

# Praying with Young Children

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As parents, we find that we pray often and earnestly for our children. We ask God to keep them safe, to make them well, and to help us as we care for them. But there is another gift of prayer that comes to us: the gift of praying with our children.

There is a big difference between a child's prayer and that of an adult. And it is precisely this difference that makes it such a privilege to pray with little children. They lead us to an enjoyment of God that we may have been missing. When allowed to pray naturally, their simple words come straight from the heart.

What is prayer? We have probably been told that prayer is talking to God. But talking is only one of the ways that young children communicate. They help us understand a broader and richer notion of prayer: to pray is to listen to God and respond, to receive God's gifts and respond.

When adults pray, it is natural for us to include many prayers of petition. But the prayer of young children is primarily praise and thanksgiving. They thank God for bread, animals, and the sun, and as one child put it, for "opening the doors of my heart." In the littlest ones we may observe prayer without words: an attention given to religious objects, a sigh of deep contentment, the humming of a melody from the liturgy or an eagerness to listen when we speak about Jesus. When they pray verbally they may use few words; they might also surprise us by enjoying long intervals of silence.



How might we, as parents, help our children enter into prayer? When we think of family prayer, what comes to mind are the common places of prayer in the home: table and bed. The times when we share a meal or prepare for sleep are moments of relaxation and recollection. How natural it can become to express our thanks to God for food prepared and offered and for the completion of another day! The ritual of prayer at these moments is welcomed by even the smallest children and ensures that God's presence is not forgotten. Simply lighting a candle at mealtime and singing or saying our thanks to God attracts and delights even the youngest child. The baptismal sign of belonging to Christ—a small cross traced with your thumb on the child's forehead—can become a nightly blessing.

Of course, mealtime and bedtime are not the only times of prayer. Little children love to “be with God” frequently. We can offer them a special prayer corner by preparing a low table or shelf, or even a deep windowsill, with a cloth perhaps the color of the liturgical season, a crucifix of the risen Christ, a statue of the Good Shepherd or the Madonna and Child, and a vigil light or a small vase with a flower from the garden. Simplicity is the best guideline for fostering prayer.

Another great help for the child's religious formation is quiet time in the home. Quiet is needed not only for prayer but also to discover that one has an inner life.

If prayer is response, what is the starting point that invites the child to respond? It can be naming God as the one who brought everything into being, declaring God's unending love, telling the child about Jesus' birth, or explaining that he died but is risen. We usually need to speak only a few words. The very slightest suggestion of the mystery of God, spoken with reverence, often stirs the heart of a young child. Their response is in



their listening, their gratification, their joy, and sometimes in their request that you “say it again.”

We may notice that children “lift their voices” in prayer, and so music becomes a way to assist them. We can listen in church for songs that address God directly or for antiphons and alleluias that are easy to sing. Just a line or two will do for the child.

Once we notice the child's delight in prayer and his or her ability to turn to God, we can offer more in terms of the language of prayer. We can go to the psalms, the enduring prayers of our tradition. “The LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23) and “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27) offer both beautiful words and strong images. Prayer words such as “alleluia” and “amen” can be introduced. As the child grows, we can begin to share the prayers we hold dear. Again, one line at a time is enough. For example, we can pray together, “Hail, Mary, full of grace” on the solemnity of the Annunciation (March 25) after listening together to the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary.

Prayer is so much more than reciting something. In the precious years of early childhood, prayer can be a biblical phrase, a body relaxed, or a singsong declaration of God's love. These responses begin a lifetime of heartfelt prayer.

#### For Further Reading

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