

# Seven ways I want my kids to learn about God

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When I consider how I want my kids to learn about God, a creation metaphor seems appropriate. All that Genesis noise and bustle and energy—so great it spilled over seven days—may remind parents of the small whirling dervishes that cavort through their homes. God's ongoing creation could be seen as the divine response to a child's wonder at sunset and sunrise, parakeet and python, waterfall and wave.

"Wow," says the child, "do it again!"

God does it again. Again God finds it good.

The Good News came first in the person of Jesus, not in a book. It continues to echo through human parents. From our touch, our response to the infant's needs, our laughter and wide embrace, the child learns the trust in humans essential to faith in God. As human parents, we co-create with God long after conception, throughout the child's life.

However, the creation metaphor breaks down if we interpret it too literally. Children are not blank slates, but "messengers from a world we once deeply knew but have long since forgotten," writes Alice Miller in *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (Basic Books, 1981).

In that spirit of mystery and awe, we begin.

## 1. Let there be reverence

From recent research on the spirituality of children, we have learned that our attitude toward children must be filled with reverence. Two must-reads for anyone involved in this enterprise are Sofia Cavalletti's *The Religious Po-*

*tential of the Child* (Liturgy Training Publications, 1992) and Robert Coles' *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990). Through 25 years of work with children, Cavalletti found repeatedly that children knew things about God no one had told them. Coles, a Harvard professor of medicine, felt humbled before children's "exquisitely private moments of awe and wonder and alarm and apprehension."

## 2. Let there be family

Children's first and best learning about God occurs in the context of family. That may sound arrogant, so let's qualify. It doesn't mean the psalmist's idea of family, the olive branches placidly surrounding the table. Nor the hygienic, sentimentalized notion of family we associate with "The Brady Bunch." It means family unsanitized, with all its warts.

From the chaos of family life can spring religious faith. Children learn far more from experiencing relationships than from studying doctrine. Before children meet the larger faith community, they learn "community" at home: sorting laundry, negotiating TV channels, buying groceries with a fair distribution of treats.

For children whose concept of prehistoric time is anything pre-CD-ROM, Jesus and his friends lived a long time ago. Before they understand the church as a community of memory, where Jesus' words and deeds are kept alive, they must first know family memories. They crave the stories of their parents' first date, Grandma's feud with the landlord, the day they were born. Only then can they appreciate

people who sing together: "All people here who remember Jesus, brother and friend. All who hold to his memory, all who keep faith in the end."

Jesus himself is a perfect example of a child learning faith from his family. He had his mother's habit of reflection, and his familiarity with scripture must have come initially from his home. He drew on images from childhood to describe the reign of God. Salt and leaven, lost coins and sheep, stories and meals were household fixtures he invested with new meaning.

## 3. Let there be story

The paramount reason for teaching through story is that the Judeo-Christian tradition contains some doozies. Just for starters, consider David on his rooftop drooling over Bathsheba as she emerged, tingling and tawny from her bath. Or Lazarus, lurching from the tomb, layered in graveclothes like an onion in papery skins. Or the child's loaves and fishes that multiplied and multiplied, until 5,000 bellies were full.

Children are no dummies. Their radar is set for the interesting stuff. As writer Eudora Welty explains, "Listening children know stories are there. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole."

Jesus set the precedent for teaching through storytelling. Instead of analyzing the dysfunctional family, he told the parable of the prodigal son. Instead of preaching about compassion, he told of thugs attacking a traveler on the road to Jericho and a Samaritan finding him, bruised and abandoned.



If we want to teach our children as Jesus did, we'll cast the doctrine of divine providence in poetic images: flowers of the field, birds of the air.

To tell children stories invites them to enter the mystery, bringing their gifts of imagination and sensitivity. Then they can form a relationship with God that is more than intellectual, a unity with God that is bone-deep.

#### 4. Let there be celebration

Children's days can be dull. Repeatedly, they follow the same orbit of school, playground, and home. Not that stability isn't important, but everyone likes variety in the secure routine.

The original matrix for celebration is the home, where the child first blows out the candles on the birthday cake. Within that context, a religious sense develops. In church, the child may stare at the backs of heads and hear incomprehensible language. At home, the translation can occur.

As we bless our children, feed them at the eucharistic table, hug them at the kiss of peace, join hands with them for the Our Father, we speak a profound message of affirmation and belonging, often with few words. We are speaking on the level of the imagination, which, every advertising mogul knows, stays in memory long after verbiage is forgotten.

However, we must help the child make connections between the ritual and the lived reality. Otherwise, we run the risk of merely passing on a collection of empty gestures. Thus Eucharist doesn't make much sense if we haven't eaten together, sharing jokes and disasters, disappointments and triumphs. The Paschal Mystery of dying and rising takes on meaning when we share our joys as well as sorrows.

#### 5. Let there be laughter

Parenting is often stressful, and taking on religious education may seem like an impossible burden. If we take ourselves too seriously, we look like Robert De Niro in "The Mission," lumbering up a cliff, dragging the heavy,

clanking baggage of penance. That kind of self-indulgence is its own reward.

People with pious lives, prune faces, and perfectly folded hands make me nervous. From my children I have learned how play can be prayer. A child has the natural gifts of simplicity, presence, and wonder that adult contemplatives work hard to develop. Praise of the Lord does not always leap easily to adult lips. Children may not use religious jargon, but they can admire God's handiwork in the perfectly pitched baseball, a muddy tulip tip, a hummingbird, or a sloppy kiss.

When I companion them best, I act like Miriam playing her tambourine, David dancing before the ark, or the spirit of creation: "I was his delight, playing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (Prov. 8:30).

#### 6. Let it be experiential

My college-aged daughter recently took a course on Japan in which she learned more about that country than she ever thought possible. The secret lay in the intensity: total immersion in the Japanese culture. Students sat on the floor in a circle around the *tatami* mat where *ikebana* was displayed. They made topographical maps out of play dough, created origami boxes, ate Japanese snacks, painted scrolls, and participated in a tea ceremony. How I wished her religious education had been this experiential!

The best catechesis is also a hands-on affair. Contrast these scenes, for instance. One group of children wiggles, squirms, and yawns throughout a boring lecture on the Eucharist. Another group kneads bread dough and pops it in the oven before hearing the story of Jesus feeding 5,000. They munch fish crackers as they choose an activity: making fish from paper plates or role-playing the miracle.

The session concludes as the bread emerges from the oven, hot and fragrant. Which group remembers Jesus providing abundantly for all, because the story was etched on every sense?

No guy falls in love with a girl's femur; no woman marries a man be-

cause he's functional. Perhaps we should frame religious education in the poetic language of falling in love, rather than the academic jargon of mastering subject matter. Then our children would never "graduate." Their relationship with Christ might last a lifetime.

#### 7. Let there be rest

Just as God rested on the last day of creation, let's leave ample room to breathe, sufficient white space to frame the message. Contemporary kids are often overscheduled with soccer practice, piano lessons, and Scout meetings. To nurture their spiritual lives, we must allow them quiet time for doing nothing. Although this apparent idleness runs counter to a workaholic culture, it contains a biblical wisdom: while the farmer seems to do nothing, the seed grows and sprouts (James 5:7-8).

Simply staring out the window can bring a child a peace that provides ballast against more turbulent times. In silence is a deep strength that children can never tap if they have not grown comfortable with the quiet of radio and TV turned off. A retreat director once told toddlers to enter their "heart rooms" in silence, so they could listen to Jesus. Not bad advice for adults, who strain to hear his voice despite frantic schedules.

Psalms 131 describes the creature resting in the Creator, intimate and secure as a child in a mother's lap:

It is enough for me to keep my soul still and quiet, like a child in its mother's arms, as content as a child that has been weaned.

We can overhear that deep sigh of contentment as God looked over creation and found it good. We can hear the same satisfied sigh as our children rest in the God they long for, the God who made them. □

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