

Passing on Your Faith to the Next Generation

Donna J. Habenicht

Nine-year-old Allan cried disconsolately. He had lost the special hunting knife his dad had made for him from hard steel and leather. When he started across the alfalfa field next to their house, the knife was securely in its sheath fastened to his belt. But when he reached for it on the other side of the field, it was gone. How could he ever find it in a field of alfalfa? Mommy hugged him and said confidently, "Let's call the whole family. We'll all pray that God will help us find your knife. He knows exactly where it is right now." So the family gathered, and everyone prayed that God would help them find the knife. Then they all went out looking, trying to cover the route Allan thought he had taken. Then, a shout of triumph! Dad found the knife hidden among the alfalfa plants. Another family gathering. More prayers. But this time broad smiles lighted every face, and all the prayers said "Thank You, God."

Liza, our fourteen-year old grand-daughter is facing a major move. She has lived all her life on a beautiful Caribbean island. Now her parents have decided to move back to the United States. Recently she sent me this e-mail message, "I keep asking myself: Will I be smart enough? Will they like me, and will I make friends? This all scares me, but I know that I'll like it when I get up there. God will be with me, and I'll do all right." Clearly, she is depending on God to see her through this major upheaval. Her parents have passed along to her their own faith in God. I've heard them say, "God will lead us. He has everything under control."

Three, nine, or fourteen—age doesn't matter. It's all part of passing along our religious values to our children—one of the greatest joys, and sometimes one of the greatest puzzles, of parenting. In Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 God tells us that passing our religious values to our children should be our all-day, every-day priority. Teach your children when you get up, when you go to bed, when you go about your daily tasks. Involve their minds, eyes, ears, and hands. Total immersion.

Sound difficult? It's not. It's really quite natural and simply flows out of your daily family life.

1. Give your home a spiritual atmosphere. Children absorb the atmosphere around them. Make the atmosphere of your home palpably spiritual and faith oriented. Does your home say that you are people of faith in God? Are some religious pictures visible? Religious magazines? The Bible? What toys or games do the children have to play with? What TV shows do you watch? What's on the Internet? What CDs do you play? What kind of conversations take place? What do your children see when they first awaken in the morning? When they close their eyes for sleep?

2. Share your joy in the Lord. Children gravitate toward joy and happiness. If faith in God makes you sour, they'll go elsewhere for the joy they crave. So, make Psalm 118:24 your family motto: "This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Thank God daily for his blessings. Talk about them, make a family "Joy From God" notebook. Record in it special joys that come from God, and let anyone add a page any time they want to. Talk about God's love and forgiveness. Talk about His grace. Share the joy! Fill your hearts with gratitude.

3. Share your personal faith experience with your children. Don't let your faith in God be one of your family's best-kept secrets. Talk openly about God. Share your faith experience—including its ups and downs—with your children. Demonstrate in your own life the power of God's grace. They'll learn that faith is a real part of your life, and they'll want that faith too.

My parent shared a personal faith experience with me that I have shared with my children and grandchildren. My father, Grandpa Lugenbeal, was a couple months from his college graduation with a degree in theology when the college president summoned him to his office. The president asked Dad to stay on at the college as the farm manager, saying that he felt he did not have the social skills that a minister needed.

Dad thanked the president for the job offer and for his concern but said that he really felt called to the ministry and wanted to give God a chance to use him in that way. The summer following graduation he worked as a trainee with an evangelist. In the fall he took a job teaching a church school and pastoring a church on the side. The next year, Mom taught the school, and he pastored full time. Dad went on to become a respected church administrator. Dad's story has encouraged generations of our family to believe in following God's directions for our lives.

Children can be gently led but not driven toward faith in God. Make your faith the beginning of a family tradition, passed from generation to generation. That is the Lord's way. He says, "Tell it to your children and they will tell their children" (Psalm 78:4-7).

4. Pray for your children and with your children every day. Christian parents have always prayed for their children. Hannah prayed for Samuel, Jochebed and Amram prayed for Moses, and Elizabeth and Zacharias prayed for John. But we must do more than pray *for* our children. We also need to pray *with* them every day. Pray many short prayers during the day to communicate your joy or sorrow or need to God. Your children will quickly pick up the idea, and God will become their confidant and friend.

Make prayer an established tradition to begin and end every day. Gather your family around you before you send them out to confront the world each morning. Pray

for angel protection and for the Holy Spirit to be with each family member during the day. Do the same each evening, thanking God for His blessing and care during the day.

Listen carefully for your children's needs and unspoken questions. Respond with loving concern. Help your children find assurance through prayer. Pray about decisions, wrongdoing, special events and temptations, and about friendships. And pray for others.

5. Read God's Word every day. God's Word undergirds faith, and it provides answers for life's dilemmas, assurance in difficulty, connection in times of stress, and promises for the future. Without a strong connection to God's Word, your children will not develop faith in God.

Show your children how important the Bible is to you. Use it every day, lovingly and reverently. Turn to it for help in daily affairs. Claim Bible promises for your family's needs. Keep the family Bible in a special place of honor. Share your own insights from Bible study, as well as your joy in God's Word.

Your children need Bible knowledge to build their faith in God and to learn how God wants them to live (See 2 Timothy 3:16). God's Word can be a protective shield from the tempting sin-traps around them. Make Bible learning fun and interesting. Create happy memories around God's Word. Choose a time of day when everyone can be relaxed and enjoy the experience of God's Word. Use a modern version so the children will understand better. Select short passages that have meaning for the children and that will guide their behavior. Let older children wrestle with the meaning of the Bible verse and come up with their own ideas. Trust the Holy Spirit to speak to your children. Use Bible games, role playing, audio tapes, videotapes, and pictures. Give Bibles to each of your children, and make the presentation a special occasion.

Teach Bible principles that will help your children deal with life. Show Bible reasons for faith. Go to the Bible for answers to everyday twists and turns and bumps in the road. Help your children think independently about what the Bible says—what actions should they take? Encourage your children to memorize key verses that will be a comfort and guide to them in the future. Make memorizing Scripture fun and interesting. Personalize the Bible by relating it to your children's interests, needs, and puzzling situations.

6. Use everyday experiences to teach religious values. Jesus usually taught values by telling stories about everyday happenings. What does your family see every day that might deepen your children's faith in God?

When you plant a seed, you have faith that it will sprout. When you put a disk into the computer, you trust the programmer who wrote the program. When you travel in an airplane, you trust the mechanic who checked the plane and the pilot who flies it.

Faith and trust are written all over our everyday lives. You can use these experiences to help your child understand faith in God.

The discerning can use the great outdoors to teach religious values. Trees, for instance, come in many shapes and sizes—palms, oaks, maples, flamboyans, pines, redwoods. Some have very deep root systems and are flexible. They can withstand hurricane-force winds and great storms because their roots are anchored deep in the earth. When we study God's Word and learn about Him, we are planting our heart roots into deep soil. We cannot be upset and thrown about or destroyed by evil temptations. We are protected by our faith in God.

In the end, what counts is your children's own faith. You should use all of the above ideas to help them develop a personal faith connection with God. Invite your children to accept Jesus as their personal Savior from Satan's sin tangle. Teach your children that Jesus is a Friend who never leaves or abandons us. He is a forgiving Friend who wants a forever relationship with them. Nothing could be more beautiful or more reassuring. Your children can walk beside Jesus for the rest of their lives because you have introduced them to Him and to your religious faith.

Reprinted from *Signs of the Times*, October 1999. Used by permission. At the time of original publication, Donna J. Habenicht, Ed.D. was a professor of educational and counseling psychology at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and specialized in children's character and religious development. She is now retired and has written the books *How to Help Your Child Love Jesus*, and *Values Begin with God: Eleven Essential Values and How to Teach Them to Your Child*.