

Raising Kids Who Care

Session 1: Wasting Time with Family

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God,
you know the challenges we face
in raising children.

Guide our conversation today
as we talk about the difficulties and joys
of teaching our children to care for the world
and the people in it.

May the Holy Family be with us
and grant us courage and energy
to be present for our children.

Help us to support our kids and one another,
as we walk together in faith.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Living in Relationship

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

- Welcome! Thank you for making time to reflect together on how we might raise kids who act on the values of our faith.
- There are few times or places in our society today that teach the value of putting others first. Our society can be self-centered with a me-first attitude, and this is the context into which today's children are born and raised.
- Families can stand in stark contrast to this message, however, because family connections remind us that human beings are social and community-oriented. The family reflects in ordinary, everyday ways what Catholicism has always taught—that relationship with God exists as a part of relationship with others.
- As scripture reminds us, these relationships are connected— “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). The family is where we learn to see another's need as greater than our own. It's usually within a family or at home that we learn how to respond generously to other peoples' needs.
- It can be as simple as allowing the person who has to leave the house first use the bathroom before you, or as labor intensive as hosting a cast party for 40 boisterous teens. No one ever called it holiness or spirituality. We were taught to think of it as taking turns and sharing.

- Our society poses unique challenges and questions for families' moral and spiritual development. Technology, overloaded schedules, affluence, individualism—all of these make it harder to teach self-sacrifice. Learning and teaching sacrifice in a situation of plenty can be a difficult thing to do.
- Sharing usually works best when there is not enough—from not enough money for new clothes to not enough lasagna for everyone to have as much as they would like or not enough floor space for that party. More screens in the house or enough mobile phones for every family member might eliminate some arguments, but having so much technology can also discourage community. We may miss important opportunities for learning to live with and for others. If there are fewer arguments or conflicts in our families today, it could be because there are less conversations and connections happening among us.
- One thing that seems to be decreasing as material resources increase is time. Society teaches that time is money, and this mindset flows into family life. We may guard our time too intensely or preach to our children about using time wisely. We tend to complain about all of the things that take time. And what is the most common response we give when asked how we're doing? "Busy!"
- Living in a family or community requires that we surrender time to one another. A child's first steps, first words, impromptu family picnics, and moments when your child decides to confide in you—these things are not subject to our schedules.
- Pope Francis has posed the question: "Parents, can you 'waste time' with your children? It is one of the most important things that you can do each day." How would we answer his question?
- If we can make this mental shift, maybe it no longer "takes time" to give our child a ride, tell a story, or listen attentively because we have decided to give this child the gift of our full presence. St. Thomas Aquinas calls this "the sacrament of the present moment." In our families, we might just call it being available.
- The ways that we make time to talk to our kids about dilemmas and questions they face is something that will stay with them forever. These actions are an example of what it means to be family, not to mention the satisfaction or joy often found in placing the needs of someone you love before your own.
- We all know that time and mental and emotional availability are difficult things to come by in our lives today. We need the support of our communities, God, and one another.
- It helps to know that we are not alone in this process. We have the experiences of the group gathered here, the wisdom of Scripture and the church, and the love and support of God in our prayer to help guide the way.

Reflection Questions

- ① When was a moment recently where you experienced the "sacrament of the present moment" or an important moment of encounter with your child? What did it feel like?
- ② What activities or environments allow you to feel most present to your children? Which make it more challenging for you to be present? Why?
- ③ Technology, overloaded schedules, affluence, and individualism are listed above as challenges in our lives. Which prove to be the biggest challenges in your family? What would you add to the list?

Do Feelings Count?

- Morality is often understood as knowing right from wrong. The church has taught that morality usually comes along with our ability to reason. However, with advances in our understanding of childhood and moral development, psychologists have realized that morality actually begins in *empathy*, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.
- Empathy happens in our relationships, often through our emotions. As parents, we have probably noticed the empathy that kids have for others who are hurting and the different ages at which empathy arises.
- We have probably seen the two-year-old who attempts to soothe another child's tears with caresses or a favorite toy, and also the two-year-old who ignores or hides from another child's pain. Children appear to be born with varying degrees of empathy that develop at different rates, which is very normal.
- The four-year-old who pleads, "that's not fair," has a sense of injustice. Young children know how to play fair (even if they don't do it all the time) or be kind. These moral actions in kids are often rooted in feelings, not necessarily logic. Often at these beginning stages, children offer to others what they would need in that situation.
- When my youngest child was two, I fainted in the kitchen. When I awoke, she had covered me with her blanket and put her favorite stuffed animal by my head. Her eyes were red and she had obviously been crying, but she set aside her own fear to help. She offered the support she knew and was able to put my needs first.
- Children have a moral sense that develops independently of the rules made and enforced by adults. Very early studies with elementary school children have demonstrated that the knowledge of a moral code or set of rules (like the Ten Commandments or the Scout Oath) has little to do with the moral behavior of children.
- This doesn't mean that we shouldn't teach our children the Ten Commandments. It means that we should teach them these biblical guides using examples from their relationships with friends or family so they can understand the commandments more fully.
- Feelings such as empathy, sympathy, admiration, anger, and guilt are an important part of our moral reactions to human situations, for children and adults. Children develop values through the experience of these emotions and how they are processed, supported, and acted out by the people around them.
- Empathy—learning to understand and respect the needs of others or a group—is the foundation of virtue. The growth of empathy is a stepping stone for the development of morality in a child. Because empathy begins in relationships, it's important to find ways to support and talk to our children about their relationships—at home, at school, on their sports teams, etc.
- American culture often forgets the importance of relating. We eat fewer meals together, and when we do, there are screens to distract us from communicating. Our indoor recreation has become more passive and isolated, also involving screens.
- At one time, we built porches on the fronts of our houses where we would sit together and chat with neighbors. Today, we build decks on the back of our homes for privacy and isolation. We all feel this to some degree, right? We ride on the train or the bus, and nearly every person is wearing headphones or scrolling on their mobile device. Empathy is in danger if we forget how to pay attention, listen, and relate to the people around us.
- Empathy develops slowly and requires a real-time investment from parents, schools, and the larger community, especially in the early stages. Some studies suggest that empathy in parents, that is, their sensitivity to other peoples' feelings and injustice, may influence early moral development in children.

- If we hope to raise ethical children, we cannot be too busy to spend time reading, playing, talking, and daydreaming with them. Never underestimate conversations at family meals or in the car. Is it possible to have one family meal every day? Or a few per week?

- Another way to reinforce empathy is through storytelling. You could go to your local library and search for age-appropriate stories that teach strong values. It can be helpful to read the stories out loud and ask children how they would feel if they were the main character. How might they have acted if it were them in the story?

Reflection Questions

① Can you think of a time when you saw your child responding (or not responding) to the needs of another—at home, on the playground, at school? Please share.

② How do you talk with your children when you see them a.) respond well to another's needs? OR b.) respond poorly to someone else's needs?

③ Are there any devices, practices, or things in your family and/or household that create barriers to relating or talking to one another? How might you better limit what keeps you from relating to one another?

④ What activities or practices would give you more time and space to communicate with your children?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Dear God,
thank you for the gift of
emotions and empathy.
We want to put others first,
but don't always know how.
May your Son Jesus guide us
to listen and respond
to the needs of our children,
loved ones, and neighbors.

Give us the courage
to extend our empathy past our front door
and out into the community.
May we be channels of your love and grace.
In Jesus' name, we pray.
Amen.

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