

Faith-Nurturing Family Activities

by Keith Johnson

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Family devotions are notorious for giving migraines to parents and causing children to groan. Formal family devotions at home can range from breakfast Scripture readings, bedtime prayers, or even "sermonettes for Christianettes from the dinette." But even these can come across as irreverently artificial, canned, and hokey, further creating a gap between church and home. Christian parents realize the value of time at home spent with God -- but how do we do it? Family faith-building need not always be structured to be effective. Whether the setting is formal or impromptu, the purpose is a conscious effort to strengthen communication, to experience communion, and to build community.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 suggests the best way to meet these goals. Moses says that "these commandments...are to be upon your hearts." We are told to "impress them on [our] children." How? By talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." WOW! Here's movement; crafts (gee, we should even write on our doorframes -- get out those stencils!); conversation; and creative, hands-on teaching at its best -- all to be done with our children.

Activities that are natural yet directed, routine yet imaginative, personal yet spiritual, nurture faith at home. A spiritual home will produce a spiritual child who matures into a spiritual adult. Here are specific activities to help parents build their children's faith at home.

1. **Worship Preparation** -- Prepare for formal "at church" worship before you leave home. Wake up earlier than your kids so you're not rushed. My mom diffused the Sunday-morning-rush stress by waking us up to the soft sounds of Christian music. Music sets an emotional tone wherever it's heard. It worked for King Saul, and it worked in our madhouse also.
2. **Prayer** -- Have you ever passed by someone broken down on the side of the road but you just couldn't stop? Why not pray aloud for that person? Or when you spot an ambulance or squad car speeding to the scene of a problem, pray for the people involved, their safety, and their relationship with God. You'll find that children fight over who gets to pray. Another time for prayer is just before kids run off to school. My wife commits our children to the Lord and challenges them to stand up for the things that are right and against the things that are wrong.
3. **Bible Reading/Study** -- Read a key verse at breakfast. Read or tell a Bible story in your words before bedtime. Bible reading should be a social, bonding opportunity, not a dry discipline devoid of purpose. Remember: Short passages for "short people," long passages for "long people."
4. **Meals Together** -- Mealtime is family together-time. Even if you regularly don't eat meals together, you can still create activities that nurture faith during mealtime. Assign table-setting chores and the before-dinner prayer to different family members. My daughter loves to have everyone pray with her when she prays. Encourage conversation. I like to ask open-ended questions at the table. Ask each person, "What's the best thing that happened to you today? the worst?" Instead of asking, "What did you do at school today?" get specific: "Who did you play with at recess? Who did you sit with at lunch and what did you talk about? Who was your friend today at school?"
5. **Family Fun** -- Television, the newspaper, Nintendo, shopping, and the telephone can interrupt or effectively eliminate opportunities to build faith. Pull the plug on these things. I like to join my daughter in cleaning up her room. She and I have a great time singing the cleanup song and sharing. Or set up craft or coloring books on the kitchen table as kids get home from school. This will give them an opportunity to be creative and will give you an opportunity to talk with them. Board games have become one of our family's favorite activities. Around the Monopoly board, we dream about what our homes will look like someday on the inside and outside.

6. **Celebrations** -- Birthdays in our home are all-day events. One child is special, and we emphasize that. On holidays we try to focus on giving to others. We encourage each child to learn the value of giving by picking out a gift for siblings. On Easter we decorate together and invite another family to help. We tell the stories that make the holidays meaningful and focus on others in practical ways. Traditions are powerful ways to bond and cement what's important. My grandfather would tell the story " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas" each Christmas morning. Before packages are opened, we read the Bible's account of Jesus' birth.
7. **Vacations** -- The best part of a vacation is the memories it gives family members. Planning, packing, sitting in a car for hours on end, sleeping in a strange bed, and having unexpected breakdowns produce stress and conflict. But no sooner have we returned from a vacation than we're planning the next one. Why? Because of the intense togetherness of these excursions. My wife and I were surprised to learn that our children prefer driving to flying. Our children (11, 8, and 5) prefer driving because they have our undivided attention for hundreds of miles. To a child those dull stretches of highway look great when you have your parents all to yourselves. We play road games, stop for treats (a.k.a. potty stops), and have crazy conversations. Prayer for the journey is standard, but what about prayer at the restaurant so others will know that God is important? What do you do on Sunday away from your home? Try sitting together in a different church for the first time -- maybe even a church from a different denomination.
8. **Service Projects** -- It's been wonderful to hear my kids pray each night for the last four years for Mariamu in Zimbabwe. We sponsor this little girl and pray specifically for her food, water, education, and family. We feature her picture [rominently in our home. She has literally grown up with us. Visiting convalescents' homes as a family, helping a new neighbor move in, bringing lunch to Habitat for Humanity workers, or assisting in a park cleanup gives kids the valuable experience of seeing faith with works.
9. **Sacrificial Giving** -- Allowance time is a perfect opportunity to demonstrate sacrifice and giving. Set up three cups: one for God, one for saving, and one with your child's picture on it. Allow children to determine who gets what, and help them stick to it. Let their savings be for a specific project. Turn in their "God" cup once a month at church (once a week for younger kids).
10. **Rest** -- Spiritual nap-time? Sometimes a busy family needs a break. God knew we would fill our time with busyness and commitments. Rest doesn't come naturally, so God had to command that we take a break. A family pause is an ideal time to regroup, reconnect, and recharge.
11. **Family Mission Statement** -- Stephen Covey introduces an important concept in the life of a family by encouraging families to come up with mission statements. Covey writes that there's a "supreme value in the process of long-term thinking and planning in building strong families. Deciding as a family what your worthy purposes, worthy visions, and worthy values are will unite your family in ways you've only dreamed of. Your mission statement will embody principles everyone has participated in choosing and that everyone has committed to live, both publicly and privately." In the process of writing your statement, everyone gives input into the "big picture" of your family. God is placed at the center of your home not by chance, but because you've purposed it to be that way.
12. **Family Conference** -- We have family night every Saturday. We take turns planning an activity. If it costs money, then Dad has to be consulted to see if it's in the budget. We also have three or four family conferences each year to assess our assigned chores and responsibilities, to evaluate family nights, and just to connect in a formal way.
13. **Conflict Resolvers** -- Sometimes siblings can get on each other's nerves. What better way to redirect tension than to think about the good qualities of one another. Whenever someone in our family is mean-spirited to another family member, the offender has to say or write four things he or she appreciates about the other person. This makes us thankful for one another and tenderhearted. It's also fun to watch the other person take in the compliments. We conclude with all of us chiming in a good quality we appreciate.

Times when we have to discipline our children become great opportunities to share God's forgiveness and unconditional love. Last night my two boys had a water fight in the basement with their friends. They were in their rooms awaiting the punishment, and their contrite hearts melted my wife and me. They were truly sorry and said, "I wish I could take it back." What a wonderful time to share the forgiveness that resembles God's forgiveness.

Conflicts, as with all family situations, provide clear opportunities to put flesh to Jesus, put teaching into practice, and make Christ the center of our homes and therefore our lives.

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