



Insights from Research & Theory

Practices for Forming Faith with Children

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The Insights & Practices from Research and Theory Series explores the latest research and thinking on forming faith with families and age groups, and suggests practical strategies for forming faith that reflect the current research and thinking.

Part One. Insights from Research and Theory

If we accept the broadly affirmed theological premise that God is present in every human person, regardless of age and development, then we owe it to children to help them discover and respond to that gracious presence in their lives. Even if children cannot grasp the full meaning and implications of the Christian journey, we have a solemn responsibility for developing their innate spirituality and nurturing them, over time, into the Christian way of life.

It's clear from the research and literature on children's faith formation that this responsibility remains largely unrealized. In many communities, children only find welcome in the church if they do not act like children. All churches say they welcome children, but how many really do?

How many churches genuinely and systematically seek answers to such questions as: *What is the spiritual condition of the children when they are born? In what ways should Christians include young children within the fellowship and community of the church? How might believers effectively raise children toward a vital love and faith in God? What responsibilities should the church in general, along with parents or caregivers, take in the spiritual instruction and nurture of children? How can Christians work together for our children's good?* (Lawson and Hardwood)

With these queries in mind we seek to respond to these four questions:

1. ***What about faith transmission is relevant to children and children's faith formation?*** The faith transmission process culminates when a young person or young adult makes a conscious choice to make their faith and religious practice an integral part of their identity and life. The discovery and nurture of children's spirituality is crucial to embrace faith and practice later in life.
2. ***What does the body of literature indicate as the most important contributors to effective faith formation with children?*** Spiritual development begins during the earliest years of a child's life and flourishes when adults intentionally invest in their spirituality. While parents hold primary responsibility for their child's faith formation, it is best cultivated in multi-generational faith communities (Middleton).

3. ***What does the body of literature show are the activities, tasks, and behaviors that bolster faith formation with children?*** It is no surprise that parents, families, and the church community must work in partnership to help children experience God's presence and love. We will see a strong emphasis on creating relational opportunities for wonder, discovery, and free response, with only some emphasis on teaching doctrinal content.
4. ***What are the implications for faith formation leaders, and the church community as a whole?*** In collaboration with parents and families, faith formation leaders and churches are challenged to move away from a strict schooling model that provides theological answers to questions that children are not asking, to a model of mutual exploration and discovery. God is already present in the hearts and minds of children. How does the faith formation leader help children discover that presence?

Drawing upon the writings and research of more than a dozen experts in children's spirituality and faith formation, we offer a concise, cogent, and hopefully helpful response to each of these four questions. Our goal is to empower you to develop new and innovative approaches and strategies for children's faith formation that truly leads to a committed, engage faith life. From that work, we are confident, will emerge best practices for the future of faith formation in churches.

1. What about faith transmission is relevant to children and children's faith formation?

Faith transmission is passing faith and religious practice to the next generation. It has succeeded when that generation takes their faith and religious practice with them as they become adults. So, we spend years of faith formation work with children and adolescents in the hope that it will "stick." This a great challenge to programming efforts at church, and a great challenge to the parental and family efforts in the home. Since it takes years to know if we have succeeded, how do we know we're on the right track?

For children, the key task toward transmission is "meaning-making." Several authors (Campen, Csinos, Larson, and others) describe how children are receptive to wonder, encounter, and reflection that empower them to make meaning of the world around them. Further, that spirituality is innate to the human person from birth, and if nurtured, becomes a key meaning-making tool. Although spirituality is a capacity that we are born with, it is also a capacity that we must learn to engage. One-third of our spiritual capacity comes from our biological makeup, while two-thirds is nurtured through our interactions with others (Chapman).

Through discover and play, wonder and stories, reflection and language, young children can make meaning of their lives and experiences. Faith for our children is fostered through exploration and intentional experiences, all within a strong atmosphere of faith (Larson).

Therefore, faith formation leaders (and parents) should engage in practices and activities that invite, listen, nurture, and guide children as they participate in the meaning-making process. The work begins with the call to show up, listen, wonder, and offer our own honest reflections too (Campen).

Let's explore further.

2. What does the body of literature show are the most important contributors to effective faith formation with children?

The experts in the field of children's spirituality and faith formation identify four broad and intertwining factors.

1. Meaning-making. Effective faith formation with children recognizes that they are continually processing their experiences, making meaning of them, even if they cannot express or articulate the meaning. In addition, it recognizes that they have an innate spiritual sense, and are predisposed to spiritual, God-connected meaning-making. The spiritual nature of a person is at least as important as the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Middleton).

It can be difficult for adults to grasp the depth of young children's spiritual experiences as they are not able to verbally articulate them due to limited vocabulary and ability to present them in ways adults understand (Middleton). Still, they regularly construct concepts based on their experiences, and when applied to the spiritual landscape, they begin to grasp big picture concepts such as *God is good, God loves me, God is real and present in my life* (Middleton).

Children approach meaning-making through a combination of verbal communication, play, story, art, and mirroring behaviors in which relationships are a critical link between engagement and articulation of understanding (Larson). When the faith formation effort is too quick to supply pat answers, the creative meaning-making process is thwarted. Effective faith formation journeys with the child and goes where the Spirit leads. As one author put it, we can get glimpse of how children perceive God simply by asking them to draw a picture of God (Borgo).

2. Discovery. Through play, story, and other experiences, effective faith formation provides ample opportunity for children to develop and form their own relationships with God, and with others who believe in God. Effective faith formation with young children is open, varied, and unpredictable; far from linear and strictly curricular. But that does not mean it is without planning or forethought.

Adults may be tempted to introduce factual comprehension and "correct" moral application of the Bible too early. Yet, faith as encounter with the living God must precede any presentation of Christian moral principles (Cavelletti). Once a child has an encounter with Jesus, it is natural to desire to know more of God and to respond to God's love through actions pleasing to God (moral behavior) (Middleton). God's invisible river becomes visible in the children's play as they create meaning about life and death (Berryman).

In short, effective faith formation with children provides ample room and opportunity for discovery and creativity and is judiciously cautious in its efforts to communicate doctrinal teaching. Instead of providing answers to questions that they are not asking, we seek to stimulate their wonder that leads to their own questions of the heart . . . and then we do the best we can to respond in the moment.

3. Conversation. In his research and writings, David Csinos places great importance on conversation in the process of spiritual discovery. (This factor also emerged from the data on family faith formation.) Csinos writes, "In all four instances in which I interviewed children in pairs or small groups, I witnessed the young theologians engage in theological meaning-making as they spoke with, questioned, and challenged one another's views. . . . Every one of the children—regardless of church—demonstrated that the interview was a means by which the children actually made theological meaning" (Csinos).

Unfortunately, Csinos points out, that it became apparent that children do not always have opportunities to engage in such rich and stimulating conversations in their faith communities—or at least they do not always feel that they can have these sorts of conversations with others (Csinos).

4. Posture of Family and Church. Effective faith formation with children recognizes that they need adult role models to aspire to, and they need a semi-structured environment for discovery and meaning-making. Because spirituality is an innate capacity, it cannot be taught; rather, it must be supported and cultivated through lived experiences and meaningful relationships. Historically, such support has been offered by families as well as religious communities, schools, and civic life (Chapman).

Marcia Bunge aptly presents three sets of juxtaposed truths about children to aid adults in accurately viewing and relating to them. First, children have strengths and gifts to offer yet they are vulnerable. Second, while children possess spiritual capacity, they still require significant and nuanced guidance. Third, like adults, though children are still morally developing, they may offer spiritual wisdom (Middleton).

Two key questions emerge: *How can families do the work of meaning making together? How can faith formation leaders support and journey alongside them?* Tanya Campen writes,

Making meaning together is work that requires courage. We begin with a posture of grace: we recognize and claim God at work in our lives and in the lives of others. Next, we lean into this grace with a posture of curiosity, being open to all the possibilities God reveals. Finally, we lean into this work with a posture of love. The gifts families bring to this work are their values and their time. When their values and their allocation of time align, they find space to participate in the meaning making process together.” (Campen)

Both families and church community would do well to give credence to Lacy Finn Borgo’s four elements that shape and form a child’s relationship with God:

1. *God’s self.* The ways children experience God . . . through goodness, truth, beauty, wonder, and awe.
2. *Relationships.* Children encounter God through relationships with other people, nature, art, wonder and mystery. A child’s picture of God is formed in the beginning by the most powerful adults in their lives.
3. *Pain in human living.* Children also encounter God through the woundedness of human experience. In pain, they can become open to God’s healing presence.
4. *Life of Jesus.* For centuries we have focused on the importance of children connecting with the death and resurrection of Jesus but missed the basic element of connection found in Jesus’ *life*. Jesus’ life modeled the spiritual practices of prayer, solitude, and celebration. (Borgo)

When children engage in discovery with adults and peers at church, it leads them to believe that they are loved and cared for, esteemed, and valued (Crosby).

3. What does the literature show are the activities, tasks, and behaviors that bolster faith formation with children?

As our experts and researchers reflect on the data and their own experiences, they offer guidance for church communities and faith formation leaders. We have compiled a list of helpful hints, strategies, tactics, and suggestions.

Multi-dimensional view. Keeping children’s strengths and vulnerabilities in mind prepares adults both to learn from children and to facilitate their spiritual growth. Such a multi-dimensional view of children equips adults to welcome children in the church community and family with a healthy mutuality. Approaching ministry to, for, and with children from this vantage point, church communities benefit from offering both age- specific and multi-generational faith experiences. (Middleton)

Partner with families. Tanya Campen imagines faith formation leaders as shepherds and guides. “Families need an invitation to create space to practice using these tools and encouragement and support when the work is messy, frustrating, and hard. Our work is to connect, equip, and support families in making meaning together.” (Campen)

Equip parents. The church’s ministry with children is significant, but parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing children in faith. Leaders must develop ministries to equip and support parents in this critical role. (Larson)

Intentional experiences. Through a variety of different and repetitive activities, children can explore, engage, and express their faith unique ways. These should engage emotions as well as cognitive facilities where children can engage both physically and intellectually. (Larson)

Open-ended stories and parables. Jesus taught using parables frequently without explanation. When facilitators allow children to discover God through open-ended presentations of parables and narratives, they foster children’s natural strength of opening meaning in contrast to adults’ proclivity to close meaning. (Middleton)

Play. Jerome Berryman, the originator/inventor of the children’s faith formation process known as *Godly Play* offers several extraordinary insights. He says, “To become real, we need to be like children, playing in the flow of God’s creative power.” Berryman goes on to say, “When we reflect further on the flow of God’s creative power flowing through us, it becomes apparent that it is a wholeness with four expressions. There is not only flow but also play, love, and contemplative silence.” (Berryman)

Berryman then describes what happens in nine moments of “mutual teaching” that take place in the *Godly Play* setting:

1. Children are welcomed one by one, and asked, “Are you ready?”
2. The organization of time contributes to mutual teaching. It has the same deep structure as the Holy Eucharist.
3. The experience of space in the room is “transitional” filled with objects that embody Christian language. During their use they become alive.
4. The mentors provide bonding that is secure for the children, respecting their independence.
5. Mentors guide the children’s use of the creative process: wonder, scanning, insight, development, and soft closure.

6. Mentors encourage a process of “tacit knowing” about the flow of God’s creative power.
7. Objects depicting the Christian language are visible to all. They embody sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative silence.
8. The communication used in the room is “essential” rather than “simplified.” Essential language speaks from depth to depth.
9. The feast is when children say spontaneous prayers, share a simple snack, visit informally, sing, and repeat together important bits of Christian language like the Lord’s Prayer. The mentor blesses each child with words of affirmation. (Berryman)

Processing Tools. Tanya Campen describes six tools that are helpful for children to process their experiences and discoveries. She suggests that faith formation leaders should be using these six tools:

1. *Story.* Story invites children into a time and space where they can do the holy work of active wondering and meaning making.
2. *Liturgy and Ritual.* The words, actions, and rhythm that make up our time together and are the tools for a child’s meaning making process.
3. *Relational Awareness.* Through their actions, wondering, and work, it became clear that children are very aware of themselves, others, and God.
4. *Memory Markers.* Children’s ways of remembering what they have experienced and learned as they to the holy work making meaning.
5. *Wonder.* Creating a place for children to wonder and use their imagination is essential to their meaning-making process.
6. *Work.* The child begins identifies their work and begins seeking ways to respond with faithful action. (Campen)

Worship. When we find ways for children to both participate and lead us in our corporate worship, they are capable. Ed Willmington writes, “When children are placed in situations like the ‘Kids’ Worship’ they will often treat it as an opportunity for play and craziness with their peers; however, when we present them with opportunities to enter a holy space and show them that we value their participation, they almost always bless us with their ability to respond in worship.

Willmington goes on to say that youth should be regularly involved in the larger worship life of the growing young churches. They can be invited to pray, sing, read scripture, give announcements, and usher. They can join the wider age range of people in the worship life of the church.

Faith formation is deeper, “sticks” longer, and stimulates more frequent prayer when churches worship, serve, socialize, and learn together (Middleton).

Culture. Nearly all the authors allude to culture in one way or another. It’s clear that whether in the home, church, or religious school, a culture of mutual discovery, wonder, exploration, and meaningful learning must be nurtured. This is supported by dedicated leadership, authentic relationship-building, ritual, and prayer.

4. What are the implications for faith formation leaders, the church community as a whole?

While every church is in favor of children's faith formation, do they all have an adequate understanding of children's spiritual development, and can they effectively apply that understanding to their faith formation efforts?

It is relatively easy to develop and maintain a schooling model of faith formation for children that treats the subject, "faith," as primarily an intellectual body of content, and the students as "little adults" into whom the content is poured. It is altogether another challenge to embrace children as multi-faceted, whole persons and lead them into authentic wonder and discovery of the goodness of God that touches their hearts and souls and sets them on a lifetime journey of faith and religious practice.

In her work, Karin Middleton offers the following statements that can guide faith communities in thinking about children:

1. God loves children and desires for them to know God.
2. Children are negatively impacted by sin.
3. God has made provision for addressing the impact of sin.
4. Children are capable of a genuine spiritual walk with God.
5. In children, God sees qualities of faith that should characterize adults who would be part of God's kingdom.
6. Parents should be equipped and supported in their critical role as children's primary instructors and models of the Christian faith.
7. The church has a responsibility to help in the spiritual nurture and instruction of children. The church community can include children in beneficial ways in the life and practice of the church as they grow.
8. Children are meant to grow in their own faith, not simply rest on the faith of their parents.

Middleton goes on to ask if churches should eliminate separate, age-appropriate experiences to fully and authentically welcome children. She then points out that Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman "offer a restorative paradigm for intentional age-specific church experiences in which the purpose of 'apart' ministry is equipping children for 'together' worship. Yet, it should not replace it. This leads the church to a both/and approach to nurturing faith through age-appropriate experiences and intergenerational formation opportunities that genuinely welcome children." (Middleton)

With these statements in mind, we should reflect on our children's faith formation programs and honestly assess them with these questions, such as:

- ◆ Considering the research and literature on children's faith formation, do our current practices deserve our continued time and energy?
- ◆ In a digitally-enabled, post-pandemic world, do these practices continue to serve us well or have they served their time?

Then, ask some forward-thinking questions. Considering the research and literature on children's faith formation:

- ◆ How can we create an authentic spirit of wonder and discovery for our children?

- ◆ How can we create a spirit of mutual growth and learning?
- ◆ How can we fully incorporate children into the worship and community life of our church?
- ◆ How can we encourage parents to grow in faith themselves, and to become faith-formers for their children?

Consider these four steps:

1. Assess your how well your current children’s faith formation practices align with the research and literature.
2. Identify areas of programming that need to be redesigned or terminated.
3. Create new initiatives as needed.
4. Develop programming that is not solely reliant on an intellectual-based schooling model but utilizes a wonder and discovery approach that gives full credence to the whole person of the child.

The importance of effective faith formation with children cannot be underestimated when it comes to broader goal of faith transmission, empowering then next generation to embrace faith and religious practice as they enter adulthood. ***The journey begins in childhood!***

The Studies Consulted for the Report

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Part Two. Strategies for Faith Formation with Children

1. **Incorporate the ways that Generation Alpha (2012 -) children learn into all catechetical programming and experiences.** While the Alpha generation is still relatively young, their learning preferences are still emerging and evolving. Based on research in the learning sciences and current trends and observations, there are characteristics that can guide effective learning approaches for the Alpha generation.

What would it look like if catechesis with children is designed and conducted based on these learning strategies?

- ◆ *Personalization and adaptability:* Alpha children benefit from personalized learning pathways tailored to their individual needs and interests.
- ◆ *Incorporate technology thoughtfully:* Leverage technology to connect with them, but be mindful of its potential pitfalls. Use interactive apps and educational games to provide information, foster discussions, and create virtual communities.
- ◆ *Short attention spans:* The abundance of information and stimuli in the digital age has contributed to shorter attention spans among Alpha children. Learning experiences that are concise, visually appealing, and interactive can help maintain their focus.
- ◆ *Multimodal learning:* Alpha learners respond well to diverse forms of media and content. Utilize a mix of text, images, videos, and audio to cater to their different learning preferences.
- ◆ *Hands-on and experiential learning:* Alpha learners benefit from hands-on and experiential learning opportunities. Incorporate practical activities, experiments, and real-world experiences to deepen their understanding.
- ◆ *Visual and spatial learning:* Visual content, such as infographics, diagrams, and animations, can be particularly effective in conveying information to Alpha children, as they are drawn to visually stimulating materials.
- ◆ *Collaborative learning:* The Alpha generation is growing up in a highly connected world. Encourage collaborative learning experiences, both in-person and through digital platforms, to promote teamwork and communication skills.
- ◆ *Interactive:* Interactive experiences can foster better understanding and engagement. Encourage discussions, questions, and activities that allow them to apply their faith to real-life situations.
- ◆ *Encourage curiosity and exploration:* Alpha children are naturally curious and eager to explore. Create a learning environment that fosters curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills.
- ◆ *Encourage critical thinking:* Foster their ability to think critically about their faith, beliefs, and the world around them. Encourage them to ask questions and explore different perspectives.
- ◆ *Emphasize emotional intelligence:* Foster emotional intelligence and social skills through activities that promote empathy, understanding, and emotional expression.
- ◆ *Play-based learning:* For the youngest Alpha learners, play-based learning can be an effective approach to engage their imagination and cognitive development.
- ◆ *Storytelling:* Stories are a powerful tool for teaching moral and spiritual lessons. Share age-appropriate stories from the Bible that resonate with their experiences.
- ◆ *Address difficult questions:* Alpha Generation children are exposed to diverse perspectives and challenging questions early on. Address their doubts and questions in an open, respectful, and age-appropriate manner.

2. **Implement a comprehensive plan for forming the faith of families with young children (after Baptism)** with age-appropriate programs, activities, and resource to guide the family from birth through the start of school (0-5 years old). Every six months, from birth to five years old, parents can receive age-appropriate

faith forming resources to use with their children (print, audio, video, digital) and parenting tips for the new phase of their child's growth, published on the family website and communicated via email or text.

- ◆ *Faith practices* - Bible stories, prayers, meal rituals, values
- ◆ *Seasons of the year* activities
- ◆ *Milestones* - birthdays, baptism anniversaries, “first” milestones, entry to preschool and kindergarten
- ◆ *Parenting knowledge* - understanding young child development and practices for effective parenting of young children
- ◆ *Parenting for faith skills* - reading a Bible story, praying with a young child, having faith conversations
- ◆ *Online group* for parents of young children
- ◆ *Mentors* from the church community (e.g., grandparents) to accompany parents on the journey from Baptism to start of school
- ◆ *Gatherings for parents and for families* at church

3. **Employ the process of the catechumenal model in sacramental preparation for First Eucharist** using a three movement process of preparation, celebration, and mystagogy. Using the catechumenal process, catechesis with parents and families can be *personalized* around their religious faith and practices today by catechesis designed for people: 1) who have a vibrant faith and relationship with God and are engaged in a faith community, 2) who participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith is less central to their daily lives, 3) who are uninvolved in a faith community and who value and live their spirituality outside of organized religion, and 4) who are unaffiliated and have left involvement in organized religion, and have little need for God or religion in their lives .

- ◆ Preparation
 - A first proclamation of the Gospel (kerygma) and introduction to the Christian life – especially for parents who have been minimally involved in their faith life and practice
 - Catechesis on the sacrament of Eucharist
 - Celebration of liturgies, rituals, and symbols for the sacrament
 - Engagement with a community of faith and support – other parents or families, the intergenerational faith community
 - Mentoring by members of the faith community
- ◆ Celebration of the Sacrament
- ◆ Continued Growth and Accompaniment (Mystagogy)
 - Parent formation and family catechesis
 - Continued mentoring
 - Continued engagement with a community of faith and support

4. **Provide a holistic curriculum for grade school children that provides a *rich menu of faith forming experiences each year*** that includes *intergenerational, family, and children programs and activities* and incorporates all *five elements (tasks) of catechesis*: knowledge of the faith, celebration of the mystery (liturgies and seasons of the liturgical year), forming for life in Christ (moral life), prayer, and active engagement in community life.

A menu approach has 1) a variety of content, programs, activities, and resources; 2) a variety of formats—on your own, mentored, small groups, and large groups; 3) a variety of times to participate and scheduling options (synchronous and asynchronous); and 4) hybrid, online, and gathered modes of programming.

A menu of faith forming experiences can be tailored to the faith and practice of the children and their parents: 1) who have a vibrant faith and relationship with God and are engaged in a faith community, 2) who

participate occasionally in the faith community and whose faith is less central to their daily lives, 3) who are uninvolved in a faith community and who value and live their spirituality outside of organized religion, and 4) who are unaffiliated and have left involvement in organized religion, and have little need for God in their lives.

A menu approach provides a way to structure learning with experiences, programs, and activities designed to promote growth in faith for people who want to grow deeper in the faith, for those who are inquiring or aren't sure the Christian faith is for them, and for those who don't need God or religion in their lives.

Families with children could select from a menu of faith formation experiences to create their plan for the year or for a season of the year. The menu would include:

- ◆ *Intergenerational* faith-forming experiences: Sunday Mass, seasonal celebrations, intergenerational learning, mentoring relationship with older members, ministry opportunities in the church, and more
- ◆ *Family* faith-forming experiences: whole family programs at church, grandparent—grandchild activities, activities for faith practices at home, and more
- ◆ *Age group* faith forming experiences: classes, courses, retreats, Vacation Bible School, Christmas play, service activities, and more

Churches could establish participation guidelines for families and children, so that each year or season they would select a certain number of intergenerational experiences, family at-home activities, and children's programs at church.

The menu approach puts the learner (families and children) at the center of faith formation and gives them choice over what and when and where they will learn. It moves away from one-size-fits-all catechesis for children. A menu approach provides the opportunity for variety, choice, and personalization.

5. **Engage grade school children and their parents (and grandparents) in a family catechesis program** as a primary model for children's catechesis (monthly or twice-a-month), addressing all of the foundational themes and topics of children's catechesis. Family catechesis models usually incorporate the following elements:
 1. A shared meal
 2. Shared prayer experience
 3. A whole family learning experience on the topic of the program with content and methods appropriate to an all-ages audience
 4. In-depth learning on the topic can be conducted in three different ways: a) the whole family learning together with activities appropriate to all ages; b) parallel groups learning at the same time with content and learning activities for age groups and a parent group; and c) learning activity centers with whole family and age-specific learning activities at a variety of stations or centers
 5. A closing whole family activity to discover how to apply their learning to daily life using resources and activities provided in print or digital formats.
6. **Provide environments that allow children to encounter the living God directly.** Children's relationship with God is shaped and formed by the way they experience God through goodness, beauty, wonder, and awe; through relationships with other people, nature, art, wonder, and mystery; through the woundedness of human experience that opens them to God's healing presence; through Jesus' life and how he modeled the way God intends us to live. Parishes can provide safe and trusting environments for children to experience prayer in a variety of forms and settings, participate actively in Sunday Mass, to experience the liturgical seasons, to celebrate rituals and sacraments, to participate in retreat experiences, to serve people in need,

care for creation, and more. Children can experience God through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the parish community according to their abilities. Catechesis guides children's participation by providing them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community. This restores the connection between learning and practice—precisely what is missing in the traditional model of classroom learning, where the material presented stands divorced from the practice of faith. It also overcomes the age segregation so prevalent in churches today.

- 7. Create safe spaces for children to wonder, discover, and make meaning.** Catechesis seeks to create a space in which children can share their stories, practice wondering, use their imaginations, and learn from the entire community. Rather than attempting to give children the faith, creating spaces for wonder, discovery, and meaning making nurtures the spiritual presence that is already in the lives of children. Nurturing spiritual growth in children includes recognizing the Divine presence in their lives. It involves nurturing the spiritual growth process and guiding all children as they make meaning from their experiences and relationships. Spiritual growth honors the individual child and affirms their particular developmental process.

Catechesis helps children to know, interpret, and incarnate the faith. It provides an intentional space that teachers and children share their faith stories with each other, engage in intentional theological reflection, and use developmentally appropriate methods that help every child learn, make meaning, and respond to their experience with the Holy. We do this by creating a safe space where children are valued and respected, and by inviting them into the process of learning through claiming and responding to God's presence in their lives.

Through intentional and authentic conversations, children and adults find space to listen to God and to discern how they might respond to all they are hearing and experiencing. Through this process we encourage and model for children how to do the work of meaning making, not by giving them information, but by inviting them and guiding them, by sharing stories and asking questions, by inviting them to share stories and ask questions, and by listening to what they say.

As children **engage** in the Word and traditions of the faith, **recognize** the presence of God and others, **claim** their own experiences, and **respond** to these experiences, they make meaning that informs and affects their individual faith narrative. In doing the important work of engaging, recognizing, and claiming God's presence in their lives, children begin to hear God's call to respond and they know what to do next. In responding to God's grace and love, they enter into another experience, another possibility, continuing their meaning making in response to this new information and wisdom.

Using these four elements, doing the holy work of meaning making, and participating in this process, children build their faith narrative and develop religious language to articulate and celebrate how God is working in their lives. Adults support children in this process by modeling language and creating space for them to discover and practice their faith. They encourage children in the work of engaging, recognizing, claiming, and responding to God's presence in their lives.

- 8. Implements parent formation and education** through programs, activities, resources, webinars, and more for parents of children.

- ◆ See the **Insights and Practices** article on “Practices for Forming Faith with Families & Parents” for ideas for parent formation and for family faith formation. Go to: <https://www.ncclcatholic.org/insights--practices.html>.