

Faith of Our Children: A Model for Home Devotions

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“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” This was the childhood prayer that I dutifully recited each night before bed. It brought mixed emotions to me. How could I fall asleep, trusting God to “keep” my soul (which had connotations of safety) but then also worry if I might die in my sleep? And yet this prayer, along with others that my mother taught me, helped to form a habit of including God in my everyday life. As Christian parents, the mandate to “train up a child in the way he should go....” (Proverbs 22:6) can be both daunting and exciting. While raising three daughters, I remember sometimes feeling worried if my husband and I were teaching them Biblical concepts in such a way that would be applicable to their lives. Recently I asked my now grown daughters about their perceptions of our family’s devotions. They were kind and honest about what worked ...and what failed! Following are some thoughts, ideas and suggested resources on home devotions for children in the early elementary school ages.

1. Consistency and brevity are important. In our zeal to raise Godly children in an increasingly ungodly world, we can forget some practical parenting realities. Twenty to thirty minutes might be a recommended time frame. Keeping home devotions at the same time each day (e. g., after the dinner meal) or on the same day of the week helps children with developing core concepts around predictability and trust.
2. Children’s Bibles, short storybooks based on the Bible, and stories with practical, moral messages can be effective resources. Children can take turns picking the story to be read by the parent. When the child can read, have her read some of the resource being used. This builds her confidence and helps her to hide the Word in her heart (Psalm 119:11).
3. Parents can follow the reading time with reflective questions. “What stood out to you about this story?” or “does this story remind you of anything that happened to you?” suggest to children that their perceptions are valued, and that Biblical concepts relate to real life. Questions that merely draw out facts on people, places, or historical Biblical details, (i.e. “what are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel?”) need to be used with discernment. My youngest adult daughter stated to me: “I had to concentrate so hard on remembering the names of everything in the Old Testament, so I wouldn’t feel stupid when the questions were asked. Sometimes, I missed the point of the whole thing!” Whoops!!!
4. Include prayer time. Encouraging young children to “tell Jesus something that happened today” or “tell Jesus how you feel about _____” are some ways to help children articulate their heart-felt thoughts and feelings.

5. The late Fred Rogers, from the television show “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood” shares in his book The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers that he once broke a fig bar in half and said to the camera: “I wish all of you could eat this with me.” It then struck him how in a symbolic way, he was sharing the Eucharist with his young audience. Our families can also symbolically share the Eucharist together. Whether devotions incorporates a family meal, or pizza or popcorn... “breaking bread” together can build spiritual bonding.
6. As illustrated in #3, mistakes happen in family devotions and children may later tease their parents about them... but they survive them! God teaches parents through family devotions too. He doesn’t require perfection from us...just a heart that desires to please Him.

Ask the Lord to show you His ideas for your unique family devotional plan. As their loving Creator, He knows how your children’s minds and hearts will best grasp His ways. He will guide you. He will also show us, even in our adult parental role, how we are beloved children of God (I John 3: 1 & 2) and that as we parent our children, He will also parent us.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

1. A Children’s Bible. Check with your local Christian bookstore or Christianbook.com for suggestions and recommendations.
2. David and I Talk To God, Psalms for Children by Elspeth Campbell Murphy
3. Poems and Prayers for the Very Young by Martha Alexander
4. The New Bible in Pictures for Little Eyes by Kenneth N. Taylor (Moody)
5. The Book of Virtues by William J. Bennett (Simon and Schuster)

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