

BY SUE WASHBURN

Teaching children to pray

Let your kids see you in prayer—get caught praying!

We all have images of children at prayer. Eyes closed, hands folded, faces serene. They look quiet, contemplative and content. Like a Hallmark card or a Precious Moments figurine.

Then, of course, there is the reality. Eyes open, then scrunching shut, hands twisting, bodies squirming as they try to emulate their parents or other adults they see in prayer. Parents shush them, push their heads down and tell them to quit fidgeting and pray.

As parents we want to teach our children how to tune into their spiritual selves, to share with them the depth of our own faith. We want to show them how to give thanks and praise and find comfort by developing a personal relationship with God. But it is such an important task that many of us feel intimidated.

It is easy to show kids how to bow their heads, fold their hands and recite memorized verses. But many parents feel awkward when it comes to teaching children to pray from their heart. The formula for success, however, is really quite simple: To teach kids the power of prayer, let the kids see you in prayer. Get caught praying!

What is prayer?

Prayer is simply our ongoing conversation with God—a two-way conversation, although the responses may not always be obvious. There can be an ebb and flow to our prayer life depending on the circumstances of our daily living. At times we may give thanks and praise; at other times we ask for help. On some occasions we may be joyous; at other times we are furious. Whatever the situation, it is important to keep the conversation open and honest.

Most of us assume prayer is a formal, verbal recitation. But it actually can occur in many forms—a silent meditation, a joyous dance, or an abstract artistic expression of love for God. We need to encourage our children to express their prayers in ways that are natural for them rather than conforming to our adult ideas of prayer.

Too often we teach our children to pray out loud, in prescribed settings, at certain times. We teach them to talk and not listen. We fail to embrace their exuberance, their uninhibited enthusiasm.



Part of daily life:

“The ritual of prayer is not just in the words but in the time and place — at the table, before bed, outside in nature. This allows kids to understand it is part of the events in their daily life.”

— Mary Lou Ferris

Sue Washburn is a Pittsburgh-based free-lance writer living in Apollo, PA. This article is courtesy of *Presbyterians Today* June/July 2004, pages 25-28.

Start with rituals

From breakfast to bedtime, rituals play an important role in every child's life. Prayer is no exception. Prayer rituals can be comforting as kids develop patterns in their life. It is also an easy way to introduce prayer to a child at an early age.

"The ritual of prayer is not just in the words but in the time and place—at the table, before bed, outside in nature," explains Mary Lou Ferris, associate for Christian education for Redstone Presbytery. "This allows kids to understand that God is part of the events in their daily life."

Father Matthew McClain of St. Alexis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, suggests keeping prayer times consistent despite changing circumstances. "Don't skip grace because there is a guest for dinner or while eating at a restaurant. Let the kids see that it's not something to be ashamed of."

Learning the rituals and traditions of their faith also allows kids to feel comfortable in worship services. Rabbi Sandy Sasso, author of *God In Between* and *Adam and Eve's First Sunset*, says it is like learning a sport. Once you know the rules, you can play on different fields with different people. "By using traditional prayers, you're connecting to the community around you," she explains. "You can feel confident entering the community because you know the rituals they use."

Make it personal

While ritualistic prayers are a way of incorporating prayer into the life of a busy family, they should not be the only form of prayer. In addition to learning the ritual prayers of their faith, parents and children also need to learn to pray from the heart.

"Ritualistic prayers are an important step, but sometimes you get to the point where you're just saying the memorized words," says McClain. "If you want to mature in your faith, you have to develop your own personal prayer voice."

Ferris says that mealtime prayers can be a good

place for kids to transition from ritual to personal prayer. At first children may recite a traditional prayer, but over time they can be shown how to give thanks for the specific things in their life. "The time and place remain as part of the ritual," she says. "But the prayer itself becomes more personal. In fact, I've known stories of kids who say grace by saying thank you to God for everything they see on the table and in the eating area. It might make it difficult for those waiting for the meal, but the child is learning the importance of personal prayer!"

Developing a personal prayer voice does not mean working on public speaking skills or writing powerful prayers to be read out loud. It means finding places and ways that allow you and your child to pray from the heart. It means dropping the pretenses and getting real with God.

David Perry, pastor of Delmont (Pennsylvania) Presbyterian Church, says prayer should include everything in our lives—the good, the bad and the ugly. Too many people worry that there are things they cannot take to God. Perry says this is just not true.

"Many of us hold something back, even in prayer," Perry says. "The idea is to be fully open, not just present the pleasant parts of you. There's nothing you can say in prayer that would surprise

God."

"Look at the Psalms," McClain explains, "you can see every human emotion. There's anger at God and other people. There's frustration, there's loss of hope. It is powerful to tell kids that there is nothing that they can't say to God. There's no feeling they can't share in prayer."

Overcome spiritual stage fright

Some parents feel uncomfortable when it is their turn to say a prayer out loud. They have a kind of spiritual stage fright. But prayer is not about being impressive, it is about being honest. A fumbled heartfelt prayer is more meaningful than one that is eloquent but insincere. Even a child can tell the difference.

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Perry admits it is common to want to sound good in front of others. “But you’re not praying to satisfy the people around you,” he says. “You’re praying to speak with God. Sometimes I wonder if I sound like an idiot in front of the congregation, but ultimately it doesn’t matter. If a prayer is given in sincerity and is heartfelt, God understands.”

“You have to risk being human in front of your kids,” says Aimee Wallis Buchanan, co-author of *Making Worship Real*. “You have to be willing to be honest”—even if it means finding yourself tongue-tied.

Buchanan tries to make the young people she works with and her own children feel comfortable in prayer by assuring them that words and eloquence are not all that important. “God already knows the prayer,” she says. “If all you can do is say a name or word, that’s fine. God knows the rest.” This helps to take the pressure off. Once kids get comfortable, she says, they progress from one-word prayers to full prayers in very little time.

The voice of the heart

“Prayer is a service of the heart,” says Sasso. “It encourages an awareness of the world around us.” McClain says, “We assume prayer is all about our spiritual lives and not our everyday life. But the fact is, prayer is good for you. It can calm you and remove burdens, whether they are spiritual or psychological.”

If you allow your child to see and hear you pray, you show him that you are trying to live a righteous life. He will see you admit your wrongdoing, work through your sorrow, and express joy at the goodness in life. Through your prayer, you show him how to be reflective about the events that touch his heart, too.

Prayer, the voice of your heart, sometimes speaks of love, sometimes anger. Sometimes it is repentant and sometimes it is conflicted. Sometimes the prayers are eloquent, sometimes broken. Sometimes the prayers are simple enough for even a child to understand.

Wow! Joy! Hallelujah! 

7 ways to incorporate prayer into family life

BE FLEXIBLE

Let your prayer life evolve naturally so that it fits easily in your life. A short prayer is better than no prayer. A prayer in the car on the way to school can be as important as one with the entire family before dinner. Find what works best for you and your family.

CHOOSE A SPECIFIC TIME

Find a time when your family is together and not under stress. Mornings are too hectic for most families, but dinner or bedtime often works well. Keeping a regular prayer time is one way of building stronger bonds as a family.

TRY FLASH PRAYERS

If you cannot seem to find a regular prayer time, try short flash prayers as the need arises. For example, a quick “Thank you, God” for a beautiful sunset or “Give her patience, Lord” for a strung-out mother at the grocery store.

CREATE A BOOK OR BOX

Sometimes children do not know what or whom they want to pray for. Create a picture book of special people in your life or a box of treasured objects. These can help a child think of things to pray for.

USE SENTENCE PRAYERS

Rather than have one person lead a prayer for the entire family, ask each person in turn to say a sentence prayer. A parent can give the introduction and conclusion while the children provide the specifics for their lives.

SING AND DANCE

Invite children to sing or make up songs of prayer. If your child is not a vocal diva, perhaps she would prefer to dance to prayerful music. Allow your child the freedom to express her feelings without feeling constrained.

USE YOUR HANDS

Use the Internet or library to find prayers in sign language. Sometimes having a movement to go with the words makes learning a formal prayer easier.

Prayer—it's not a test

Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders talk about praying with children

If children worry too much about the mechanics, prayer can feel like a test, and they don't want to feel like a failure. Leaders in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions all suggest making prayer easy and approachable for kids.

"When kids grow up, they hear prayer done in formal settings," says Aimee Wallis Buchanan, Presbyterian pastor and co-author of *Making Worship Real*. "They hear prayers that sound smart and adult. As a youth leader, I try to take the mystery out of it. Kids can use their own words and language to pray."

"Prayer is not about learning fixed formulas, but a way for children to give expression to a world that is alive within them," says Rabbi Sandy Sasso, author of *God In Between* and *Adam and Eve's First Sunset*. "If we want children to learn the liturgy of our traditions, they will first need to learn the prayer of the heart."

Dalia Mogahed, outreach program director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, bows to Mecca and prays the salat five times a day. Even though the prayer is formal, she says the people of her faith keep children in mind.

"We're taught to be very tolerant and playful with children during salat," she explains. "It is not a time to be strict, and we don't want to make it seem harsh. I believe very strongly that salat and supplication [personal prayer] should always be a positive experience."

tion of Purim teaches that prayer can involve movement, drama, story and even at times 'noise.'"

"Children have such a potential for faith," comments Mogahed. "If parents can channel that belief into something true, like God instead of the tooth fairy, we give them a gift they can carry throughout their life. It will be of greater service to their spiritual development."

In addition to the religious benefits, there are other benefits of prayer. "Prayer encourages an awareness of the world around us," Sasso says. "It makes us pay attention when we are otherwise preoccupied."



Getting real with God

It is powerful to tell kids that there is nothing that they can't say to God. There's no feeling they can't share in prayer.

—Father Matthew McClain

Sasso, Buchanan and Mogahed agree that children have a natural capacity for faith that should not be squelched by adult expectations about what prayer should look and sound like.

"Instead of trying to force children into an adult prayer structure, why not capitalize on their innate prayerfulness?" suggests Sasso. "The Jewish celebra-

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