

# Who is your kids' best teacher of the faith?

## YOU ARE!

**N**o matter where you looked, you couldn't miss the nervous look on parents' faces all over the room. Nearly 100 of us gathered in the church basement for the first session to help our 7-year-olds prepare for their First Reconciliation.

On this particular Saturday morning we were handed a textbook for parents as well as for kids. There was a priest, a nun, and a trained director of religious education standing before us. We could tell, once our kids were sent away, that they were going to be asking us questions. Uh-oh. It began to feel like eighth-grade catechism class all over again, waiting to get drilled by the bishop on our Confirmation day.

Luckily they didn't quiz us about the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit or the corporal works of mercy. Instead we heard about being our children's "first and best teachers," the ones who would teach them more about the sacrament of Reconciliation than anyone else ever could.

Nervous looks again. You could see what a lot of parents were thinking: "Who, me? I don't know all that religious stuff." Or, "I barely have time to do the laundry and get dinner going, let alone sit down with a textbook." Or, "I'm not exactly a saint, you know. I want my kids to learn from someone holier than I am."

But the more we heard, the more we began to get the point. The truth is, kids learn most of their ways from us. Even the most rebellious teen, in the long run, takes her lead from her parents. Some of the most basic lessons in life—what forgiveness and kindness look like, how to be honest without hurting feelings—are really "caught" by children rather than being formally taught by parents. Here are some ways your children can "catch" their most important spiritual lessons from you.

By MARY LYNN HENDRICKSON, editor of the newsletter *At Home with Our Faith*.

**1. Attitude.** One thing our kids definitely catch from us is attitude. Maybe it's genetics, the food we eat, or the late nights we keep, but a parent who's a grump is bound to have at least one little grouser in the house. Likewise, the parent who can find humor or hope in sticky situations usually has a child who is optimistic. Most of us are a mix of both.

Encouraging positive attitudes, however,

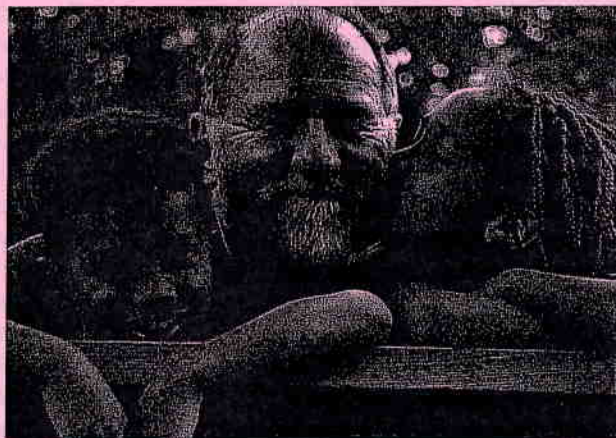


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creates household harmony by keeping whining and bickering at bay. Positive attitudes also hold great power to influence how we respond to our neighbors, our church, and our world—areas of our life that, according to Jesus, beg for a Christian reaction from us.

Moms and dads can help their kids be positive, and positively spiritual, when they:

- **Encourage attitudes that are especially Christian.** Probably the best-known list of Christian attitudes can be found in the Bible (1 Corinthians 13), in St. Paul's description of real love: patience, kindness, hopefulness, and mercy, among others. Look them up in your Bible or at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com). Maybe even post them on the fridge.

Specific saints, too, are known to champion specific attitudes. St. Francis de Sales liked to emphasize gentleness: "When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with

gentleness and time," he wrote. And, "Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections but instantly set about remedying them. Every day begin the task anew." Mother Teresa talked a lot about joy. St. Thérèse of Lisieux was good at finding gratefulness in everyday tasks.

- **Cultivate the attitude of forgiveness.**

Many consider forgiveness to be uniquely Christian. While other religions share many attitudes with Christianity, Jesus was a religious pioneer in emphasizing the need to forgive. When negative attitudes get the best of us—when we say vicious things about people or snap at our children when something else is bothering us—our kids need to hear us ask for forgiveness. They also need to know that Mom and Dad are generous with forgiveness and mercy when they, in turn, make mistakes.

- **Put attitude in its place.**

While attitude is important, it's not the final judge of how we act. When I was a teen, my dad would sometimes say, "You don't feel like it? I don't feel like going to work either, but I do it." Kids need to learn from us how to honor commitments when they don't feel like it. They can learn that they also have the power to feed their positive attitudes and downplay their negative ones.

**2. Example.** Try on this saying from Sir Francis Bacon: "He that gives good advice builds with one hand; he that gives good counsel and example builds with both; but he that gives good admonition and bad example builds with one hand and pulls down with the other." Because providing a good example isn't always easy, generations of parents have leaned on the old "Do as I say, not as I do" principle. Some ways to be a better example:

- **Choose rules wisely.** When you nitpick over every little thing your kids do wrong, you're creating ideals that you should believe



ing up to, too. Make everyone's life easier by choosing a few major principles that are important at your house. Then live up to them, kids and parents alike. Don't expect things of your kids that you don't expect of yourself.

- **Watch for contradictions.** A child will follow your example rather than your words. A parent who drops her child off at church for CCD but never goes to Mass undoes what's taught in CCD.

- **Show the way.** Don't simply encourage your child to read or to pray. Remember that a picture speaks a thousand words; you're more likely to convince them if they see you reading or praying regularly yourself. Let them grow up knowing that Baptism means being active in their faith. Let them see you donating baby food and diapers to a homeless shelter or your parish's program to help single mothers. Let them hear you explain to other parents why R-rated films are off-limits for even some of your older kids, how gratuitous violence and degrading sexual references don't square with what you believe.

**3. Experience.** Any adult who has raised children or hired someone knows that experience is a wise teacher. Some experience we gain for ourselves, but some we also learn from the mistakes and advice of others.

As parents, we can help our kids grow spiritually by making good use of experiences:

- **Tell stories.** No matter your children's ages, share with them what faith was like for you growing up. How did you and your family celebrate your First Communion? What were your earliest thoughts about God? When did you first have the moral courage to tell the truth about something even though you knew it would get you into trouble?

- **Create experiences.** Our kids are sponges, soaking up everything they see and hear, both good and bad. Give them something good to soak up, especially in the faith department.

Do something special to celebrate holidays with a faith observance that is unique to your family. Find a way to share your memories of deceased loved ones on the feast of All Souls, November 2. Create a family Advent tradition to enrich your celebration of Christmas, and prolong the religious reason for the season by observing the 12 days of Christmas.

Is there a small prayer or saying your family can use in times of joy or worry? Something fun or special you could do together after Sunday Mass—taking a walk, going to a nearby park, or going out for breakfast?

**4. Effort.** Anything we put great effort into is a neon sign about what's important to us. Kids who want good grades study harder. Adults who spend a lot of time at the gym value their health. Families who are serious about being a family make a commitment to spend quality time together.

- **Take inventory.** What values do you want for your children, now and in the future? Do your primary family activities reflect these? If not, what commitments can you make so that your actions reflect your ideals?

- **Reward effort.** Write a keepsake letter to tell your teen how proud you are that he has joined a particular service project through the parish. After you take little ones to visit a nursing home or help at a soup kitchen, grant them a special privilege such as staying up a little later or doing an activity they love.

- **Stretch yourselves.** The most satisfying "A" we ever get on a paper is in the class that's most challenging to us. Make effort reap great rewards in the faith department by doing something challenging as a family at least once a year. Help a local Habitat for Humanity crew build a house, even if you can't tell a hammer from a hacksaw. Cut back on your own Christmas gifts and spend the difference on presents for a needy family instead. Your local Catholic Charities has plenty of families who need help.

**5. Enthusiasm.** Enthusiasm or excitement, in a spiritual sense, become inspiration for our children. Think of all we pass on to our kids unconsciously by simply letting them bask in the glow of our own passion for baseball or ballet. Do your kids see you excited about the faith that you say is so important that you want them to follow in your footsteps? If not, what would it take? Pitching in to help decorate the church so it looks dazzling for Easter? Hearing you praise some especially beautiful music or worthwhile sermon after weekend Mass? Other ideas:

- **Seek natural wonders.** It's hard not to be moved at the sight of a towering mountain range or the wingspan of a mighty eagle. The psalms we hear at church are full of such images, using them to cry out with gratitude to God. Visit national parks on family vacations or catch a sunset closer to home. Marvel at rainbows, remembering that God gave them as a promise to always be with us. Enjoy the season's first heavy snowfall, how quiet and peaceful it makes the world seem.

- **Bask in beauty.** Make sure that every

day offers an opportunity for your family to enjoy, together, something truly beautiful. Catch a concert or an art exhibit. Do as a friend of mine does and stop into an empty Catholic church whenever you get the chance, to sit in silence and gaze at the stained glass, the flickering vigil lights, and statues of saints.

At home, rent a movie with stunning cinematography or a beautifully told story of moral courage. Try books or videos about great painters or photographers. Such a "beauty break," you'll find, is the perfect way to ease into prayer time together.

Don't overlook Catholicism's long tradition of championing the arts. Be sure your home contains a bit of religious artwork, whether a print of Michelangelo's figures from the Sistine Chapel ceiling or a mail-order purchase of Chagall's face of Christ. My kids love to finger the beautiful rosary beads one of my grandmas collected through the years. I take after my other grandma by collecting different cultural images of the Virgin and Child, most of them simply snipped from the front of Christmas cards.

- **Share your loves with your loves.** If you enjoy gardening and it shows, indulge your child when she wants to join you. Let her experience the joy of helping you pick the most beautiful blooms. Tell her why gardening is important to you, how it feels like a touch of the holy. If you love to cook or to build things out of wood, respond to your child's curiosity by talking about what it feels like to create something. Don't forget to point out that we are connected to God the Creator especially when we create.

*Every day we have a hundred opportunities to make a lasting impression on our children. What do we want them to tell their own grandchildren one day? Stories about going to the park and skipping stones with their dad after Sunday Mass, or tales of how they watched *Slime Time Live* on Nickelodeon every night? Everything we do teaches our children in profound ways—every day—what it means to be a grounded person of faith in a mixed-up world. Let's be sure we teach them well.*