

The Secret for Passing Your Faith on to Your Kids

What's the best way to pass your faith and your values to your children?

I know that's a huge concern for many fathers. One of my top goals as a dad is that my children would embrace the faith that I have tried to live out.

In the recent book *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations*, Vern Bengtson presents some eye-opening discoveries about "religious transmission." Based on his research involving more than 3,500 people whose lives covered more than a century, he found that the pivotal factor in whether children continue their parents' faith is a strong bond with their father.

When it comes to training kids in matters of faith and morals, we might typically think of teaching them right from wrong, emphasizing obedience to specific rules and expectations, and being a reliable role model for right behavior.

But Bengtson found that, while all those things are significant, they aren't sufficient if there isn't a strong emotional bond between the parent and child. A warm, close relationship with one's father makes the most difference in regard to passing on religious faith—even more than a good relationship with one's mother.

The same also appears to be true in nonreligious families: A strong emotional father-child bond creates the best chance for transmitting beliefs and values on to the next generation. (And while my examples and illustrations here describe a religious home, you can apply these principles to different approaches to faith and values.)

Doesn't his point about relational warmth make perfect sense?

How many people do you know who were raised in religious homes but through the years had fathers who were too busy—at work, doing hobbies or even serving in the church—to build a strong relationship? It's typical for those kids to resist their dad's desires, especially in faith matters. They will likely resent their father's efforts to be leaders in faith matters and may view their dad as a hypocrite.

Since the religious training isn't backed up with a solid, caring relationship, the children may fight against everything Dad stands for. Some of that will happen with teenagers anyway, but as dads, we need to learn from this.

One of my favorite sayings is "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It's especially true among the people in our homes. To pass on a legacy that includes faith or a system of values, we have to focus on building solid relationships with our kids.

They need much more than a list of rules and principles. Those times of teaching, worship and/or prayer are certainly important. But don't forget, dad, to also build a strong relationship so your children will want to follow in your footsteps. They need love to hold it all together.

How can you build that closeness in practical terms? Here are a few ideas in this week's **Action Points**:

- Set up a habit of doing something together, one on one, that your child will look forward to. It could be breakfast out on Saturdays, frozen yogurt every other Monday or something similar. Let your child choose the food or activity.
- Take a kid along when you head to the hardware store, the auto mechanic or the grocery store. Away from the rest of the family, you'll have more of each other's attention. And if something happens where you get to

model honesty or service to someone else, that's a bonus.

- Tell your stories to your kids—about experiences, events and conversations that have shaped your beliefs through the years.
- Talk about dreams—yours and theirs. What is happening in your community or in the world, and how do your beliefs provide hope and meaning even in uncertain times? And how might your child be able to make a difference during his or her life?
- Be involved in whatever ways you can. When you're there through the ups and downs of life, you'll become a reliable point of reference for your child.

What's your secret for building that close bond with your kids? What has worked when it comes to passing on your beliefs? Please help other dads by leaving a comment below.

Carey Casey is the CEO of the National Center for Fathering, a nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the culture of fathering in America by enlisting 6.5 million fathers to make the Championship Fathering Commitment. Subscribe to his weekly email tip by clicking here: ["Yes! I want tips on how to be a great dad who lives out loving, coaching and modeling for my children."](#)

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