

TEN SIMPLE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IDEAS FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

FROM THE EDITORS OF *POCKETS*
AND *DEVOZINE* MAGAZINES





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What are spiritual practices? We might call these *holy habits* or some other name. These are the practices by which we draw closer to God and shape our lives as followers of Christ. Humans are creatures of habit. Most of us follow certain routines from the moment we wake in the morning until we go to sleep at night. We wake and prepare for the day in a particular way; we drink our coffee or tea and eat breakfast at a certain time; we move into the day's activities according to specific rhythms we've established, and so on. And whether we're aware of it or not, these habits we routinely follow each day are making us into the people we are.

Just as our habits form the boundaries of our days, we can help the children and youth we care about to cultivate habits that will help them grow in faith. Kara Oliver, in her book *Passing It On*, writes about her toddler nephew who is already a die-hard fan of Indiana University sports. She notes that parents often find the idea of spiritually forming their children intimidating. Maybe the parents themselves didn't grow up in a home where faith was discussed. Or maybe they did and fear passing on beliefs they found hurtful. Or perhaps discussing spiritual matters with their children simply feels awkward to them. But Kara notes that we are forming our children in all sorts of ways and, "The same practices that form a die-hard Hoosier or a politically astute child—family time, regular practice, and concrete symbols—can convey Christian tradition and spirituality to our children with equal joy and lasting effect."

Why is this important? Of course, we want to bring our children up to know and experience these spiritual practices because we want to raise them to know and love God, to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to be guided and shaped by love of God and neighbor. But if we need other, perhaps more tangible reasons, we can look at the research of the Search Institute and its work on developmental assets. (Learn more

about their work at searchinstitute.org.) They have identified 40 assets that help children and youth grow into healthy adults. The more of these 40 assets a child or teen has in his/her life, the less likely he or she is to engage in high-risk behaviors and the more likely he or she is to become a happy, successful adult. Regular (weekly or more) participation in a religious community is on that list. And so are various values that are reinforced by the practice of spiritual disciplines including:

- service to others
- caring, concern for equality and social justice
- integrity, honesty
- responsibility
- healthy lifestyle
- peaceful conflict resolution
- a sense of purpose for one's life.

So here, drawn from a combination of “classic” and newer Upper Room resources, are our Top 10 Spiritual Practices for Children and Youth:

1. **Paying attention.** Simply paying attention is about as basic as it gets. But it can also be challenging in our world today. Young children are good at noticing. They notice bugs and flowers and the way a pea rolls around on the plate. That gives us a natural way to connect the things they notice to God the Creator. “Thank you, God, for creating that cool bug.” “Wow, God makes some beautiful flowers!” etc.

As children grow into tweens and teens, they become more distracted by a lot of the same things that distract us. So we can help them (and ourselves) by simply inviting them to notice, to pay attention, to look for signs of God all around them. “I see the beauty of God’s creation in the sunrise.” “I see God’s compassion in you in the way you care for your friend.”

2. **Blessing.** Henri Nouwen writes, “To give a blessing is to affirm, to say ‘yes’ to a person’s belovedness. And more

than that: to give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks.” There’s great power in helping children and youth (and adults, for that matter) know that they are beloved by God. Parents can bless children and youth as they head out for the day or on particular occasions, such as a birthday or the start of a new school year. Our congregations can bless children and teenagers as they’re promoted to new grades, as they participate in special activities, as they take on special roles in the church, as they begin to serve others. All of us can look for opportunities to say to one another: “You are God’s beloved. God delights in you.”

3. **Breathing.** One way we can use our breath to focus and pay attention to God is simply through deep breathing to calm and center ourselves when we’re feeling anxious. Another way is through use of a Breath Prayer, which is simply repetition of a short prayer phrase timed with one’s breathing. Typically, the prayer is made up of a favorite name for God, along with a short phrase stating what we’re seeking from God. The classic breath prayer is some form of “Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” This is a great form of prayer to teach children and teens to use because it’s short and simple and anyone can do it anywhere.
4. **Silence.** We live in such a noisy world. Kids may love their tablets and phones and other electronics, but they can also learn to love periods of silence. We can help them with this by practicing silence together when we’re with them. We can encourage them to simply be silent and enjoy being in God’s presence. Start with short periods, maybe only a few seconds and gradually add on to that. And we can encourage them to practice silence as part of their personal prayer time.
5. **Creative expression.** God gives us all gifts of creativity; and we can pray through our writing, our drawing or coloring, our music, our movements. Encourage kids who love to write to journal or to write their own prayers or psalms. Those who love to express themselves

through visual art can learn to draw or sculpt their own interpretations of scripture stories or to express their feelings through their artwork.

6. **The Examen.** This is the traditional Ignatian practice of reviewing the day to find God's presence in it. There are many simple expressions of this prayer practice that people use in family settings (happy, sad, sorry; thumbs up, thumbs down; roses and thorns; pows and wows; highs and lows; etc.) It's a wonderful practice for families to do together, but we can also encourage children and teens to make this a part of their personal prayers at the end of each day.
7. **Scripture.** Of course, scripture is foundational to our Christian journey. We teach our children Bible stories all the time—Noah and the ark, Jonah and the big fish, the birth of baby Jesus, etc. But we can also help children and youth learn about how scripture can comfort and sustain us in difficult times. We can talk to them about the verses that sustain us and the times we've used those verses. Encourage them to memorize verses and to carry verses with them. We can also be open with children, and especially teens, about the passages we find difficult to understand as we help them to ask good questions and search together for answers.
8. **Body prayer.** A body prayer is simply a prayer involving movement or physical action. It's easy for kids to understand this if we talk about it in terms of what we do with our bodies when we pray. We close our eyes. We fold our hands. We bow our heads. Some people kneel, some people open their hands, some people dance, etc. We can explain to kids that God made our bodies and we can use our bodies when we pray. Here's one body prayer that works well for groups or individuals:

BODY PRAYER

Placing both hands on top of the head, pray out loud:

God be in my head and in my understanding.

Placing both hands over the eyes, pray out loud:

God be in my eyes and in my seeing.

Placing both hands over the ears, pray out loud:

God be in my ears and in my hearing.

Placing both hands over the mouth, pray out loud:

God be in my mouth and in my speaking.

Placing both hands over the heart, pray out loud:

God be in my heart and in my feeling.

Placing both hands on top of the thighs, pray out loud:

God be in my legs and in my moving.

Placing open hands one on top of the other in front of the body, pray out loud:

God be in my hands and in my touching.

Placing both arms at the side of the body, hands open and turning outward, offering our life to God, pray out loud:

God be in my life and in my journeying. Amen.

(Ciona Rouse, *The Way of Pilgrimage*, Upper Room Books)

9. **Sharing Gifts.** This is about finding ways to be generous. We can help kids think about simple ways they can use their own money (allowance, birthday money, money they earned) to help others—buying a pair of socks or gloves to help someone who’s homeless; donating to an animal shelter, helping to build a well where there is no clean water, etc. Kids understand these acts of generosity. But we can remind them that they can also be generous in other ways—with their time, with their ideas, with the way they regard others, etc.
10. **Do 1 Thing.** Small acts of kindness and compassion help us to share God’s love with others and to live the way Jesus taught us to live. We can help our kids to make a habit of these acts by encouraging them to choose each day or each week one thing to do for a neighbor, a classmate, a friend, a family member, a stranger.



TEN SIMPLE SPIRITUAL IDEAS FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY FROM THE UPPER ROOM

Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation by Marjorie J. Thompson (product #798)—A foundational text on the primary importance of the family in forming and nurturing children’s spiritual lives.

Growing Compassionate Kids: Helping Kids See Beyond Their Backyard by Jan Johnson (product #932)—Helps parents learn to incorporate social outreach and mission into family life.

Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens by Dorothy Bass and Don C. Richter (product #975) — 18 teens and 18 adults partner to experience some ancient Christian practices and discover how they can deepen our awareness of God’s presence in our lives today. (Leader’s Guide available online at practicingourfaith.org)

The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (product #858) — Explores classical spiritual disciplines of the church as practices that enable youth (and all of us) to say YES to God; and identifies families, congregations, and mentor relationships as the holy ground where this is likely to happen.

Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides by Betty Shannon Cloyd (product #923)— Explores simple ways parents and grandparents can introduce children to the presence of God and nurture them spiritually through daily, routine activities as well as planned devotional times

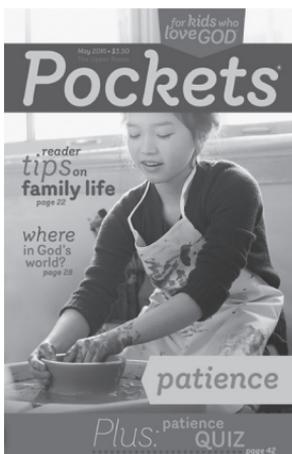
Passing It On: How to Nurture Your Children's Faith Season by Season by Kara Lassen Oliver (product #1497)—A practical guide to nurturing children's faith including a guide for weekly family gatherings, suggested daily practices, and a leader's guide for parent groups using the book together.

Scrambled Starts: Family Prayers for Morning, Bedtime, and Everything In-Between by Jenny Youngman (product #1499)—The author's own journey to reshape her family's prayer life as well as prayers for various family occasions.

Pockets magazine—A devotional magazine for children ages 6-12 that uses a mixture of fiction, poetry, art, scripture, games, and activities to help children grow in their relationship with God. Pockets.org includes additional content for families and groups using the magazine together.

devozine—A devotional lifestyle magazine for teens, written by teens and adults who love them. The magazine includes daily meditations and weekend articles to help teens develop a lifelong practice of spending time with God and reflecting on what God is doing in their lives. See devozine.org for additional resources for youth and youth leaders.

All of these resources are available through the bookstore at upperroom.org or by calling Customer Services at 1-800-972-0433.



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