

20 Ways to Teach Children to Pray



By Nancy Flanders

The single most powerful thing Catholic parents can do for their children is teach them to pray. Depending on the child, this may be an easy or difficult task. By teaching your children to pray, you give them the opportunity for a close relationship with God and the achievement of the ultimate goal—getting to heaven. There are a variety of ways to teach your children to pray, and it's never too late. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- 1. Introduce common prayers.** Start with a simple prayer like the Our Father and focus on just that one prayer for a couple of weeks or days, depending on your child's age. This prayer specifically teaches us how to show respect, request our daily needs, and ask for forgiveness and protection.
- 2. Teach gratitude.** Jared Dees, catechetical minister and creator of *The Religion Teacher*, a website for religious educators says, "At dinnertime, ask kids to share one thing they are thankful for to teach spirit of gratitude. It's helpful in developing a spiritual life."
- 3. Teach your child to listen.** Teach your child how to be still and recognize God's answers to her prayers. This involves follow-up. If your child prays for something, make sure you talk about whether or not she gets what she prayed for. If she does, teach her to say a prayer of thanks. If she doesn't, talk about how that can be an answer to her prayer, too.
- 4. Change the station.** Dees believes that the twenty-minute drive to school or the grocery store is the perfect opportunity to teach prayer. He says, "Use time in the car to play certain reflective music—or even Gregorian chants. Have some fun, and use that downtime to be reflective."
- 5. Read the Bible together.** Sister Regina Cochran, F.S.E., says, "Reading the Bible is important, and not just a children's Bible. (She reminds us that there are, of course, certain sections, especially the Old Testament, that are not story-time material.) She says, "Reading from God's inspired Word is important—especially the stories we all grew up with such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, etc. These are exciting to children. Children's Bibles are good for them to read on their own. However, reading pure Scripture to children can make a deeper impact."
- 6. Encourage your child to keep a prayer journal.** In it, your child can write down his favorite prayers, draw pictures of himself talking to God, or illustrate the gifts God has given him for which he is thankful.
- 7. Get out of your comfort zone.** If there's something you've been wanting to do, but have been nervous about or haven't made time for, such as joining the choir, becoming a lector at Mass, or praying together as a family, *do it*. You'll be showing your child that God comes first as you lead by example.
- 8. Have realistic expectations.** Don't expect your child to pray for world peace. That's too big of a concept for many young children to understand. Encourage your child to pray for little issues that are relevant to her, and don't ask for anything more. As your child grows, so will her worldview and her prayers.

9. **Teach obedience.** Teach your child to pray not only for what he wants God to do *for* him, but what God wants *him* to do. This mentality will stay with him through life as he prays for guidance during tough times and when making big decisions.

10. **Teach the five-finger method.** This approach to prayer may help your child become comfortable with praying. It includes five steps: give praise, give thanks, make a request for another person, ask for forgiveness, and make a request for yourself.

11. **Read.** Keeping a variety of Catholic books around the house will invite your child to learn more about her faith. Read them together, or just allow your child to explore the books on her own.

12. **Sing.** Teach prayer through song. Dees advises parents to use music with hand motions. Younger children love this, and older kids will come out of their shells. “Praying with praise,” he explains, “will get children more involved and using their voices and bodies for the purpose of praising God.”

13. **Teach the Sign of the Cross.** Be sure to incorporate it into each prayer you say together, and take the time to teach it correctly. Father Michael Schmitz, chaplain for the University of Minnesota-Duluth Catholic Campus Ministry says the Sign of the Cross is vital even for young children. He has observed that when many Catholics die, the last gesture they make is to cross themselves. Their very last act on earth is to make the Sign of the Cross, because, according to Father Mike, it has been such a part of their lives as far back as they can remember, beginning with their parents.

14. **Pray the rosary.** Dees believes it is important to teach the rosary even to very young children. It may not be possible to pray the entire rosary every day with small children, but even just a decade a day, or the entire rosary once a week, can help your child make praying the rosary a habit.

15. **Create a family prayer.** Let your child compose the words to a daily prayer you can say together. This will help him to see that prayers can be in traditional forms (The Lord’s Prayer) or in one’s own words.

16. **Teach your child that nothing is impossible with God.** Let your child know that, even when a dream or a goal seems impossible to reach, with God it isn’t. Tell your child stories about miracles that have occurred—even in today’s world—because of prayer.

17. **Read about the saints.** Sister Regina says that discussing the saints with your child and reading stories about them can help your child desire a closeness with God while learning the power of prayer through real life examples of remarkable lives.

18. **Pray together.** Father Patrick Peyton always taught, “The family that prays together, stays together”—and this is not a cliché. Sister Regina says, “Experience tells us that what is most important is that parents play an active role in praying with and in front of their children. If a child sees their mother and father on their knees, it will take only seconds and he or she will be there with them.”

19. **Make prayer a habit.** Pray a morning prayer when you first wake up. Say grace before each meal. Pray before going to bed. Incorporate pray into as many key points of your day as you can. Dees says to make these prayers a habit even when you’re in a public place. “It can be challenging to pray in public,” he says, “but we need to have the courage to do so.”

20. **Make it real.** As children get older, parents should continue to teach meditation and reflection. Dees says, “Don’t just read the Bible for understanding—read and reflect on it in your own lives. Have your children imagine themselves having a conversation with Christ during certain events in the Gospel or after reading a certain Gospel passage.”

Prayer is a daily part of our lives and should be for our children as well. Dees’ last piece of advice is, “Don’t get stuck in the basics. We tend to sell kids short on how capable they are of praying.” Once you know which methods of prayer will work best with your children and for your family as a unit, stick with it.

Nancy Flanders *Nancy Flanders is a part-time writer and full-time mom to three little girls, one of whom has cystic fibrosis. She is the social media manager and contributing editor for Parenting Squad. You can view her personal blog at ChronicAdmissions.com.*

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