



# Faith Formation with Families in Today's Church

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Leif Kehrwald

**T**he pressures, challenges, and realities facing families today make it difficult for them to intentionally grow in faith together. Societal and cultural trends point toward individualism, pluralism, personal choice, instant gratification, and a belief that any persons or institutions of authority are suspect. Add to this the frenetic pace of activity that most American families keep, and the result is a situation where both intention and availability to explore faith at home are severely limited.

One can also paint a rather bleak picture of congregations today. Over the last couple of generations, the Catholic Church—and, I suspect, most mainline Christian congregations—have fostered a passive approach to faith growth at home. With our schools, our faith formation programs, our youth programs, our Bible camps, our retreats and rallies for youth, and a plethora of other well-meaning programs, we have successfully communicated to parents and families that the best thing they can do for their children and teens is to *drop them off* at the church, and we will make disciples out of them.

But of course, our disciple-making efforts have yielded less positive results than we (anyone) had hoped, so we conclude that parents and families are not doing their part. We remind them over and over that they are the *primary educators* in the faith. Yet why don't they behave like it? Why are their priorities skewed? Could it be that *we* have conditioned them to behave in exactly this way?

In his 2006 pastoral letter on faith formation, *Learning, Loving and Living Our Faith*, Catholic Bishop Tod Brown of the Diocese of Orange, California, raises some rather pointed and poignant questions.

- Our religious education programs are packed with youngsters preparing in the second grade to receive their First Communion but the enrollment often drops dramatically in the ensuing years. Why don't they come back?
- In some of our schools less than half of the Catholic students come to Mass on the weekend with their families. Why aren't they there?
- After preparing for and receiving Confirmation, many...good-hearted young men and women move on to other things. Why do so few remain regularly involved in service projects or youth groups?
- (Referring to couples who come to the Church for marriage, Bishop Brown writes,) After their marriage, why are so few of them regularly involved in the life of their parishes? (Brown, 2-3)

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I believe we must raise the bar in our commitment to challenge and support all families in their faith-building efforts. I also believe we must raise the bar in terms of our expectations for families and households themselves to make a stronger commitment to explore faith at home. We need to shift the paradigm of household faith growth as something optional and hoped-for to something that is expected; from extraordinary to ordinary.

## Families and Faith

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From the Roman Catholic perspective, there seems to be a disconnect between what the church says about the holy and sacred nature of family life and how the typical family *feels* about themselves. In short, the church says rather pointedly that the family is indeed sacred, an authentic ecclesial expression, a *domestic church*. Yet, the average American Catholic family (and presumably, Protestant as well) rarely *feels* that they are holy and sacred.

The source of this disconnect could lie in two places. Either the church is wrong in its claim, or families do not have an adequate understanding of holiness, in particular, *homemade* holiness. I find the church's stance on family life difficult to argue with. In fact, a great deal of what the church has said about marriage and family life through the centuries is downright inspiring. So I must conclude that families themselves don't quite get it. They just don't grasp the meaning and possibility that they are inherently holy and sacred.

And yet, at the same time nearly every family catches glimpses of the Spirit on occasion. Even amidst its foibles and quirks and problems and dysfunction,

every so often the very nature of living as a family reveals the wholesome sacredness of this unique community. Most people cannot explain it, but nearly all have experienced it. But the fact remains that on the whole and from day-to-day, most families would not consider themselves holy and sacred.

Holy and sacred does not mean problem free, not by any means. It does not even necessarily mean "capable of solving our problems." All it means is that as believers the family occasionally encounters the genuine Mystery of Love. And therein lies the rub: most families don't realize that it's quite so simple.

In his exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II articulates the fundamental tasks of the Christian family. One of those tasks is ecclesial, meaning to participate in the life and mission of the church. While challenging for many, this task is easy enough to understand. However, to address our concern about ordinary family living, John Paul II goes on to say, "the Christian family also builds up the Kingdom of God in history through the everyday realities that concern and distinguish its state of life" (#50).

The United States Catholic Bishops reinforce this notion of everyday holiness in their 1994 pastoral message to families, *Follow the Way of Love*. Quite simply, yet profoundly, they state,

A family is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The early Church expressed this truth by calling the Christian family *a domestic church or church of the home*.

This marvelous teaching was underemphasized for centuries but reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council. Today we are still uncovering its rich treasure.

The point of the teaching is simple, yet profound. As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church.

Your domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united with and supported by parishes and other communities within the larger Church. Christ has called you and joined you to himself in and through the sacraments. Therefore, you share in one and the same mission that he gives to the whole Church (8).

Notice what they did *not* say. They did not say that when Christian families say their meal prayers, when they gather around the Advent wreath, when they worship on Sunday, they are a true expression of the Church. Of course all of these are true expressions, but the bishops use the term *daily life*. Believing families seeking God's presence in their normal activities, in their *daily life* as a family, are a true expression of the Church.

According to Jim Merhaut, holiness simply means set apart. Merhaut writes, "Divine holiness, expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, means to be absolutely set apart *from* sin and set apart *for* love. Holiness is not distinct from creation and physicality; holiness is separating oneself from the ways of sin so as to live a distinguished life of love" (Kehrwald, 12). With respect to families, Merhaut reminds us "family living is embodied living. Day to day, hour to hour, and minute to minute, family members literally brush up

against each other and the world around them as they explore the depths of love in and through their fleshy experiences” (Kehrwald, 12). If only families could make the connection between their “fleshy experiences” and their perceived understanding of holiness!

Merhaut goes on to pose a very important question, and then he offers an insightful answer.

What separates Christian families from other families? What makes a Christian family holy or complete? It is not necessarily the organizations to which they belong, although holiness will require the rejections of some organizational affiliations. It is not necessarily the house in which they choose to live, although the choice of a house and a neighborhood may be significantly influenced by one’s path to holiness. It is not necessarily the things they own or the food they eat or the entertainment they pursue, but a particular path too can influence these to holiness. Rather, Christian families are set apart from other families because their love for Christ is the primary motivation for all they are and all that they do. (Kehrwald, 13)

The Christian vision of family life describes the family as a community of life and love. Family life is sacred and family activities are holy because God’s love is revealed and communicated there. As a result, families can come to believe that God dwells among them, empowering them to recognize and respond to God’s gracious activity in their lives.

## Faith Moments in Family Life

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The first, primary, and most important task for families to grow in faith is to recognize their “moments of meaning” and intentionally mine them for what they have to teach. Everyday, families experience what I call “moments of meaning” that have the potential for becoming religiously significant. Aside from those extraordinary moments when God’s grace literally explodes in the face of the family, many of these ordinary moments may go by undetected, let alone reflected upon. To probe their religious significance, someone in the family must point it out, and then the family must acknowledge it and respond to it.

In his classic book, *An Experience Named Spirit*, John Shea writes

There are moments that, although they occur within the everyday confines of human living, take on larger meaning. They have a lasting impact; they cut through to something deeper; they demand a hearing. It may be the death of a parent, the touch of a friend, falling in love, a betrayal, the recognition of what has really been happening over the last two years, the unexpected arrival of blessing, the sudden advent of curse. But whatever it is, we sense we have undergone something that has touched upon the normally dormant but always present relationship to God. (97)

We seek to help families recognize God’s gracious presence in their daily lives, *and* show them how the Christian tradition can illuminate their experience, turning “ordinary” human moments into religiously

significant ones. In order to do this, we must help families become aware of the moments of meaning in their lives, filter their experiences through the lens of faith and spirituality, become aware of God’s gracious presence in their lives—and respond to it—develop a faith rapport with one another, connect their informal faith experiences with the more formal religious practice of the community, and become intentional about their desire to grow in faith.

A tall order, you may think. Indeed, it is! Yet we must keep two things in mind. First, some families are doing just that. Some families have found creative and meaningful ways to connect their life experiences with faith growth. They *are* intentional about it, and it is much more than just another “should” in their busy lives. Second, as church leaders, we simply don’t have a choice but to move in this direction.

With this tall order in mind, I offer a four-step process designed to help families notice their moments of meaning, reflect upon them, put them in dialogue with the Jesus story, and see what difference it can make in their lives. I have worked with numerous groups of parents and families, and given a conducive atmosphere, I can attest that the four steps work. When parents and families are given the opportunity to work through these steps, they actually do begin to connect their daily life with their faith practice.

Essentially, what I am about to describe is a rather simple process of theological reflection, a practice learned by anyone engaged in serious spiritual formation. I would never use the term “theological reflection” with ordinary families, for surely it would intimidate them; better to simply call this “remembering and reflecting on our moments of

meaning.” The process helps families pause and take a look at what’s happening—become present to the moment—and then purposefully engage in several sequenced steps that lead them toward a spiritually-based interpretation of what’s happening. The steps help the family mine the sacredness of the key moments of their lives.

Here’s an example of a family moment; I call it “Spring Musical.”

*Josh is a high school senior who loves music, dance, and drama. Throughout his high school career he has landed only minor parts in the school drama productions. He has always felt that his true talent has not been fully recognized until one January afternoon, he arrived home and announced, “I got the lead in the Spring musical.”*

As I describe the four steps, it will benefit you, to bring to mind a “moment of meaning” from your own family experience. Perhaps the moment occurred just this morning or within the past week, or perhaps it is a memory of a moment that occurred long ago. On a blank piece of paper, make a note of your moment. Write a few lines to describe it. (The four steps described below can be found in greater detail in Chapter Five of *Families and Faith*.)

## Step One: Awareness Stop! Look! Listen!

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The first step is someone in the family must realize “we’re having a moment of meaning.” Someone realizes that something deeper is going on within the family. The event may be relatively benign, such as a resolution to a conflict or a piece of good news, or an unexpected good deed that someone performs simply out of the goodness of his or her heart.

Or, it may be an extraordinary moment, such as a teenager’s first love lost, or a child’s first day of middle school, or the death of a loved one.

Instead of just enveloping this event into the routine of the day, someone must take notice that something important just happened, and then point it out to other family members. He or she must speak up and say, “*Stop! Look* what’s happening here! Can we *listen* to what the Spirit wants to say to us at this very moment?”

There is risk involved here because other family members may not want to recognize the moment. It may mean being intimate with one another, or reconciling with each other, or any number of things that would bring them out of their protective shell and be vulnerable with each other. It’s easy to dismiss the gut feeling and let the moment of meaning pass.

*Growing up, Josh’s mother always dreamed of being a professional ballerina. Her dream never came true. When Josh announced his good news amidst the noise and chaos of preparations for supper, Mom knew how what a triumph this was for him. And she knew that unless she did something, the rest of the family would just let it go with a “That’s great, Josh.”*

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. How did you and other family members become aware of it?

## Step Two: Acknowledge It!

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In their own way, the family acknowledges that things are not the same as they were before the “moment.” Their routine of ordinary life has been disrupted so they can embrace this new

encounter. They begin to recognize the presence of the Spirit in their midst.

Like the first, this step also requires some intention and leadership by one or two persons, who urge the whole family to venture into the encounter. As a whole, the family must be willing to allow the disruption. They must be willing to trust enough to go along this unexpected path to see what can happen.

*Mom gives Josh a congratulatory hug, and announces to all, “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Don’t be late; we have something wonderful to celebrate!” When they all sit down for supper, Josh finds that he’s been given the “special plate” reserved for special occasions and accomplishments. And everyone finds a wine glass at his or her place. Wine or juice is poured into the glasses, and Mom begins the meal with a toast to Josh, “It’s not everyday that one of our lifelong dreams comes true, but today, for Josh, one did. Hurray for Josh in landing the lead role in the Spring musical!” Applause all around. The meal conversation centers on what the audition was like, how Josh selected and prepared his monologue and solo, and if the director is aware that Josh, while a great actor and a good singer, is not a strong dancer. Later, the discussion flows into rehearsal schedules, performance dates, and arrangements for Grandma and Grandpa to come see the show.*

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. How was it acknowledged? Who led the family into further exploration of the moment?

## Step Three: Connect to the Sacred

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The family senses that the moment can teach them something, and they are convinced it has implications for their spiritual well-being as a family. They want to mine its riches. How do they do so? With intentional action, the family will seek answers to no less than five basic questions to help them reflect on the moment of meaning, and to glean what it has to teach them.

1. **How does our story connect to the Jesus story?** Is there a gospel story that connects to the family encounter? What is the meaning and message behind that story? Does that message also apply to the family encounter? What does the Bible say about this situation? What would Jesus do in this situation?
2. **How do we pray about this encounter, or how does this encounter change our prayer?** Does the moment call for rejoicing or repentance? Does the encounter draw the family into intimate embrace and prayers of gratitude, or does it call for prayers for courage and resolve? Does it challenge the family to stand up for others, or call us to circle their wagons and draw in on themselves? What are the prayers, and what are the ways to pray in each of these circumstances?
3. **Who are the wisdom people with whom we should connect?** Does the encounter require some interpretation? Who does the family turn to help them understand it? Or

does the event simply cry out to be shared with others in joy and happiness? Does the family have an outlet to do just that? Or does the moment of meaning call for comfort, support, and encouragement? To whom can the family turn? Or does the moment simply call for mutual commiseration from someone who's "been"?

4. **How does this encounter intersect with the life of our faith community and our religious practice?** Does the moment of meaning impact the way the family worships or otherwise participates in their faith community? Is it calling them to engage in a ministry, service, or program that is new to them? Are there others in their church who can benefit from hearing about this encounter?
5. **What resources should we pursue for further growth?** Is there a book the parent or family can read, a movie they should see, a music CD they ought to hear that will help them continue their learning and growth from this encounter? Is there a class or lecture or intergenerational event that might help? Is there a magazine or journal to which they should subscribe, or a website that they should frequent?

*Josh's triumph is also Mom's dream come true. She finds herself reflecting on how she has prayed for Josh continually since he was a baby. She just knew that someday his talent would be discovered. In her prayer she feels a bit like the*

*persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) or the midnight neighbor (Luke 11:5–13) in pestering God with her prayers for her son. Now she is emboldened to ask her family to pray for Josh, and the whole cast and crew, by adding a simple blessing to their meal prayer each evening. Also, since several members of the cast and crew go to the same church, Josh's mom has asked if they could receive a special blessing on the Sunday before the show opens. .*

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. Did your family make a connection to the sacred? How so? What questions was your family confronted with?

## Step Four: So What?

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After the family has pursued the faith connection to their moment of meaning, they need to evaluate its impact. Maintaining a posture of intentional awareness, they should discuss questions such as these:

- What difference has this experience made in our lives?
- How have we grown from it?
- What about ourselves has it revealed to us?
- What memory have we created? How will we revisit it?
- What have we learned about our faith, about life, about each other?
- How will this experience change our behavior?

It is likely that individual family members will reflect on these or similar questions. Ideally, however, the routine of family life will bring members together for opportunities to share their reflections with each other. Of course, the family needs time and space to do this. They need plenty

of quantity time together in order to have the quality time to share with each other on a deeper level.

*Of course Josh performed well, and the family has a complete video of the entire show. While Mom will never tire of watching clips, she knows Josh will grow up and move on, and his performance will seem juvenile. No matter, because she knows that for both of them this experience has renewed their confidence in God's gracious activity in their lives, and in God's response to prayer.*

➤ Take a look at your moment of meaning. What have been the implications for you and for your family?

Most families are overwhelmed by all of the information coming at them and all the expectations laid in their laps. If they perceive faith and religious practice as just one more “should” in their lives, it will likely fall near the bottom of the priority list. Yet through the steps outlined here, their faith can actually become a valuable tool for discovering family balance, discerning choice, building camaraderie, experiencing intimacy, and of course, spiritual growth.

## Recognizing the Moments

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It's not enough to simply declare that the Christian family is holy and sacred, and therefore, that all the events in the life of the family are potential moments of faith growth. While this is certainly true, the vastness of possibilities may render both the family and the church leader blind to all but the most obvious possibilities. Therefore, categorizing these experiences allows for the practical application of resources, assistance, and connection with

others in the community who may have had similar encounters.

The following points form a framework for strategic response in helping families make the connection between faith and everyday life. These points recognize the full range of faith encounters that families can have, yet offer seven separate “categories” from which to offer pastoral assistance and effective resources (see Kehrwald 70-71). Notice the repeated connection between faith and ordinary life. Imagine helping the family place their “moment of meaning” into one of these responses, and assisting their learning in that context.

1. **Intentional.** Parents are the first and most influential educators of their children. Families provide the foundational setting in which a young person's faith is formed. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the parents' role as primary faith educator?
2. **Daily Life.** Families grow in faith when they “stop, look, and listen” in order to recognize God's gracious activity in their daily lives. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the ordinary or extraordinary events of daily life?
3. **Wholeness and Well-Being.** When families build healthy relationships with each other through positive interactions, sharing meals, solving conflicts, and so on, they also grow in faith together. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to maintaining, healing, or enriching family relationships?
4. **Change.** While sometimes resisted, moments of change and transition in family life open windows for faith growth. Several predictable transitions correspond with sacramental moments. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to an experience of change or transition in the family?
5. **Religious Practice.** When families practice their faith—through conversation and discussion, ritual and celebration, outreach and service to others—they grow in faith together. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to religious activity in the home or in the larger faith community?
6. **Worship.** When families participate in the liturgical feasts, seasons, and rhythms of the church, they make connections between their faith encounters and the faith life of the larger community. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the worship celebrations of the faith community?
7. **Contemporary Culture.** Families meet the challenges of contemporary culture by articulating their values, establishing clear priorities, and making careful decisions, all in an atmosphere of community support. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the family's relationship with society and popular culture?  
When family members, particularly adults and teens, are familiar with and understand these seven points, two things occur quite readily. First, they will more easily and more often recognize the “moments of meaning” that occur in their families. Second, they will have a clearer sense of how to respond to the movement of the Spirit in a way that benefits all.

## Application

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When I have shared the seven points described above with church leaders, I am often asked how to put them into practical practice so that the leader can actually help families recognize and reflect upon their moments of meaning. In response, I invite the leader to engage in the following steps:

1. **Articulate your sphere of influence.** In other words, what program or service or ministry do you have responsibility for and influence over?
2. **Describe the families in your sphere of influence.** In your program or ministry, what can you generalize about the families connected there: e.g., school-age, adolescent, dual-career, and so forth. Of course, every family and household is unique and there is a great deal of diversity among any group of families, but there will also be some similarities. Name those similarities.
3. **Develop home activities.** With these family similarities in mind, try to surface one or more practical, doable home activities that will help families recognize each of the seven key points. You may want to link these activities to a particular season or event of church life. As an example, see the chart at the end of the article, “Connecting Family to Congregational Life: Lent,” which shows some Lenten home activities connected to each of the seven points.

4. **Determine delivery method.** Go back to your sphere of influence. What’s the best way for you to package and deliver these ideas to the families in your program or ministry? How do you tailor the content and the promotion of these activities in order to maximize their potential for use? How do you build in opportunities for feedback and accountability?

Ideas for family faith-building activities are plentiful. The challenge lies in getting families to engage in them. Here are some practical tips:

- **If they build it, they will use it.** When families create it, they are more likely to remember, value, and do something with it.
- **Keep it simple.** Be creative and make it pleasing to the eye, but make it simple to accomplish. Given them options to choose from, but not too much to do.
- **Give them all they need.** Be sure households have the tools and supplies they need to engage in the activity at home.
- **Show them what they’ve got.** When you have the parents and/or families gathered, walk them through the activity and resources. Show them how it works.
- **Practice.** If we want families to express their faith at home, give them opportunities to practice doing so while they are gathered with facilitators and other families.

## Conclusion

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Today’s family is busier than ever before. We cannot coerce them into exploring faith, just as we can no longer coerce them into worshipping every Sunday. But amid their frenetic pace and their constant effort to provide for and raise healthy families, today’s parents are also searching. They search for meaning, for answers, for insight into what will help their children and themselves navigate the dangerous waters of today’s American culture. Many have discovered that a living, thriving faith congregation helps them do just that. But in order to fully benefit from that community, they must also become an intentional domestic community of faith. For their sakes, as well as our own, we must help them do just that.

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## Practice Ideas

# Connecting Family Faith to Congregational Life: Lent

Principle	Home Activity	Church Link
<p><b>Intentional</b> Parents are the first and most influential educators of their children.</p>	<p><b>Sacrifice</b> Sacrifice needs to be alive and well in family life. Everyday acts of sacrifice—parent to child, husband to wife, sibling to sibling—show how much we love and care for each other. Sacrifice focused on our relationship with God needs to be a priority too. Talk about sacrifice in your household.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the ways members of our family make sacrifices for each other? Why do we make these sacrifices?</li> <li>• What sacrifices can we make to grow closer to God? What sacrifice does God want us to make for others at home, in our neighborhood and world?</li> </ul>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas to the families in your sphere of influence?</i></p>
<p><b>Daily Life</b> Families grow in faith when they “stop, look, and listen.”</p>	<p><b>Serving/Almsgiving</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show an act of kindness to each family member today.</li> <li>• Show an act of kindness to a friend and to someone who is difficult to like.</li> <li>• Do someone else’s chores one day this week.</li> <li>• Donate a new item of children’s clothing to the local homeless shelter.</li> </ul>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p><b>Well-Being</b> When families build healthy relationships they also grow in faith together.</p>	<p><b>Ideas for Fasting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give up one TV show today and spend that time helping a family member.</li> <li>• Think about a bad habit that you would like to change, like telling a lie, yelling at others, getting angry, or putting people down. Choose to avoid that habit and do something positive instead.</li> </ul>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p><b>Change</b> Change and transition in family life open windows for faith growth.</p>	<p><b>Sacrifice continued</b> Using the list of ways to practice sacrifice, create goals for your family, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will think of each other’s feelings and needs, and sometimes be willing to give up what we want freely and happily.</li> <li>• We will not always have to be first to choose a seat in the car, to use the computer, to have that piece of homemade pie. Sometimes we will be last.</li> </ul>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p><b>Religious practice</b> When families practice their faith, they grow in faith together.</p>	<p><b>Ash Wednesday Blessing of a Home Cross</b> Many families have a cross or crucifix which hangs on a wall in their home. On Ash Wednesday, the family can gather to bless this special Home Cross. Provide a blessing prayer.</p>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p><b>Worship</b> When families participate in the liturgical feasts, seasons, and rhythms of church.</p>	<p><b>Lenten Daily Prayers</b> Provide simple ideas for daily Lenten prayers, such as this meal prayer: <i>Bless us, Lord, and the food we are about to eat. May our love for one another, and the food we share, strengthen us to share your love with others</i></p>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p><b>Contemporary Culture</b> Families meet the challenges of contemporary culture.</p>	<p><b>Grow in Awareness of Justice</b> What can we do together as members of a family to increase awareness of justice issues and the ways to work for justice?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect “information nuggets” that family members find on various justice and service topics. A sample “nugget” could look like this: <i>Did you know? Every day in the United States, one in four children under 12 run short of food; most at risk are families headed by women with incomes less than 75% of the federal poverty level.</i> Talk about ways your family can help.</li> <li>• Participate in a movie night for families, or the entire community, focusing on a “values video” or a justice-oriented theme.</li> <li>• Participate in a school, church, or community justice education program.</li> </ul>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>