

A Play Date with God

Teaching Children to Pray in Creative Ways

By Julianne Will

Young children are naturally very expressive people. Excitement spills out in hops and wiggles and yelps. Anger is unleashed in kicks or stomps or slammed doors. And there is almost an art to the high drama of a child who is so-o-o-o bo-o-o-o-ored.

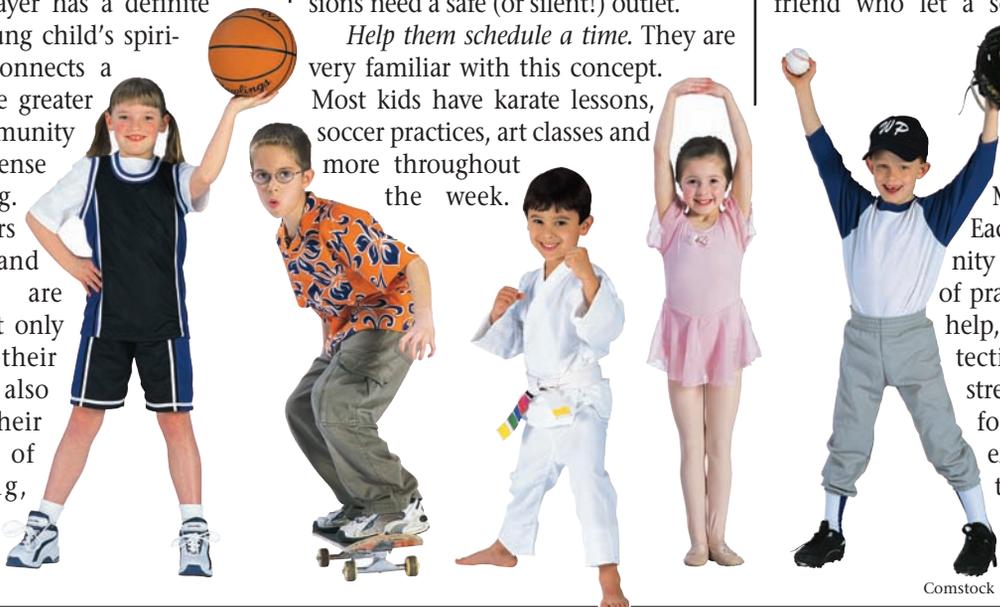
Teachers and parents are often challenged to find constructive ways to harness this energy bubbling so close to the surface. Artistic and physical activities can help manage the emotion; when it spins out of control, the time-out is a tried-and-true favorite for reining the outburst in.

We often overlook one wonderful tool children can use to manage their moods, however. Prayer, a source of strength and comfort, and an outlet for joy for adults, can be an excellent resource for children as well.

Introduce prayer as a way to talk to God in any situation. Kids have so much to say; only God has the infinite time necessary to listen to it all. Best of all, God won't tell a child to raise his hand, quit talking with his mouth full or correct his subject-verb agreement. The whining, the shouting, the whoops for joy — all can go straight to God.

A prayer by any other name. . .

Formal prayer has a definite place in a young child's spiritual life. It connects a child with the greater Catholic community and offers a sense of belonging. And the prayers we revere and remember are important not only because of their history, but also because their expressions of thanksgiving, petition and adoration are



applicable across time. Formal prayer also can articulate a feeling when a child is at a loss for words.

The words of saints can inspire young children, too. Because the saints were real people who made mistakes, just like us, they seem more accessible to kids who are always being told what not to do. The saints' writings often reveal these struggles, especially when read in the context of a short life story. Assigning children a saint to "be" for All Saints' Day is an excellent way to help them identify with these real-life heroes.

Children often find informal prayer especially appealing. They don't have to worry about getting it right. They can tailor the words to the need at hand. They can talk to God just as they would their friends, without fear of sounding uncool or silly. God is never too busy or bored. Informal prayers can go straight to the heart of a child's day-to-day life.

Teach it within their reach

Praying to God is an abstract concept for children, however, requiring concrete explanation. Position prayer within their everyday lives so they can recognize how to apply it when their expressions need a safe (or silent!) outlet.

Help them schedule a time. They are very familiar with this concept. Most kids have karate lessons, soccer practices, art classes and more throughout the week.



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They plan play dates with their friends — why not plan a "play date" with God? Ask each child to identify a time every day when he or she can put God on the calendar.

Help them see that anytime is great, too. Brainstorm everyday situations in which prayer might be a natural response. Facing a tough day at school? Scared at night in the dark? Angry at a friend who let a secret slip? Guilty about hitting a sibling? Excited about a trip to the movies with Mom and Dad? Each is an opportunity for different types of prayer: a petition for help, a request for protection, a call for strength, a need for forgiveness, an expression of gratitude.

Help them learn some prayers

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to use. Offer children a variety of choices. Stress the value in memorizing a few to call on in a pinch. Encourage them to look up others when they want to initiate a conversation with God. Different prayers touch hearts in different ways. Introduce children to the beautiful array of old and new works that make up our Catholic tradition.

Help them write their own. Children will truly embrace prayer when they take ownership. After studying some age-appropriate existing prayers, give them time to consider what they would like to share with God. Ask them to write a "script" of the discussion, including what they said to God and what they heard Him tell their hearts in return. Not only does this move their attempt beyond a single line or two, it also

emphasizes the importance of listening for God's call in our lives.

The honesty and expressive nature of children lend themselves well to the start of a wonderful relationship with God at a time when they are realizing the value of many types of relationships outside their family. Teaching them to direct that spiritedness toward God is a tremendous gift, one that likely will reinvigorate your own spirituality as well. ■

Julianne Will was the general editor of "Catholic Prayer Book for Children" (Our Sunday Visitor, \$10.95 hardcover, \$3.95 paper) and is the author of the upcoming "Stations of the Cross for Children" (Our Sunday Visitor, fall 2005 release).

Prayer to Help Me Be a Saint

The saints were really amazing, God;
their love for you was great.
They prayed and preached and spread your word,
even when faced with hate.
Helping, sharing, spreading grace,
they'd give up their last dime.
Now they're blessed with the joy of heaven
until the end of time.

But the saints were still just people, too;
they sometimes did things wrong.
They doubted, worried, and sinned at times,
and didn't always get along.
So maybe there's still hope for me,
to be named a saint, too.
Lord give me strength to try again,
so I can live with you.
Amen.

— "Catholic Prayer Book for Children,"
edited by Julianne M. Will

