

Inspiring a faith that lasts

How churches can support parents in nurturing their children's faith



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Foreword



As parents, there are so many things we teach our children. There are the 'magic' words of please and thank you to learn, the right way to hold a pencil, how to tie up shoelaces, and how to cross the road safely, to name just a few. And the learning process isn't confined to the early years. As children get older, we do our best to help them learn about relationships, internet safety, and money management.

Our children are watching and finding things out from us all the time. And that includes what they learn from us about faith. But it's possible to give this little, if any, thought. We devote ourselves to nurturing their physical, intellectual and emotional growth, but how much time do we give to sharing our faith with our children?

At the heart of the Church is a ticking time-bomb. It is estimated that only 50% of children with Christian parents grow up to have a personal faith of their own as adults. In contrast, those who do not practice the Christian faith are virtually 100%

successful in passing on their lack of belief to their children. The need to address this situation is urgent. If nothing is done, the Church faces a crisis within a generation.

Parents are their children's biggest influencers, but in our research for the Kitchen Table Project, we've discovered that many mums and dads feel ill-equipped to nurture their children's faith or don't know where to start.

Of course, parents cannot take total responsibility for their children's spiritual life and there are no guarantees, but through building warm relationships and being intentional about sharing their faith, they can give their children the best possible opportunity to have a relationship with God of their own.

In this booklet, we will share some findings about the important role of parents in passing on faith, and we will begin to explore how churches can support and encourage them. Thank you so much for joining with us.

Rob Parsons, OBE

Founder and Chairman,
Care for the Family

Endnotes

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Introduction

Welcome to this booklet for churches and church leaders.

We are thrilled that you have taken the time to look at this material. It's designed to help churches think about what steps they can take to encourage and equip parents and carers in the amazing opportunity they have to impact their children's own journey of faith – a crucial area of ministry within church life.

We'll cover five key steps:

1. Believe it matters
2. Understand how parents feel
3. Know what works
4. Change a culture
5. Take some action

About Care for the Family

Care for the Family is a national charity which aims to strengthen family life and help those who face family difficulties. Working throughout the UK and the Isle of Man, we provide marriage and relationship, parenting, and bereavement support through events, courses, a volunteer network, online and other resources. Our work is motivated by Christian compassion and our resources and support are available to anyone, of any faith or none.

For more information visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk

Step 1:

Believe it matters

Childhood is the key time when people come to faith

Research shows that most people come to faith by the age of 19¹. Only 2% of Anglicans are converts from non-Christian families,² and 92% of adult churchgoers say they attended church at least occasionally as children.³ That means that most of the Christians sitting in your church on Sunday were sitting in church as a child, right alongside their Christian parents.

But just 50% of children brought up in Christian homes continue in faith

Think about the children involved in your church – statistically only half of those children are likely to be following Christ when they are adults⁴. However successful our evangelistic efforts with people who were not born into Christian homes, there is likely to be a drastic decline in the UK Church unless that trend changes.

Parents can make the difference

So what are we to do? Our thoughts may well turn initially to our children's work or Sunday school. But while that's important, churches can potentially overlook the crucial role of parents in the home.

The biblical foundation

Sharing faith with the next generation is an important theme throughout the Bible. Parents are repeatedly exhorted to teach their children about God, so that the next generation have the opportunity to experience God's love, goodness and forgiveness for themselves.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:5–7).

"He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (Psalm 78:5–7).

Websites

Parenting for Faith – www.parentingforfaith.org

BRF's Parenting for Faith programme provides resources and training for parents, communities and churches to support them in bringing up children in the Christian faith. The website is full of videos, articles and resources to equip parents to help children and teenagers develop a lasting and vibrant two-way relationship with God.

Godventure – www.godventure.org.uk

Creative ideas and resources for prayer activities, Bible activities and exploring God through play.

Guardians of Ancora – www.guardiansofancora.com

A free game-app from Scripture Union for children aged 8 to 11 to help them explore Bible stories and develop their relationship with God.

Courses

Parenting for Faith

A free video-based resource with eight sessions, for churches or small groups. It aims to help parents discover they are perfectly positioned to show their children the reality of a life with God and to empower them to have their own vibrant two-way relationship with him.

www.parentingforfaith.org/parenting-faith-course

Courses from Care for the Family

The Marriage Sessions

A flexible, four-part, DVD-based resource that explores how a couple can build a fantastic relationship, whether newlyweds or married for years. Featuring Rob Parsons, Katharine Hill and special guests, with stories from real-life couples plus street interviews.

Parentalk – The Primary Years

In six sessions, this resource looks at the topics that affect just about every family, including the busyness of family life, understanding children's 'Love Languages', speaking and listening, how best to set boundaries, preparing children for the outside world, and the

importance of family time. Presented by Rob Parsons and Katharine Hill, with family interviews, street vox-pops, humorous short dramas, real-life parenting case studies, and presenter discussions. Contains a DVD, Group Leader's Guide and ten copies of the Parent Notes.

Parentalk – The Teenage Years

A ready-to-run course for parents of teenagers. Rob Parsons and Katharine Hill are joined by special guests, including broadcaster Carrie Grant, educational psychologist Dave Lumsdon and youth specialist Rachel Gardner. A DVD, group leader's guide and parent handbooks are all included.

Getting Your Kids Through Church

A DVD-based course for parents, church leaders, youth and children's workers – anyone who is passionate about nurturing and encouraging faith in the next generation. The eight sessions explore some of the vital issues that affect every home, church and community, from tackling the busyness of everyday life to creating an environment where our children feel they belong.

"Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation" (Joel 1:3).

"For I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord" (Genesis 18:19).

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

We see an encouraging example of this in the life of Timothy, who lived in Lystra with a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (Acts 16:1). It is clear in Paul's second letter of encouragement to Timothy that the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother had played a crucial part in him embracing the Christian faith for himself:

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5).

Paul recognises that Timothy's relationship with these ladies, who he loved and trusted, and who had taught him the scriptures from an early age, had been foundational in his salvation. Their teaching and lifestyle had prepared the ground for Timothy to experience God for himself:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14–15).

But the Bible also provides us with examples of what happens when this truth is not passed on. In Joshua 24:15, Joshua declares, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord", and verse 31 confirms that Israel served the Lord throughout Joshua's lifetime. However, we go on to read that "After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10).

Somewhere along the line the baton had been dropped. Sharing faith in God with the next generation had broken down, and in the book of Judges we see the consequences – a people who "quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked" (Judges 2:17).

Parents are the biggest influencers

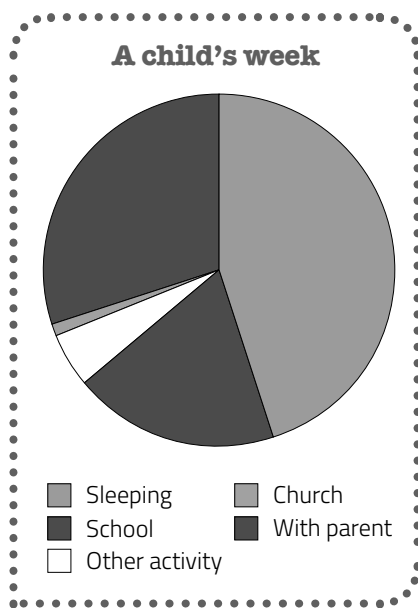
Parents can sometimes doubt whether they have influence with their children,

especially when it seems that they may not be listening to a word they say! But as well as the biblical foundation, there are practical reasons why parents are in the prime position to inspire faith in their children.

A child who does not go to playgroup or nursery school will probably spend at least 21,900 daytime hours within the

home by the time they are ten. It could take the average church group more than 421 years to spend the same amount of time with this child.

Research shows that parents are the single biggest influence on their child's faith⁵ – which includes both those who have an active Christian faith, and those who don't follow any faith.



Modelling a relationship with God

At its heart, the gospel is an invitation to enter into relationship with God. Parents can model what that looks like every day, in a way that is very hard to achieve in Sunday school or similar settings. After all, what we're trying to convey is that the Christian faith is not just about attending church on a Sunday morning! Parents can show their children what it means to turn to God in difficult times, to forgive and love each other, to receive God's grace when mistakes are made, and to thank him for the good times too. Our children's work at church is important, but the greatest impact is when children see faith lived out every day in both the tough times and the good times.

Further reading

Getting Your Kids Through Church Without Them Ending Up Hating God

Rob Parsons (Monarch Books)

Practical wisdom for anyone passionate about encouraging faith in the next generation. This book explores how our children's view of God can be influenced by how we live out our faith. It highlights some of the challenges that brings and provides tips on how to nurture our children to develop their own personal faith.

Parenting Children for a Life of Faith

Rachel Turner (BRF)

Clear and practical suggestions to help children develop a personal faith, not just knowledge about faith. The book explores how to proactively disciple our children, model the reality of being in a relationship with God, and connect children to God's heart. Full of encouragement and real-life help.

Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids

Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark (Zondervan)

An encouraging and helpful guide for parents about helping children move from childhood faith to a faith that is uniquely theirs. Includes practical ideas and questions to help apply the material at home.

Bringing Home the Prodigals

Rob Parsons (Hodder & Stoughton)

Prayers, reflections, stories and encouragement for all those who care about a prodigal.

Key resources

Raising Faith

Katharine Hill and Andy Frost
(Care for the Family in association
with Essential Christian)

A brand new and exciting magazine-style book designed to encourage and support parents. Full colour throughout and packed full of easy-to-read articles, providing practical tips and ideas to help parents inspire their children's faith in everyday life.

It Takes a Church to Raise a Parent

Rachel Turner (BRF)

An insightful resource bursting with useful stories and illustrations. This is a valuable tool for church leaders and all who want to create a church culture where parenting for faith can flourish.

Step 2: Understand how parents feel

So how can we best encourage parents in this ministry at home? It's not as straightforward as just telling parents, 'You should do this!'

It's certainly not about making parents feel guilty in any way but encouraging and equipping them so that they grow in confidence. Parents have many concerns, fears and uncertainties, and it will help if we can understand and address these. 92% of parents told us they knew they should be doing more to nurture their children's faith⁶ – but putting that into practice was not so easy. Parents found it hard to overcome hurdles such as cultural influences, pressure from others in the wider family, and difficult life circumstances. Our research highlighted that there were three big issues which parents particularly struggled with.

I'm just too busy

Family life today is busy. In many families both parents are working full-time⁷, and a significant proportion work unsociable hours⁸, so time together as a family is squeezed. The number of mums or dads parenting alone continues to

rise⁹. Parents are trying to manage the school run, homework, playdates, church activities, supermarket shops, car or home repairs, paying bills, cooking, housework, walking the dog, and endless emails. Relaxed time together as a family can become very scarce. So encouraging parents that they need to nurture faith at home can feel like an extra pressure they can do without – simply adding to their sense of failure and guilt.

We can help by reassuring parents that sharing their faith with their children is not about adding another long list of tasks in to their schedule. The key is to be intentional. As we inspire parents to look out for opportunities to show their faith in normal, everyday life, then they will begin to find simple ways to help their children to connect with God. This could be when they are walking them to school, over meals, at bed time, queueing at the supermarket, or waiting for a sibling to come out of school.

Resources

The Kitchen Table Project

The Kitchen Table Project is an initiative from Care for the Family aimed at creating a movement of mums and dads who join together to share ideas, learn from and encourage each other to inspire faith in our homes. It recognises that the church will play an integral part in encouraging parents in that journey: firstly, by empowering them to realise that they have the most influence over their children's faith and therefore the greatest opportunity to inspire it in everyday life; and secondly by supporting and equipping them.

Here are some of the ways in which you can be resourced by the Kitchen Table Project:

1. Encourage parents to join our online community

Sign up to be part of the online community and to receive regular encouragement and practical tips for nurturing children's faith.
www.kitchentable.org.uk/join

2. Host an Inspire session or encourage parents to run one

Our *Inspire* session is an easy-to-run small group that starts the conversation about nurturing faith in our children. It's designed to be fun, relaxed and interactive, allowing parents to share

ideas and experiences, and find ways to support one another. Everything you need to run a session is free to download.

www.kitchentable.org.uk/inspire

3. Spread the news at church

On the website you'll find posters, leaflets, and a church toolkit that includes sermon outlines, discussion questions and ways to equip parents to share their faith at home.

www.kitchentable.org.uk/church

4. Encourage parents to follow us on social media

Where they can chat to other parents, share ideas and experiences, find out about everything that's going on and keep up to date with all our new resources.

Facebook and Twitter: @ktpcampaign

5. Receive church leader updates

We'll send monthly emails with new ideas and inspiration for equipping parents in your church.

www.kitchentable.org.uk/join

And we can also encourage parents to *make* time, which might mean having a good look at the calendar. Perhaps parents could take it in turns to go out with one child at a time for breakfast at Tesco on a Saturday morning or consider dropping a sports or music activity so that the family can eat together at least once in the week. It's about helping parents to find opportunities within the rhythm of their family life to spend time together. It doesn't have to be expensive or complicated; just making the most of these opportunities to have conversations that help build faith and love.

It might also mean looking at our church schedule. Is it possible that we expect parents to attend so many meetings and events through the week that they haven't got enough time to invest in their families? Are there small changes we could make which would make a significant difference in the lives of families in our congregations?

I'm not good enough

Most parents are all too aware of their failings: the times when family life is a bit fraught, voices are raised or tempers

lost. They may have a past they are not so proud of, or feel that their lifestyle disqualifies them from passing on the baton of faith.

But we can encourage parents that God has entrusted their children to them and they are good enough. We can help parents to realise that they can use their mistakes as well as their victories to demonstrate God's grace and forgiveness, which will empower them to share their faith with their children. Modelling saying sorry when mistakes are made teaches children so much about how God forgives us and helps them to see that a relationship with God isn't something just for a Sunday but impacts our whole lives.

Parents can be reassured that God chooses to use us in our brokenness and weakness to accomplish great things for his kingdom through his strength. As God assures Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Nurturing our child's faith can be done despite our weaknesses as we live in complete dependence on God, who is the only one who can bring new life.

And finally...

Changing our church mindset and way of doing things may seem pretty challenging and rather daunting – or may fill you with excitement!

Whatever your initial thoughts, we hope that some of the ideas and case studies you have read about will inspire and help you to start thinking about how you can best support and encourage the parents in your congregation.

A good place to start may be to look at what you are already doing and how these areas of ministry can be tailored to strengthen and support couples and parents. Or you may want to look at introducing some of the ideas you've read about in step 5 or the case studies. Each church and family is unique and you will know what will work best within your congregation. You could also ask parents what they would like or provide them with some options to choose from.

Take a look at the resources section listed below to get you started. And if the first thing you try doesn't work as well as you would like, don't be afraid to try something else. There are plenty of ideas to choose from.

You might be concerned that parents may not engage or that you may not reach everyone right away. Mindsets and culture take time to change and develop. It is likely that you will start by engaging the parents who are keen to disciple their

children and are already doing this at home. That is a great place to begin. The Kitchen Table Project here at Care for the Family is about starting a conversation between mums and dads so that they can support each other and share ideas. You only need one person eager to see faith being inspired in the home to start this conversation with other parents. Hopefully, as parents see changes happening in other families or hear a consistent message in various areas of church life, they will be encouraged and empowered to inspire their children's faith in the everyday.

"Sometimes it is in small changes that the biggest opportunities are waiting to be discovered."¹³

And let's not forget what we are hoping and praying for – that our children will develop their own authentic, independent relationship with God, experiencing the peace and joy that comes from knowing they are loved by him. Let's be inspired and help parents catch that vision too.

I don't know where to start

For others, the biggest barrier is not knowing where to start. Nurturing a child's faith seems like such an overwhelming task that we'd rather not even try. As leaders we can suggest to parents that they think about small seeds they could plant – helping them to find little things they could do in the week which are intentional and consistent. We could even help by providing an easy resource to use, like a CD of Christian songs for car journeys.

For some parents the idea of talking about God with their child feels daunting, as they worry they won't know the answers to the questions their children might ask. We can all be tempted to think that nurturing faith should be left to those who have a robust understanding of scripture and ideally a degree in theology.

The truth is, most of us will find ourselves out of our depth at some point when we are trying to explain difficult theological concepts to children, which we might not fully understand ourselves. Not all parents will feel

confident or equipped to unpack every theological nuance for their children. The questions can come thick and fast. What is the Trinity? Will my dog go to heaven? Were there dinosaurs in the ark? Why did God let my school friend die in that accident? We can help parents see that what really matters is that they can model a willingness to keep learning and to trust in God even when they don't have all the answers. Research shows that what's more important is giving room for doubts, questions and wondering – rather than having definitive answers to impress on our children that give them no space to explore for themselves and come to a point of personal belief.

It's important to cheer on parents – telling them that we believe in them and that they are capable for the task.

Step 3: Know what works

To know how we can best support and equip parents, it's helpful to understand what works in nurturing a child's faith.

Fundamentally of course we want to acknowledge God's sovereignty and the importance of prayer, and to encourage parents in praying for their children. Research has also identified some foundational elements that help create an environment in families where faith can grow.

Four key elements

1. Home

A warm, affirming family where children feel safe, loved and accepted gives a secure foundation for their faith to grow.

Many people report that feeling close to their parents and experiencing a warm family environment played a part in them developing faith.

Of course there are no guarantees. But when we support mums and dads through parenting courses and other initiatives, we are giving them the tools and strategies to create the rich soil within which faith can take root and flourish.

2. Be real

It's not about expertise. We are not perfect, but living out our faith in a genuine way inspires children to want this for themselves.

Children need to see what real faith looks like in the day to day. We can't pass on what we haven't got! As we help build up parents in their own faith, they can then pass that on to their children.

3. Be intentional

Finding simple ways to involve God naturally in everyday life encourages our children to know and love him.

We can encourage parents to look for those little ways they can build faith into everyday life. It might involve praying together as a family on the way to school, mentioning God as Creator when we walk in the park, or agreeing to serve together at church in some way.

4. Belong

Involving children at church and building relationships with others helps our children to feel they belong in God's family.

Evidence shows that children's faith benefits from the positive influence of their grandparents, as well as through being connected to other adults in the church. Whether their church has a huge youth group or they are one of the only children there, they need to feel that it is their family, a place where

Union Road Presbyterian Church, N. Ireland

At Union Road Presbyterian church families are an important part of the church community, and teaching families about the Bible's big picture and the key truths is a priority. This emphasis was firstly introduced in the church service, starting with actively engaging the children in prayers and songs by explaining the words and meanings. A new children's song is chosen each month and parents are asked to download it to listen to at home. In the children's talk ideas are given to discuss at home in families, and 'take home' sheets are given so that families can carry on talking about the topic at home. Different ways of engaging with sermons have slowly been introduced, such as note-taking sheets, which both young people and some adults have found helpful! A children's slot has also been

included in the evening service, to encourage more families to attend it together. Beyond the Sunday service, families have been encouraged to go on mission trips together, and during these trips children have become excited about reaching out to others.

Some of the ideas they have tried have worked better than others, but giving a choice of activities to match the different interests of different families has been effective. They've also learned not to expect that everyone will engage in everything. There has been an increased number of families attending more regularly at morning and evening services. Parents have reported that they can talk about church more easily at home, and they look forward to going to church, where they can learn together as a family.

Locks Heath Free Church, Hampshire

At Locks Heath Free Church nurturing faith at home is kept at the forefront of conversations. Recently a small group of mums met to listen to a podcast and then shared different ideas that they were currently using to nurture faith at home. Ideas for how to talk about faith at home have been included in a sermon, and then follow up articles distributed afterwards. On Sundays with the younger children

there is an emphasis on leaders sharing what has been taught in the group with parents, or encouraging the children to share at home. The leaders sometimes suggest ideas for age appropriate follow-on activities at home and to encourage further discussion. They have tried new ideas, and try to keep the conversation going to inspire and support parents, which is an ongoing challenge.

What has this journey looked like for others?

Sutton Vineyard Church, Surrey

A few years ago the staff team at Sutton Vineyard church decided to refresh their children and family's ministry, so they began by recruiting a Children's Pastor. Hannah took on the role this year, with a vision for changing the focus of the children's ministry over the long term, of which a key part is helping families talk about faith more deeply at home. Over the past six months Hannah, with the support of the church leadership, has begun to change the way the children's work is viewed and implemented in church. They are working at going deeper in biblical content with the children and encouraging Sunday learning to spill over into home life.

Hannah started by surveying the volunteer team, parents and children. She then held a vision-casting evening with over 50 volunteers, outlining the ideas and timescale and explaining why they were making changes. The church has now put foundational things in place, building blocks for moving forward. Follow up emails are sent out to new or visiting parents. Social media is used as a tool to give parents ideas and encouragements through the week as to how to follow up on that Sunday's topic. Termly topic cards are distributed to let parents know what is happening in the children's work

each week. Hannah is hoping to run a family discipleship day where parents can see faith at home being modelled in a home environment. She is also planning to run courses to give parents practical tools to dig even deeper with their children.

At points making change has been scary, as they wanted to ensure they didn't upset people or push them away. It has also taken longer than they originally expected. But Hannah has been very aware of the support of the staff team behind her, enabling her to take risks and learn from them if things didn't go according to plan. Volunteers have been energised by the new vision, and they have re-surveyed parents and children to see what they think of the changes. It's still new and fresh but has so far proved very encouraging, with parents reporting that their children are talking more about how Jesus impacts their everyday life at home.

they belong, and that they have a contribution to make.

Building on children's openness

So when should we start thinking about nurturing faith in homes? As soon as a child is born – and in fact we can be encouraging parents to pray for their children before birth. Even very young children can praise God; in the Psalms we read, "Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger" (Psalm 8:2).

In his book *Born Believers*, psychologist and anthropologist Justin Barrett explains that children are born receptive to the idea that there is a God; for example, they can intuitively see a designer when they look at creation.

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20). From their earliest days children have much to make sense of in creation – why are trees green and the sky blue, who decides when the sun goes to bed

and the moon and the stars get up, why is water wet, what is infinity, who made you and who made me ... As parents help their children think about these and other big questions of life, it can help cultivate wonder, and play a part in signposting children to a creator who is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good.

Barrett helps us see that children seem predisposed to believe in a supernatural being who can bring order and meaning to their lives. And the way in which many of them create imaginary friends indicates that accepting the existence of an invisible, transcendent God can actually come quite easily to them.

We can also be confident in talking to our little ones about God's grace. Unlike many adults, children don't feel the pressure to reciprocate or earn; they simply welcome gifts with open arms. In the same way they have little problem in embracing the concept of the wonderful undeserved gift of grace. So parents can be encouraged that in many ways we have a natural foundation to build on, when seeking to inspire faith in our children!

Stages of faith

John Westerhoff in his 1976 book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* defines four stages of faith.

| | | |
|---------|-------------------|--|
| Stage 1 | Experienced faith | Infants assume the faith of their care givers because this is what they are exposed to – this is their first and vital exposure to Christianity. |
| Stage 2 | Affiliative faith | Children start copying what they see in those around them; they will join in because ‘everybody else does it’. |
| Stage 3 | Searching faith | Children start asking questions, trying to understand the things they have already been taught, so they can decide whether they believe this themselves. |
| Stage 4 | Owned faith | This is when a child passes through the searching stage and gets to a place where they ‘own’ their faith. |

During preschool and primary years, children are predominantly experiencing the faith of their parents. No home is neutral; we are all passing on our values to our children whether it’s intentional or not. So whether we are teaching and modelling the Christian faith, or suggesting through lack of faith interactions that faith doesn’t matter,

our children will often start by assuming these views as their own, before questioning it more for themselves at a later stage. If parents share their faith with their children as a natural part of their daily way of living, children are likely to spend their formative years understanding the Christian faith as a normal part of life.

Make church welcoming and inclusive

- Think about whether you can have more services which are accessible and welcoming for children as well as adults, so that all generations can worship and learn together.
- Create a booklet which parents can use to explain the church building or worship service for children, and the meaning of elements such as communion or the offering.
- If you have a vision statement or similar, could you produce a ‘child-friendly’ version?
- Provide sheets for following along with sermons (you can find basic templates online).
- Make rooms child-friendly and safe so that families feel welcome.
- Find a way to enable children to send in prayer requests for the church family.
- Encourage a commitment from the whole church to get to know families and invest time in them.
- Provide online links to key songs that you sing in church so that they can be learned at home so they’re more familiar.

Involve children in serving

- Find ways for whole families to serve together, e.g. place a whole family on welcome.

- Identify areas where children could be involved in service and ministry, e.g. helping with the AV, handing out notice sheets, helping with music, serving refreshments, taking the collection, leading prayers.
- Think about how children can get involved in any campaigns, e.g. 40 Acts, or Fairtrade Fortnight.

Encourage intergenerational relationships

- Run hospitality Sundays, where people offer to host or ask to be hosted, and then match up people who wouldn’t normally cross paths, e.g. a young family with an elderly couple.
- Host an intergenerational Bible study or prayer meeting.
- Encourage parents to identify individuals who could agree to pray for their child and take an interest in them.
- Suggest that parents identify individuals who would be happy to involve their child in an area where they serve in church life and teach them the role.
- Invite the older generation into Sunday school to share parts of their testimony and let the children pray for them.

"We are choosing Lent as a period when we can all look at the same sermon topic and Bible passages so everyone will hear the story and look at it in an age appropriate way from the adults to youth to children and also small groups. I hope this will promote discussions across the ages and within the homes as well."

A children's worker

- Give away resources like prayer cubes or lend out Bible story activity bags for parents to use at home.
- Provide seasonal resources for parents to explore faith at home with their children (e.g. for advent).
- Run a course such as *Parenting for Faith* (see Resources section) – maybe as a separate option for parents in another room while the sermons are being preached.
- Or use one of the sermons in the Church Toolkit to make the subject a natural part of your teaching in church (see Resources section).

There may also be opportunities to create links between Sundays and home – whilst remembering that the church's main role is to support parents as they explore ways of nurturing faith in their own homes, in a way that works

for them. This is not about giving the impression that the only task for parents is to follow our lead and reinforce the teaching that is happening in church and Sunday school.

- Give parents advance notice of what you'll be covering in children's groups, perhaps once a term.
- Provide take-home ideas after Sunday school or other children's clubs, which encourage parents and children to continue exploring the topic together.
- Consider whether the church's teaching could be structured so that adults and children are looking at the same subjects or passages.
- Invite parents into children's programmes to see what happens.
- Ask parents what topics could be covered in church or youth group which would help their children in their current stage of faith.

4. Belong

When children feel that they truly belong in the church family, and that this is 'their' place, where they are loved and valued, faith is much more likely to 'stick'. For children's faith to grow and last, it will really help if they feel they are part of a larger community of believers and that this is their home.

Step 4: Change a culture

What is the church's role?

So what then is the role of the church in this; how can we help? Mark Holmen in his book *Church + Home* puts it like this:

*"The Church is called to be a lifelong partner (not replacement) with parents to help people know God's story, tell God's story, and be God's story 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, beginning in their homes and extending through all aspects of their lives."*¹⁰

The church's role is to encourage, equip and support parents as they seek to bring their children up in the faith. This doesn't mean there isn't a place for churches to be teaching children about Jesus directly – there certainly is – but equipping parents needs to be at the forefront of our thinking.

During our research we spoke to many church leaders and children's workers. 59% of church leaders reported that they do a lot to nurture the faith of children directly, whereas only 12% reported doing a lot to help parents nurture faith at home. 94% of church leaders felt that churches should be doing more to help parents, as did 85% of children's workers.

As churches we know however that we face barriers in supporting families. In our survey 50% of leaders felt that the

biggest barrier to them doing more was not having enough people to support the ministry. This is certainly a challenge for almost all churches.

But changing the culture need not involve setting up a whole new ministry stream to support parents to nurture faith at home. It needn't require big budgets, lots of staff, expensive equipment or the most dynamic children's work.

It probably does mean a change of mindset and focus, however. Many churches are beginning to recognise that if we are investing all our effort into the hour we have with the children on a Sunday, but not supporting parents at home, it is unlikely to bear the fruit we are hoping for. The challenge is to consider changing things around so that our main focus is equipping parents to nurture faith, backed up by what we teach on a Sunday and during the week.

Encouraging and equipping parents

The most important thing we can do is simply to encourage parents in their efforts. Rachel Turner suggests that it's a big leap for parents to understand that they are actually more effective and influential than the trained and skilled 'experts' in the church. She points out that it takes a lot of courage for

parents to really believe that they are the foundation of God's plan for the spiritual lives of their children, even in the midst of their imperfection and busy lives.

As Rachel says:

"Parents feel guilty a lot – about a huge variety of things. A myriad of 'shoulds' live in their heads, and they often feel they are failing to do what is expected of a 'good' parent: 'I should be playing with my child three hours a day, and I'm not. I'm a rubbish parent'; 'I should be cooking with organic food all the time'; 'I should be able to afford better clothes for my kid'; 'I should take them out more.' These 'shoulds' weigh parents down and make them feel as if they are failing ...

"So when we push parents to do 'faith at home', their guilt reflexes come in strong: 'I should be reading my Bible with my kids'; 'I should be better at praying with them'; 'I should do mission with them'; 'I should be teaching them about Jesus.' They can begin to feel isolated and afraid, and they believe the consequences for their failures will be the sacrifice of their children's and teens' walk with God."¹¹

Our goal is to find ways to 'cheer lead' parents that they are the right people for the job. God has positioned them and equipped them, and we are here to support them.

One of the most encouraging things we found during our research was that as soon as parents were prompted to think about the importance of nurturing their children's faith it had a positive impact on their home life. This included making them more alert to spotting potential opportunities that naturally occur as part of everyday life and encouraging them to try out new resources. As one mum put it:

"This project has really helped me to focus on nurturing my children's faith. I had thought that if I was telling them about God in Sunday school, I didn't want to overdo it at home. Through this project I have realised I have to seize all opportunities to talk to my children about God. The perfect time may not come along so just go with every chance and pray God will bless it. Not to worry about having the right words but just start the conversations."

Of course this will not be the case for every family, but if churches can simply raise awareness of this issue with families, and demonstrate how much can be accomplished in the course of everyday life, this could in itself lead to big changes.

- Encourage parents to share ideas and encouragement with each other, maybe through a Facebook group or meeting regularly to chat and pray.

Help parents to let their children see their faith

- Ask families to pray at the front of church, parents and children taking turns.
- Support parents to pray out loud in small group settings, so it feels less strange doing so at home.
- Consider teaching the congregation short liturgical prayers and encourage parents and children to pray them together at home.
- Give parents simple ideas such as praying out loud in the car instead of praying silently in their mind or spirit; sharing with their children what God has spoken to them about in church; letting their children see them read the Bible at home.

3. Be intentional

Creating habits in the family can make talking about God a regular part of family life. These can include daily or weekly routines, as well as special occasions. For the church it's about providing tools that parents can use at home, whether that's actual resources, or through training or modelling.

Model what it looks like

- Model how to pray with children and provide creative ways to do so.
- Normalise discipleship within the home in sermons. Everyday sentences like, "When we prayed with our children yesterday ..." helps raise the expectation that parents do talk about God and pray in the home.
- Encourage families to create habits, e.g. praying in the car on the way to school.
- Set up *Inspire* groups so that parents can meet to support each other and share ideas of ways they can nurture their children's faith (see the Kitchen Table Project section at the end).

Resource parents

- Provide new parents with a book on inspiring faith in our children.
- Use opportunities such as baptism or dedication to help parents reflect on how they can be inspired to live out the promises they are making regarding raising their child in the faith.
- Dedicate a section of your church website to resources for parents, to help them navigate the wide range of options available.
- Choose a small number of different children's Bibles for various ages, and stock copies for sale in your church.

2. Be real

Being real involves children being able to see their parents' faith in both the highs and lows. In that way they can see how faith makes a difference to the everyday, and understand that it's OK to have confusing questions and not have all the answers.

It will help parents to do this if they see other Christians being real, whether that's other parents or their church leaders. Learning from the encouragements and struggles of others will make them much better equipped to share their own faith with their children. It also helps them see that the struggles they are facing are normal – reminding them that no one is perfect, and we are all trusting in God's grace and strength in this great task.

Hearing others describe how they share their faith with their children in the rhythm of everyday life can also normalise it. This will help parents feel less daunted by the idea of sharing their faith with their children at home. For example, a

"I would like God to be a bigger part of our everyday life. We don't talk a lot about God during the day, but I probably just need a bit more courage to seize the opportunities and not be afraid of not having the answers."

church leader or small group leader could mention in a sermon or discussion that they pray with their child on the way to school, or talk about the beauty of God's creation while visiting the beach, and this can really empower parents to realise this is not as difficult as it may seem.

Model vulnerability and encourage peer support

- Partner families who have small children with parents who are further along the parenting journey, for encouragement and prayer.
- Encourage a culture of openness in midweek groups and prayer meetings, where parents can feel safe to talk about their highs and lows of parenting.
- Consider sharing examples in training or sermons of times when you didn't always get it right!
- Get to know parents. Visit the church toddler group or wherever parents are likely to gather to begin to get to know their situations and give them chances to ask questions.

"This project has really helped me to think about how to do this as part of everyday life. The focus on our role in nurturing our kids' faith has helped me to see opportunities I hadn't realised were there before, and it has reminded me of the necessity of grasping every one."

Challenges for leaders

It's important to acknowledge that this can be a difficult subject for many leaders, vicars or pastors. It may be that our own children or others we love seem to have wandered away from God at the moment and as Rob Parsons puts it:

"We feel that perhaps for us it's too late. If this is your situation, let me remind you of that wonderful verse from the book of Joel: 'I will give you back the years the locusts have eaten.' It is never too late to reach out to an adult child; never too late to say sorry; never too late to pray."¹²

The truth is that even if we do everything 'right' and give it our best efforts, our children may still go their own way. In fact, even God had trouble with his children – they went a way that their Father didn't want them to.

But we might still find it challenging raising these issues in church. Maybe we don't feel confident that we know what we should be encouraging parents to do. Or perhaps we feel that we shouldn't interfere with family home life.

The good news is that our Christian faith makes it very clear that we don't have to 'have it all together' before we can share the good news with others. In fact, sharing our own struggles can be much more freeing for other parents than sharing our successes and giving the impression that we've got all the answers.

As leaders we may also wonder how we can possibly find time to do anything about this, alongside all the other issues we're trying to manage, and how it can fit into a busy church schedule. Later on we'll look at how we can start small and how it's more about a change of culture rather than necessarily running big new programmes.

Step 5:

Take some action

In this section we want to provide you with a range of ideas that you can adapt to best encourage the parents in your congregations.

We are not suggesting that you aim to cram every one of them into church life, or even that it would be advisable to do so. The goal is to provide you with some suggestions to help you as you start to think about what will work for your church. It's about weaving the concept through church life, perhaps supported by some special events, but fundamentally becoming a core part of the culture of your church.

"If we can teach people that [nurturing faith] can be a natural part of life – for instance, something that can happen over meals or while you are driving – it is more likely to be taken up rather than rejected."

Church leader

Importantly, this isn't about feeling overwhelmed by fifty new things to add to the 'to do' list, or trying to force

something that doesn't work for your congregation. We can start small and find ways of tweaking what we already do. Think about how you can create a culture where parents feel encouraged and inspired in the privilege of helping their child develop their own relationship with God.

Let's turn then to the four elements that we identified as being key to inspiring faith in children.

1. Home

Children are much more likely to share their parents' faith if there is a strong parent-child relationship. Partnering with parents in this area will mean supporting individuals, strengthening marriages, and equipping mums and dads in their parenting as well as in their own faith journey. Your church is probably doing many things already to strengthen and support individuals in their personal faith, from Sunday morning teaching to small groups and various ministries. But how much of this supports and encourages parenting? Could you make small

changes to what you are already doing to incorporate this?

Here are some ideas of ways in which you could care for and support parents.

Care for parents

- Provide marriage courses and special marriage enrichment events (such as Care for the Family's *Marriage by Design*).
- Consider pastoral care for parents so that they can feel supported in issues which affect their home life.
- Encourage parents to be involved in midweek Bible study or housegroups, for support and accountability – are there others who could babysit occasionally to make that possible?

Support parenting

- Run parenting courses (such as Care for the Family's *Parentalk* courses).
- Signpost parents towards books, podcasts, events and other resources to support them in their parenting.
- If as a church you pray regularly for those leading various ministries, why not include praying for parents in that – recognising the importance of their role in discipling their children.

Foster positive parent/child relationships

- Suggest social opportunities for parents and children to spend time with each other and other families. This could be a simple brunch or movie night.
- Encourage mums and dads to find ways to spend time 'one on one' with their children – maybe through a programme such as 'Who Let the Dads Out?'
- Consider whether families (including the leaders!) are so over-scheduled that they don't have enough time together; are there sufficient free evenings in the church weekly calendar?
- Encourage parents (and other adults in the congregation) to pray for the children when they go out to their activities rather than the church leader praying for them.