

Equipping Families to Teach the Faith to their Children

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Introduction

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up.

Deuteronomy 6:5-7

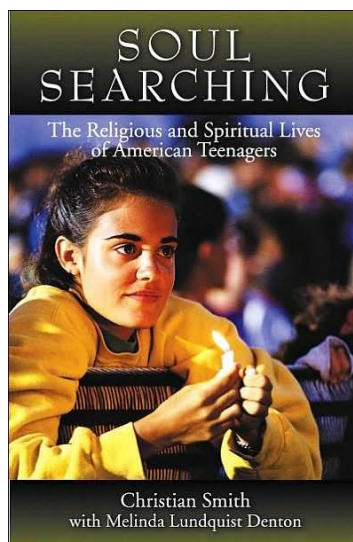
Why is teaching faith formation at home important? Is it necessary for children and youth who attend Sunday school and other church activities on a regular basis?

The scripture passage above is a familiar one. Although the words are ancient, modern research supports their truth. Despite the pressures of our consumerist and media-oriented society, the family is still the most powerful influence on the faith development of children.

[The National Study on Youth and Religion](#) which was done from 2002-2012 stated that:

The evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. 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 book [Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Life of American Teenagers](#) by Christian Smith reports the findings of The National Study of Youth and Religion if you'd like to know more about it.



What do families need from churches?

Families need to see the importance of their role in the faith formation of their children, to be encouraged in their role, and to be equipped for their role.

Sharing the results of the studies mentioned previously can be one way to start a conversation about families being the primary faith formation influence in their children's lives.



We can also help families realize the importance of their role by using examples of family influence in the Bible, the impact of family on people of great faith throughout the history of the church, and through personal testimony of people in the congregation who were influenced by their families.

Churches can help families feel they are in a haven by accepting them where they are and realizing that families today come in many different forms.

In the past families were often encouraged to give the task of educating their children in the faith to church professionals, who were seen as experts. Families today may feel inadequate for the task of passing on their faith.

Churches can help families to feel more confidence about taking the lead in their children's faith formation by offering studies and resources for families to become more knowledgeable about the Bible, church history, and other matters related to the faith. If you're going to offer a study, it's important that it be accessible to those with small children, so you might want to offer childcare or a children's activity during the time of the study or offer it online. Your church library can offer print, digital, or multi-media resources. Books on tape are a good option for those who spend a lot of time driving to work or to children's activities.

Families and children can also learn together. One of the benefits of adults and children worshipping together is that the basics of the service can be explained for the benefit of the children while those adults who don't know the basics can also learn without being embarrassed. Families learning together may mean that everyone is in the same place and learning the same things or they may be together for part of the time and then separated into age-related groups for more in-depth learning. The confirmation curriculum, *Confirm not Conform*, added a [separate adult program](#) when they realized

parents were waiting around while their children were in class and could benefit from an engaging class of their own where they could talk about faith issues from their own perspective in an atmosphere that was more open to questioning than their own confirmation experience probably was.

Part of encouraging families is making them aware that true faith is not being able to recite a creed or explain theological ideas but is a way of life. Setting an example in how they live is more important than theological knowledge. Sharing faith involves being honest. Children can sense that someone is hypocritical if they tell others how to act but then don't follow their own advice. Families need to be encouraged to talk about their faith as they model God's love in their actions.

People of faith don't always agree on issues and there are many questions for which we have no adequate answers. Families need to know that saying "I don't know" is a perfectly valid response to questions their children may ask them about God and faith.

Churches can equip families to practice their faith at home through sharing resources for prayer, service, and other spiritual practices. This can be done by sending home resources created in Sunday school or an intergenerational program. Examples would be an Advent wreath (along with a family-friendly litany for lighting the candles), a book or container of table graces, items and information about setting up a sacred space or family altar, as well as a list of the many online resources that are available for family faith formation.



Families who don't normally practice faith formation in the home may need a jump-start to initiate the process. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Arlington, Virginia, decided their Sunday school program wasn't working anymore so they created [FISH: Families Integrating Sunday and Home](#). The program has since been modified, but initially families gathered together every four to six weeks for Sunday FISHing, a potluck lunch with group teaching after worship. For faith formation during the weeks between Sunday FISHing, families went to the FISH website, which had a weekly Gospel reading, a prayer starter, discussion questions, and a place to post comments, reflections or questions. The website also had information about worship and outreach opportunities. Now the FISH website, while encouraging families to come to church as often as they're able, provides information about Episcopal worship and worship at St. Andrew's as well as outreach opportunities at the church which families can participate in. There are also links to suggested home faith practices.

Best practices in family faith formation

An article by John Roberto of LifelongFaith Associates titled [“Best Practices in Family Faith Formation”](#) talks about the benefits of family religious involvement, the impact of parental faith on children and teens, how families practice their faith at home, core family faith practices, and how congregations can engage in family faith formation.

Let’s take a brief look at the last two: core family faith practices and how congregations can engage in family faith formation.

Core family faith practices

Roberto looks at research that shows “a number of significant family faith practices that...contribute to building families of faithful Christians and strengthening faith in daily life.” While each study uses different language, a number of core family faith practices appear in each study. Roberto lists five core family faith practices and emphasizes that there is one overriding theme that is woven through all the research that led to these five core practices and that is “the integration of faith and daily family life.”

Core practice number one is **family faith conversations**. Hearing their parents’ faith stories is one of the most important influences on the faith of children and teenagers, but caring conversations include more than this; they involve the sharing of faith, values, and care of others.

Family devotions and prayer are core practice number two and these provide a way not just to learn more about the Bible and Christian traditions but also how to apply these to daily life. Devotions and prayer can include “public worship, bedtime prayers, Bible reading and study, table grace, evening and morning prayers, and praying alone.”

Core practice three is **family service**, which can be a powerful way for family members to grow in faith. Family service provides an opportunity for children to see their parents actively live what they believe. It also creates a bond between family members not only as they serve together but also as they retell the various events through the years. However, rather than a monthly outing, service should be an integral part of a family’s life together.

Family rituals and traditions are core practice number four. These can take many forms such as mealtime and bedtime rituals and celebrating birthdays and special achievements. They also include church year rituals as well as milestones such as the first day of school, graduations, etc.

The last core practice is the **family meal**. Recent research shows that a family that eats together as a family five or more times a week has a lower incidence of teenage drug and alcohol use; more emotional stability; and better relationships. Many of a family's faith practices occur during the family meal: conversations, praying, reading the Bible, and other rituals and celebrations.

How congregations can engage in family faith formation

Roberto also lists 10 ways that congregations can nurture the faith of families. He cautions that congregations should not be asking families to program another activity into their busy days but should be helping them “attend to, experience, and talk about faith as part of their daily family activities...and extend care beyond their own boundaries to others and to creation.”

The first thing congregations can do is to **make family faith formation a goal** of congregational life and ministry and one focus of everything they do as a church.

Congregations can also utilize current church ministries and programs to **teach and model family faith practices**. Settings where the whole family is present or where the parents are available while the children are involved in an activity offer an opportunity for a teaching and demonstration activity which can provide families with an experience before they try it at home. This also helps to develop the adults' confidence and competence. For instance, show family members how to bless each other or teach them a table blessing to say before eating.

Congregations can **help families strengthen practices that they're already engaged in** such as serving others in need, caring for creation, and seeking justice.

Another way congregations can help families in their faith formation is by **involving the whole family in congregational life, programs, and leadership roles**. Work with the programs you already have and if one individual is involved in them, then look for ways to involve the rest of the family. For instance, an entire family can serve together as greeters or work together on a service project.

In many congregations, programs are separated into age groupings; the term “silo ministries” is used to refer to separate ministries and programs that aren't connected. Congregations can **offer programs where all ages learn and participate together**. When families learn together at church, it is much easier for them to continue the learning at home. Family conversations are more likely to occur when everyone is experiencing the

same thing. There are many free resources for intergenerational programs online as well as books with suggested programs; these often follow the church year or focus on family-centered topics. Vacation Bible School and retreats can be intergenerational, as well as many other programs that churches are currently offering to groups segregated by age.

Family faith formation can also be developed around milestones, the significant moments in our lives. Sacred and ordinary events are named and recognized in the life of a congregation as the generations gather together to bless an individual or mark the occasion in worship or at home. A tangible, visible item may be given as a gift that is a symbol of the milestone being celebrated. Faith community milestones include baptism, receiving a first Bible, confirmation, and other events related to an individual's life in the congregation. Life-cycle milestones celebrate birth, graduation, wedding, retirement and similar personal events. Rhythm of life milestones would be things like birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, or other recurring events. **Milestones can be celebrated in both the congregation and in the home.**

Another area in which the congregation can assist the family is in **providing a variety of developmentally appropriate family service projects**. Research shows that parents who model serving others to their children raise more compassionate and caring children.

Congregations can assist families by **providing home kits** that contain activities to facilitate family faith practices. These can be based on specific church seasons, Scripture readings, or an event in the life of the congregation. These kits can contain things like family prayers, suggested Scripture readings, Advent calendars with daily activities, storybooks or DVDs, suggestions for service projects and alternative gifts, as well as conversation starters for use during family meals or in the car.

The **internet is another tool** that congregations can use to reach families. Email and social media sites can all be used to encourage families and direct them to online family faith formation resources.

Finally, congregations can **provide parent education, resources, support, and encouragement**. Christian Smith in the book *Soul Searching* states that "The best way to get most youth more involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities."

Intergenerational ministry

Intergenerational ministry goes hand in hand with family ministry and equipping families for faith formation. The report [“Practices for Forming Faith Intergenerationally”](#) on the [Lifelong Faith site](#) states:

We have known for some time that a graded-level, schooling model of faith formation focused almost exclusively on children and youth, all by itself, fails to move the needle in the quest for effective faith transmission, i.e., passing faith to the next generation. Rather, a whole life approach that offers intergenerational programming and home/family learning options, along with age-specific efforts has a much greater chance of authentic and lasting faith transmission.

The [Search Institute website](#) states:

Our decades of research show us that young people’s development is rooted in their community and in their relationships. When they have high-quality, positive relationships with parents, teachers, mentors, coaches, and peers, they are more likely to develop resilience in the face of obstacles, grow, learn, and develop social-emotional skills.

Parents also benefit from being with other parents and being able to share their joys and concerns with others who are seeking the best ways to bring up their children in today’s hectic and diverse world.

Holly Catterton Allen in an article titled [“Bringing the Generations Together: Support from Learning Theory”](#) states that:

No better place exists for the most number of people to learn Christian ways from “more experienced members of the culture” than in intergenerational Christian communities. People of all ages and maturity levels are present actively carrying on the very essentials of Christianity. In IG [Intergenerational] communities, children learn from each other, younger children, older children, teens, and adults. And adults learn from teens and children. All benefit from each other with a sense of mutuality; in essence, they grow each other up into Christ.



Resources – websites



The **Building Faith** website has a section called [Home Practices](#) which has articles and activities for households of all shapes and sizes.

[FAITH5](#) (Faith Acts In The Home) is a simple, easy-to-implement faith practice to incorporate into your bedtime routine for five to fifteen minutes a night. The website states that “When done over time, the FAITH5 carries the power to enrich communication, deepen understanding, aid sleep, and promote mental, physical and spiritual health.”

The five steps are:

- SHARE your highs and lows
- READ a Bible verse or story
- TALK about how the Bible reading might relate to your highs and lows
- PRAY for one another's highs and lows
- BLESS one another

The website has information on the faith practice as well as resources to purchase such as the book [Holding Your Family Together](#) and a 6-week DVD course on implementing the practice.

The [Faith Formation Learning Exchange website](#) has sections dedicated to research studies; faith forming processes; faith formation practices and approaches; and foundational books. There is a page called [Foundational Books: Family & Parent Faith Formation](#) with suggested books about family faith formation.

[Faith at Home](#) has resources for sale to encourage the home to be the primary place for faith formation.

[Faith Inkubators](#) offers family and intergenerational ministry resources.

[GenOn Ministries](#) sells resources for intergenerational and family ministries.

[Home Grown Faith](#) offers the services of Linda Staats, a consultant, workshop leader, and curator of resources.

The [Lifelong Faith website](#) publishes a free downloadable journal with articles written by leaders around faith formation and intergenerational ministry. There are numerous articles on the website. The Intergenerational Faith Formation section has a number of free downloadable intergenerational programs based on seasons of the church year, sacraments, and other themes.

[Messy Church](#) offers articles and resources for starting a ministry which is a way of being church for families involving fun and is Christ-centered.

[Milestones Ministry](#) offers products, instruction, and coaching related to recognizing milestones. Taking Faith Home offers bulletin inserts and weekly devotional resources including faith conversation starters, service ideas, Christian rituals and traditions, and daily prayers.

[The United Church of Christ](#) website offers information and articles about Family Ministry and links to Children's Sabbath resources.

The United Methodist Church's [Intergenerational & Family Ministries](#) website offers resources, training, and support for ministries with families of all configurations.

Another website of interest is [Vibrant Faith at Home](#). They have free resources to support families as they raise their children in the faith. They state that they seek to equip and empower households to:

- TALK with each other about their faith
- PRAY together in ways that are comfortable and comforting
- RITUALIZE their important moments, and
- REACH OUT in service and support of others.

More than 60 faith activities are published each season -- spring, summer, fall, and winter. The activities are organized into six categories:

- Caring Conversation
- Ritual & Tradition
- Prayer
- Bible Story
- Serving Others
- Learning about Faith