

EXPERTS' ADVICE

No one knows a child like their parents, therefore no one can lead a child to Christ like their parents. Leading their child to Christ is, in fact, a parent's primary job. But that job becomes increasingly difficult as a child grows. Telling a 4-year-old that Jesus loves them is easy. Answering a 16-year-old's hard questions about the Church's teachings on love, sex and God is decidedly less so.

That may be one reason why the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate found that 45 percent of Catholic teens say their parents rarely or never talk with them about faith. (And why another 27 percent say their parents talk about it less than once a week.)

But while raising faithful teens may be difficult, it's far from impossible. Here, Catholic youth ministers offer some do's and don'ts for parents looking to engage their child more fully in the faith of their baptism.

DO ...

... be understanding

"You've got to at least try to see things from their vantage point. If you don't do that, you're behind from the beginning. You've set them up to dismiss you. It's important to approach discussions in a way that respects them and treats them with dignity."

— Jim Beckman, the Augustine Institute, Denver

... pray

"Be prayerful throughout the entire process. Call upon saints like Monica, who prayed heroically for St. Augustine's conversion. And if your child is struggling, give thanks that it's happening at home, where you can engage in these conversations with them. You're blessed to have that opportunity. Many parents don't get that."

— Brian Kissinger, St. Mary of Sorrows Catholic Church, Fairfax, Va.

... talk about Sunday Mass

"Ask them what they thought about the Gospel or homily. Share your thoughts, too — what you liked or what challenged you. And don't accept generic answers. If they say the lesson they took away was to be nice, ask them to whom they need to be nice or what they could do to be a nicer person. Require them to reflect on the specific actions they need to take."

— Christopher Bartlett, St. William Catholic Church, Round Rock, Texas

... have family dinners

"Sit down at a the table, put the cell phones away, turn off the television and eat together for 30 minutes a day. So many parents and teens are disconnected from one another, and lots of teens' issues remain unnoticed because there's not enough regular interaction with the adults in their lives. Family meals are important in correcting that."

— Alison Griswold, St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, Panama City, Fla.

... share your spiritual journey

"Live the faith in a way that's transparent. Be a good witness and talk openly with your children, in an age appropriate way, about how you became a disciple of Christ, about what you struggled with and how you still struggle, but why you keep choosing to follow Christ. Share your story as a way of inviting them to go deeper in their faith."

— Jim Beckman

... pray together

"The family Rosary is a great place to start, but don't stop there. It's important for parents to share with their children what they're praying about, what they're struggling with, what they're sharing with the Lord, and what he's saying back."

— Jim Beckman

... be patient

"Remember, they're teens. Their interests, passions and opinions change with the wind. Know that you have to give them a little room to make mistakes and wait patiently for them to come back around."

— Angela Gaughan, St. Bernard Catholic Church, Pittsburgh

DON'T ...

... wait

"Start talking to your children about faith long before the teenage years. The earlier you start talking with them about Jesus and the Church, the easier it will be."

— Alison Griswold

... neglect your faith life

"You can't give what you don't have. Nurture your prayer life and your spiritual life first, then allow that to flow into your family life."

— Christopher Bartlett

"If you're uncomfortable sharing your faith because you don't feel your faith is strong enough, then that's your first step. Get stronger. Go to a Bible study, read, pray — that's what will help your children."

— Angela Gaughan

... let them skip Mass

"You would never let your child not get out of bed in the morning or not eat simply because they said they didn't want to. The same goes for Mass. It's OK to require your children to attend Mass as long as they live at home. Even better, plan your family's week around Sunday Mass. Teach them its importance by not letting anything — games or practices or work — interfere."

— Alison Griswold

... preach

"You can't impose faith. You can only propose it. Sometimes, the best place to start that is by poking holes in modern philosophy. Ask a lot of questions. Gently lead them to seeing the contradictions."

— Jim Beckman

... waste the teachable moments

"It breaks my heart to see teens get in their parents' car, then put their earbuds in. It's much better to listen to the music together on the radio. Then, after the song, stop it and talk to your child about the song's message. Use everything — music, television, chores — as an opportunity to talk about the Faith."

— Christopher Bartlett

... hesitate to call in the cavalry

"If a teenager is really fighting you on some point, nine times out of ten, you're not going to be the person who helps them find their way through the struggle. So have lots of resources around the house — books, magazines, newspapers — that present the truth. And ask someone else to intervene — a youth group volunteer, family member, or trusted friend. Be creative."

— Angela Gaughan

... think it's too late

"If you dropped the ball on your child's faith formation, if you neglected your faith life and only now realize the importance of God, if you haven't made Mass the priority, admit that to your child. Apologize and tell them you want to get the family back on track."

— Christopher Bartlett