

How to Talk
to Children
about

PRAYER

KATHY HENDRICKS



**TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS**

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Introduction

“How do I talk to my child about...?” This is not an uncommon question among parents as well as teachers and catechists. Abstract concepts, hard-to-broach subjects, and sensitive issues all require a particular kind of language that gives a child enough information without being overly complex or confusing. The same is true for many aspects of our faith.

This series of books provides parents as well as teachers and catechists with a range of questions about these topics. Each one offers terminology relatable to a young child’s experience as well as family activities to stimulate further conversation and comprehension. In sharing these responses, you are likely to find yourself more than capable of talking to your child about these and other topics of faith and practice.

What is prayer?

For your information

The most basic way to define prayer is talking and listening to God. Most of us grasp the first part. When distressed, anxious, weary, or in grief, we have no trouble calling out to God and naming our deepest concerns. Memorized prayers, such as the Our Father, spring to our lips when joining in communal worship or as part of a daily routine. Expressing our needs, naming our joys and sorrows, giving voice to fear or worry—all of these are ways of talking to God that give rise to a deepening relationship of love.

The second part of the definition can be a bit more challenging, but it is equally important in forming such a relationship. Learning to quiet our thoughts so as to enter more deeply into our hearts is the way of contemplation. It is akin to letting the fog lift so that we can see more clearly. Prayer is an expression of our faith in God's presence. As we engage in both talking and listening, God is also hearing our deepest needs and speaking directly to our hearts.

Talking to children about the meaning of prayer

A good place to begin an explanation of prayer is by offering the simple definition of talking and listening to God. From there, name different things the child might want to tell God. Start the conversational ball rolling by sharing something you pray for. Since children are concrete thinkers, make your examples relatable. For example, praying for safety for your family when going on a trip or asking for help in being a good parent.

Explain that prayer is also talking to God about what makes us thankful, worried, sad, or joyful. Liken it to the conversation you might have with a good friend with whom you want to share your

feelings and concerns. Then take turns sharing something you might each say to God about how you are feeling right now. Remember that little children are very concrete and immediate. They may pray for a stuffed animal one day and a grandparent the next. Be careful not to censor their prayers.

Emphasize that the words we use don't matter as much as the intention behind them. Prayer is something we can do any time we want to talk to God. Mention the second half of the definition—listening to God. Explain that we listen to God by being quiet and letting God speak to our hearts. We may not hear actual words, but we might be given an idea, grow joyful, or simply feel more at peace. Practice being quiet for a minute and listening for what God might be saying to each of you.

Pray together

Loving God, we want to grow closer to you. Remind us to pray each day by telling you what's on our minds and listening to you in our hearts.

Guide your child in making simple gestures for prayer, such as folding their hands, kneeling by their beds, or bowing their heads. Note how each one shows reverence for God and draws us into an attitude of prayer.

Why do we pray?

For your information

There's a saying that prayer doesn't change God; prayer changes us. After all, if we believe that God sees and knows all, we hardly need to provide updates to our daily circumstances or the world's needs. As with any intimate relationship, however, it is essential to spend time with the one we love. Thus, to grow more deeply in our friendship with God, it's vital to share what is in our hearts and minds. The different forms of prayer—petition, thanksgiving, praise, adoration, and intercession—provide a range of ways to express our needs, joys, longings, concerns, and hurts. When we have made mistakes or caused pain to others, we turn to God for forgiveness as well as help in asking for and showing mercy. While making a decision or puzzling over a moral dilemma, we seek divine guidance and the grace to act with wisdom and integrity.

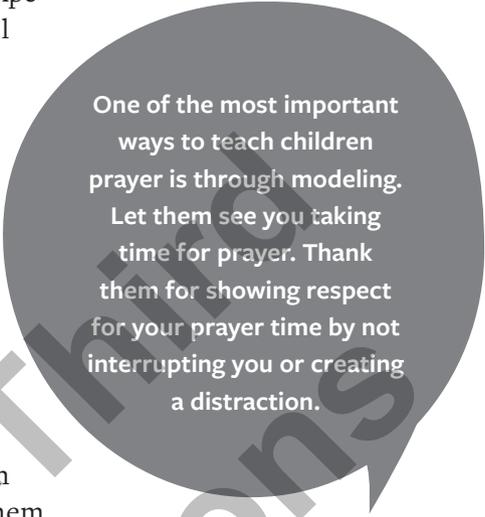
Talking to children about why we pray

Tell your child why you pray. Share an experience in which you turned to God for a specific reason. It might be for consolation after suffering a loss or in thanksgiving after your child was born. Stress that we pray because it keeps our minds and hearts centered in God's love.

Take turns sharing ideas about why people pray. Consider those in your family, neighborhood, or parish. For example, an elderly relative who is homebound might pray for comfort when she is lonely. A newly married couple might ask God's blessing on their life together. Look for various reasons your family turns to God in prayer.

Point out that, when we are angry or resentful, prayer can soften

our hearts. Apply this to an experience in your own life. Tell about the way in which prayer changed you by making you more loving, compassionate, and understanding. Explain how such a process can take time, which is why praying regularly is so important. You might point out the example of someone from your family or parish who spends time in prayer and how it makes them more loving and understanding.



One of the most important ways to teach children prayer is through modeling. Let them see you taking time for prayer. Thank them for showing respect for your prayer time by not interrupting you or creating a distraction.

Pray together

Heavenly God, there are so many reasons to turn to you. Help us to listen to our needs and to bring them to you in prayer.

How does God hear my prayer?

For your information

In the gospel of Matthew Jesus offers his disciples a beautiful teaching on prayer. “But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret will repay you...Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (6:6, 8). This “inner room” is not a physical space but an interior one—the heart. It speaks to the quiet space we must seek in order to find what we most truly need and long for. And God, who knows already what’s in our hearts, will be waiting for us.

This is consoling in those times when we wonder whether we are praying with the right words or intentions. It not only relieves the pressure from the mistaken belief that we need to control the conversation, but it also speaks to God’s abiding presence. Even when it seems as if our prayers are going unanswered, we can place our trust in God, who knows and loves and understands us from the inside out.

Talking to children about how God hears our prayer

Read or tell your child the account from Matthew 6:6–8 about the teaching of Jesus on prayer. Point out how Jesus encouraged his disciples to trust in God’s presence, even though they couldn’t see or hear him. Use the example of how your child can always count on your love, even when you aren’t physically present. In the same way, God is always present to us and is ready to listen to us.

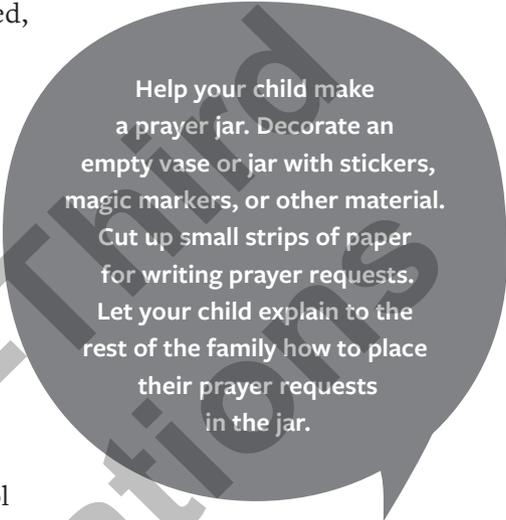
Stress how God knows what we need even before we ask. Draw

once again on your own relationship with your child and describe how you can often see when he or she is sad, angry, or afraid. However, even though you love your child very much, you can't see everything they need. God does know our every need, our every fear, our every longing, and our every desire. Even when it seems as if God is silent, we can always trust in that abiding love.

Recall a time when your child asked for something but didn't get it. Perhaps it was an expensive toy or staying up too late on a school night. Explain your decision to deny your child's request. Perhaps it was a concern for your child's well-being or the need to consider the good of the entire family. Point out that it sometimes seems as if God doesn't answer our prayers, especially if we ask for something specific. In much the same way as a parent, God sees what we really need rather than what we want for the moment.

Pray together

Jesus, you taught your followers to bring all their needs to God. Show us how to place our trust in God's presence and love.



Where can I go to pray?

For your information

Jesus is a wonderful example of someone praying in all sorts of places. Sometimes it was while he was on the road, teaching and healing people. Other times, it was off in a quiet place by himself or with a few trusted friends. He practiced the prayers of his people in the synagogue or before eating ritual meals. He shows us how prayer is never limited to a particular place or time. This is especially good news for those who are busy juggling family, work, and other responsibilities. It also affirms the value of both individual and communal prayer. If prayer were only restricted to places of worship, it would highly curtail the amount of time given to personal reflection. If it was meant only for “alone times,” it would lose the rich dimension of joining in liturgical or family prayer. When we make the world our place for prayer, the possibilities are endless.

Talking to children about where to pray

Ask your child about favorite places to pray. Then name some of the places where Jesus prayed—by himself in a secluded place, around the table with friends, with others who practiced his faith, and before he healed people. Take turns naming places where you *could* pray—at church, in the car, the bathroom, or while lying awake during the night. Stress how we can pray anywhere and at any time.

Invite your child to help create their own prayer corner. Decide on some items that will facilitate individual prayer—a prayer pillow, small table where they can place books, an electronic candle, a cross or other sacred object. Stress that this is a place

the child can always come to for her or his own time of personal prayer. You might then involve the entire family in creating a communal place for prayer. It could be as simple as placing prayer items on the table where you gather to eat or a more elaborate home altar around which you can gather together as a family or use as individuals.

Choose a Sunday to stay at the parish church after Mass to let your child explore this place of communal worship. Point out places where different parts of parish prayer take place – the altar and ambo during Mass, the tabernacle, the baptismal font, side chapels, votive candle stands, and outdoor shrines or gardens, to name a few. Once you are back home, encourage your child to draw a picture of your parish church as a way to affirm the parish as an important part of your family's prayer life.

Pray together

Ever-present God, it's wonderful that we can pray to you wherever and whenever we want. Bless our home and make it a very special place in which to lift our hearts to you.



Make a prayer card for your family car. Use an index card to write a simple one-line prayer asking God to guide you safely to your destination. Place it in the visor of your car and use it to pray together before starting the engine.

How do I learn to pray?

For your information

Just do it! There are prayers you can learn by heart so that you always have them close to you when you aren't sure what to say. Praying each day makes it a practice—like learning to play the piano or getting good at a sport. There is a saying that the only person who prays well is the one who prays often.

Setting a time for daily prayer is a helpful way to form a habit. For some, the early morning provides an opportunity to spend some time in reflection before the day begins. For others, bedtime is ideal for giving thanks and expressing regrets over anything hurtful that was said or done through the course of the day. And, of course, there are little moments that crop up here and there that give rise to prayers of gratitude, petition, or blessing.

Talking to children about learning to pray

Set aside a regular time to pray each day to help your child learn the discipline of prayer. This is not meant to be a rote exercise, however, but a precious time to spend with God. Children are often adept at spontaneous prayer, so such a practice can become a time to bring their concerns to God.

Stress that there is no right or wrong way to pray; the important thing is to do it! When talking to children about prayer, offer guidance and then allow them to move into a form that suits them. Some might prefer to pray quietly, and others want to express their prayers aloud. Take turns offering prayers so that the child learns from the way in which you pray.

As they mature, children can be taught to memorize short and simple prayers, such as grace before meals and bedtime bless-

ings. The Our Father grows in meaning with time and is an important part of both communal worship and personal meditation. Help your child with these prayers by going through them line by line.

Pray together

Wondrous God, there are so many ways we can pray to you. Guide us as we learn to pray to you each day.

Help your child make a prayer rock as a reminder to pray before going to bed at night. Wrap a small rock in a piece of fabric and tie it with a ribbon. Tell the child to put the rock on their pillow as a reminder to pray before going to bed.

What should I pray for?

For your information

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). Jesus’ teaching on the “what” of prayer was clear: anything you want! What we pray for can range from our “daily bread” to world peace. As we mature in an understanding and practice of prayer, we come to recognize the longing of our hearts that lies at the root of what we want, need, and seek. The five forms of Christian prayer (petition, thanksgiving, adoration, praise, and intercession) offer a way to expand our prayer through an inclusion of those things that make us happy as well as those that generate fear or anxiety, cause concern, and uncover our need for forgiveness and mercy.

Talk to children about what to pray for

Explain how Jesus said to bring all our needs to God in prayer. Since children are concrete thinkers, they are likely to ask God for material things. To broaden an understanding of prayer, point out that the deepest needs are in our hearts. This means we can ask God for strength, courage, and assurance when we feel afraid. We can thank God for the good things we have been given. We can tell God how happy or sad we feel. We can also pray for other people, especially those who need help or feel lonely or afraid.

The five forms of prayer are helpful in expanding the breadth of prayer. Small children find it easy to name the things they want (petition) as well as to pray on behalf of others (intercession). Encourage children to offer prayers of *thanksgiving* and *praise* for the gifts that are part of daily life, and to express their love for God (adoration) in verbal and nonverbal ways.

Help your child make a five-finger prayer by tracing their hand on a piece of paper and cutting it out. Write the following prayer intentions on each finger— thumb: people close to you (family, friends, etc.); first finger: people who help you (teachers, doctors, first responders, etc.); second finger: people who lead us (government, church, etc.); third finger: people in need (the poor, sick, etc.); pinkie finger: yourself.

Reinforce an understanding of how we can pray anytime and anywhere by pausing to express your joy, awe, or gratitude in the middle of a family outing or one-on-one time with your child. In like manner, invite your child to offer a prayer when they see or experience something distressing or sad. To help them verbalize their feelings, help your child compose a prayer for times when they are happy or sad and then illustrate it and place it by their bed or in another familiar place.

Pray together

Loving God, it so good to know we can tell you anything. Help us to listen to the needs in our hearts so that we bring all of them to you in our prayers.

Do other people pray for me?

For your information

Blessings are another form of prayer we may have learned as children, particularly at mealtime. In blessing our food, we express gratitude for what we are about to receive and acknowledge the bounty with which it has been given to us. Blessing another person is an act of tenderness that affirms the love we have for God and for one another. This is a lovely face-to-face way to pray for others.

Prayers of intercession, in which we pray on behalf of another, are often offered from a distance. Consider the parent praying for the well-being of a child in the middle of the night, or the friend holding another in prayer during an illness or experience of loss. Praying for another is a profound way to expand our spiritual horizon beyond our own needs and wants. It reminds us that we are interrelated and that what happens to one of us is felt, in some way, by all. Such prayer enlarges our capacity for compassion and empathy and reminds us that we are not meant to go it alone.

Talking to children about the prayers of others

Explain how a blessing is something we can offer as a way to pray for another person's well-being. Incorporate these prayers into your daily routines by blessing your child before he or she leaves for school or prior to bedtime.

Explain that the prayers of other people help us to be strong when life is difficult. Just as we can pray for others who are sick or frightened, in need of something important or of God's guidance, other people can pray for us.

Tell how you hold your child in your heart even when you are apart from one another. Share about the ways you pray for him or her, and why. Talk together about other people who are likely to be praying for your child, such as grandparents and other relatives as well as friends and people from your parish.

Emphasize how, even though we may not know people are praying for us, those prayers are heard by God. Tell about a time when you found out someone was praying for you and what it meant to you. Invite your child to describe how it makes them feel to know that others are praying for him or her.

Pray together

Thank you, God, for the people who love and care for me. It makes me glad to know they are praying for me.

Search online for books or individual prayers of blessings to use in your family. Use them to pray for one another and encourage your child to bless others in the family in addition to being blessed by them.

What if I don't feel like praying?

For your information

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18). What happens when we can't pray? Or when our prayer feels dry, forced, confused, or lacking in conviction? The truth is that, at some point, we will experience periods of distraction, dryness, and dread. Rather than giving up, we can face these times with resilience and determination, eventually even finding grace in them.

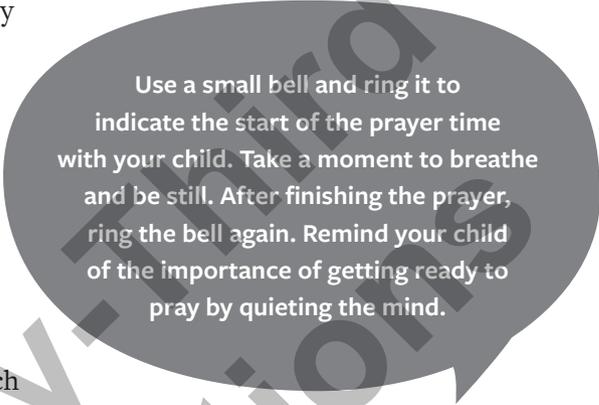
Distractions can be one of the most common factors in a struggle with prayer. Managing external distractions, such as turning off the phone or retreating to a place where one can be alone, is much easier than dealing with internal ones. Worry, fear, overload, and fatigue are all forms of mental distraction that curtail a regular prayer practice. On top of that there is the guilt that comes when we recognize that we aren't doing enough to maintain that practice. Letting go of unrealistic expectations around the quantity and quality of our prayer is a step toward dealing with mental distractions. When we “pray in the Spirit,” as Paul advised, we recognize that prayer can be ongoing and varied—taking place even below the surface of all our daily tasks.

Talking to children about praying when we don't feel like it

Ask your child to tell about times they don't feel like praying. They might describe feeling tired or impatient to go and play. Sometimes they may not know what to say, or they feel God isn't listening. Share how you can feel the same way. Point out that God

doesn't expect our prayer to be perfect. The important thing is to pray even when it is difficult.

Developing a prayer habit takes discipline. That means doing it every day, even when we don't feel like it. Help your child make a prayer plan for the times they will remember to pray. This might take the form of a wall chart that the child can check off each day. Or it might simply be a shared time in which you and your child pray together—at bedtime or before school. Review the plan after a week or so and talk about what helps the child remember to pray.



Use a small bell and ring it to indicate the start of the prayer time with your child. Take a moment to breathe and be still. After finishing the prayer, ring the bell again. Remind your child of the importance of getting ready to pray by quieting the mind.

Prayer may be hard when we hear of a disturbing event, such as a natural disaster or acts of violence or abuse. Children might express feeling mad at God for not doing something to help people who are suffering. Assure your child that we can even bring our angry thoughts to God. You might want to refer to a psalm that expresses anger or a desire for vengeance. The line from Psalm 22—*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me*—is easy for a child to understand. Remind your child that we can bring all our thoughts and feelings to God, who is always ready to hear us.

Pray together

Dear God, help me to pray when I am tired or angry or just don't feel like it. I believe that you will always be there even during times when it's hard to pray.

Can I pray when I feel sorry for something I did?

For your information

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others who trespass against us...” In the Our Father, the only two things we are asked to do are seek forgiveness and extend it to others. The times when we are brought low by our own failings and hurts are some of the richest opportunities for prayer. To ask for forgiveness is to seek freedom from shame, guilt, and remorse. It requires an open and humble heart. When we are willing and able to face our own capacity to hurt others and alienate ourselves from others and from God, we grow more mature both psychologically and spiritually. By ceasing to hold to false pride or illusions of who we are, we open ourselves to receive the grace that comes from God’s infinite mercy.

By knowing what it means to ask for forgiveness, we are more readily able to extend it to those who have wounded us. Doing so releases us from toxic resentment, anger, fear, and a desire for vengeance. To forgive doesn’t exclude justice, however, nor does it entail excusing acts of abuse, violence, or cruelty. We forgive the individual without condoning the act. Praying to be forgiven and to be capable of forgiving others is an empowering step toward reconciliation with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Talking to children about praying when feeling sorry

Stress that God loves us no matter what we have done and that we can always turn to God when we feel bad about something we have said or done. Introduce simple prayers of forgiveness to your child that begin with the words “I’m sorry for...” The child may not want

Help your child make a heart chain. Cut out several paper hearts and place them in a basket with a roll of tape and markers. Each time your child offers a prayer of forgiveness encourage him or her to decorate the heart and tape it to other hearts to make a chain. Point out the ways in which your child is becoming more merciful through prayers of forgiveness.

to express aloud what he or she is feeling, so don't press them to do so. Instead, remain a quiet and assuring presence as they offer their prayer in quiet.

Explain that, when someone has hurt us we can ask God to help us forgive. Point out that this isn't always easy and may take some time. Encourage your child to keep praying for a forgiving heart and to trust that God is always ready to help us become more loving and merciful.

Be sure to differentiate between forgiving an individual and condoning the hurtful thing he or she did. Abuse, bullying, and acts of violence are inexcusable and the pain they cause should not be dismissed or diminished. Point out your own love and concern, and tell how you pray for your child's well-being, safety, and happiness. Provide assurance of your presence and concern so that the child knows to always come to you if someone is harming them.

Pray together

Merciful God, it is hard to admit when I have been wrong. I can always rely on your love and on your help when I need to forgive someone else.

What helps me pray?

For your information

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux once noted the need to stay in touch with “holy things.” It is a lovely reminder of the various tools that can draw us into varied forms of prayer. Experiences connected to the five senses form a sacramental view of life, one in which the invisible reality of God is made visible through what we can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste. It’s no wonder that, over the course of centuries, tools for prayer developed around these five senses. Rosary beads that slip through our fingers draw us into meditation on the mysteries of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Incense makes tangible the meaning of letting our prayers rise to God (Psalm 141). Icons and stained-glass windows draw us into the presence of holy people and scenes from the Bible. Instrumental and vocal music provide a sense of quiet and peace or evoke expressions of wonder, praise, and thanksgiving. Each holy thing makes prayer even more interesting and engaging.

Talking to children about what helps us pray

Show a children’s Bible and explain how it can be used to pray. Use a psalm verse to pray in thanksgiving or praise, or to ask for help and guidance. Invite your child to open to a favorite story about Jesus. After reading it together, take turns praying for a quality that Jesus showed in his care and love for others.

Tell your child how music has been part of prayer for many years. Talk about how music can make us feel happy, sad, or peaceful. Explain how listening to instrumental music or chant is a way to pray quietly, just by listening and letting the music surround us. Point out how singing is a way to join with others in prayer, particularly when we are at church.

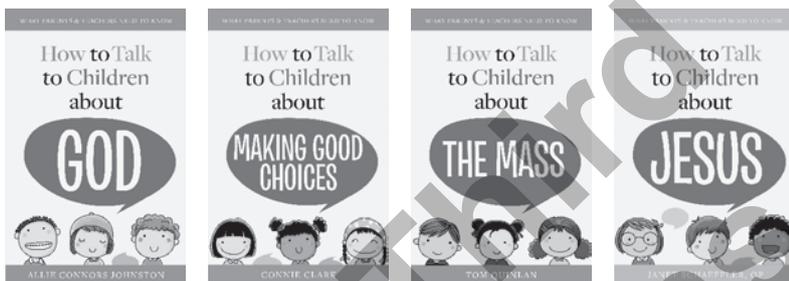
Invite your child to use a cell phone or camera to take a picture of something they want to pray for or about. It might be a picture of God's creation, such as a flower, a tree, or a pet. It might be a picture of a friend or relative who needs prayers for healing and comfort. Use other visual art to encourage your child to pray by setting out an icon or other form of sacred art downloaded from the Internet.

Show how to pray the Rosary by placing your child's fingers on the larger bead at the start of a decade and praying the Our Father together. Point out the next ten beads and how each one is for praying the Hail Mary. At the end of the decade we pray a Glory Be. Explain how, once we learn how to use the rosary, we let the prayers remind us of Jesus and how he was born, what he did, and how he suffered, died, and rose again.

Pray together

Thank you, God, for giving us so many ways to pray. I want to use my eyes and ears, my nose and mouth, and my whole body, mind, and heart to grow closer to you in prayer.

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