

Catholic Parenting 101

Special Times Activity

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Time needed:

20 to 25 minutes / 2 to 5 times per week

Purpose:

Provide a child with positive and joy-filled experience that responds to the core longing to love and be loved. In no small way it provides an embodied experience of the unconditional love of God that is consistent, gentle, compassionate, and accepting. On a more practical level, special times settle the inner life of a child and give positive attention to appropriate behavior, often reducing attention-seeking negative behavior.

Ten Core Components to Special Times

1. Parents should decide how much time they can realistically set aside for their children. Many parents find that 15-20 minutes, 3-4 times per week is possible. If a child's behavior is problematic, then parents should consider 20-25 minutes per day, 6-7 days per week.
2. Children should know and look forward to Special Time.
3. Children should be told the "rules" for Special Time. Here is an example:
"Zack, you and I are going to start spending some very special time together every day. Every night after we finish the dishes, you and I are going to spend 15 minutes together without anyone else around. I will let you decide what we do together. You can choose any activity you want, except watching TV or playing video games."
4. Parents often find it helpful if they prepare for this Special Time a few minutes in advance by doing something to relax and to help clear their minds, such as exercising, praying, or taking a nap. It is important for parents to approach this with a soft heart and an intention of giving the child an experience of compassion and love.
5. The goal of this time is to allow positive interactions to occur between parent and child. Parents can begin by simply watching the child play, reflecting what is going on, much like a sportscaster would call a game.
6. Parents should avoid asking questions, teaching lessons, directing the play, or giving commands. The child should be allowed to direct the play.
7. If the child misbehaves, the parent should simply turn and look away. If the misbehavior continues, the parent should gently walk away and tell the child that Special Time will resume when the child can behave nicely.
8. Parents should use a timer so that both parent and child can monitor the time together. While Special Time is going, parents should avoid all interruptions. When Special Time is over—that is, when the timer sounds—Special Time should end.
9. Parents should keep a record of how many times per week they are able to keep their commitment to their children. Parents will need to be compassionate and gracious with themselves; most parents find it very difficult to maintain this sort of commitment for long.
10. Parents should adapt Special Times based on the age of the child. Younger children thrive with shorter, daily times. As children get older, fewer, longer times work better. As children transition into adolescence, parents should consider scheduling regular "dates" with their teens such as having breakfast together or going for a drive to a favorite destination.

Challenges: Most parents find it very difficult to set this time aside regularly and then to keep it protected against distractions. It is often helpful for parents to agree together to "cover" for each other so that these Special Times happen as designated.