

How do Parents Pass on Faith?



An extensive body of research suggests that certain aspects of family life are particularly crucial for effectively developing the faith life of childrenⁱ:

◆ *Parental harmony.*

Parents' feelings about one another determine to a large extent whether the atmosphere of their home is loving, trustworthy and secure. Their warmth and affection is as important as the way they manage their differences and resolve conflict.

“Conjugal communion constitutes the foundation on which is built the broader communion of the family, of parents and children, of brothers and sisters with each other, of relatives and other members of the household.”ⁱⁱ

◆ *Effective communication.*

The parent-child relationship, so important for children's relationship with God, often stands or falls by the way they communicate with one another. Obviously good patterns are easier to establish when children are young - it gets a lot harder as they grow older. Nevertheless, it appears that teenagers still want to discuss difficulties and problems with their parents.

“Relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and guided by ... heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

◆ *Wise parental control.*

Parents who exercise a democratic style value both independence and disciplined conformity in their children. They combine firmness with freedom, affirming their children's individual qualities and style, while setting standards for conduct.

“Children offer a specific and irreplaceable contribution to the Christian family. They will be aided in this if parents exercise their unrenounceable authority as a true and proper "ministry," that is, as a service to the human and Christian well-being of their children, and in particular as a service aimed at helping them acquire a truly responsible freedom, and if parents maintain a living awareness of the "gift" they continually receive from their children.”^{iv}

◆ *Parental affection.*

Children whose parents are always emotionally available see their parents as trustworthy and themselves as worthwhile. One Australian study showed that “the nature and quality of the relationships between parents and their adolescents are of critical importance for an adolescent's adjustment and mature response to the Christian faith.”

“Parental love... is the animating principle... inspiring and guiding all concrete educational activity, enriching it with the values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service, disinterestedness and self-sacrifice.”^v

◆ *Gospel-oriented parents*

As opposed to law-oriented parents, gospel-oriented parents actively value a spiritual dimension to their life, see God in a personal, caring way, are relatively certain of their faith, are rooted in Scripture, consider their faith to be important and take a positive attitude toward life and death.

“The family... shows itself to be the domestic sanctuary of the church through the mutual affection of its members and the common prayer they offer to God, if the whole family is caught up in the liturgical worship of the church, and if it provides active hospitality and promotes justice and other good works for the service of all their brethren in need.”^{vi}

◆ *Communication of moral values*

Caring parents are the primary influence in shaping the moral values of their children, values such as caring for others, protecting the vulnerable, keeping promises and showing love and mercy. Parents do this in many ways, not least by the loving relationship they have with their children (which makes them more receptive to parental values) and by modelling their values in their actions, their use of time, their conversation and the commitments they make.

“Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs.”^{vii}

◆ *Serving others*

Involvement in service activities when young has been found to be a good predictor of a strong faith, more than participation in activities such as Bible study or worship services. Opportunities for families to serve others together can also increase the amount of time spent together as a family.

“The family's sharing in the Church's mission should follow a community pattern: the spouses together as a couple, the parents and children as a family, must live their service to the Church and to the world.”^{viii}

◆ *Sharing faith at home.*

Research suggests that the sharing of faith at home is an extremely powerful means of passing on faith in God. It virtually doubles the probability of children participating in the life of the parish. Even if parents feel that their efforts to share faith leave much to be desired, God's spirit seems to work through the efforts themselves. Seven home faith-sharing activities were found to be directly related to mature faith in children and youth. These, in order of significance, are: a mother who models the faith, a father who models the faith, a regular dialogue with mother on faith-life issues, a 'servanthood' event with a parent, an action of faith, a regular reading of the Bible and devotions in the home, a regular dialogue with father on faith-life issues, a regular dialogue with an adult, not a parent, on faith-life issues.

“The ministry of evangelisation carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable. It assumes the characteristics typical of family life itself, which should be interwoven with love, simplicity, practicality and daily witness.”^{ix}

ⁱ The following eight key areas, together with the supporting research are explored in more detail in *Passing on the Faith* by Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel. Saint Mary's Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Pope John Paul II: *Familiaris Consortio* #21

ⁱⁱⁱ FC 43

^{iv} FC 21

^v FC 36

^{vi} *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #11 (1965)

^{vii} FC 36

^{viii} FC 50

^{ix} FC 53