul Hill in *Frogs Without Legs Can’t Hear:*

Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation summarize much of the research on family faith practices in Four Keys: caring conversation, rituals and traditions, devotions, and service. The Youth and Family Institute uses the Four Keys as the basis for helping congregations and families develop faith at home. To these Four Keys we will add one more family faith practice: the family meal.

As you read and utilize these insights, be sure to recognize that there is one overriding theme that is woven through all of the research: the integration faith and daily family life. To quote Diana Garland "the daily activities of family life are the canvas for experiencing and sharing their faith life with one another."

Core Practice 1: Family Faith Conversations

Christian values and faith are passed on to the next generation through supportive conversation.

Listening and responding to the daily concerns of family members make it easier to have meaningful conversations regarding the love of God, and are ways to express God's love to others. Hearing their parents' "faith stories" is one of the most important influences on the faith of children and teenagers.

"Caring conversations include more than simply telling our stories. At the heart of the communication recommended here is the sharing of faith, values, and the care of others. This can range from supportive listening, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with another, and simple praise and thanksgiving to challenging admonition, ethical discussions, and call to action on behalf of God's creatures and creation.…The story of Jesus and our life stories are woven together as one fabric that brings forth endless variety of caring conversation." (Anderson and Hill, 112-113)

Core Practice 2: Family Devotions and Prayer

The Christian faith shapes the whole of our lives and involves a lifetime of study, reflection, and prayer. Family devotions and learning provide a way to learn more about the Bible and Christian tradition as a family, and apply the teachings to daily life as a follower of Jesus Christ. ". . . a devotional life is essentially a way of living in the world connected to the saving work and message of Jesus Christ, the intersection between the eternal and the mundane in a way that personalizes God's saving work and word. But one's devotional life is always connected to the larger body of Christ. This understanding of a devotional life includes, but is not limited to, public worship, bedtime prayers, Bible reading and study, table grace, evening and morning prayers, and praying alone at any time of the day or night. All of these occasions are opportunities for the word of God to be "at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). (Anderson and Hill, 134)

Core Practice 3: Family Service

Engaging in service with one's family can be a powerful opportunity for growing in faith. Both children and adults are more likely to have a growing, strong faith when their family serves others together. "When parent and child/teen together perform service activities, the child/teen sees the parent's capability, faith, and values in action. The cross-generational bond takes place not only in the service event, but also in the retelling of the event through the years. . . . Most significantly, service is not merely a once a month outing….Service is the day-in and day-out lifestyle we lead that manifests the faith in us and involves our children in the faith. Parents and families can engage in this key every day. (Anderson and Hill, 151-152)

Core Practice 4: Family Rituals and Traditions

Families identify themselves and tell their family stories through daily routines, celebrations, and rituals. Rituals and traditions are those patterns of behavior that occur with regularity. They communicate meaning, values, and relationships that exist between people and with God (including God's created universe). Family rituals can take many forms from daily rituals such as mealtime, bedtime, leaving and returning; celebrations such as birthdays, anniversaries, and special achievements; church year rituals at home such as Advent and Lent; milestones such as births and deaths, first day of school and graduations, etc. Family rituals and traditions speak volumes about what the family values, believes and promotes, and how much the family values its faith. "Family rituals and tradition serve as a repository that preserves much of a family's history, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams.

> . . . All families, indeed all communities, have ritual words, gestures, actions, and traditions that are repeated periodically. The challenge for the church is to help families more consciously and meaningfully participate in these significant rituals and traditions." (Anderson and Hill, 163)

Core Practice 5: Family Meal

Research has been accumulating demonstrating how eating together as a family five or more times a week is strongly linked to lower incidence of bad outcomes, such as teenage drug and alcohol use, and to good qualities like emotional stability, low levels of family stress, and good parent-child/teen relationships.

Regularly eating together supports family members in staying more connected to their extended family, ethnic heritage, and community of faith. The things family members discuss at the supper table anchor children and teens more firmly in the world. The research is clear: regular family meals have a very positive impact on the family and its individual members. Good things can happen when family members gather together to eat.

So many of the family's faith practices happen around the family meal: having conversations, praying, reading the Bible, celebrating rituals and traditions, to name a few. The family meal is one of the few rituals that allow families to act out their concern for each other, and their need and desire to be together. The family meal is the time when family comes first, establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. Just as a meal was central to the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as whole. It is a daily opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life.

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