

# **Fasting, giving, praying: 25+ ideas for what kids & teens can do for Lent**

Fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are at the heart of the forty days of Lent. Here are some strategies for helping your kids get involved in these traditional penitential practices.

Most of these ideas are appropriate for kids ages six and up. The best way to introduce younger children to Lenten practices is for them to see adults and older kids in the family practicing them; use their natural curiosity and desire to be “grown up” as a springboard for talking about what you’re doing, and why.

Here’s what you’ll find in this article:

- Let’s Talk about Lent
- Fasting Ideas for Kids and Teens
- Why Do We Fast and Abstain?
- Giving Ideas for Kids and Teens
- Prayer Ideas for Kids and Teens

## **Let’s talk about Lent**

A good way to start Lent is to talk with your older kids and teens about what Lent is – especially its essential connection to baptism. Here are some talking points:

- The roots of Lent go back to the early Church, when those who wished to become Christians underwent a period of preparation before their baptism. Once limited to catechumens (those preparing to enter the Church), eventually the whole Church adopted the practice of renewing one’s baptism through a period of penitence and recommitment to the Christian life.

- Today, Lent is a time when “all the baptized are called to renew their baptismal commitment,” according to the U.S. Catholic bishops. “The key to fruitful observance of these practices is to recognize their link to baptismal renewal. We are called not just to abstain from sin during Lent, but to true conversion of our hearts and minds as followers of Christ. We recall those waters in which we were baptized into Christ’s death, died to sin and evil, and began new life in Christ.” [Read the full article from the USCCB here.](#)
- Translation for younger kids: “Lent is a time when we practice new ways of giving up sin and doing good so we can be closer to God.”
- The traditional practices of Lent, drawn from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, are almsgiving ([Matthew 6:2–4](#)), prayer ([Matthew 6:5–15](#)), and fasting ([Matthew 6:16–18](#)).

## Fasting ideas for kids and teens

Fasting and abstinence are the practice of giving up something in order to turn away from sin and draw closer to God. The thing we give up (food or meat) might be good in itself, but we relinquish it in order to obtain a greater good...God. Fasting is not only a form of penance, but a spiritual discipline that helps us make room for God, strengthens our will, prepares us for mission, and puts us in solidarity with the suffering of Christ and suffering people around the world.

Here are some of the spiritual benefits of fasting:

- **It’s a form of penance.** Throughout the Old Testament, people covered themselves in ashes, took off their fine clothes, and fasted in order to express their repentance from sin. Fasting serves a similar purpose today.
- **It makes room for God.** By emptying ourselves, even if just a little bit, we make room for God to enter our lives more fully. When fasting and abstinence are hard, we are moved to turn to God in prayer for help.
- **It strengthens the will.** Fasting is a spiritual

discipline; just as physical exercise makes our body stronger, fasting strengthens our will. Practicing self-denial in small things strengthens our will to resist sin in other areas of our lives.

- **It prepares us for mission.** Fasting imitates the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. Just as Jesus used this time to prepare for his public mission, fasting prepares us to continue his mission in the world.
- **It puts us in solidarity with the suffering Christ.** Whatever small suffering we experience when we fast brings us closer to the suffering Christ—and all people who suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and abuse on a daily basis.

Only adults (ages 18-59) are obligated to fast (although teens 14 and older are obligated to abstain from meat on Fridays). In addition to this obligation, everyone is invited to choose additional penitential practices during Lent. “The fasting that all do together on Fridays is but a sign of the daily Lenten discipline of individuals and households: fasting for certain periods of time, fasting from certain foods, but also fasting from other things and activities,” the U.S. Catholic bishops say (*Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, page 96). Beginning at about age five or six, children can be encouraged to “give something up,” or to adopt a positive practice, as a way of entering into the spirit of Lent.

When encouraging your kids to fast, help them brainstorm some creative ideas. A positive experience is more likely if you make the fast concrete and measurable. For example, instead of just saying, “I’ll stop fighting with my sister,” sit down and figure out specific actions that will lead to a “conversion” in this area. What causes the fighting? If the problem is borrowing clothes without permission, make that part of the fast. Recording kids’ lenten achievements with a chart or a coin jar might help your kids stay on track.

What can kids fast from for Lent? Here are some ideas:

## **1. Give up the usual suspects**

Consider these tried-and-true fasting favorites: Sweets, video games, smartphones (or create “quiet zones” free of phones), soda, junk food, social media, and other creature comforts. LifeTeen has posted several fun lists of [teen-specific fasting ideas](#), some of which would be good for older kids, too.

## **2. Quiet it down**

Monks practice silence in order to better hear God. Your family can, too, by turning off radios and music players (maybe just in the car), turning off the television, eating a meal in silence (or while listening to some sacred reading), practicing [Thirty Seconds of Silence](#), being silent for the first fifteen minutes of the morning, or even having a day of silence.

## **3. Make your room or home a desert**

Jesus spent forty days in the desert. Kids and teens can imitate his example by making their room more desert-like as well, removing pictures and posters from walls, putting away rugs and comforters, emptying closets and dressers of all but the most essential outfits, throwing extra clutter (gadgets, trinkets, toys) in a box to be stored away.

## **4. Slim down your wardrobe**

Kids can count up the number of outfits they have and select ten percent to wear during their fast. (For inspiration, read the stories of saints who gave away their clothes to the poor.) At the end of the fast, they can consider donating some of the clothes they didn't wear.

## **5. Write your fight**

Older kids can cut down on sibling squabbling by committing to writing down their complaints rather than making them

verbally. Print out “complaint forms” that include guidelines for rephrasing complaints using respectful language.

## **6. Give up your place**

If your kids are always fighting about who gets to sit where or who gets to be first, then read and talk about Jesus’ teaching about “first” and “last” place: [Mark 10:41-45](#). Challenge your kids to live that teaching out during Lent.

## **7. Be one with the poor: sleep on the floor**

One of the purposes of fasting is to remind us of the plight of the poor, especially those who lack the basic necessities of life. Your kids can underline this element by giving up something that is symbolic of a basic necessity that other people lack. For example:

- Sleep on the floor, not in bed, to practice solidarity with the homeless.
- Drink nothing but water (and maybe milk, for growing bodies) to be in solidarity with those who lack safe drinking water.
- Walk to school instead of getting a ride to be in solidarity with kids who lack access to education.
- Do not purchase anything for yourself (except for absolute necessities) to be in solidarity with those who must live on less than \$2 a day.

You can probably think of more. Give these practices an extra punch by linking them up with positive acts of giving and praying.

## **8. Give up your hair**

What you do with your hair is an expression of your identity, so it’s not surprising that hair has played a role in the stories of the saints and people in the Bible. As a Nazarite, Samson famously drew strength from his long hair; Paul cut his hair after taking a vow. And the beautiful hair that St.

Therese of Lisieux cut off when she entered the convent is still on display today.

If having their hair “just so” is an attachment for teens, they might consider giving it up (one way or another) for Lent. Alternatively, if they don’t care about their hair at all, they might go the other way and keep it well groomed during Lent.

## **9. Give up something for the sake of the environment**

Let your Lent fast do double duty by giving up something that will benefit God’s creation as well. Give up warm showers to save energy (and water); give up meat to reduce carbon emissions; give up unnecessary lights (the darkness will be appropriately Lenten); give up unnecessary car trips (use the time walking or biking to pray); or give up soda bottles and cans. Get the details at Ryan Langr’s article [5 Lent Fasts that Benefit God’s Creation](#).

## **10. Practice humility, and give up a vice**

Here’s a real challenge for older kids and teens (and adults). Before Lent, ask trusted friends and family members, “What area of my character do you think I need to work on the most?” Or ask: “What’s one thing that I do that annoys you the most?” Hearing the answers to those questions without getting defensive will offer a great opportunity for practicing humility!

Turn that around into a positive by practicing the appropriate virtue. For example, if everyone thinks you talk too much, practice holding your tongue. If people think you worry too much, focus on giving your worries to God.

## **Giving ideas for kids and teens**

Giving (traditionally called “almsgiving”) is a spiritual

practice that goes back thousands of years in many of the great world religions. Like fasting, giving is as much a spiritual discipline as an act of charity, especially when our giving comes at a personal sacrifice. In our small acts of giving, we strive to imitate Christ, who gave his life for us on the cross so that we might have eternal life.

When you talk to kids about their ideas for giving, share with them the story of the widow's mite ([Luke 21:1-4](#)). As you might recall, a poor widow gave two small coins to the Temple treasury, but because she gave all that she had, Jesus said that she had given more than those who had given larger amounts out of their plenty. The lesson: it is the size of our generosity, not the size of our act, that makes the difference.

Here are some ways that your kids can practice giving this Lent.

### **1. Make a giving jar**

Make a list of small acts of giving that your kids can perform throughout the day. Encourage them to keep track of their acts of giving. Later, count up their acts of kindness and allow them to deposit a coin in a "giving jar" for every act of giving. On Good Friday, count up the coins and give them to the poor; on Easter Sunday, fill the jar with candy (one piece for each coin).

### **2. Perform a random act of kindness every day**

Perform a different random act of kindness every day; doing it secretly makes it more fun. See [RandomActsOfKindness.org](#) for ideas.

### **3. Share**

Older kids who are especially possessive of their toys or bedroom space can be encouraged to share, actively and kindly, with their siblings. Or, encourage kids to share by donating

the money they saved from their sacrifices (for example, giving up junk food) to a charitable cause.

#### **4. Practice being present**

Teens can commit to putting down their phone (or other electronic device) when someone is present with them. Even better: create phone-free zones (like the dinner table).

#### **5. Share stories**

“The sharing of tales is an act of love and can truly change the world,” says Marni Gillard, a member of the Teaching Catholic Kids [Parents Facebook group](#). She suggests that kids and teens be encouraged to share their stories in order to “push through” “push through” their resistance to being open and vulnerable with others. The flip side of this practice would be asking parents, grandparents, and other elders to share their stories, especially stories of when they were kids.

#### **6. Learn and take responsibility for a new chore**

Even little kids can participate in giving by learning a new chore, especially if the chore is a simple adult task that makes them feel more grown up. But this is a great idea for older kids, too.

#### **7. Raise money for a charity**

Let your older kids and teens choose a favorite cause, then challenge them to raise as much money as they can for that cause. At the end of Lent, they can donate the money to a related charity.

Catholic Relief Services is famous for its [Rice Bowl campaign](#), which has also gone digital in recent years. But whether you raise money for CRS or another worthy charity, encourage your kids to be creative with their giving. Can they raise money by putting on a show, or doing small favors for neighbors? How



about donating allowances, or scouring cushions and floors for loose change? What about a social media campaign?

## **Prayer ideas for kids and teens**

Virtually all of the saints spent large chunks of time in prayer. The reason? These wise men and women realized that prayer—that ongoing conversation or relationship with God—is essential to living the Christian life. It is possible to do good works without prayer or belief in God, but prayer powers the spiritual life. When we pray, we are better able to let God work through us instead of trying to “do it ourselves.”

### **1. Put out holy water**

You can underline Lent as a time to renew our baptismal commitment by making holy water available for your kids to bless themselves...at the beginning of the day, at the end of the day, or when they go out of the house. You should be able to get holy water from your parish; keep it in a little bottle, or put it in a dish on your family prayer table. Explain that the holy water reminds us of our baptism and strengthens us in our Lenten practice.

### **2. Do an examen at the end of every day**

The examen is one of the most powerful practices for spiritual growth, period. In a nutshell, the [daily examen](#) is a practice popularized by St. Ignatius of Loyola in which you set aside fifteen or twenty minutes a day to prayerfully “examine” your day to see where God was present, and to discern how God is calling you to grow. Practicing a regular examen is a great way to prepare for receiving the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, too!

### **3. Say the Rosary throughout the day**

Teens and pre-teens can carry a rosary with them, using it to

pray throughout the day. Any set of beads (such as a beaded necklace or bracelet) could be used to keep track of prayers.

#### **4. Wear your faith**

Kids can be encouraged to wear Christian symbols (a necklace, bracelet, or t-shirt) as a witness to their faith—and to remind them to live out their beliefs more consistently.

#### **5. Get to know Jesus**

Get to know Jesus by reading the Gospels this Lent. Have kids read one of the Gospels in an age-appropriate Bible, or read it together as a family, over the course of Lent. The Gospel of Mark may be read in one long sitting. Supplement (but don't replace) your reading of the Scriptures with any of the great movies or videos depicting the life of Christ. Max McLean's [Gospel of Mark](#) is an excellent one-man dramatic retelling of the Gospel available on YouTube.

#### **6. Practice Lectio Divina**

If you haven't introduced your kids to the ancient practice of Lectio Divina yet, this Lent may be the time to do it. Why? Because learning to pray with the Scriptures opens up huge new horizons for their relationship with God as they learn to listen to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to them through his Word. Check out [Lectio Divina for Kids: Teach Your Kids to Pray with Scripture](#).

#### **7. Pray three times a day**

Muslims are well known and respected for their practice of praying throughout the day, but did you know that Christians are also called to pray throughout the day? We call this prayer the [Liturgy of the Hours](#). While your kids will not be able to pray the actual Divine Office throughout the day, they can pray a simple morning, noon, and evening prayer. Older kids and teens can set an alarm on their digital devices to remind them; also, look for Catholic prayer apps to help with

this practice.

## **8. Go to confession**

If your family hasn't been to confession this year, calendar it for Lent. If you do celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly, try to increase your frequency during Lent. Can you celebrate the sacrament once a week? If you do, be sure to talk about what impact it had on your faith life when Lent is done. Check out [Celebrating Reconciliation with Kids: 9 Ways to Get Into the Habit](#) for help.

## **9. Go to daily Mass**

If you're able, try taking your family to Mass every day during Lent...or pick a special day (perhaps a Friday) once a week to attend daily Mass. If daily Mass is impossible, read the Scripture readings for the day every day throughout Lent.

## **10. Pray the Stations of the Cross**

Since the earliest centuries of the Church, Christians have made pilgrimages to Jerusalem in order to retrace the steps of Jesus during his suffering and death (the *Via Dolorosa* or "Way of Sorrow"). Around the fifteenth century, Christians began the practice of prayerfully meditating on the Passion of Christ by reproducing that pilgrimage in miniature in what eventually became known as the Stations of the Cross.

You can pray the Stations of the Cross with your family at your local parish or at home; check out [The Stations of the Cross for Families](#) for ideas.

## **11. Pray the Seven Penitential Psalms.**

Check out the USCCB website for both [audio and text versions of the Seven Penitential Psalms and the Songs of the Suffering Servant](#), and incorporate these into your family prayer time. "During times when we wish to express repentance and especially during Lent, it is customary to pray the seven

penitential psalms,” says the USCCB website. “The penitential designation of these psalms dates from the seventh century. Prayerfully reciting these psalms will help us to recognize our sinfulness, express our sorrow and ask for God’s forgiveness.”

## **12. Journal your Lent**

Older kids and teens might be invited to keep a spiritual diary or journal during Lent. It’s a concrete way for them to keep track of their spiritual life, and an easy step toward doing a daily examen. The [Way of the Cross Journal for Children](#) from Peanut Butter & Grace is geared specifically toward helping younger kids journal their Lent.

## **When do Catholics fast and abstain?**

In the United States, the Church calls on Catholics ages eighteen through fifty-nine to the regular practice of fasting and abstinence from meat; pregnant and nursing mothers, as well as the sick, are exempted.

Fasting is defined as consuming only one full meal and, if necessary, two smaller meals (less than one full meal combined) throughout the day, with no snacks between meals. Abstinence means not eating meat, such as poultry, beef, and pork. Fish, meat-based broths, eggs, butter, and other animal-derived products are allowed.

Adults are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, with the Good Friday fast ideally lasting through Saturday evening. In addition, everyone ages fourteen and older is required to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent. Abstaining from meat is strongly encouraged on all Fridays throughout the year, but not required as long as some other penitential practice replaces it (for example, giving up sweets or performing some charitable work).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops posts

information about fasting and abstinence requirements on the ["Fasting and Abstinence" page of its website, usccb.org.](https://www.usccb.org/faith-life/lent/faq)

## Learn more

- [Lent](#): a complete set of resources from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- [Deuteronomy 9:9](#), 18, 25-29; 10:10; [1 Kings 19:7-18](#); [Daniel 9:1-19](#); [Jonah 3](#); [Matthew 4:1-11](#)
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #[1434](#), [1438](#), [2043](#)