

Nurturing the Faith of Children, Teens, and the Whole Family

Four Insights from Research

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(This article was written for Catechetical Sunday 2020, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

We believe that the family is “is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world” (*Follow the Way of Love*). One of the consequences of the 2020 pandemic’s impact on life in the U.S. was the rediscovering of the centrality and importance of the family and the home for society and for churches. Education, work, and church life (worship and faith formation) all moved home overnight. Churches that had developed strong relationships with families (and all generations) and had robust efforts to support parents and nurture family faith at home made a much smoother transition to home-based church life. Those that did not, struggled.

How can we partner with parents and develop vital and vibrant families of faith? Over the past two decades we have been blessed with some of the best research ever done on the role of parents and the family in forming the faith of children and young people. These studies have affirmed the centrality of parents, and the whole family, in forming the faith of children and youth.

This essay draws from several major research studies to identify findings that can be used to develop approaches and strategies to engage, encourage, and equip parents for family faith transmission and formation. Use the four research findings in this essay to assess your current practice, redesign ministry and programming, and create new initiatives that engage, encourage, and equip parents and the whole family at home, church, and school. There is no more urgent task for churches today than strengthening parental and family faith and practice.

#1. Parents are the most significant influence on the religious and spiritual outcomes of young people.

At the heart of all the research is the finding that the most important influence shaping the religious and spiritual lives of children and youth is their parents. The overwhelming evidence from the research studies shows that the parents of American youth play the leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and often for the rest of their lives.

One of the most basic suggestions of our findings is that young adults arrive at a sense of their fundamental identity and worldview not by weighing all possible intellectual arguments for and against a proposed way of life, but rather by roughly adopting the worldview of those mentors who left the deepest impression upon them—and who loved them and cared for them the most. It should come as no surprise, then, that the emergence of the new generation of dedicated young Catholics (Christians) will rise and fall with the choices of their parents. (Bartkus and Smith, 70)

The single most powerful force in a child’s religious formation is the spiritual personality of the parent. We know the parental factors that make a significant difference in promoting faith in children and youth include:

- parents’ personal faith and practice
- a close and warm parent-child relationship
- parent modeling and teaching a religious faith
- parent involvement in church life and Sunday worship
- grandparent religious influence and relationship (Bengston, et al.)

It is critically important that parents are authentic examples of what they claim to believe. Their authenticity includes faithful living as well as sharing with their children their struggles and failings.

#2. The primary way by which a religious identity becomes rooted in children’s lives are the day-to-day religious practices of the family and the ways parents model their faith and share it in conversation, collaboration, and exposure to outside religious opportunities.

The crucial location where young people’s religious outcomes are largely decided is not the church, but the home. The primary responsibility for passing on religious faith and practice to children rests with parents; religious congregations are secondary and primarily serve to provide support. This means that the most important agent in the religious and spiritual outcomes of children and youth are neither clergy nor youth ministers, neither educators nor the voices of popular culture and media, but parents. (Bartkus and Smith)

In *Religious Parenting*, Smith, et al. affirm this finding, “Parents have only one good and hopefully effective way to raise children to understand and carry on their family’s religion (or perhaps return to it someday after a period of disaffection). That is for parents simply to practice their own personal religious faith, naturally, for its own sake and as role models for their children. If all goes well, children will over time learn, absorb, and embrace their own version of that faith, almost unconsciously. (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, 179)

#3. The family is the primary community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced.

We have discovered through research that certain faith practices make a significant difference in nurturing the faith of children and adolescents at home. “Raising religious children should thus primarily be a practice-centered process, not chiefly a didactic teaching program. Parents modeling religious practices is primary, and explaining belief systems is secondary” (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, 179). Among the most important practices are:

- Reading the Bible as a family and encouraging young people to read the Bible regularly
- Praying together as a family and encouraging young people to pray personally
- Serving people in need as a family and supporting service activities by young people
- Eating together as a family
- Having family conversations about faith
- Talking about faith, religious issues, and questions and doubts
- Ritualizing important family moments and milestone experiences
- Celebrating holidays and church year seasons at home
- Providing moral instruction
- Being involved in a faith community and participating regularly in Sunday worship as a family

The way that family prayer unifies the family stands out. Family prayer is a time of family togetherness and interaction, a space for social support, and a means for intergenerational transmission of moral and spiritual values. Family prayer include the issues and concerns of individuals and the family, helps reduce relational tensions, and provides feelings of connectedness, unity, and bonding. (Dollahite, Marks, and Boyd)

#4. The quality of a parent’s relationships with their children or teens and the parenting style they practice make a significant difference in faith transmission.

Parents cultivate relationships of warmth and love which makes everything else possible. While faith practices and attending religious services are important, the quality of the parent–child relationship is even more important. (Dollahite, Marks, and Boyd)

Parents balance religious firmness with religious flexibility in their parenting. Parents who can avoid religious rigidity through balance are more likely to maintain more positive relationships with their children. (Dollahite, Marks, and Boyd)

Parents balance desire for religious continuity with children’s agency. They transmit their faith to their children while honoring their children’s agency by teaching principles and values, providing expectations of religious participation and responsibility, not forcing faith, allowing exploration and mistakes, and showing respect for children’s views. (Dollahite, Marks, and Boyd)

Parents talk with their children about religious matters during the week. This is one of the most powerful mechanisms for the success or failure of religious transmission to children. When parents talk about their religion in personal terms, that sends a strong message to their kids that it's really important to them. (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo)

Parents practice an “authoritative” parenting style (as opposed to authoritarian, permissive, or uninvolved style). Parents maintain and enforce high standards and expectations for their children while simultaneously expressing a lot of open warmth and connection to their children and confidently giving them enough space to work out their own views and values. (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo)

Parents listen more and preach less. The way parents approach parent–youth conversations about religion and spirituality matters. It is a more satisfying and successful religious and relational experience when the conversations were more youth-centered than parent-centered. (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo) (Dollahite, Marks, and Boyd)

Reflection

For each of the four research findings as a guide, ask how you can **encourage** parents to grow in faith and become faith formers, **equip** parents to incorporate faith practices into family life at home, and **engage** parents in education and formation, as well as the whole family in faith forming experiences and programs.

1. Assess how well your current practice addresses the four findings.
2. Identify ministries and programming that need to be redesigned.
3. Create new initiatives to engage, encourage, and equip parents and the whole family at home, church, and school.

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About the Author

John Roberto, the current NCCL Board Chair, has spent a lifetime working in Catholic faith formation—teaching, writing, researching, and consulting. He founded Lifelong Faith Associates in 2006 to continue his work. He was the founder and director of the Center for Ministry Development from 1978 to 2006. His latest publications include *Lifelong Faith: Formation for All Ages and Generations* (Church Publishing, 2022), *Faith Formation with a New Generation, Families at the Center of Faith Formation*, *Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century*, and *Generations Together*.