

Spiritual Practices with Children and Youth



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PRC – Practical Resources for Churches

Some background



The first Sunday schools focused on giving information.

Let's begin by looking into the background of our ministry with children and youth, specifically, how Sunday school came about. Due to the Industrial Revolution, poor children were working six days a week in factories and were illiterate. Sunday schools started to teach the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic) using the Bible. Basic catechism, morality, prayers, and hymn singing were taught as well.

The movement spread to other countries, but by 1870 Britain and America had compulsory state education and Sunday school became limited to religious education. So Sunday school started with a focus on giving information and until recently this was often still the case. Children were expected to memorize scripture and recite the answers to questions in a catechism. Anyone who went through a confirmation program more than 20 years ago can probably attest to this. Being confirmed meant learning your denomination's doctrine without questioning what you were taught. In many churches and schools, the faith formation of children and youth was based on head knowledge, with the idea that they would become disciples of Jesus because of the information that was in their brains.

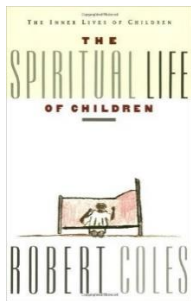
Child development theories and stages of faith

In the late 19th and the 20th century, various child development theories were formed by people like Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. These experts studied children's cognitive, personality, and moral development.

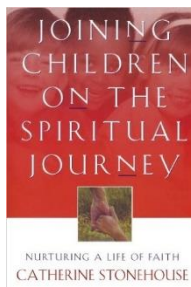
There were also those who studied faith development. James Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith* suggested that there were six stages of faith. John Westerhoff who wrote *Will Our Children Have Faith?* listed four stages of faith. He also believed that faith is strongly influenced by personal relationships and that it's necessary to explore what we truly believe in order to understand who we are in our relationship to God. Westerhoff stated that children and youth need to experience faith, not just learn the facts about religion. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* was originally written in 1976; a third edition was published in August 2012.

Today's leaders in children and youth ministry were influenced by these theories of faith development and are exploring which aspects of faith formation are most effective in children and youth's faith development. Some important people in the field include Karen Marie Yust, Eugene Roehlkepartain, Christian Smith, Kenda Creasy Dean, Catherine Stonehouse, Mark Yaconelli, Dorothy Bass, and Ivy Beckwith.

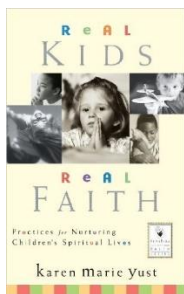
Children's spirituality resources



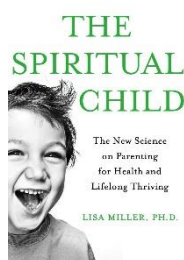
As those involved in the faith formation of children and youth realize the importance of experiencing faith, rather than just learning facts about religion, there is an increased interest in the spiritual life of children and numerous books on the topic have been published. [*The Spiritual Life of Children*](#) was written by Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist, and published in 1991. It's the account of his interviews with children from various cultural and religious backgrounds about their understanding of God and spiritual matters. The book includes their response to Coles' questions as well as drawings made by the children. The book is fascinating and shows that children do, indeed, have rich spiritual lives.



Catherine Stonehouse's book [*Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*](#) was published in 1998. It provides information about spiritual formation during childhood, reviewing contributions from child development experts like Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and James Flowers. Stonehouse also gives guidelines for Christian educators to enhance children's spiritual development using the techniques of Jerome Berryman's Godly Play, so that adults and children can journey together toward deeper intimacy with God.



[Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives](#) was written by Karen Marie Yust and published in 2004. It's written for parents and those who work with children; it provides ideas for nurturing children's spiritual formation. The inside flap cover states that "Yust challenges the prevailing notion that children are unable to grasp religious concepts and encourages parents to recognize children as capable of authentic faith."



[The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving](#) emphasizes the scientific research on children's spirituality. It was published in 2015 by Lisa Miller. In the first chapter of the book, Miller talks about all the things parents do to help their children reach their full potential and then states that those "high aspirations often miss the single most crucial ingredient of all, the only thing that science has shown to reliably predict fulfillment, success, and thriving: a child's spiritual development." Miller defines spirituality as "an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding...spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence."

She also says:

A child's spirituality precedes and transcends language, culture, and religion. It comes as naturally to children as their fascination with a butterfly or a twinkling star-filled night sky. However, as parents we play a powerful role in our child's spiritual development, just as we play a powerful role in every other aspect of our child's development. Science now tells us that this spiritual faculty is inborn, fundamental to the human constitution, central in our physiology and psychology.

Miller adds: "Research shows that natural spirituality, if supported in childhood, prepares the adolescent for critical developmental tasks of that age. If supported in adolescence, natural spirituality deepens and can become a significant resource for health and healing through adult life."

In a discussion of the difficulties that parents and others may have in nurturing the spiritual side of children, Miller states:

Our predominantly materialistic, 24/7 media-infused world is not set up for the introspective thought involved in spiritual reflection. We're pressured to fill downtime with productive activity, and we often feel compelled to fill in any quiet moment with diversions. This is how we live and this is what we're modeling for our children.

Miller also mentions other obstacles parents face when trying to spiritually parent their children.

Best practices in children's faith formation

Children's spirituality is greatly influenced by the relationships they have. Studies show the family is the first community of faith and the most powerful influence on the faith of children and teenagers. Those of us in the church involved in children and youth ministry can help parents in the spiritual formation of their children. We can expose children to a variety of spiritual practices and help parents to continue these practices at home.

LifelongFaith Associates is an organization which helps congregations develop Christian faith formation for people of all ages. An article from them entitled "[Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation](#)" by John Roberto and Kathie Pfiffner states:

Today, we know so much more about how children learn than we did fifty years ago, and the learning methods and activities that engage children today are unlike those of previous generations. We know that the world of their childhood has drastically changed, and adjustments are necessary to provide faith formation that forms the whole life of the child – head, heart, and soul. Churches that understand this shift have made fundamental changes in the way they do children's faith formation.

The article lists six best practices which include: learning experiences that involve the whole child, ministering to families, and involving children in the ministries of the church. I'd like to call your attention to Best Practice 3 which states: "Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

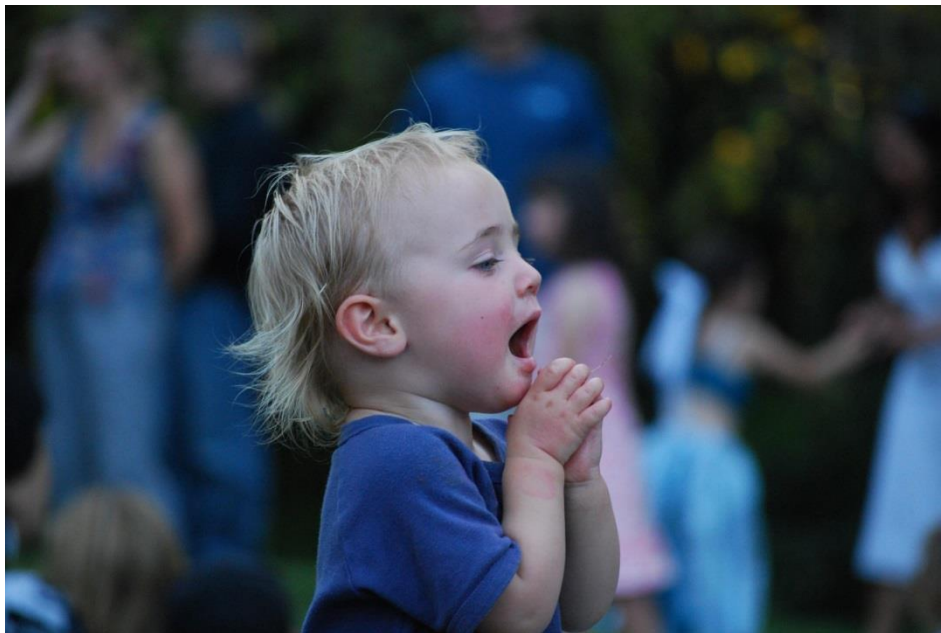
By the way, past and current issues of the Lifelong Faith journal are available as free downloads on their website: lifelongfaith.com.

Spiritual practices enable children and youth to encounter God

When we minister to children and youth, we can create an environment that allows them to encounter God by teaching spiritual practices. Anyone who works with children knows they have an innate spirituality. They're full of wonder and see magic in the world. Through spiritual practices they can stay connected with their spiritual side as they grow and mature.

Traditional spiritual practices include such things as prayer, meditation, and fasting, but anything that helps us get closer to God can be a spiritual practice. When you're working with children and youth, look for ways to help them be aware of God's presence.

Children and youth live in a world where they are continually bombarded with media, noise, and activity. We may think that more activity is the way to connect with them, but it can be a gift to show them how to slow down and quiet themselves. I've seen this in my own ministry with children and youth. When my husband and I were teaching a particularly active group of 4th and 5th graders, I decided I wanted to do a guided meditation with them. My husband was sure they wouldn't be able to be still for it. I had them sit with their eyes closed and concentrate on their breathing as I read to them a scene where they encountered Jesus. They remained quiet during the meditation and, even when I told them they could open their eyes and the exercise was over, they remained silent for several moments.



Suggested spiritual practices for children and youth

Prayer/mindful meditation

There are different ways to pray or meditate. Many children (and even adults) have an idea of prayer as something that is spoken or written where they communicate their thoughts and requests to God. But prayer should also be listening for what God wants to say to us.

One type of prayer that can help children and youth do this is centering prayer, where they choose a sacred word to say silently to themselves. When thoughts intrude they

return to their sacred word. A beautiful book for children about this type of prayer is [*Journey to the Heart*](#).

In breath prayers a short phrase, such as “God, come quickly to help me” or “Jesus, I love you” is chosen or created. Children breathe in as they silently say the first part of the phrase and breathe out for the second part. This can be done during a specific time of prayer or throughout the day.

Guided meditations were mentioned previously, where verbal instructions are given to relax and concentrate on breathing as a scene is presented for the listeners to imagine themselves a part of.

You can also take children and youth on a nature walk and have them meditate on the beauty and wonders of creation.

Examen is usually done at the end of the day, as we reflect on how God was present during the time and how we responded to God’s presence.

There are websites with suggestions on how to do examen with children:

[Praying the Examen with Children](#)

[A Daily Examen for Children and Teens](#)

[Faith 5](#) is a variation on Examen.

Physical objects

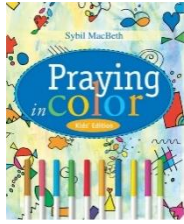
Having a physical object to touch and focus on can help children and youth connect with God.

Prayer beads have been used through the centuries by those from many different religions. Roman Catholics have the rosary but prayer beads are also being used more and more by Protestants. There are many different types of prayer beads with the beads symbolizing a specific prayer to recite or a topic to focus on.

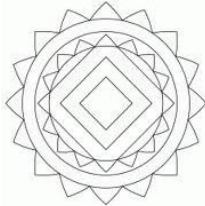


You see depicted here the [“Pearls of Life”](#) which were invented by a Lutheran bishop. Each of the 18 beads stands for something to meditate on, such as the white bead for baptism, the blue bead for serenity, and the red beads for love.

Prayer ropes are similar to prayer beads, with knots instead of beads. They come from the Eastern Orthodox tradition.



[Praying in Color Kid's Edition](#) is written by Sybil MacBeth and published by Paraclete Press. It's a follow-up to the popular book MacBeth wrote for adults called [Praying in Color](#). It uses doodling and coloring as a way to get still and listen to God. There is also a [companion DVD](#) about creating a simple workshop to teach kids how to pray in color.



Other art forms can be used as spiritual practices, such as painting, drawing, and working with clay. I have a friend who colors mandalas with her grandchildren and they find the practice very meditative. A mandala is a geometric figure representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist symbolism; it is also seen as the traditional Rose window in churches. You can find patterns of mandalas to color on the internet or in books.

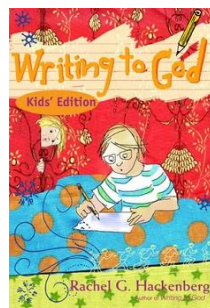
Prayer writing/journaling

Having children and youth write their own prayers can also be a spiritual practice. There are many different ways to do this. You can have children write letters to God or rewrite the Lord's Prayer in their own words. Acrostic prayers, where each line begins with a letter that forms a word, can be used with older children and youth.

Even children who are too young to read or write can create a prayer as a group using a simple repeating phrase. For example, the phrase might be "I have seen God" and the children complete the sentence: "God is in the ____" Examples might be flowers, smiles of friends, mommy's hugs.

Introducing journaling can lead to a lifelong spiritual practice. One possibility is to give children and youth journals and then use them for a set period of time in Sunday school. Eventually, the journals can be sent home to be used there. Besides written prayers and prayer requests, journals can also be used for drawing or pasting pictures or photos. A journal can even be used to record dreams.

A book called [Writing to God: Kids Edition](#) is available for children ages 5-11 and invites them to for 35 days to speak to God through their feelings, Bible verses, nature, and the ordinary events of life.



Prayerful movement

Most kids enjoy using movement in prayer. You can teach them about different prayer postures such as:

head bowed, eyes closed

head up, hands lifted up

*holding hands

*sitting

*walking or running

*kneeling

Prayer can also be done along with dance and yoga.

It's amazing how prayer postures change how we pray or feel about praying – try it yourself sometime!

You can also teach your children how to do a well-known prayer, such as the [Lord's Prayer, using hand motions](#).

Fasting

Most of think about Lent as a time for fasting, or giving something up, but fasting can be done at any time. And of course we can fast from other things than food. Children might fast from a favorite television program and youth might give up the internet for a period of time.

I remember speaking to a teenage girl about a retreat she had attended and she mentioned that not using her cell phone was one of the things she liked best about the retreat; she felt a sense of freedom. Sometimes giving something up helps us to see how we can actually be burdened by the things we consider good.

Fasting is particularly meaningful if giving something up results in doing good for someone else. Perhaps children might be encouraged to give up a treat and then donate the money saved to a food pantry.



I'm sure those of you who work with youth are familiar with the [30 Hour Famine](#) program. Youth learn about hunger, fundraise, and then go 30 hours without food. The money raised goes to support World Vision. I have to admit I wasn't sure how youth would react to this program when I first heard about it, but my daughter and other youth from my church found that participating in it was very meaningful.

Labyrinths

Walking a labyrinth is another spiritual practice that can be done by people of all ages. For those of you unfamiliar with it, a labyrinth is not the same thing as a maze. Unlike a maze, you can't get lost in a labyrinth as it has only one path to the center. The path twists and turns back on itself and is symbolic of a spiritual journey. It's been said that there's no one way to walk a labyrinth. Generally, a person walks slowly and meditates on a spiritual question or prayer and then spends some time in the center before starting to retrace their steps back out of the labyrinth.

You can look for a labyrinth where you live; a [worldwide labyrinth locator](#) is available online. There are a number of them, both indoor and outdoor, open to the public on Long Island, where the PRC offices are located. We also have portable, canvas labyrinths that we loan out.

You can even create your own labyrinth using tape or painting on a floor or rug, or using chalk or candles.

There are also finger labyrinths available, where one traces the paths with a finger instead of walking. You can [purchase ones](#) made of wood or other materials or make your own with clay. You can also download [printed ones](#) from the internet.



Sacred space/prayer stations

Another way to encourage spiritual practices is to set up a sacred space in your classroom or meeting room. Get the children or youth involved in decorating the area with things that are meaningful for them. Having a candle (I prefer flameless ones for safety reasons) that you light when entering the space can symbolize God's presence with you and your students.

You can also set up prayer stations where the children and youth are encouraged to spend quiet time in prayer or other activities. Having music playing softly in the background can also be a good idea.

If you go to Pinterest and search for [Prayer Stations for Kids](#) or [Prayer Stations for Youth](#) you'll find plenty of ideas for prayer stations.

Sacred space at home

Since we have such limited time to spend with the children and youth we minister to, it's important to partner with families in their faith formation. Share information about the spiritual practices that you're teaching, either by sending home information, emailing it, or inviting parents to attend an informational session.

Encourage families to set up a sacred space at home. Older children and youth might want to have their own. You can suggest ways to do this and what items to include; you can also have children and youth make objects for their sacred space. A simple light can be made by putting a flameless candle in a glass votive holder and decorating it with pieces of tissue paper and Mod Podge.

Devotionals

Another way to encourage the use of spiritual practices at home is through the use of devotionals. There are all kinds out there, for both children and teens. You can find online ones or purchase devotional books.

Two books for youth include [Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens](#) which offers practical ways to live that put Christian faith into action. It combines ancient faith practices with contemporary realities. [The Barefoot Way](#) is a daily devotional written by those who have encountered God and is for older youth.

[D365 Devotionals 365 Days a Year](#) is an online devotional for youth.

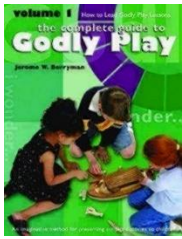
Curriculum

Many Sunday school curriculums include suggestions for prayer and other spiritual practices, but there are two that have a strong focus on them.

It was mentioned previously that Catherine Stonehouse discussed Godly Play in her book *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*. The method was developed by Jerome Berryman and, according to the [Godly Play website](#), Godly play is:

...a curriculum of spiritual practice exploring the mystery of God's presence in our lives. The Godly Play curriculum engages what is most exciting about religious education: God inviting us into – and pursuing us in the midst of –

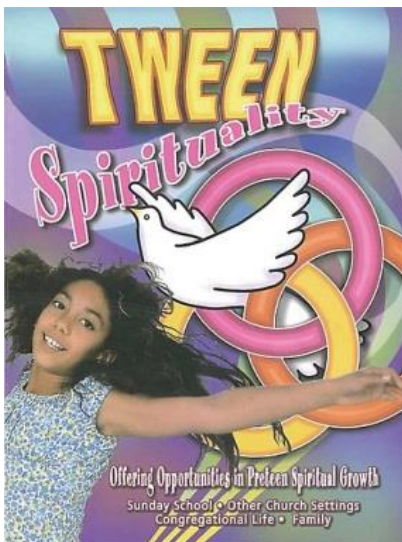
Scripture and spiritual experience. Godly Play practice teaches us to listen for God and to make authentic and creative responses to God's call in our lives.



Godly Play involves a careful telling of a Bible story, using figures and other objects which can be purchased or made. Children are asked "wondering questions," such as "I wonder which part of the story you liked best?" and then encouraged to play with the storytelling materials. [Books and other items](#) are available for purchase and training in Godly Play techniques is strongly encouraged.

[Shine: Living in God's Light](#) is Sunday school curriculum published by the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonite Church. Each Shine session has a spiritual practice to teach children with resources to reinforce the practices and to take them into their daily lives. Some of the spiritual practices that are included are: breath prayer, centering prayer, collage prayer, examen, giving, grace at meals, hospitality, intercession, labyrinth, morning and evening prayers, noticing God in creation, prayer doodling, reciting scripture, Sabbath keeping, service, silence, solitude, thanksgiving prayers, walking prayer, whole body prayer, and worship.

Tween resource



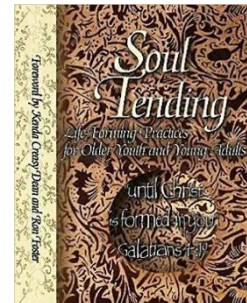
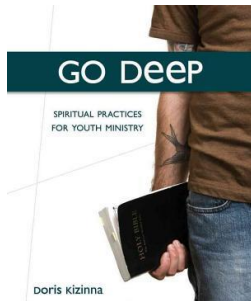
[Tween Spirituality](#) is a resource for those who work with kids ages 10-12. It encourages preteen spiritual growth by giving great suggestions for activities to use in Sunday school, worship, and at home with families.

Tween Spirituality shows ways to use Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, journaling and teaching about missions with young people.

There are also articles with ideas you can use right out of the book or as springboards to come up with some of your own unique ideas. Some of the creative activities include making items such as a stole for the pastor, blessing cards, prayer boxes, and a prayer tree. Students can learn how to bake and present communion bread.

There are suggestions for field trips to walk a labyrinth or see other styles of worship and to plan events such as a Blessing of the Animals service or a World Communion Sunday event. There are family activity ideas along with handouts and reproducibles.

Youth resources



The book [*Go Deep: Spiritual Practices for Youth Ministry*](#) was written by Doris Kizinna. It includes ideas for developing sacred space, engaging the senses, reading and being with the Word, arts and crafts, body and movement, and compassion and community. It also includes worship services and prayers.

[*Holy Things for Youth Ministry: 13 Practical Sessions*](#) by Brian Hardesty-Crouch has 13 sessions for youth, based on the research and practices of the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation and includes effective ways to transmit Christian faith by actually engaging in it with youth.

[*Soul Tending: Life Forming Practices for Older Youth and Young Adults*](#) by Beverly Burton and Drew Dyson is for senior high youth and young adults and strengthens relationships among participants as they study spiritual disciplines.

You can find more information online about spiritual practices in general and spiritual practices with children and youth. Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church offers a free download of a pamphlet called [“Ten Simple Spiritual Practice Ideas for Children & Youth.”](#)

Books for further reading

[*Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*](#) by Mark Yaconelli (Youth Specialties, 2006)

[*Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*](#) by Ivy Beckwith (Baker Books, 2010)

[*The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*](#) by Kenda Creasy Dean (Upper Room, 2005)

[*Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture*](#) by Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May (Baker Academic, 2010)

[*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenager*](#) by Christian Smith (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Devotional books for children

[*Celebrate Wonder Bible Storybook*](#)

These 150 stories will engage children through simple storytelling and open-ended questions that encourage the children to wonder about the Bible story.

[*Five-Minute Devotions for Children: Celebrating God's World as a Family*](#)

Each devotion in this book includes a story about an animal illustrating its dominant trait as created by God; that trait is then related to a child with questions to answer.

[*God's Power in Me*](#)

This interactive 52-day devotional that encourages young readers to break free from negative thinking and focus on the positive truths of who God made them to be.

[*Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*](#)

This resource features 150 popular Bible stories that are organized by 13 themes. Three reflection questions—Hear, See, Act—are included at the end of each story.

[*I Wonder: Exploring God's Grand Story*](#)

Through innovative storytelling and open-ended questions, this book offers a remarkable approach to teaching young minds to wonder about the mysteries found in God's Word.

[*Jesus Calling: 365 Devotions for Kids*](#)

These devotions are written as if Jesus is speaking directly to a child's heart.

[*My Jesus Journal*](#)

This book includes activities for families to make a Mustard Tree and Jesus Journal as well as other activities.

[*The One Year Book of Devotions for Preschoolers*](#)

Each reading in this book pairs a Little Blessings illustration with a short Bible verse and devotional thought.

[*The One Year Devos for Animal Lovers*](#)

This one-year devotional uses animals to point to spiritual truths.

[*Prayers for Faithful Families*](#)

This book equips busy parents with simple prayers, written in ordinary language, for a wide variety of occasions.

Devotionals for Youth

Print Books

[*The Barefoot Way: A Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People Who Walk with Them*](#)

This devotional from one of the Presbyterian publishing houses is only a 21-day journey but provides opportunities to journal and explains spiritual practices.

[*Cross Words: A Devotional for Youth*](#)

This daily devotional from Church Publishing has a mainline, liturgical perspective; it uses approachable language and has space for youth's own reflections.

[*OMG Devotionals for Teens and Young Adults*](#)

These devotionals are written by progressive Christian pastors and writers whose differing backgrounds, ages, and opinions make them unpredictable and meaningful to all kinds of people.

[*The Simple Truth Bible: The Best Minute of Your Day*](#)

This resource from Simply Youth Ministry features 365 daily devotions. Each devotion includes thoughts on a specific passage of Scripture and how it relates to students' lives.

Digital

[D365](#)

An online devotional experience that invites teens to pause, listen, think, pray, and go. Instrumental music is available for the devotional experience.

[May It Be So: Forty Days with the Lord's Prayer](#)

This Kindle book is a contemporary prayer guide using words and images to help teens spend time in conversation with God. It is also available as a physical book.

[Pray The Day](#)

This download from Vibrant Church Communications is a modern interpretation of fixed-hour praying, meant to connect us to God no matter how crazy our days are.

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