

# Faith Development in Families

Faith development is a life-long process and it happens primarily in relational contexts — families, small groups, congregations and other faith communities.

Faith development begins in the home, with parents having the formative influence on the faith development of their infants, young children, teenage and even older children.

Families can be places where faith is caught: where values can be practiced, where spiritual growth can be encouraged, where theology can be discussed and applied in practical ways, and where faith can be tested in difficult times as well as ordinary times.

Unfortunately, some parents believe that the church should not interfere with their family life and parenting. They may see faith development as separate from their other parenting responsibilities —the role of the professional minister or children’s ministry worker in the church. Some don’t feel confident, educated or ‘spiritual’ enough to talk about faith or are afraid of being asked a question to which they don’t know the answer. Most Christians have the same concerns when it comes to evangelism or having spiritual conversations with friends. Brian McLaren’s book, *More Ready Than You Realise*, explains in a simple way that we are all more ready than we realise to share about our faith, to have relationships of integrity, to listen well and trust God’s Spirit to work in and through us in all conversations, including with children.

Developing children’s faith in families is not about creating mini Sunday schools. It’s not about parents setting themselves up as all-knowing experts. It’s about parents taking advantage of the time and relationship they have with their children day-in and day-out to intentionally share a journey in which a growing faith shapes all they do and say.

Parents *will* influence the faith of their children. That’s a given. The faith of the parents *will* be caught by their children. As they mature, children may question or even consciously reject the faith of their parents. But their values and choices will always be undergirded by their parents’ faith. What that faith is, is the question.

The most important thing for Christian parents is to be growing in their own relationship with God. How do you grow your relationship with God? Ultimately, it’s not what you do, but what you let God do in you. However, these practices have proved helpful for many people:

- reading the Bible
- worshiping with a congregation
- participating in a small group/Bible study group
- living ethically and seeking justice for others
- praying
- serving/volunteering in the local church or wider community
- listening to or singing worship music
- spending quiet time thinking about God
- reading books about Christianity
- meeting one-on-one with someone for conversations, guidance/mentoring or prayer
- talking about Jesus and their faith with their children.

Parents who find any of these practices helpful and engage in them regularly will be modelling them for their children. They can also train their children in the practice, doing it together in a simple form at first and gradually preparing children to carry on the practice for themselves.



Any of the above practices can be done simply and incorporated into your normal family life. For example:

- pray together when at the meal table
- thank God spontaneously for blessings during the day — simple things like sunshine and rain, a safe trip in the car, a visit from a friend
- play worship music while travelling in the car
- talk about ethical shopping choices while you are food shopping
- read Bible stories (and as children mature, passages from the Bible itself) at bedtime or story time
- relate things you have read in the Bible and Bible stories to your day-to-day life
- note and talk about God's answers to your prayers of request.

## RESOURCES

A large variety of tools is available to help parents in developing their children's faith. Here are a few that are simple, effective and easy to use:

- **Family Huddles** — the Faith Five steps (talk about the highs and lows of the day; read from Scripture; discuss how the Scripture relates to your highs and lows, pray for one another, bless one another) — five minutes a day to bring your family closer together and closer to God. See the resource on our website for more information <http://sa.uca.org.au/intergen/family-resources/familyfaith/faith-5-family> or visit **Faith Ink Stepping Stones** [www.faithink.com.au](http://www.faithink.com.au)
- **Devotional Books** (for families and/or for children) – visit your local Christian bookshop and find something that suits your family. Churches may be able to recommend local bookshops or resources.
- **Bibles** (age-appropriate) – In Australia we are blessed with many different types of Bibles and Bible storybooks for children of all ages. Choose ones that suit your family, stick closely to the Biblical content and are easy for your children to hold and read. Churches may be able to recommend suitable Bibles.
- **Taking Faith Home** leaflets for families, related to the Revised Common Lectionary used in many churches. See <https://milestonesministry.org/taking-faith-home/>

## COURSES

For added support parents may find it helpful to attend a course that equips them with parenting skills and ideas for developing faith at home. We recommend that parents avoid courses that spell out a single 'approved' parenting model and that they seek one that provides models and resources that allow parents to use and develop their own strengths, abilities and personalities.

Here are two options and their websites:

- **Tool box** [www.theparentingplace.com](http://www.theparentingplace.com)
- **The Parenting Courses** (Alpha Ministries) <http://relationshipcentral.org.au/parent>

## CHURCH AND HOME

Congregations are communities of people seeking to follow God and encouraging one another in this. Churches should be the greatest cheerleaders for parents in providing resources, support and encouragement for developing their children's faith.

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According to *The Child in our Hands* initiative, developing a church and home partnership does not require a particular size or style of congregation; it requires an understanding of and commitment to the partnership. These eight congregational strategies have proven to be highly effective:

- **Leadership training** in the value of families and church-home cooperation
- **Regular home visits** from church teams providing care, support, resources and information to families
- **Resources**, eg a borrowing library with a range of good quality Bible story books, faith life stories, devotional and inspirational resources, Christian music and games
- **Christian parenting enrichment** — courses and retreats including marriage preparation and enrichment
- **Intergenerational events** — worship, social events and service projects
- **Age level ministries** — educational and social events that are specifically relevant to people at different stages of life: preschoolers, school-aged children, teens, young adults, adult men, adult women or older people.
- **Worship celebrations** of milestones in children's and family life: eg birth, baptism, starting school, new homes blessings, and commissioning for witness and service
- **Adult Christian education**

Other ways churches can positively support families with faith development include:

- look at all initiatives of the congregation through the lens of a 'family impact study'
- if your children's ministry resources/curriculum has a 'take-home' component, encourage parents to engage with it
- organise family friendly small groups, Bible studies or worship services
- provide faith discussion starters or activities that families can use to recall and debrief about what they experience in worship
- give parents of young children a Date Night to themselves by providing babysitting
- provide resources and opportunities for families to volunteer at church, serve in the community or participate in justice projects together
- limit the number of church events parents are expected to attend and encourage families to build friendships with people living near them
- run intergenerational events for families to have fun with other families or events to invite neighbours along, for example family quiz nights, games nights, dinners, picnics, or a 'shed' where parents and kids can create something together.
- encourage and teach positive parenting through parenting groups or get-togethers, playgroups, father-son or mother-daughter events, parenting seminars or mentoring with older parents
- encourage and support grandparents in their roles as Christian parents of their adult children and as Christian grandparents.

You'll find more practical ideas in *Children's Ministry in the 21st Century*, chapter 5, page 108 - 126 by Group Publishing (2007).

