



Children’s Faith Formation at Church & Home: Birth to Age 5

Jolene Roehlkepartain

Too often we focus our children’s faith formation solely within the church since that’s where we have the most control and impact. We can offer a welcoming, warm nursery. We can provide religious classes for young children. We can organize family ministry projects and programs for families with young children.

Yet, we’re missing most of our influence on children’s faith formation when we focus our efforts only within the church. It’s when we create a faith formation strategy for children that includes what happens in the church and in the home that we have the most impact in the short term and the long term.

The Search Institute studied what is most likely to predict the faith maturity of a young person by surveying more than 11,000 individuals in 561 randomly chosen congregations. Search Institute researchers identified two strong factors that predicted the faith maturity of young people: family religiousness and Christian education involvement (Search Institute, 39).

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Too often, we assume that we have no influence over family religiousness. We're grateful to see the religious families that we have, and too often, we wish we had more of these families. Yet, we can help all families deepen their faith, which benefits not only the children but every family member as well.

Encouraging Family Religiousness

What does it mean for a family to be religious? Researchers identified three key factors: talking to family members about faith or God, having family devotions, and doing family projects to help others (Search Institute, 46). The Vibrant Faith at Home website expanded this list even further, providing easy-to-do, faith-formation activities for families with young children in six areas (go to the website at: <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>):

- ◆ Caring conversations
- ◆ Ritual and tradition
- ◆ Prayer
- ◆ Bible story
- ◆ Serving others
- ◆ Learning about faith

Families that are religious are comfortable doing these types of activities. Families that are not religious (which often can be a large group of families) are not. So the key is to make it easy for all families to do religious activities that don't stretch them too far out of their comfort zone.

Parents often bring their young children to church with the goal that the church will do all the faith formation work for their children. "Church school is considered to be the primary context for children, youth, and adults to learn the content of the faith tradition and to make connections between content and living the life of a Christian in the world," writes Elizabeth Caldwell (327). One of the barriers we need to overcome in children's faith formation is the idea that this formation

happens only at church. In children's ministry, we can help parents see that they have a lot to offer and that they don't need to be "faith experts" to do so.

1. Helping Families to Talk about Faith

Which family member tends to be most comfortable talking about faith? Mom (Search Institute, 46). We need to help all the adults become more at ease with talking about faith issues. That includes not only Dad but also other adult relatives in the family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members can have a big impact on a child's faith formation.

Too often parents think they don't have the knowledge or resources to talk about faith, especially when they compare themselves to church leaders and clergy. We need to keep reiterating over and over how church leaders are resources and guides. Adult family members are the ones who make the most impact on a child's faith formation.

"By the way they hold and handle the child, by the guidance, permissions and prohibitions they give, they convey to the child a deep, almost bodily conviction that there is meaning to what they are doing," writes James W. Fowler in *Stages of Faith*. "The child, feeling cherished and included in the parent's meanings, feels an inner sense of trust-worthiness and reliability that can balance the terrors of separation and abandonment" (55).

These everyday interactions and everyday conversations are what help a child grow up well, not only psychologically but spiritually as well. When parents see that the church has influence over their child only a few hours a week compared to parents who are with their children multiple hours each day, parents can begin to realize that they do have a lot to offer.

The trick, however, is to convince parents that they can start talking about faith in easy, comfortable ways. Consider downloading a caring conversation activity from Vibrant Faith at Home once a month to distribute to parents

(<http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>). Select Caring Conversation in the library and choose activities under the “Young Family” category or have families come to church to try one of the caring conversations when you’re all together and give them another one to take home. Giving parents the opportunity to practice and succeed will often encourage them to keep talking about faith at home.

2. Getting Families to Help Others

Families often feel the most comfortable doing small, short-term, family service projects. Most families feel at ease talking about helping others and why it’s important to do so. A number of churches have monthly family service projects where families can come to church and participate in ways that help others.

Finding projects that are easy and can still have an impact often can be a challenge. Resources such as *Doing Good Together* (Friedman & Roehlkepartain, 51-52, 56) and *Teaching Kids to Care & Share* (Roehlkepartain, 20-21) are packed with lots of easy-to-do service projects that families can do together. The resource, *Doing Good Together*, also includes an entire chapter with projects that families can do on their own.

Vibrant Faith at Home also has free family service projects that you can download to use in your children’s ministry and/or giving to families for them to do at home. Go to the Service activities in the library at <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org>. Choose activities under the “Young Family” category.

3. Encourage Families to Do Religious Rituals

Some families already do religious rituals. The most common are mealtime prayers. Some also do bedtime prayers. Religious holidays such as Advent, Christmas, and Easter also often have religious rituals that families have adopted from previous generations.

Create ways for families to identify the religious rituals they do and to continue them. Often parents don’t realize that putting out a nativity crèche or Advent candles are important religious rituals. You can provide ways for families to talk about these religious rituals by creating a short talk sheet for them to use at home.

Vibrant Faith at Home also has religious rituals that you can download to give to families to do at home. Go to the Ritual and Tradition section in the library and choose activities under the “Young Family” category. Explore activities under other age groups to see if any can be used or adapted for other aspects of your ministry.

4. Getting Families to Go Deeper

Other important faith practices that families can do at home include prayer, activities to learn about faith, and Bible stories or Bible study. These, however, tend to intimidate families that are new or uncomfortable about faith issues. Think of these practices as ones to help your religious families to go deeper and to get your newer families (eventually) to go deeper into faith formation.

Vibrant Faith at Home has individual, easy-to-do activities in three of these areas: prayer, learning about faith, and Bible stories. Go to <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org> and look in the Library for activities under these categories: prayer, learning about faith, and Bible stories.

Going Deeper with Your Children’s Ministry

You won’t have much of an impact on families at home, however, if they’re not coming to church. That’s why it’s essential to focus on both aspects of Search Institute’s finding on the two strong factors that impact faith maturity of young people: Christian education involvement and family religiousness (Search Institute, 39).

How do you get families to come to your Christian education activities? By doing Christian education in a way that matters to them. Researchers identified seven key factors of what makes a Christian education program for young people effective ((Search Institute, 56): Teachers, Pastor, Educational Process, Educational Content, Peer Involvement, Parent Involvement, and Goals.

An effective children's ministry program has teachers that are high in a mature faith, care about children, and know education theory and methods (Search Institute, 56). Unfortunately, churches tend to have teachers that have these characteristics working with adults, not children. In fact, researchers found that 55 percent of adult education teachers in churches have a high-faith maturity compared with 40 percent of teachers who work with teenagers and only 32 percent of those who work with children (Search Institute, 57).

Have your teachers take the faith formation maturity scale at <http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/exploringfaithmaturity-adults.pdf>. See how they did. Which aspects of faith are they strongest in? Which need more formation?

Effective children's ministries also have a pastor who is highly committed to the program, devotes significant hours to the program, and also knows education theory and practice that's effective with children (Search Institute, 56). How much is your pastor involved in your children's ministry?

Educational process and education content include areas such as emphasizing intergenerational contact, creating a sense of community, involving children in service projects, effective teaching the Bible and core theological concepts and more (Search Institute, 56).

You also want to create your children's ministry in a way so that children can spend time together more (Search Institute, 56). Parents flee churches when their child is the only one (or one of two) in a class. Some churches have grouped different age groups together to create ways for children to interact

with each other. This can be difficult when you're working with young children since infants and 5 year olds are very different, but churches have found ways for children of different age groups to be together and get to know each other.

The last two categories are ones that children's ministries often overlook and don't realize how critical they are. This includes parent involvement and goals more (Search Institute, 56). Parents not only need ways to connect with each other, but it's critical for them to be involved in program decisions and planning. The final category is goals. Does your children's ministry have a clear mission statement? Does it have clear learning objectives?

Emphasizing the Link between Church and Home

As you plan your program and evaluate it, continue to look at the connections between church and home. The more you can build ways for families to talk about faith issues (and act on them) at home and the more you can strengthen your children's ministry at church, the more impact you'll have on families.

"Christian education matters much more than we expected," concluded the researchers who examined Christian education in churches. "Done well, it has the potential beyond any other congregational influence to deepen faith and commitment" (Search Institute, 2).

Whether we're playing with infants in the nursery, singing songs with toddlers, pretending we're running across the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians, or doing a family service project together at church, all of it matters. The way we interact with children, their parents, and their older siblings gives them a sense of whether or not they want to come back for more.

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It’s easy to focus all of our efforts for children’s faith formation into what happens at church: Christian education for children, children’s church, and other church programs for children. Yet, faith formation happens every day—no matter where children are. We can help children (and their families) grow deeper in their faith whether they’re at church, at home, or somewhere else. In fact, the more we emphasize how faith formation makes up each person’s every day experience, the more children and adults will grow spiritually.

Minneapolis-based Search Institute conducted a landmark study on what is most likely to predict the faith maturity of a person, whether that person is a child, a teenager, or an adult. By surveying more than 11,000 individuals in 561 randomly chosen congregations (Search Institute, 2), Search Institute researchers found two strong factors that predicted the faith maturity of children: 1. Family religiousness and 2. Christian education involvement (Search Institute, 39).

Family religiousness happens no matter where families are. When we focus our efforts on helping families talk about faith and act on their faith, we can build a strong faith formation for children (and their families) while helping them to discover new aspects of faith.

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Encouraging Faith Practices at Home

How can a family be religious in ways they find attractive? Researchers identified three key factors:

1. Talking to family members about faith or God
2. Having family devotions, and
3. Doing family projects to help others (Search Institute, 46).

Unfortunately, too many families don't feel confident in doing faith practices at home. They think they're not the experts and that faith formation can happen only at church. Part of our job is to show families that they're already doing faith formation at home (and not calling it that) and that they can easily do more.

How are families already doing faith formation? Some families have mealtime and bedtime prayers. Other families answer children's questions about God. Others have religious rituals that have been passed down through the generations, such as going to worship services, lighting Advent candles, reading scripture, helping others in need, and so on.

Distribute the "Emphasizing Faith at Home" worksheet (at the end of the article) to families to help them identify what they're already doing in this area. This worksheet also can help families find other ways to build faith at home.

Vibrant Faith at Home provides free, easy-to-do, faith-formation activities for families with children. Some churches download a different activity each week (or once a month) and distributes an activity to each family to do at home. This makes it easy for families to talk about faith and act on their values at home. Vibrant Faith at Home's activities cover six areas:

1. Caring conversations
 2. Ritual and tradition
 3. Prayer
 4. Bible story
 5. Serving others
 6. Learning about faith
- <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-listed-by-audience/library-audience-young-family>

Even when we provide activities, it's important to continue to address the issue that many parents feel uneasy or uncomfortable with their role in helping their children develop spiritually. "We find that many parents within the church fail to speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters and are neglecting to integrate practices into their everyday lives that nurture faith," writes Marcia Bunge, a professor of religion at Gustavus Adolphus College (Bunge, 54). Some churches develop not only children's education courses but also ways for parents to talk about pertinent issues with a children's minister or another member of the clergy. Parents often have good intentions, but many are busy, stressed, and unsure of their role as a "faith educator." The more we can get to know parents and listen to them, the more we can help them create ways to integrate faith more into their everyday home life.

Linking Church to Home

Part of what makes parents uncomfortable about faith formation at home is that they see it as an "another project" and something else to do. Instead, build on what you're doing at church and create links that extend what you're doing at church to what parents can do at home.

For example, what are you doing with the children during Christian education? Could you provide a couple of questions that parents could ask their children about what happened during Christian education as talking points during their next meal together?

Church holy days also create an ideal way to create connections between church and home. What one small thing could families do during each of the four Sundays of Advent? Create easy ways for families to mark Ash Wednesday, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and other holy days not only at church but also at home. For example, Vibrant Faith offers free activities that link many of the church holy days for families to do at home. Go to “young family” at <http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/library/library-by-category-col-150/library-category-ritual-and-tradition>.

Exploring Children’s Questions

For many families, encouraging them to pay attention to the questions that their children ask can open up all kinds of opportunities for faith formation. “Children can be natural philosophers. Much to our amazement, they often ponder big questions. They ask about life and meaning, knowing and knowledge, truth and justice, reality and death,” writes Tobin Hart, psychology professor at the State University of West Georgia. “For many, the spiritual quest is focused and explored through pondering, puzzling over, and playing with such questions” (Hart, 168).

Yet, too often, parents shut these questions down instead of seeing them as invitations to connect more with their children and with faith.

Part of the struggle is that children ask these questions when parents are busy doing something else. Another problem is that parents often don’t know how to respond.

That’s where the church can come in. Some churches have taken on these questions, in fact, encouraged parents and children to ask them and bring them to church. That way parents don’t need to feel pressured to provide the “correct answer” and churches can help families “play” with questions and go deeper into faith issues.

Getting to Know Families

Nothing will have a greater impact on the link between church and home than taking the time to get to know families. Not just by name. But by finding out who they are, what they love to do, and what they’re struggling with.

“Meaningful conversations are an essential part of a significant relationship,” writes researcher Peter Scales (Scales, 122). Too often we provide activities that grow out of “what we want children and families to learn” rather than also taking into account “who children and families are and what they’re interested in.” Both are critical to not only a successful children’s ministry but also a successful ministry that links faith formation between church and home.

One church discovered that parents were struggling with how to deal with sexuality questions (and the sexual content their kids were stumbling into on the Internet) with their 10 to 12 year old kids. The children’s minister jumped on this issue, creating a one-time class for parents, while the children focused on another issue. The parents asked lots of questions and raised many concerns. The children’s minister asked if the parents wanted a sexuality expert speak to them, and the parents said yes. During that session, parents began whispering to each other. There was a lot of information about sexuality that was new to them. Learning this information within the church gave them more confidence in dealing with these issues when their families were away from church.

Other churches have discovered that families often feel disconnected from their extended families. Many wish grandparents were still alive, healthier, or lived closer. One church linked elderly people with families in their church so they could have “adoptive grandparents.” While some of the relationships didn’t click, many of them did, bringing people together who typically wouldn’t connect.

Noticing When Families Pull Away

Being intentional about creating ways to do faith formation at church and home won't be effective unless you're paying attention to how engaged families are in your church. What happens when a family starts pulling away? Do you wait and see what happens? Or do you ask—before a family has the chance to drift away?

Most ministers don't like conflict, and most assume that when a family starts to pull away that conflict is the reason. Yet, families slip away from a church for many reasons, and if you're willing to stay connected with them, you can learn a lot by simply asking in a non-threatening way.

"I haven't seen your family at church lately. I miss you." Often a couple of statements like that encourage a family to talk. If they don't want to discuss it, they'll usually dodge the question and change the topic. A family that's pulling away will feel less alone when you ask.

A family's church involvement is much more than about church. It's about what's happening in their family. Maybe someone lost his or her job. Or someone got sick. Or one of the children joined a sport's team that practices during worship. If you already have a relationship with a family, a family will more likely be honest with you about what's going on.

A lot of emphasis in churches these days is placed on church growth. What can get lost during church-growth strategies is keeping tabs on who already comes through your church doors. It's easier to keep a family than to lose one and attract a new one. While it's important to continue attracting new people, it's just as essential to work to keep the families you have engaged and coming.

Being Relevant in People's Lives

As you link home life with church life for families with children, keep being relevant in people's lives. Continue to follow their interests, their struggles, and make faith formation applicable to their lives. Researchers found these five indicators that described adults who had a mature faith:

1. I go out of my way to show love to people I meet—53%
2. I take time for periods of prayer and meditation—50%
3. I try to apply my faith to political and social issues—50%
4. I talk with other people about my faith—47%
5. I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually—45%
(Search Institute, 11).

An effective children's ministry program pays attention to what's happening not only in children's lives but also the lives of their parents. Many families, for example, struggle with how much time children want to play video games, watch TV, and surf the Internet (all activities that get lumped into a phenomenon that researchers call "screen time"). Some parents feel they're fighting a losing battle and that the church doesn't have much to offer with this issue.

Yet, children's ministers who keep relevant find effective ways to do so. For example, one children's minister found someone in the church who enjoyed reading research studies. That volunteer discovered a study that was pertinent to parents struggling with screen time. The Learning Habit Study of 46,000 homes revealed that families who spend more time doing family activities (such as attending religious worship services together, playing board games, and having family dinners) had kids who spent less time in front of screens, did better in school, were more focused, and

had better social and emotional coping skills (Dobner).

The key is to continue to find ways to link church and home so that children and their parents can see that faith formation impacts every aspect of their lives, whether they're playing soccer, eating dinner, walking the dog, playing with a friend, or going to church. Faith permeates everything. Our role is to help children and their families see that—and live that.

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Emphasizing Faith at Home

It's easy to talk about faith at home—and to act on what you value most. Look at the checklist below. Checkmark which practices you do. Star ones you could try.

Prayer

- _____ Mealtime prayer
- _____ Bedtime prayer
- _____ Morning prayer
- _____ Prayers for people in the news
- _____ Thankful prayers

Talk about Faith

- _____ Talk about what you value and why
- _____ Discuss your family's history of faith and church
- _____ Name what you're thankful for and why
- _____ Talk about which people have made a difference in your faith journey
- _____ Identify which social justice issues you advocate for and why
- _____ Discuss when you've had doubts and why
- _____ Talk about how you feel about church today
- _____ Discuss why you think faith is important

Family Devotions

- _____ Read the Bible together
- _____ Talk about a Bible story together
- _____ Memorize scripture
- _____ Talk about how your faith impacts how you interpret what's going on in the world
- _____ Sing a favorite faith song or hymn together
- _____ Read a popular book with faith theme, such as children's books listed at Spirituality & Practice, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/features.php?id=25197#childrens>

Family Projects to Help Others

- _____ Bake (or buy) something to give to someone who is sick or homebound
- _____ Draw pictures to send to grandparents or someone else
- _____ Visit someone who is lonely or sick
- _____ Help someone who needs a hand, such as raking leaves or shoveling snow
- _____ Collect food for a food bank or food shelf