



Preparing Your Family for A Faith-Filled School Year

As we watch the days grow shorter and even a bit cooler, we parents find ourselves preparing ourselves and our children for another school year. There's something exciting about the potential for another year of learning, of friendship and of spiritual growth that transcends age and inspires even us "grown ups" with loved ones heading back to school.

The start of a new school year is a logical time to pause, to set goals, to take stock of what's worked well academically, emotionally and spiritually in the past and to commit to changes that will help to ensure our children's well being and success in school, but more importantly in life.

Within my own family, I've discovered that my sons' education and faith formation is a year-round opportunity filled with many peaks and valleys. Over the years, I've learned a few lessons to help keep us on track during the busy school year:

1. Parents need to start our days early with personal devotional prayer time before the children arise in the morning for school.
2. Families should aim to start their day in prayer together – our family tradition involves "car prayer", that is praying together in the car on the way to school, or actually in our garage near the car if older teens will be driving themselves to school.
3. This is a great time to do a "tech check up" in your home. Check all of the privacy settings on your home computers

and gaming systems. Establish rules and usage limits for the year. Discuss social networking privileges and how age appropriate usage of these tools can impact upon your children's spiritual well being.

4. Create a smooth morning routine and minimize distractions by keeping your home a "TV-free" zone in the morning.
5. Establish immediate communications with your children's teachers, let them know you care about your children's success and volunteer to help them in any way possible. Let them know they are in your prayers as they embark on a new school year.
6. Make a family commitment to volunteer service by choosing individual and family projects for the year.
7. Tame your children's crazy extracurricular schedules by limiting the number of sports and activities per child.
8. Treasure the Sabbath together – make Sunday Mass attendance together a priority for your family and find ways to become involved in ministerial service to your parish as altar servers, musicians, lectors, or even by helping to keep your parish neat and welcoming.

I recently took time with Principal Kim Cochran of St. Anthony's School in Fresno, California to seek her wisdom on ways in which families can approach this school year with an

eye towards making it a "faith-filled" experience. Mrs. Cochran is not only an experienced administrator and classroom teacher, but also a mom to two grown sons. Having been through many different types of educational settings, she agrees that a positive, proactive attitude at this time of the year is a great way to ensure good results.

Regardless of whether our children attend Catholic or public schools or are homeschooled, we as parents have the primary responsibility of raising our children in the faith and also seeing to their intellectual growth and development.

As "Domestic Church", we can sometimes feel overwhelmed by this duty, but Mrs. Cochran, a mother of two adult sons, shares some terrific suggestions for any family. For families looking to make the most of summer vacation and family time with an eye towards preparing for educational growth during the school year, she suggests experiencing new activities together, reading together daily, and keeping a journal. "Here's a great example," advises Mrs. Cochran. "After a day spent at the zoo, parents stop at the library and check out animal books, go home and read them together and then children write about their day at the zoo (personal writing) and information about the animals (non-fiction writing). Parents will have great memories of the day and a journal written by their child to look back on years later. Teachers will be happy that children were reading and writing over the summer!"

To help any family focus on growing in faith together this school year, Mrs. Cochran wisely advises an emphasis on attending Mass as a family. Beyond simply spending that hour together in Church, she recommends that families discuss the homily at home and even read the bulletin together. "There are so many life lessons to be learned from reading the bulletin: wisdom, compassion, love, responsibility." says this experienced Catholic mom and educator. "All lessons we want our children to learn whether they will attend public or private school. For older children, talking to them about mentors and role models is so important. Who will they turn to for guidance? From parents to saints to coaches and teachers, they will need mentors to help guide and encourage as they persevere through junior and high school."

Above all, Kim Cochran shares a tip that families who know her recognize in her own personality and style: "Model, model, model. When you talk about Jesus, do it with a smile on your face and love in your heart." With these suggestions and a heart open to the grace that God is waiting to shower upon our families this year, we are off to a terrific start at making this our best school year ever.

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