



CULTURE, *et cetera*

Parental example shapes kids' faith

No other factor comes close in surveys

By David Briggs
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Ask children at St. Joseph's Catholic School how God's love is expressed in their lives and many will draw a direct line from the Heavenly Father to Mom and Dad.

Katie recalls the moment before her family's car crashed, when her mother's hand reached over to shield her — an act of unselfish love that made the fifth-grader feel as if the hand of God had come down to protect her.

A classmate, Meghan, remembers when her dad "decided to stay home from a meeting to help me with my homework."

There is no question: Clergy, friends and formal religious training all affect the faith of young people, but no single factor is more important in the religious development of children than the example set by parents.

"The two are just inseparable," says Bernard Spilka, a psychology professor at the University of Denver.

"They learn more from example than they do from us telling them. They have to see love in the home. They have to see love between the parents," agrees evangelist Billy Graham, the passion rising in his fabled voice.

"They have to see the parents go to church and be interested in the church. They have to see the parents read the Bible, or hear the parents pray. Or they will grow up and it will be meaningless to them."

In an Associated Press poll taken by ICR Survey Research Group in March, seven in 10 adolescents said their parents have done the most to shape their attitudes toward religion. Only one in 10 cited a minister, priest or rabbi.

Several recent studies have found that baby boomers who seldom attend worship services — or

even those who have made it clear they are attending only for the sake of their kids — are raising children even less likely to have any kind of religious affiliation as adults.

In one study of college students in the United States and Canada, sociologists at the University of Calgary found that perceptions of "hypocrisy" were second only to a gradual drift into disbelief as the most important source of doubt reported by people who left their childhood faith.

An eighth-grade girl at Zion Lutheran School in Bridgeport, Conn., was troubled that her father and others in her family did not go to church, and as a consequence she was questioning whether she wanted to go to heaven.

"I don't really know, because I've done some bad things. I don't always ask for forgiveness," she said in a sad, hesitant voice. "I know some people in my family won't be. It's sad that I'm not going, but it's like I don't want to go and leave them."

How do parents raise a religious child? Offer them unconditional love, attend worship services together, and show your kids in both word and deed that your faith is important to you, says a consensus of sociologists, religious leaders and children themselves.

"So many parents just glibly say they want their children to choose for themselves but give them nothing to choose from," says Emory University sociologist James Fowler.

"When I go to bed at night and my dad comes in, we say our prayers together. I feel close to God after that," says Gillian, a fifth-grader at the Hutterian Brethren community in Rifton, N.Y.

A mother's careless comment — "I swear to God I'll cut your nails tomorrow morning or give you \$100" — became a lesson in faith to Jeanne, a fifth-grader at



AP photos

A child holds tightly to his stuffed animal as he prays during Sunday services at the United Methodist Church in White Plains, N.Y., in March.

Solomon Schecter School in suburban New York.

The mother forgot and paid off the \$100. The oversight was common, but she wanted her daughter to know she did not take lightly any oath to God.

God is all around 10-year-old Jesse's house. A sign reading "Jesus' Smile Lights Up Your Day" makes him happy each time he goes by it, and he and his mom say prayers together every night.

The only thing Jesse doesn't like is when his mom corrects his prayers.

"I say thank you that we had fun someplace," Jesse says, and his mother will break into the divine conversation by saying, "Dear

God, let's not talk about something that was luck, or something like that."

It is a delicate balancing act, helping children grow spiritually.

"The real key for parents is balancing conveying what they believe and allowing some freedom of expression for them," says David Heller, author of "Talking to Your Child About God."

Particularly as they enter into the independent stages of adolescence, children also desire the freedom to develop their own relationships with God.

"It's easier to believe in something personal, that's yours," says Gabby, an eighth-grader at Solomon Schecter.

Children's belief in God evolves as their lives grow more complex

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The 3-year-old boy wanted to be alone with his baby brother. With a sense of awe, he touched the baby.

"You've got to tell me about God," he implored. "I'm beginning to forget already."

The moment — described by pediatric oncologist Dr. Diane Komp in her book "A Child Shall Lead Them" — says a lot about the faith of children. Simple and pristine at the start, it grows more complicated along with their lives.

From early on, they are preoccupied with their own mortality and life after death. As they grow older, particularly when evil and sickness and death intrude, conversations with God become more critical and probing.

For some the questioning will lead to a rejection of religion. But many children discover a growing hunger for a personal relationship with God, something that provides them with love and security even as they go through the painful process of forging their own identity.

By the second grade, the God most children know is still a loving protector, one who stands beside them in nightmares and who takes care of relatives who have died in heaven. In their world, good is rewarded and evil punished.

But by the time kids reach ages 10 and 11, the formal teachings of faith receive sterner tests in the light of experience.

Now, for the first time, the children express doubts about whether they and their friends will make it to heaven.

"I'm very scared about death. ... There's a kind of comfort in that you believe in the next world, but the only reason I believe in it is to comfort myself," says Rachel, an eighth-grader at Solomon Schecter.

Still, there are many children who have kept and strengthened their faith despite evil and tragedy — children like Rafi, an eighth-grader at Solomon Schecter who refuses to blame God for the Holocaust.

"I believe God's in all of us," Rafi says. "He's the good side in us."



Children clasp hands while praying during a Saturday morning class last month at St. Charles Roman Catholic Church in Bridgeport, Conn.