

One Life Community Children's Guide

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Training children to behave in specific situations takes thought, intention, and practice, whether it's coaching them to say "please" and "thank you", how to play well and take turns, or how to participate in House Church. Scripture directs parents to keep God's word and ways constantly in front of their children: "Teach them to your children, and talk about them when you're at home or away, when you lie down or get up" Deut. 11:19. This handout is designed to help parents think through and find ways to practice faith habits with their children, and help them participate in House Church in a meaningful way.

A few general principles:

- 1) Be consistent – Kids develop/learn by exploring their environment. This means they will touch anything they can reach, run away when told to come, and push every boundary to see how immovable it really is (whether a baby gate, a closed door, or a parent's edicts). Consistency is critical for helping kids learn boundaries and expectations. If simple rules are not applied consistently, kids will learn they are not "real" boundaries. Part of this is picking a few expectations to enforce regularly [broad enough to be applied to multiple situations – i.e. "Use your manners", "Be kind", "Listen when I speak", etc.]. It also means having verbal options ready instead of saying "no" as a default response. If "no" is always the first response to a child's request, but then you are able to be begged or convinced to change your mind, kids will learn "no" does not mean "no" - it just means try harder. Ultimately, kids are more easily able to regulate their emotions and behaviors in a predictable environment.
- 2) Be kid specific – Every child is different. As the expert of your child, experiment with some of these suggestions. Find what motivates your child and what engages them. Even let them choose between 2 options. Also consider other variables that may impact your child at House Church – sleep, food, stimulation (i.e. eliminate screen time for 30 minutes before church so little brains are not in high gear when they come), etc. As a rule of thumb attention spans are roughly a child's age x 2 = minutes of focus. So a 4 y.o. can focus for 8 minutes. This may mean you have to plan several activities for a 30 minute event.
- 3) Be playful when you practice – Kids learn through play. Imagination is their primary language. Find opportunities to "play church" or practice these habits outside of House Church. Saying "grace" before a meal or bedtime is a great chance to practice prayer habits. Have kids imagine/ pretend they are listening to a lesson in House Church while completing a craft quietly for 15 minutes. Explain the "rules" of the activity and then coach and encourage them as they practice. Demonstrate how to ask for help by touching your arm instead of using words while they practice. Maybe even provide a "treat" if the kids can follow the "rules" and complete the activity (something age-appropriate like an extra story at bedtime, 10 more minutes of screen time, etc.).
- 4) Take your time to unpack these habits as you practice – don't be rushed. Just like learning any new habit or practice (brushing teeth, sweeping the floor, riding a bike, etc.) it takes time to introduce, explain, demonstrate, and then perform. So don't just rush through bedtime prayers because it's late. Plan ahead and take extra time to explain what to do, how to do it, and even why you do it.
- 5) Repeat – as with memorizing "times tables" or learning sports skills, repetition is the key to learning. Every mealtime prayer doesn't need to be a 15 minute lesson, but providing cues to what you have taught and expecting follow through will help when it's "game time". Part of repetition is creating simple routines that you practice regularly. Just like you won't start driving until everyone has buckled up, building in key faith habits throughout your day ["when you're at home or away"] takes intentional practice, repetition, and routine.

Tools to help kids learn:

- Give them Images – Model and demonstrate the behavior. Just like showing children how to hold a pencil, tie their shoes, or make their bed, show them how to practice spiritual habits as well. Demonstrate how to bow your head to pray, how to follow along with their finger when someone is reading the bible, etc.
- Give them Words – Age-appropriate words are helpful to use when talking about spiritual things. Prayer could be “talking to God”. Times of reflection could be “listening to what God is saying to my heart.” Communion could be “Jesus’ table”. Sometimes there are not simpler words. So a parent can just explain what the bigger word means outside of church. Tedd Tripp has said *“Give your children big truths they will grow into rather than light explanations they will grow out of.”*
- Give them Cues – Prepare and Prompt kids as they navigate situations. Just like you may prepare/remind them before you go into the grocery store to keep their hand on the cart, or prompt them to say “thank you” when someone gives them a gift, giving them similar reminders and prompts before they get to House Church or as we start to pray can be very helpful to orient them to their setting and expectations.

Sample activities

1) Singing – Scripture commands us to sing about God and his works. Singing is one way we worship God.

Ages 3-5 – Songs are typically short enough to factor as distinct segments for attention span purposes. This is a great time to use a child’s body to wiggle, dance, clap, jump, or sway. Body percussion is easy and fun as well (slapping their lap to the beat, stomping alternating feet, tapping opposite sides of their body, etc.). Wiggle only when there is singing – freeze when there is just music/silence. This can be a time to practice soft and loud voices as a parent gives hand signals. Listening for key words and standing/sitting every time they hear/say the word “love” or “Jesus” or “sing”.

Ages 6-8 – Help kids begin to engage singing more seriously (versus playfully). Using instruments on tempo/beat, clapping on fast songs, etc. Help kids focus on the words as well. Singing a chorus during bedtime or while riding in the car can help kids learn the songs and melodies.

Ages 9-12 – Kids this age can participate in singing. They can learn the words to many of the songs if they listen to them during the week. Talking with kids about the lyrics or concepts in the songs will help them understand and sing sincerely.

2) Teaching – Scripture is God’s written explanation of Himself to us. We spend time reading and talking about Scripture in order learn about God.

Ages 3-5 – Having a “quiet bag/lunch box” with small activities that are only used for times like this, where a child can choose to put a few items: a picture book, a coloring book and crayons, a small puzzle, etc. inside before they come to house church. Then they can open the bag/box during teaching time and choose an activity. [54 Mess Free Quiet Time Activities for 3 Year Olds! - How Wee Learn](#), [5 Quiet Children Activities For 2 - 5 Year Olds \(motherpedia.com\)](#)

Ages 6-8 – Kids can work on the worksheet/craft provided for the lesson at House Church. They can draw a picture about the text or big idea. They can read a book silently or make a card to encourage someone in the room.

Ages 9-12 – Kids can doodle or draw a word cloud. They can listen to the discussion and take notes, or look at the text in the Bible and underline/color-code phrases that are meaningful.

3) Prayer – Scripture identifies one way we can talk to and listen to God is through prayer. We spend time praying in order to listen and speak to God about important things.

Ages 3-5 – Asking kids to practice their listening skills during this time is great for several reasons. Listening is a first step to reflection and one day hearing God speak to their hearts (see 1 Sam 3:3-10). They can lay their heads down on your lap or a pillow and close their eyes, listening for sounds (a dog barking, a cup set on a table, someone breathing, etc.). They can track on their fingers how many different sounds they hear. Then after prayer time they can whisper the things they heard in your ear, or tell you the number of different things they heard. Kids can also join in this section with help from the leader or cues from a parent. Preparing children for public/group prayer time by asking them ahead of time what they would like to ask for, or if they would like to say a prayer. Parents can then help introduce these thoughts at the appropriate time. [17 Fun and Simple Listening Activities for Kids - Empowered Parents](#), [6 Simple Tips for Teaching Children to Pray \(learnreligions.com\)](#)

Ages 6-8 – Kids this age can practice listening skills like the 3-5 year olds and write down a list of things they hear. They can also practice listening to their hearts/the Holy Spirit. Parents could write down a question prompted from the lesson/text and have a child consider how Jesus wants them to respond/answer. They can draw a picture of anything they think of related to prayer (hands clasped, lips, God in heaven, Jesus kneeling, etc.). They can join in prayer time by closing their eyes along with the group and can offer a prayer if they are comfortable doing so.

Ages 9-12 – Kids can participate in prayer time with practice and prompting. They may be able to make a list of their prayers, or identify one prayer for each category (things they are thankful for, need help with, other people, etc.). They can join in prayer time by closing their eyes along with the group and can offer a prayer if they are comfortable doing so.

4) Table – Scripture explains that a cup of wine and piece of bread symbolize the sacrifice of Jesus for our salvation. Jesus commands that we should regularly eat and drink this “meal” to remember his death. This ritual helps us anchor our faith in God’s work so we don’t forget our story.

Ages 3-5 – This would be a good time to have a snack even as they continue to work on silent activities. They may not understand the significance of communion, but can see others eating/drinking. Anticipating a snack may also be a way to help motivate kids during listening time.

Ages 6-8 – Activities that illustrate “remembering” would be helpful during this portion. It can lay the foundation for explaining “ordinances” in the future. A game like Memory, a small puzzle, or a “spot the difference” picture, etc. are good for this. Rituals like “hot chocolate breathing” to relax can be easy to coach as this activity starts by having a parent make eye contact, or hold hands, and set the tempo. Giving them a paper plate to color a picture on, symbolizing Jesus’ dinner, and what type of meal they would want to share with him.

Ages 9-12 – As kids get old enough to understand communion, and eventually begin their own personal relationship with Jesus, they should participate in the Table. Until then kids can continue to practice rituals (habits that symbolize something important). This could be created by talking to kids about Jesus’ death and identifying what would help them remember his gift. It could be giving them a small wooden cross that they can hold in their hands while others take the elements. They could hold a small box on their lap and write things they are thankful for (gifts God has given them) on small post-its to put inside the box. Ask kids what they would like as they participate during house church. Let it be meaningful to them.