

Parents' caring, example help form faith

Mary Jo Pedersen/CNS

When a baby cries because she is wet or hungry and a parent picks her up, comforts her and gives her what she needs, that child has had her first lesson in prayer.

Though it is helpful later for a child to memorize prayers and learn about different kinds of prayer, a child's prayer will spring from a reservoir of confidence and trust that someone loves her and will respond when she calls.

In her most formative years, a child will pray if she sees others praying.

Prayer is an important part of faith formation. Long before a child enters formal religious education, the habit of prayer is or is not being developed at home. It develops with the example of those around him or her and the gentle mentoring in prayer that parents and early caregivers provide children at bedtime, mealtime and throughout the day.

In a study by the Search Institute called "Early Adolescents and Their Parents" ("Passing on the Faith," Strommen and Hardel, St. Mary's Press, Winona, Minn., 2000), a comparison was made between children whose parents expressed faith at home and children whose parents did not. In homes where faith was discussed and shared, children were twice as likely to be committed to their faith as they grew into adulthood than were children in homes where faith and religious practice were ignored.

It's not just what parents say about religious beliefs — "You should go to church on Sunday" — but what they do by regularly participating in worship themselves that influences a child's faith. Religious-education experts agree that a child will learn most of the basics about faith practice before the age of 6. That means he will learn to believe in and trust God, and to live like a believing person long before he learns the truths in the catechism.

Last month I watched a hassled young mother buckle all three of her small children into her car in a grocery-store parking lot. Two minutes later she unbuckled them all and marched them back into the store so that the 3-year-old could return the package of gum he picked up in the check-out line. Even before he memorizes the Ten Commandments, he will know what No. 7 means.

Every parent who ever inadvertently let a swear word slip out of his or her mouth found out that children are learning all the time.

The good news for Catholic fami-



Dave Hrbacek/CNS

Mike and Lori Shubat help their son Ben during a family-life program at St. Patrick Church in Inver Grove Heights, Minn. The new program, developed by an education specialist and the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, encourages family communication about faith and spirituality early in child development.

lies is that parents never have to go it alone when it comes to passing on the faith. The church provides a variety of excellent religious-formation programs both for children and adults.

Research on the effectiveness of religious-education programs consistently shows that children who are "dropped off" at church don't keep the faith as well as those whose parents are active partners with the teacher in their child's religious formation.

The partnership I'm referring to means that parents talk with children about what they learned in class or help with homework, attend family activities of the religious-education program, have books and videos around the house that support their child's learning. Being a partner includes praying at home, participating in the Sunday liturgy, observing Lent and Advent practices, for example.

Social workers, educators and researchers have proven to us that families have extraordinary power to shape the lives of children. Educators unanimously agree that the highest level of learning happens

In a Nutshell

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Long before a child enters formal religious education, the habit of prayer is or is not being developed at home.

Children are curious about faith. The family setting is a perfect place for this to surface.

when parents form strong partnerships with schools or churches.

But why does the research show that only about 10 percent of church-going families ever talk about faith or pray together at home? There are a number of reasons.

- Many don't really feel qualified to teach their children about religion because they don't feel they know much about it.
- Some parents may hold some anger toward the church and aren't motivated to pass on faith.
- Single parents and others who

are struggling may feel overwhelmed and unable to think about one more thing.

Parents often don't realize that from the moment of birth, their children learn about God and experience God's love through their ordinary, everyday expressions of care and nurturing. The book *Sharing the Faith With Your Child, From Age Seven to Fourteen* (Mary Jo Pedersen and Joan Burney, Liguori Press, 1992) offers encouragement to parents who feel the job is just too big for them.

Tom McGrath, in his book *Raising Faith-Filled Kids, Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home* (Loyola Press, 2000), says: "Parents don't create faith. Faith comes from God, and God has placed the seed of faith in each child. Faith is a relationship like the relationship between a vine and its branches. Faith flows. Our main task is to encourage the flow and not block it."

Pedersen is coordinator of the Leadership in Family Life Training Program for the Archdiocese of Omaha, Neb.