

Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids

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Introduction

Purpose: Why “Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids”?

Research from a variety of sources, including the National Study of Youth and Religion,¹ has long shown that parents are the most influential factor on the faith development of children. Although church leaders have known this for decades, many faith communities struggle to figure out how best to equip and support households in the important work of nurturing children’s spiritual development and religious education.

I, (Sarah) have served in three churches of different sizes over the last decade, and I’ve discussed this particular challenge with dozens of church leaders. I created “Tools for Raising Faithful Kids” as one way to equip and support households in my own church context. In my experience, many parents, grandparents, and godparents are eager to have this conversation and grateful for a supportive learning group around this topic, so I’m excited to share this tool with you!

The National Study of Youth and Religion details multiple parent-related factors that impact the level of faith participation of children and youth as they grow into adulthood. In reviewing the data, I felt that church leaders would be able to impact some factors more than others. In “Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids” I decided to focus on helping households talk about their faith outside of church. In contemplating what prevents more families from talking about faith at home, I identified two roadblocks I thought I could address. First, I have observed that many parents are uncomfortable with religious language and concepts, and they lack a confident understanding of the core stories of our faith. Second, they have limited personal spiritual experiences or personal faith practices.

We (Vibrant Faith) were thrilled when Sarah told us the story of the learning experience that she developed with her church. Since supporting the faith life of parents is our primary calling as an organization, we asked Sarah to write up her six-session experience so we could offer it as a resource to the 28 congregations that are participating in our Thriving Congregations Grant Initiative. We believe that faith in Jesus lived out in family life leads to thriving churches. Several churches in our Thriving Congregations project tested the curriculum with their families. And now we are very excited to share it with you...

The Four Goals of *Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids*

¹ <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>

1. To offer parents a loving, supportive space in which to explore practical tools for raising faithful kids.
2. To offer parents additional language and understanding that target the foundations of our life with God, helping them grow more confident and comfortable as they influence their children toward an all-in faith.
3. To offer parents spiritual experiences and a space to process and reflect upon those experiences—then migrate those experiences into their homes.
4. To offer parents basic tools for sharing spiritual experiences with children of a variety of ages.

*A Note About Intended Audience: *Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids* was created for parents. However, we expect groups interested in this resource will include parents, grandparents, and godparents. Therefore, we've used terms like "household" and "the children you love" throughout this curriculum to be as inclusive as possible.

Location: Online and Onsite

All six sessions in *Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids* can be led in face-to-face contexts. However, we've found that migrating this experience online, *for all sessions except for the final one*, helps more parents participate. One other variation—you could choose to meet in-person for the first and last sessions and include children (as an alternative). The goal is to create a loving, supportive community of parents together. The sessions are all one hour, recommended for weekday evenings. This allows parents to join the sessions after putting their children to bed, and for some households, it allows both parents to participate without getting a babysitter. It also keeps the commitment level reasonable by saving participants an extra trip to church. This series could also work well during a Sunday morning formation hour while children are in a separate class.

Incorporating Music

I (Sarah) found it helpful to ground each session by intentionally inviting God to be present with us through prayer. There are many, many ways to pray. Singing is an important way to connect with God, and can be a great tool for parents, since children learn and memorize songs very quickly. So don't hesitate to begin sessions with a brief sung prayer that would be appropriate for use with adults or children. However, every session includes an opening prayer that does not have to be sung. If you decide to sing your opening prayer, choose songs that are simple and easy to lead, whether or not you have musical ability. If you choose to use sung prayers, here are few notes on incorporating music:

1. **Mute Online** - If you are singing together online, make sure everyone but the song leader is on mute. This makes it easier for everyone to follow the song leader without the sound bouncing from person to person.

- 2. Imperfection** - Choose music that is simple enough that anyone will feel comfortable leading the singing. We don't have to have perfect pitch to sing together—it is an offering to God, not a performance.
- 3. No One "Right" Way** - If you'd like to incorporate music but don't feel comfortable leading it yourself, there are many options. You can invite someone else to lead. You can share a recording of the song. Or you can choose to open with the provided prayer alternative.

Cultivating Meaningful Conversation

One of the goals of *Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids* is to offer parents a loving, supportive space for faith-focused conversation. In working towards this goal, it is important to be intentional about cultivating kind and meaningful conversations. Here are a few tips:

- 1. Set the Tone Weekly** - Go over "What Is This Group?" in each session. This sets the tone and foundation for the conversation. It also offers something to point back to if the conversation begins to move into a space beyond what this group is intended to offer.
- 2. Leave Enough Space** - People process things at different speeds. If you notice that someone has not spoken up, you might say something like, "No pressure, but before I move on to the next question, I'd like to hold space for anyone who has not yet responded." Get comfortable with a bit of silence. You might even say to the group: "It is okay if we have a bit of silence. We don't need to fill it, but I want to make sure everyone has a chance to share." Another idea is to hold 30 seconds of silence before anyone responds. You might say: "I have another question, I'll ask it now, but I'd like to hold 30 seconds of silence for everyone to think about it before we begin responding. I'll let you know when it is time to share."
- 3. Use Facial Expressions** - One way to encourage conversation is through body language. Look at the person speaking. Use your body and facial expressions to show that you are listening and you care about what they are saying. You might smile, nod, laugh, lean in, touch your heart, or furrow your brow.
- 4. Affirm Through Active Listening** - People feel affirmed when you show that you've heard and understood what they've said. After someone responds to a question, offer an affirmation of some type. This might sound like, "Thank you for sharing that. It sounds like it was a very hard experience." Or, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like..." Or, "I heard you mention ____, has anyone else had that experience?" If you are confused or not sure you understand, ask a follow-up question. This can be as simple as, "Would you be willing to say more about ____?" Or, "Help me understand what you mean by ____."
- 5. Follow Up** - If someone shares something particularly vulnerable or challenging, it might be appropriate to follow up with a brief email, text, or phone call. You might just tell them how much you appreciate their openness. If appropriate, you might offer to talk further about what they shared.

6. **Group Dynamics** - A primary role of the facilitator in cultivating meaningful conversation is managing group dynamics so that everyone has an opportunity to share and the discussion is not dominated by one or two people. In addition to leaving enough space, you could ask participants to respond in writing before sharing aloud (in the Chat feature on Zoom, for example). You might also occasionally ask participants to share around the circle or one at a time, being clear that it is always okay to “pass.” Depending on how well you know the group, you might ask someone directly if they have anything to add, for example: “Maya, no pressure, but before I move on I wanted to check in and see if you have anything to add.”
7. **Check In on Parent’s Experiences with Kids**—One ongoing prompt of this curriculum is to encourage parents to try out what they are experiencing with their children. We’ve given you weekly worksheets designed to help them do that. It would be great to check-in with parents weekly on what they tried, and how it went. HOWEVER, recognize that your parents may need more time to work these spiritual exercises into their family life. So, it is very important to “read the room” as the weeks go on, and not focus on a parent’s immediate follow-through with their children, but rather on their own reflections on engaging these spiritual practices themselves.

Tips for Leading Online Groups

1. **Don’t Expect Early Birds** – When I led *Practical Tools for Raising Faithful Kids* in my (Sarah’s) own context, I found that adults with children at home showed up right on time or a few minutes late. Because our online sessions took place on weekday evenings, many people were rushing to finish dinner or bedtime routines before joining. I let people know that I was happy for them to join when they were able.
2. **Start & End On Time** – Even though a few people joined five minutes late each session, we started on time so that we could end on time. Weekday evenings are busy for many households and this was one way of respecting participants’ time.
3. **Don’t Mute Yourself** – As the leader, I chose to remain off mute for the majority of each session (I did make sure I was in a space without background noise). Remaining off mute allowed me to affirm participants comments smoothly and it allowed them to hear my laughter or affirming noises like they would in an onsite group.
4. **Utilize The Technology** – Rather than facilitating the online sessions in exactly the same way I would facilitate them onsite, I tried to utilize the technology available. I used the Chat feature often. If my group had been bigger, I would have used Breakout Rooms. You might experiment with polls or sharing brief videos.
5. **Copy and Paste Bolded Words Into the Chat** – You will notice that the Session Guide for each session includes some bolded words. The quoted and bolded words are suggested ways to say what the leader needs to say. The other bolded words are those we suggest you copy into the chat.
6. **Co-Host** - During each online session make a co-leader or a participant a “Co-Host” so they can let people arriving late into the meeting and keep the meeting going if your internet drops off.