

Passing on Faith in the Home – The Journey of Christian Parenting

Parenting is not what it used to be.

Two hundred years ago the responsibility of teaching and nurturing children rested heavily upon parents and the extended family. Children spent most of their waking hours at or around home or participating in activities with other family members. Limited transport options meant options for community involvement were relatively few. Schooling was not compulsory and generally available only to those with the ability to pay.

Today the picture is vastly different. Contemporary parents have many, many external activities and resources they can draw upon in raising their children. Early childhood programs, kindergartens and schools provide children with educational opportunities outside the home. Then after school there are many extra-curricular activities in which children can be involved – from sport to dance group to athletics to Girl Guides and so on. When children are back home, parents can point them in the direction of the TV, computer or games console to occupy their time, or towards toys unimaginable centuries ago. Parenting in many homes has become synonymous with “time and activity management”. Parents ensure that the basic needs of their children are met (clothing, food, shelter, health) and then out-source the rest of their children’s schedules to other institutions, groups or entertainment sources.

There are many benefits for families and children that come from parental out-sourcing. Children have access to learning opportunities and growth experiences that parents cannot otherwise provide. But *there is one vital area of child-rearing that cannot be so simply out-sourced* – the passing-on of Christian faith and values. It is God’s design and intention that fathers and mothers serve as the primary mentors, educators and guides for their children in matters of faith. Child and youth ministry programs, Lutheran schools and Confirmation courses exist to aid and support parents in this calling but can never be full substitutes for active and intentional Christian parenting.

In Scripture, God specifically places the responsibility for nurturing a child’s spiritual development on parents – not the church! Deuteronomy 6 declares God’s will for the home to function as the primary context for teaching children the ways of God: *“Recite [God’s words] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”* (vv. 7-9). In the home faith is nurtured in the ebbs and flows of daily life like nowhere else. Parents have the awesome privilege of being “God’s love with skin on” for their children. The way parents love and relate to their children, day in and day out, in good times and bad, is the most powerful influence on their spiritual formation.

For a Christian parent, the calling to pass on faith may initially seem very daunting. Parents may say “I don’t know enough” or “I don’t have the skills”. The truth is that no parent is every fully equipped or prepared in and of themselves. At the heart of Christian parenting are not our skills, knowledge or abilities but the power and presence of our living and loving God. Christian parenting involves living in daily dependence on God’s power and grace ... faithfully doing what we can and leaving the rest to him. Here are some practical suggestions to get you started.

Be yourself. God does not require you to have a Seminary degree to talk to your kids about him. Nor does he ask that you “have it all together all of the time”. He simply asks that you journey

with him and share your journey with your children in your own words and ways. Be authentic and real. Share your understanding of who God is with your children and why God matters to you – in a way that reflects the true you.

Don't limit your conversations on Spiritual matters to Sundays! Faith is for every day, not just for Sundays ... and we communicate this best to our children when we live it ourselves each and every day. Weave "God talk" into your daily interactions with your kids. Share with them how you experienced God's blessing and care during the day or how you were reminded of him through what took place. Share your thoughts and questions on Spiritual issues and ask for your children's ideas. Tell them what you're praying about and ask about their prayers. Let your kids know that Spiritual issues are important in your life all of the time!

Let your children catch you in the act of doing something spiritual. Do you have a regular devotional time – where you read the Bible and pray – that you spend with God? Are you regularly involved in some act of service that is an expression of your faith? Do your kids know about it? How about letting your kids "see" you being involved in your own Spiritual disciplines? Don't forget that your actions will teach your kids a lot about your faith – probably even more than your words! (Even the presence of an open Bible in the home can speak volumes!)

Look for natural opportunities to raise spiritual issues. The most poignant "God moments" in home life are usually arise spontaneously, at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. Wise Christian parents are on the constant lookout for opportunities "along the road" of life to point to Christ's love and his caring presence or to share or discuss Biblical truths. Even your own mistakes or failings can be used as opportunities to talk about sin, forgiveness and starting again in grace.

Use existing home rituals and traditions to create a regular rhythm for faith life in the home. Transform the regular events that are part of your home life into faith-filled moments. Say a table grace before meals. Make meal times a "media free zone" where family members can share about their day and where they saw God at work. Make bedtimes an opportunity for prayer with and for your children, and to read Bible stories to them. When your children leave for Kindy or school, give them a short blessing (e.g. "The Lord Jesus bless you and watch over you today"). When travelling with your children in the car, put on Christian CDs. In other words, think about what you already do as a family and "tweak" these by adding a Spiritual element. You can then go on to add new rituals or traditions, built around the Church year (e.g. for Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost) or family milestones (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries).

Have a plan for family devotional times each week. Work to carve out short blocks of time (e.g. 10-15 minutes) at least once or twice a week where you can gather as a family around God's Word and pray together. Use a Bible storybook that is applicable to the ages of your children and pray about the happenings that are part of your lives. Once you have agreed on a time and an approach, stick to it. With consistency over time you will build a precious habit of faith with the potential to permanently deepen and enrich your family life.

Build on the ministry your church provides. Make and take opportunities to connect the ministry of your church community to your home practice of faith. Develop a weekly habit of discussing your pastor's sermon or sharing your insights from Sunday worship. Take an interest in what is being shared in Sunday School or confirmation class and ask for related resources you can use in the home. Invite your congregation to actively support and partner with you.

Find ways to serve together as a family. The call to follow Christ is a call to service. Parents communicate a lot about their faith in Christ by their willingness to serve, and by serving with their children they show them how faith intersects with worldly needs and concerns. Think about ways you can work together as a family to do something to help others or support a cause beyond the home.

Pay attention to your own Spiritual growth. Perhaps the most important thing a Christian parent can do to pass on the Christian faith to their children is to take seriously their own walk of faith. Passing on the faith is not so much a matter of doing but of *being* and *becoming* in Christ, allowing him to work through us. Maintain a commitment to a regular worship and devotional life. Read Christian literature and take opportunities for fellowship and learning with other Christians. As you grow in your own faith, your children will in turn be Spiritually influenced.

Have fun with your kids! Unfortunately, too many children are given the impression from their parents and other adults at church that Christianity means being grumpy, bored or straight-laced. Perhaps one of the most helpful things you can do for your kids' spiritual growth is to model for them that the Christian life is one of love, peace and joy! God's desire is that we enjoy the gift of life and make the most of it. So intentionally plan fun times for your family. Show your children that the Christian life can be fun!

May God richly bless your parenting journey!

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