



GROWING HEALTHY PASSION

Spiritual Disciplines for Families

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Spiritual Disciplines are things that we practice in order to get good at what we currently cannot do. While there are many traditional spiritual disciplines, there are three that can be easily applied to family life.

Solitude

Time needed: 15-30 minutes, 2-7 days per week.

Purpose: Teach children how to slow the reactive nature of the mind, pay attention to their inner feelings and longings, and pay attention to the quiet and whispering Presence of God. Over time this discipline will help children to work skillfully with overwhelming feelings and passion.

How-to Strategy: Some families create mandatory quiet times of 15 to 30 minutes in their homes for at least one and as many as seven days per week. At a minimum this means that no electronics (i.e., telephones, computers, ipods) are used, and a general sense of reverence and quiet are created. Some families light a few candles throughout the house. Parents often mentor children in prayerfully reading the Scriptures or some other spiritual reading or devotion. Parents can also encourage children to write in their journals, or practice some form of reflective, meditative prayer, such as Lectio Divina, Centering Prayer (see www.centeringprayer.com), or Christian meditation (www.wccm.org). Younger children may need one-on-one attention from a parent, reading quietly to them, praying with them, or dialoging with them.

Challenges: Particularly when initiating this spiritual discipline, it is important to imbue this time with a sense of joy. Times of solitude can be ended with a special snack or treat. Or, times of solitude can be linked with other positive family times (i.e., right before family video night or special meal, or while visiting favorite vacation spots.)

Special Times

Time needed: 20 to 25 minutes, 2-5 times per week.

Purpose: Provide a child with positive and joy-filled experience of their core longing to love and be loved. In no small way it provides an *embodied experience* of the unconditional love of God that is consistent, gentle, compassionate, and accepting. On a more practical level, special times settle the inner life of a child and give positive attention to appropriate behavior, often reducing attention-seeking negative behavior.

How to Strategies: There are ten core components to Special Times:

1. Parents should decide how much time they can realistically set aside for their child. Many parents find that 15-20 minutes, 3-4 times per week is usually possible. If the child's behavior is problematic, then parents should consider 20-25 minutes per day, 6-7 days per week.
2. Children should be told when Special Time will be, so that the child can look forward to it.
3. Children should be told the "rules" for Special Time. Here is an example:
"Zack, you and I are going to start spending some very special time together every day. Every night after we finish the dishes, you and I are going to spend 15 minutes together without anyone else around. I will let you decide what we do together. You can choose any activity you want, except watching TV or playing video games."
4. Parents often find it helpful if they prepare for this Special Time a few minutes in advance by doing something to relax and to help clear their mind, such as exercising, praying, or taking a nap. It is important for parents to approach this with a soft heart and an intention of giving their child an experience of compassion and love.
5. The goal of this time is to allow positive interactions to occur between parent and child. Parents can begin by simply watching their child play, reflecting what is going on, much like a sportscaster would call a game (i.e., "now it looks like you are going to build something new with those blocks; I wonder what you are building or if you want me to help you.")
6. Parents should avoid asking questions, teaching lessons, directing the play, or giving commands. The child should be allowed to direct the play.
7. If the child misbehaves, the parent should simply turn and look away. If the misbehavior continues, the parent should gently walk away and tell the child that Special Time will resume when the child can behave nicely.
8. Parents should use a timer so that both parent and child can monitor the time together. While Special Time is going, parents should avoid answering the phone and minimize all other interruptions (this is harder than it sounds). When Special Time is over (i.e., when the timer sounds), Special Time should end.
9. Parents should keep a record to count how many times per week they are able to keep their commitment to their child. Parents will need to be compassionate and gracious with themselves; most parents find it very difficult to maintain this sort of commitment.
10. Parents should adapt Special Times based on the age of the child. Younger children thrive with shorter, daily times. As children get older, fewer, longer times work better. As children transition into adolescence, parents should consider scheduling regular "dates" with their teens to go for breakfast, for a drive, shopping, or to some other favorite destination.

Challenges: Most parents find it very difficult to set this time aside regularly, then to keep it protected against distractions. It is often helpful for parents to agree together to "cover" for each other so that these Special Times happen as designed.

Christ-Centered Service

Time Needed: Varies. 20 minutes per week to a half-day per month.

Purpose: Christ-Centered Service teaches children that the most fulfilling expression of their longing to love is to serve those in need. This provides an experiential alternative to the prevailing cultural view that the most fulfilling expression of our core longing to love and be loved is self-centered gratification.

How-to Strategy: There are many different possibilities to help children engage in Christ-Centered Service. Here are a few:

1. **Share decisions about financial giving.** Prayerfully share the requests your family gets for donations. Teach children that “it isn’t our money; it’s God’s money and we get to give it to the people who need it.” When children learn about the people who live with chronic poverty and suffering in the world, and are then invited to pray about and help choose where to send donations, children can begin to get a taste for the satisfaction that comes when caring for others.”
2. **Support lonely and disconnected people.** Identify people God has placed in your family’s life who are separated from the community, such as relatives, friends in senior centers, and/or missionaries, etc. Make a regular commitment to write a prayerful and thoughtful letter and/or e-mail. Or, even better, make a regular visit to their home. If visiting a senior center, consider bringing a Bingo game with you and some treats, and provide small prizes for winning (i.e., \$.25/game). Emphasize relationship building and mutual prayer for these friends to clarify the way in which our deepest desire to love flows from the life of God.
3. **Plan a short-term mission trip.** Check with your church or denomination office to identify opportunities for a short-term mission trip as a family.

Challenges: Most families are overscheduled and have little time for these commitments.

