

Catholic Parenting 101

Creating a Christian Family In Your Home


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If someone entered your home for the first time, what indications would they see that they are visiting a Christian family? Would they see a crucifix, a Bible, religious art, or faith-based literature? Beyond this, what would they notice about your family that would lead them to believe that a Christian family lives here? Would they know by how you greet them, how you talk with them and with your family members, or how you pray before—and perhaps after—meals?

Outward signs can give a glimpse of what a family believes. But the real story of being a Christian family is lived out each day in our relationships. It is lived out in our relationships with each other in our own homes, as well as with our neighbors. It is lived out in the ways we treat friends, classmates, colleagues at work, and even people we have not met.

Growing a Christian family is an intentional process. As parents we are in a position to make decisions about how to go about engaging our children as they grow in creating a Christian family. First, we might begin by looking at some of the ways Jesus himself built relationships with those he loved; for example, he shared meals, prayed, went fishing, and talked about his Father's call to each of us to live a life of love and service.

Research conducted through the Augsburg Youth and Family Institute, the Search Institute, and others has uncovered five keys that encourage faith development in the family and that echo Jesus' own practice for building Christian relationships.



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These are:

1. Family regularly gathers to share meals
2. Caring conversations that include "God Talk"
3. Family prayer time and shared devotions
4. Family involved in service together
5. Sharing rituals and traditions

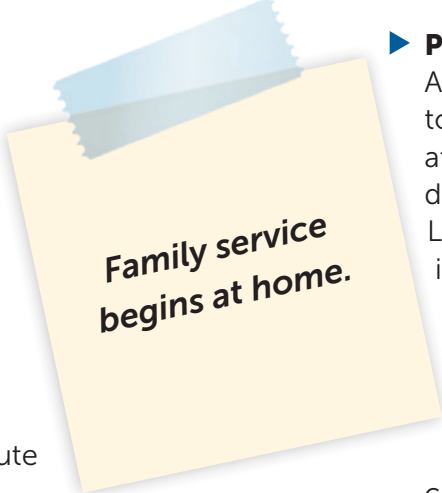
Here are examples of how you can apply these five keys to family faith development to support your preschool age, elementary age, and middle school age children in growing as members of a Catholic family.

Preschool Family

- ▶ **Meals:** Make family meals a standard part of your day, and always begin the meal with prayer. Some families incorporate family prayer rituals after meals as well, such as praying the Rosary together. Talking around the table at meals is a great way to help children develop their conversation skills and confidence to use those skills appropriately around adults. Ask them what they did today. Who did they play with? Invite them into the conversation.
- ▶ **God Talk:** "God Talk" with children can often take the form of stories. For example, reading aloud from a children's Bible or from a book with biblical stories can be a great way to introduce children to God. Prayer time with children can happen easily as part of a daily ritual in getting ready to go to sleep. Begin by teaching children to memorize prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary. These are prayers that will serve them well throughout their lives.
- ▶ **Prayer time and shared devotions:** Children first learn faith through experience. When your family worships together each Sunday, your child begins to learn how important it is to gather as a community to pray.

► **Family service activities:**

Family service begins at home. For preschoolers this means helping out with chores around the house, such as emptying waste baskets, making beds, sweeping a floor, or separating laundry for the wash. Each of these is a simple task that younger children can do to contribute to the good of the family.



Family service begins at home.

► **Rituals and traditions:** Rituals and traditions such as taking part in the celebration of Mass on Sunday, or incorporating an Advent Calendar into your family prayers in preparation for Christmas, are very effective teaching tools. Do not limit the celebration of rituals and traditions to religious celebrations. Include traditions connected with birthday celebrations and family meals eaten together at such times as Thanksgiving. Also develop special rituals to mark transition events in the lives of your children, such as going to school for the first time or learning to ride a bike. Mark these moments with special mini-celebrations that recognize that the child is growing up.

Elementary Family

► **God Talk:** Take time each day, both around the dinner table and at other times, to talk with your child. Check on how well your child's school day has gone. What went well? Are there any problems or challenges that have occurred? Continue to ask, "What do you thank God for today?" This keeps God in the conversation.

► **Prayer time and shared devotions:**

As your family prayers and devotions continue to evolve, invite your children to lead prayers at meals, as well as to lead or read special devotions each day throughout Advent or Lent. In addition, encourage children to get involved in liturgical ministries open to them in your parish such as servers, readers, or musicians. These ministries all represent ways your children can be of service to the parish community. Be sure to make this point with your children—that serving the community is important and is another way to serve the family—and that you are proud of them for offering this service.

► **Family service activities:** As children grow older, take opportunities to extend your family's service activities into the community. This could mean raking leaves for a disabled neighbor or sorting food at the local food pantry. The key is to begin to move your children out of the home into service to the broader world, which includes your neighborhood and the broader civic community. Take time to share a meal with each other after these service activities, and invite your children to talk about what they experienced, what they learned, what was most memorable.

► **Rituals and traditions:** Our Church presents many opportunities to share in rituals and traditions during the elementary years. These include celebrating the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the Sacrament of Eucharist. Two keys to helping children appreciate these sacramental moments are to have applied these graces in our own homes by teaching them to make apologies when a wrong has been committed (Penance and Reconciliation) and the importance of sharing meals together (Eucharist).

Reconciliation is about admitting our wrongs, making amends, and forgiveness. Eucharist, in part, is about sharing a meal; learning more of our story of faith; and being nourished for living that faith each day at home, in the neighborhood, at school, and beyond.

Middle School Family

► **Meals:** Family meal times together are vital for middle school children. As they begin to take initial steps to establish their independence, they need the assurance that they remain secure in their family groups. Research through the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse at Columbia University shows that families that share meals together on a regular basis also have a much lower incidence of children growing up to use or abuse alcohol and other drugs. The key finding here is that we develop many of our values as a result of the conversations shared around the table day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. It's not that drug abuse is the topic of the day at the dinner table, but references to what the family believes about these behaviors quite naturally comes up from time to time through regular conversation around the table. What a blessing!

► **Family service activities:** Two keys that mark the growth of children through adolescence are belonging and searching. As families share time through outings, trips, and service projects, they continue to discover what it means to belong to a family that is supportive of each of its members. Extend service into the broader community as your children grow. Examples could be making regular family visits to a nursing or veteran's home to get to know residents, or working at a local food pantry or soup kitchen as

a weekly part of family life. Whatever direction your family takes in commitment to service, be sure to continue to take time, preferably over a meal, to process the experience together: what are they learning, how do they feel? You can also allow "God Talk" to enter the conversation by connecting service with a passage from the Bible, such as Jesus' direction to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick.

► **God Talk:** When young adolescents have a strong sense of belonging, it serves as a foundation from which to begin searching in their faith journey: asking questions about what God is calling them to in their lives and how to apply Christian values and virtues to their relationships. When it comes to caring conversations, there are several critical moments which we can take advantage of to open up communication with our sons and daughters. These include car time, a great opportunity to catch up on what is happening in the lives our children. Oftentimes "car talk" is enhanced since we do not have to look each other right in the eye. It serves as a bit of a buffer at times when talking about sensitive concerns.

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Other Key Moments

In addition, three other key moments to connect with young teens (and children of all ages) include:

- 1. Exits and entries:** When we leave home in the morning and return in the afternoon or evening. These are regular moments when we can wish each other a good day and say “I love you” as our children head off to school. When they return, it is time to welcome them home with a friendly greeting and ask how their day has been.
- 2. Bedtime:** This continues to be a time to check in to see how the day has gone, to check how friendships are going, and to see if they have any concerns.
- 3. Memory-making moments:** Times such as special outings, holiday traditions, marker events such as thirteenth birthday (you are a teenager now!), and Confirmation are memory-making moments. Celebrate these moments in memorable ways. Times of crisis can also be times when memories are made. These include times of sickness; accidents; or times of upheaval, such as during a divorce or at the death of a family member or friend.

Perhaps a key to realizing a vision for your own Christian family is bound up in asking the question, “What kind of qualities would we like our son or daughter to share with the world as an adult?” Then ask yourself, “What is one thing I can do today to help them develop these qualities?” Can we teach them to pray, to be of service, to take an interest in others, to share conversation and a meal around the table, to be a good sport? By addressing these questions day by day as your children grow, you will help to create a Christian family among all of its members.