

# Building Families, Building Faith

By Leif Kehrwald, Center for Ministry Development, Project Coordinator:  
Family and Intergenerational Ministry Services.

It's no secret that parents, grandparents, and key adults play a crucial role in the faith lives of children and teens. The most important factor in determining a child's faith future is the family's own *intentional* way of going about it. In fact, *intention* is crucial to all aspects of healthy and whole family living. Experts have identified five key moments in ordinary family life that, when families anticipate and plan for these moments—rather than letting the moment dictate the outcome—family members will immediately like each other better, and they will function better as a family.

## Family Moments

**1. Exits and entries.** Every parent knows that the morning routine can set the tone for the whole day. Getting up and out of the house is not easy, but when they anticipate the potential stumbling blocks, and allot time and energy for them, the whole process goes smoother. The same is true with re-entry in the evening when family members return from work or school or after-school activity. There is pressure to get supper on the table, while at the same time each person has his or her own distinct needs and demands. It can be a time of chaos. Yet, often if each family member gets a little attention, and each person also has a pre-assigned task, the whole family can make its way to supper in relative harmony.

**2. Car time.** Whether it's the daily school run or the annual family vacation, the car trip can sometimes bring out the worst in family members. Some families plan for and make good use of their car time through intentional conversations, singing, praying, or simple games. Car time can occasionally provide terrific one-to-one time with a teenager. Ironically, sometimes a *lack* of eye contact allows the teen to open up a bit.

**3. Mealtime.** Most families don't have as many meals together as they would like. Suggest this: Ask families make a commitment to have supper together—the whole family—at least once a week. Pick a night and commit to it. Get everyone involved in a part of the meal beyond just eating; such as preparation, table setting, meal prayer, table clearing, cleaning up. Each person should make a contribution to the meal. Choose something interesting and fun to discuss.

**4. Bedtime.** No matter what our age, we all need routine and predictability. Each day, the closer we get to bedtime, the more important the routine. Without it, the evening can easily become a disaster. Children need a way to wind down and bring their day to a close. Through stories, prayers, and other simple rituals, parents and adult family members can help children approach the sleeping hours with a sense of contentment, casting a blanket of peace over the whole house.

**5. Memory-making time.** Every family has moments that cry out to be remembered. Some of these moments can be anticipated such as a birthday, holiday, or anniversary. Others sneak up on the family unannounced, such as when a baby takes his or her first steps, or a youngster scores a soccer goal, or a family member gets a job promotion. When these moments occur, someone in the family has to initiate the appropriate acknowledgment and celebration. That's how memories are made.

When families bring intention to these five key moments, they become sources of strength and solidarity, rather than times of stress and division. Encourage your families then concentrate on these five moments. But because you want your families to grow in **faith**, keep the five key moments in mind, and read on.

## **Faith Moments**

If parents and guardians never talked to their children about healthy eating and basic body grooming, could they assume the children will do these things when they are older? Probably not. If they never talked about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse, could they assume that their children would automatically conclude these are bad? Not every child. If there are no consequences for failing to do homework or household chores, can a parent fairly expect his or her children to develop a sense of responsibility all on their own? No.

Similarly, if you parents and adult family members never talk about being Catholic and take concrete steps to form their children in faith, can they expect them to arrive at the doorstep of adulthood with a foundation for genuine faith expression and practice? Not likely.

How can you help parents, grandparents, and all adult family members to provide this important faith formation? Consider what research tells us about three activities that, above all else, seem to empower young people to take their faith and religious practice with them when they launch into young adulthood, rather than discard it as soon as they are free to make their own choice.

**1. Family Faith Conversations.** When parents and families deliberately discuss issues of faith, belief, spirituality, and worship, it shows their children and teens that faith is priority, and it makes a real difference in the ways they live their lives. And hearing about their parents' faith journeys is one of the most important influences on the faith of young people. Empower your families to have open-ended discussions on relevant and controversial issues. This will create an atmosphere for dialogue and growth. While it's important for parents to know just how they stand on a given issue, it's just as important to allow for a variety of opinions.

Share these ideas with your families:

- Take advantage of teachable moments. The more in touch we are with our own faith journey, the fewer teachable moments will escape us.
- Invite discussion on a provocative issue or controversial topic.
- Allow doubts and different opinions to be expressed.
- Be willing to be questioned about your own views and beliefs.
- Take opportunities to pray together.
- Use media (TV, radio, computer, etc.) and current events as discussion starters.

**2. Family Ritual and Devotion.** Even when not done well, families who share prayer and ritual together raise children of faith. Look at three categories, and encourage your families to really think about them.: 1) *Routine*. How might families bring ritual and prayer to the daily routines of life, such as leave-taking in the morning, mealtime, bedtime, and so on? 2) *Seasonal*. How can families celebrate and pray with the seasons of the year—both the seasons of the Church (think Advent/Christmas or Lent/Easter), and the seasons of their own family lives (such as start of school year, soccer season, family vacation, other)? 3) *Rites of passage*. How can families pray over or ritualize the events that mark change them, such as starting a new school, moving into a new home, landing a new job, and so on?

Share these ideas with your families:

- Initiate at least one annual religious ritual in your family each year.
- Give your family rituals time, space, and planning.
- Get a book or two on family prayer and ritual.
- Share responsibility for celebration and ritual among all family members.
- Give simple blessings to each other and the things we use daily: bikes, school supplies, and so on.
- Set up a regular time for family prayer. Whichever family member is in charge can lead the prayer however he or she wishes, and at the end select next week's leader.
- Celebrate Baptism Days as well as birthdays. Light the child's Baptismal candle and tell the story of his or her birth and Baptism.

**3. Family Outreach and Service.** Families may be faced with challenges and problems that make it difficult to imagine finding time, energy, and desire to extend a helping hand to others. Yet acts of selfless mercy can transform family woes into healing, and bring help to those in greater need. There is no more powerful influence of faith and family unity than working together to help others. Help families consider what they can do, however small, to reach out beyond themselves in works of mercy or acts of justice.

Share these ideas with your families:

- Regularly invite children to join in social action. Be invitational without inflicting guilt.
- Expose children to advocates, victims, and situations. Diffuse their fear and ignorance.
- Actions should be within children's capacities. Look for opportunities in which children can play a specific role, and respect their limits.
- Integrate fun whenever possible. Combine the action with a fun event. Join with other families.
- Once a month deliver food to needy families via St. Vincent de Paul.
- Commit yourselves to visiting an elderly person on a regular basis.

These home-based activities won't guarantee your children will grow up to be faithful Catholics. Nothing will. But, in partnership with your parish or school, you will at least be giving them a strong foundation to do so.

For more ideas and information, see *Families and Faith: A Vision and Practice for Parish Ministry*, edited by Leif Kehrwald, Twenty-Third Publications, 2006. Available through [www.mycatholicbookstore.com](http://www.mycatholicbookstore.com).