

# 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

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- 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?

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- 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

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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

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*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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# Raising Kids Who Care

## Session 2: Rules, Rules, Rules

### Opening Prayer

*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Gracious God,  
Be with us as we teach our children  
to care for those around them.

Help us to see  
where we may have overlooked  
or missed the pain of another.

Give us compassion for ourselves  
and all parents on this journey  
as we guide our children to live your commands  
and help to build your Kingdom.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.

### How Do We Talk about Rules?

*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.*

- In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis talks about the importance of parents “fostering good habits” in their children. He and many experts agree that “active methods” and dialogue are the best ways to help children learn the importance of values. The question is, *what does that look like?*
- It can be hard to set rules and boundaries that seem fair and reasonable for kids. Sometimes we enforce rules in a way that might be effective in the short term but doesn't lead our children to care for others around them.

- Sociologists recognize three basic patterns of how rules are enforced in families: power assertion, love withdrawal, and inductive rule enforcement. Our faith tradition and experts in early childhood development would encourage an “inductive” process, which we’ll learn more about in the next section. First, let’s explore why the other approaches can be less helpful.
- Power assertion as a way of enforcing rules uses superior physical strength or authority of the parent to make a child obey. There are certain times when power assertion is necessary—for example, to grab the hand of a toddler who reaches for a hot pan or to physically remove a kid behaving roughly on the playground. But this way of enforcing rules through power only addresses the immediate problem and doesn’t affect the child’s deeper understanding of the rule or motivate the child to act differently.
- Enforcing rules through power can also have negative side-effects, like teaching kids that physical force is a good way to get someone smaller or younger than you to do what you want. For many kids, this way of enforcing rules can look or feel like bullying.
- Another common pattern that experts see in families is rules enforced through “love withdrawal.” It can be easy as a parent to feel hurt or sad when our kids misbehave, and we might interpret that action as the child’s lack of love.
- But when children are taught to act a certain way to earn love from their parents, actions can become connected to approval rather than a child’s own sense of right and wrong.
- This can also create fear in children that they will lose their parent’s approval, and this way of enforcing rules can even cause children to lie or cheat as a way to maintain approval from parents, teachers, or other authority figures.
- I’m sure many of us have had a personal experience of rules being enforced in an unhelpful or even damaging way. We may have come across a rule that did not make sense to us or the painful process of feeling like we were constantly trying to gain someone’s approval.
- Being a parent and exercising unconditional love and patience can be challenging. The invitation that Pope Francis gives us in *The Joy of Love* is to not be intimidated or fearful of raising our kids or making mistakes, but to enter into a journey of growth with our kids where “children can truly learn for themselves the importance of certain values” and where we can “lovingly...help them grow in freedom” into caring individuals.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What experiences have you had in your own childhood or as a parent that serve as examples of unhelpful rule enforcement through power assertion or love withdrawal?
- ② When have you felt that you used parental authority in a way that didn’t feel right? What might you do differently if you were faced with that situation again?

# Inductive Process

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- As we learned in the last section and perhaps our own childhood experience, withdrawing love from our children in times when they have disappointed us and enforcing rules through power often have negative effects.
- Of course, most of us would feel that we love our children without any strings attached—just as God loves us—but we know that in the day-to-day this ideal it can be messy. What counts is the perspective of our children. Do they feel just as loved when they mess up or fall short as they do when we are particularly proud of them?
- This unconditional acceptance and love do not mean that children can do whatever they want. Rules, boundaries, and structure are so important in the life of a child, but these rules should help our kids become more and more independent.
- Our households and families should have well-enforced rules. Certain actions or kinds of behavior should certainly be prohibited, but children also need to know *why* these actions are disruptive and how they hurt others. We should spend time talking with our children about the reasons behind the rules and the consequences of unacceptable behavior.
- A child's own empathy can play an important role here as we talk with our kids about the possible consequences of certain kinds of behavior, at school or at home. Do you ever ask your child to put her or himself in the shoes of a classmate or a sibling to imagine how a situation might have felt for others involved?
- This inductive or active form of rule making and enforcement often involves asking our children more questions. This allows space for kids to think about a situation and why a certain rule might exist. For example, asking a kid who has left his shoes in the middle of the floor, "Is that where your shoes belong?" followed by the comment, "Someone might trip if you leave them there" is an example of inductive rule making.
- Another important step in this process is to imagine how things look or feel from your child's point of view. Are there ways that our children could participate more in decision making in the house and family? Do they feel manipulated to act a certain way?
- As much as I might want to say to my children that they have to do something "Because I said so," I know that is more the frustration or exhaustion talking. As Jennifer Poindexter outlines in the Positive Parenting FAQ (AFineParent.com), some good, inductive alternatives include:
  - "My answer is 'No.' Here's why...";
  - "Nothing has changed in the last 5 minutes. My answer is still 'No.' The reason is still..."
  - "I've already answered that question. Do I seem like the kind of parent that would change my mind that quickly?"
  - "I said 'No.' Can you tell me why?"
- Pope Francis encourages us to think about where our kids are spiritually and developmentally, asking, "Do we seek to understand 'where' are children really are in their journey?" (*JL*, 261) Our job is to walk with our kids, showing them that they are unconditionally loved by God and us, and that they have the responsibility and the joy of giving that love to other people.
- Positive behaviors and patterns should be encouraged in positive ways. A system of family rules—about bedtime, household responsibilities, screen time, activities, etc—simplify family life and offer children a sense of security and belonging. These rules can become a source of identity, informing how children understand themselves and their role in the family. When a particular rule becomes "what we always do in our family," it becomes as much of a ritual as specific holiday celebrations.
- We'll talk more about forming these rules and household rituals in the next session.

## Reflection Questions

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① Share a recent example of when you have used a more “inductive” form of rule enforcement or when you and a child had a good conversation about breaking or upholding a rule.

② Take a moment to imagine, from the perspective of your child, what it feels like when you enforce the rules. From this perspective, in what ways do you feel like you enforce rules well? In what ways do you feel like you could do better?

## Closing Prayer

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*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Jesus, you invited all to come and follow you.

You showed them that you are the way,  
the truth, and the life.

You taught your disciples how to think and act  
and reminded them of God’s love  
every step of the way.

Grant that we may make disciples  
of our own children,  
teaching them your way, your truth,  
and your life.

We pray this in your name.

Amen.

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# Raising Kids Who Care

## Session 3: Habits of the Heart

### Opening Prayer

*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Dear God,  
we thank you for the gift of our children,  
with all of their joy and complexities.

Send your Holy Spirit to be with us today  
to give us insight about how they  
—and we—  
spend our time and energy.

Let our minds and hearts be open  
to how you invite us to grow  
in our role as parents.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

### Household Rituals

*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.*

- There is a long-standing rule in our home that whoever prepares the meal does not have to do the cleanup. As the kids grew up and eventually left for college, the rule became less necessary because meal prep became simpler and clean-up faster. When the kids return for a holiday or semester break and everyone's favorite dish finds its way to the table, each cook is always grateful for the rule.
- That's the wonderful thing about rules; they develop a life of their own. They can eventually become part of our kids' understanding of what is "just," and then we no longer need to enforce them in the same way, although they might need occasional reminders!
- In a family, rules—especially chores—can offer kids a feeling of security and belonging. Family rules or norms can even be a source of identity for kids. Rules can become family rituals that are understood, practiced, and even celebrated!

- My daughter once had a friend over, and the friend arrived before my daughter was finished with her chores. I said to the girls, “Before you go and play, you just have to finish hanging the rest of the laundry on the line.” My daughter’s friend was quite cheerful and engaged as she helped my daughter. Later, I said to her, “Emily, thank you. You are always so helpful when you’re here.” She responded, “I think it’s because my Mom never lets me help at home and I don’t have chores.” I was so struck by her response. She really wanted to be involved and feel the sense of satisfaction of helping with household responsibilities.
- In earlier generations, children were given more meaningful opportunities to contribute to the household responsibilities such as planning and preparing meals, cleaning the house, taking care of sick family members, and more.
- Today many parents are much more hesitant to ask their children to do household tasks or they only assign smaller responsibilities, such as clearing the table or cleaning up after themselves. However, many studies show that being more involved in household chores helps children develop a more caring attitude, makes kids more responsible and independent, and makes them feel like a more active part of family life.
- So “rules” do not always have to be about what *not* to do. Part of the active process of parenting can be developing household rules and routines that bring the family closer together and allow the work of a household to be more evenly distributed.
- Consider the difference between the following two families. In the first, after the family eats dinner together, Dad does the dishes while the children clear the table, vacuum underneath it, and then feed the cat, while Mom puts away the left-overs and cleans the counters. There may be some grumbling at times, and playing with the cat slows the speed of the children’s work, but the family is all engaged together.
- In another family, Mom does the dishes and all the clean-up while Dad goes back to his home office to work more while the kids scatter to their rooms and get lost in their electronic devices until bedtime.
- The first family may never claim they are enjoying great family time, but they certainly are living out values of cooperation, personal responsibility and informal connection during which stories can be told and experiences shared.
- A child psychologist once told me that it is more work for parents to have one child who is not expected to take on household responsibilities than it is to have two children who are active participants in the care of the family and home.
- Household rules and rituals can help children understand themselves and their role in the family. It is important to decide upon clear rules and practices and enforce them consistently. It is empowering for our children if we trust them with real tasks, and ultimately it helps us and them—though they *will* complain sometimes! These rules can become habits, and as our faith teaches us, good habits become virtues.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What are some of the rules and expectations in your household? What are some of your household rituals?
- ② If you asked your children what the household rules were, what would they say?
- ③ How have rules, rituals, or household chores shaped how you relate to your children or how they relate to you?

# The Importance of Forgiveness

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- As we know, even with consistently enforced household or school rules, our kids will sometimes break them. It's important to think intentionally about how we might respond when this happens.
- I once worked very closely with a woman I respected deeply. She was a mother of four daughters, and while she was a very good mother, she was also in touch with the fact that we are all human and flawed. She knew that, as a mother, she was not always perfect, sometimes far from it. But what impressed me most about her as I witnessed her interact with her kids was her willingness to apologize.
- If she had said something to one of her daughters that she later realized was not the best way to handle the situation, she would go into her daughter's room before bedtime, sit on her bed, and apologize, explaining why she had said what she said and why she felt like she needed to apologize.
- I also saw her practice this with our work staff. I learned from her the importance of humility and the importance of forgiveness.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation can also be important in helping children distinguish the difference between doing something bad or wrong, and *being* bad. The question is, how do we help kids accept responsibility for unacceptable behavior while not reinforcing unhelpful feelings of shame?
- Children can be taught at an early age to recognize that particular *actions* are shameful because these actions are below what is expected of them, without seeing *themselves* as shameful people. Trust is often first understood when children realize that the adults around them—parents, teachers, etc.—expect certain behaviors of them that they are very capable of fulfilling.
- When a child fails to live up to that trust, it hurts that relationship. It is good if children feel discomfort over the distress of another person, and it is very important that they feel discomfort if they have caused this distress. In these instances, it is important to focus on how the behavior makes the child feel and on how it affects others in the group, not on how it makes us—the caregiver—feel.
- We want children to do something because it is the right thing to do, it makes them feel good about themselves, and can make their peers feel good about them, too.
- When a child has made a serious mistake, it's important to talk about the consequences and help the child think through some solutions. The goal is to build independence in the child by offering ways to correct the wrong and at the same time reinforce the sense of responsibility for having caused the problem.
- If a child is to develop a healthy sense of trust and a healthy sense of guilt for legitimate wrongdoing, she needs to be free to make mistakes and try again. The same is true for us as parents. Hopefully, we can feel the humility and mercy to make mistakes and seek forgiveness from our children when we feel we have not lived up to the best version of ourselves.
- Forgiveness teaches us that we are trustworthy people, capable of taking responsibility for our mistakes, even when assuming that responsibility is painful. If we want to protect our children (or ourselves) from ever feeling bad about anything, we may deprive them of emotional skills that they need to grow into moral people.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Share an example of a recent moment when your child disappointed you or betrayed your trust. How did you respond to this situation?
- ② When have you felt like you did not live up to being the kind of parent you wanted to be? Did you seek forgiveness from your children? Why or why not? Please share.
- ③ Share about a time recently when you felt you handled a moment of discipline in a way that was loving and effective.
- ④ What are some things that worry you in reprimanding or disciplining your kids?

## Closing Prayer

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*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Gracious God,  
guide us as we teach our children  
right from wrong  
and good from harm.

Help us to help them  
to realize when they have done wrong  
and take responsibility for their actions.

May they always remember  
that we love them regardless of their actions.

Grant that we might find joy in each other daily.

In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen.

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