

Six Keys to Engaging Parents and Families in Parish Faith Formation

Authored by [Joseph D. White](#) in [Issue #2.3](#) of *The Catechetical Review*

The family has a privileged place in catechesis. The *Catechism* states that “parents receive the responsibility of evangelizing their children” and calls them the “first heralds” of the faith.^[i] The family is also called “domestic church”—the church of the home.^[ii] Catechesis in the parish can give structure and support to faith formation in the home. Parish catechesis is systematic and comprehensive, while the formation that parents provide is more organic and focused on particular occasions in the life of the family. Parents play an indispensable role in helping the faith come alive for their children. The family is the first place where each of us is called to live the faith that we have received.

Despite the important role of family in catechesis, many catechists and catechetical leaders find it a challenge to involve parents in parish faith formation programs. Here are six keys to engaging parents and families in catechesis:

1. Take time to listen to families.

Who are the families of the children or teens you serve? What are their challenges and struggles, their interests and priorities? Pope Francis states:

Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.^[iii]

One implication of these words is this: if we wish to evangelize the families of our parish, first we must listen to them. This means reaching out to families, sharing about ourselves, and expressing genuine interest in getting to know them. The time we make to do this will be some of the most valuable time spent in ministry with families.

2. Help families make connections between faith and family life.

We live in a highly secularized society—an environment that tells us that faith is something we practice at church on Sundays, not something we live in our everyday lives. This stands in sharp contrast to living as intentional disciples, for Jesus calls us to be the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14). In such a societal context, how can we begin to make the faith real for families we serve?

One place to begin is in the everyday moments of family life. In this year of mercy, we hear frequent mention of “works of mercy.” When parents of young children hear the Corporal Works of Mercy discussed, they might say to themselves, “I wish I had time to do these things, but I’m too busy with raising my children.” What they might not realize is that every day they are doing works of mercy as they minister to the needs of their family members. How many times have you, in your tasks as a parent, fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, or visited the sick? Parents do these things often for their children. It’s important that parents recognize this as mercy in action, especially because Jesus says, “as you did it to one of the least of these . . . , you did it to me” (Mt 25: 40). Every time a mother or father cares for their children, they have an opportunity to have an encounter with Jesus himself.

Provide families with resources for connecting everyday moments of family life more explicitly with their Catholic faith. In addition to practical ways to live out the lessons being learned in faith formation sessions throughout the week, give families resources such as family prayers for bedtime, blessings for times when family members leave the home each day, special blessings for milestones and family events, seasonal resources, and guides to creating a home altar or sacred space.

2. Foster a sense of community among families.

Families today often find it a challenge to come together due to busy schedules, conflicting priorities, and other practical issues; but making connections with our parish family is an essential aspect of what it means to be Catholic. Ours is not a solitary tradition of only an individual, personal relationship with God, but always encompasses a communal one, in which we celebrate and pray together as brothers and sisters. The Letter to the Hebrews admonishes us, “We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another” (Heb 10:25). Facilitating connections and building community between our families is one way we can help our families to appreciate the value of togetherness and build relationships that will last for years to come.

Consider hosting some sessions of faith formation for parents and children together, so parents can experience your sessions for themselves and are better able to reinforce the lessons at home. If possible, arrange some optional meetings for families outside of the regular sessions. Potluck dinners, class programs and plays, or attending a family movie as a group can be great ways to build community among the families in your parish. Seasonal gatherings for families can also be a fun way for families to learn and celebrate their faith together. They can take some preparation, so it might help to get families involved in the planning and setup as well.

4. Pay attention to the developmental stages of family life.

Consider how the faith formation program involves families at every stage. One period of family life that is often overlooked by parishes is the time between baptism and the school-age years. This is unfortunate, because families are restructuring during these early childrearing years—shifting priorities and routines as well as social circles as they adapt to the new realities of parenthood. If the parish is walking closely with families as they realign their priorities and social circles, this stage of family life might provide an opportunity for families to form a close bond with parishes that will last for years to come.

Adolescence is another stage of family life in need of particular focus. Research indicates that the parents of adolescents experience the highest levels of parenting stress, but parenting classes and groups are usually focused on parents of younger children. Forming Catholic conscience in teens is particularly challenging in today’s world. Parishes can increase the chances that teens will remain active and faithful Catholics by partnering with parents of adolescents and supporting them in this task.

5. Structure catechetical ministry for parent involvement.

The parish is not meant to take this responsibility of forming children in faith away from parents, but must support and equip parents by making catechesis organized and systematic and by giving parents the tools they need in order to be primary catechists. One way to communicate this clearly is to give parents a variety of ways to be involved in the parish catechetical program. Volunteer roles could include catechists and also catechetical assistants, teams to help with special events and projects, and volunteers from other ministries who can share their ministry with groups of children as appropriate.

6. Help families share their faith.

Every baptized person is called to be a missionary—to share Christ with others through word and action. The call to evangelization is directed towards us as individuals, towards the entire Church, and also towards our families—the domestic

Church. Parents are called to be evangelizers of their children. Children, too, learn to be missionaries as they share what they are learning with family members and others, and as they strive to be examples to peers and younger brothers and sisters.

Catechists help children share their faith by helping them articulate what they have learned. Still, knowing the faith is not enough. We must be witnesses in our families, our schools, parishes, and communities. In every catechetical session, always include some discussion of how to live what we have received. Roleplay good and moral decision-making exercises. Offer families ways to participate in service projects together. Provide parents with conversation starters they can use to talk about the faith with their children.

Involving parents in catechesis can be a difficult task, but it's too important to give up. Let us renew our efforts to engage whole families in learning about, *and* living out, their faith.

Dr. Joseph D. White is a National Catechetical Consultant for Our Sunday Visitor. He is a contributor to the Alive in Christ catechetical series and author of the booklet, Involving Parents, Engaging Families: Tested Tips for Catechists and Teachers.

Notes

[i] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2225.

[ii] *Ibid.*, par. 2224.

[iii] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 171.

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