



Growing Up Catholic

A ministry of The Pastoral Center

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Leader Guide

Thank you for your willingness to help lead your group(s) in this time of learning and sharing about the privileged journey of Catholic parenting!

Scheduling Your Sessions

This resource can be used in a number of ways:

- ◆ gather parents into small group discussions as their children participate in the parish faith formation sessions
- ◆ schedule “Parents' Nights” or other regular gatherings of parents (perhaps after Sunday liturgy, providing child care)
- ◆ arrange for online discussion groups

Preparing the Materials

The participant materials are provided in both separate files for each session and in a single file. The handouts are four pages long for each session. We recommend that you distribute the handouts at each session, rather than giving them out all at once at the beginning. This will help your people remain focused on the current week and keep them from forgetting to bring their handouts each week.

Facilitating the Sessions

The simple format of the sessions allows them to be led without the help of a staff person. However, it would be helpful to have one or more volunteer facilitators (or lead parents) who welcome participants, track the time, and help ensure that everyone has a chance to share. If you have a large group, we recommend breaking up into smaller groups of 5-8 for discussion.

Here are some tips for leading the group:

- ① **Be welcoming and hospitable.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or new to participating in your parish/faith formation events. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
- ② **Review the group conversation guidelines** (see below) at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Parents have strong feelings about parenting. Make sure everyone feels comfortable in the group.
- ③ **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group.
- ④ **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to begin the discussion. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the “popcorn” method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity. Don’t ever put people on the spot by compelling them to share. Let people know that, at times, it’s absolutely fine to listen attentively and not feel they need to respond.
- ⑤ **Listen to feedback** from the group along the way. Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.
- ⑥ **Encourage the group to read the content aloud** rather than silently. An excellent way to get everyone’s voices heard early on is to use the “round table” format. Simply go around the circle having each participant read one paragraph. This paves the way for sharing: often once people have broken the ice and spoken in the circle, it’s easier for them to further participate.

Group Conversation Guidelines

Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

- ① **Our goal** is to connect our faith with the way we parent and live our lives. Keeping this goal in mind will guide our conversations and what we do afterwards!
- ② **Confidentiality.** What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
- ③ **Start on time—and end on time.** Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
- ④ **Conversation involves everyone.** Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. If you have many ideas, hold back from sharing a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to share the first time. At the same time, don't pressure anyone to share. There may be times when people just need to listen.
- ⑤ **Respect each other.** All perspectives are worthwhile. Avoid dismissing, making fun of, or judging anyone's thoughts and experiences.
- ⑥ **Share from your own experience and speak for yourself.** Don't problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do. Certainly share what you have found helpful in your life, but without the assumption that everyone has to follow your approach.
- ⑦ **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's human nature to have different opinions. There's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and experiences. Even though we share a common destination as the People of God, each person is on a unique journey.
- ⑧ **Turn off mobile phones** before the group begins. Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time so you can be fully present to others.

① *WHEN KIDS ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS*

Opening Prayer

God Who Listens,
Our children discover life's meaning
through asking questions.
Thank you for this opportunity
to gather with other parents,
as we explore our privilege of
exploring questions with our children.

Guide us in our conversations;
deepen in us our faithfulness
to you and to our children.
Amen.

Children's Questions

We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.

- It's the very essence of childhood to be filled with questions:
 - ▶ ones that might seem simple at first glance, yet turn out to be difficult to answer
 - ▶ some that leave us stunned that children think about such things
 - ▶ some that challenge us to re-think what we believe and value
- Often, too, children's questions are a way for them to tell us what's on their minds. Sometimes, children aren't skilled at voicing their concerns or worries, so they may hide their questions within a question.
- Children's questions cover a wide range of topics:
 - ▶ Why is the sky blue?
 - ▶ Where does water come from?
 - ▶ How do airplanes stay up?
 - ▶ Why do people get sick?
 - ▶ Will my dog go to heaven?
 - ▶ Why can't I see God?
 - ▶ Why did Jesus have to die?
 - ▶ How come when I pray, God doesn't always answer me?
 - ▶ What happens when we die?
- Children will often ask very honest questions when they encounter something new: "What is she wearing?" (a burqa). These are great opportunities for them to learn.
- Of course, we can't foresee all the questions our children will have. Their questions will challenge us to reflect on what we believe. At the same time, we don't have to have all the answers or have all our beliefs completely solidified in order to have conversations with our children.

Receiving Questions

- **Your child's questions may come at inconvenient times.** The last thing you want to do when you're trying to get kids to school on time or get dinner on the table is answer a heavy question. But with our hectic schedules there's *never* a good time, is there? So here are some ideas to help you receive your child's heartfelt queries as they come.
- **Be grateful** for your children's questions. You might want to praise their curiosity by saying, "That's really interesting! What made you think of that?" Help them to feel positive about asking a question, rather than uneasy. That will help keep your communication lines open.
- **Seize the moment.** Questions don't come at a specific time each day or when we set aside time for them. Take advantage of the moment. Be prepared to stop for the conversation; if that isn't immediately possible, promise to talk about the issue as soon as possible and keep your promise!
- **Listen attentively to understand what they're really asking.** Be sure to let your child finish talking before responding with an answer. While listening with your ears, look also at your child to discover facial clues. Is she afraid or worried, or is she just curious? When a child is asking a question, stay focused by not allowing your mind to wander or to begin to formulate an answer prematurely.
- **Get their perspective.** It is often helpful to at least initially turn the question back to them: "What do you think?" This can be a helpful way to initiate conversation, especially around religious and philosophical questions.

Reflection Questions

- ① What are some questions that your child has asked you that were challenging to answer?
- ② What tends to be your first reaction when your child asks you a difficult question?
- ③ Have you ever gained an important insight into your child by a question he or she asked? What happened?

Some Guidelines

- **Affirm.** Take your children's questions seriously—even those that might seem unimportant or frivolous to you. Answer all of them candidly and respectfully. We give an important gift to our children when we act as if no question is silly or inconsequential.
- Children are often not able to give the proper weight to the importance of information. Hence, their questions might seem to be trivial or insensitive about important topics ("Why is he so fat?"), when they simply don't have enough information or experience to be tactful. Even when we're baffled by their question, saying, "Many children ask that," can lessen their anxiety from asking the question.
- **Listen for the question behind the question.** Often there's a specific concern, or at the very least, a curiosity that's driving the question. For example, many things can trigger the question "Are you going to die?" It might come because of a news story, a death in the family, a storybook, or a bad dream. Asking it is often a child's way of expressing his concern about himself: "What will happen to me if you aren't here?"
- **Take time to clarify.** You and your child might have different meanings of a word. If your child asks, "Why is she so mean?" you might want to ask, "What do you mean by the word mean?" or "Why do you say she is mean?"
- **Don't be afraid of difficult subjects.** Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was once asked how God could allow the devastation that comes after an earthquake or natural disaster. Rather than giving a pat answer, the pope said that this was difficult for him to understand, too. He just knew God is close to those who suffer.
- **Answer honestly.** Some questions might be difficult and catch us off guard. Avoid lying to or misleading your child. Do your best to give an age-appropriate answer.
- **Keep it simple.** Sometimes the best approach is to respond only to what your child asked. As parents, you know how much information your child is ready to hear; respond to them according to their level of understanding. If a four-year-old asks, "What is sex?" she may have merely heard a reference to the gender of a baby.
- We might want to follow-up to their question with our own questions to discover clues to their thinking and to determine what they are really asking.
- **If you don't know the answer,** promise to find out (and invite them into the search). For faith-oriented questions, you can ask a staff member at your parish.
- If the question is unanswerable, gently let your child know that no one knows the complete answer; but make sure they do not think you are avoiding a reply.
- **Be aware of what your child is listening to and watching.** Many questions will be a result of what they see and hear in the media. Explore the messages that are given and how these might differ from the messages in the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

- ① What subjects are you worried your child may start asking questions about?
- ② How might you answer one of your child's past questions differently based on these guidelines?
- ③ When might you be tempted to give a less than honest answer? Why?

Closing Prayer

God Who Listens,
Thank you for guiding us throughout life's questions.
Help us to journey with our children
 through their questions of life and faith.
May all the questions deepen our relationships with one another
 and with you.
Amen.

Growing Up Catholic Parent Conversations: Family Matters. Copyright © 2017 Janet Schaeffler, O.P.
All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Published by The Pastoral Center / PastoralCenter.com.