Supporting children with prayer

Information for teachers

The late Pope Francis explained that prayer is like “speaking with a friend: in prayer one opens one’s heart.” Pope Leo has also emphasized prayer as a living relationship with God, encouraging us to cultivate a true and lasting friendship with Him through prayer. Mission Together also places great emphasis on prayer, encouraging children to see prayer as a way to deepen our friendship with God and with others.

“Teach us how to pray”

Friendship with God is like any other, it requires regular communication. Just like other forms of communication - speaking, writing, reading - prayer is something we learn and develop. Even Jesus’ disciples had to learn to pray!

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Luke 11:1

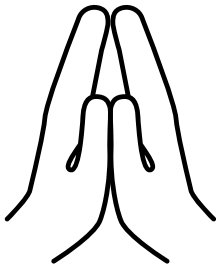
With this in mind, it is good to remember that to lead prayer does not mean to “do” the prayer to, or for, the children. As with all learning, staff should guide, involve and encourage children at their own stage of development, as they develop their own understanding of, and participation in, prayer. Praying is a deeply personal experience and can never be judged or assessed.

Positive role models who consistently demonstrate prayerful and reverent behaviour can support this process, as children often learn by observing and mirroring others. Providing reassurance, understanding and support is as crucial for children as it is for adults.

Before you begin

Before beginning prayer, do your best to distinguish between ‘prayer time’ and ‘other time’ by creating a sense of the sacred.

- Say to the children that, whilst God is present everywhere and at all times, we can feel His closeness and peace most especially when we pray.
- Explain to the children what will happen and why, because their understanding is an essential part of developing their own prayer life.
- Creating a focal point for prayer may help children connect with the prayer activity. Cover a small table or chair with a cloth the colour of the liturgical season: green for Ordinary Time, purple for Advent and Lent, white for feast days. Red for martyrs and Pentecost.



- Place on/in the focal point a candle, a Bible, and a cross. Additional items which are relevant to the season may be added, such as a religious image or artefact, flowers or a plant.

Setting the scene

Preparing for prayer can develop a child's appreciation of stillness and silence, a means by which we open ourselves to God and learn the value of personal reflection.

- Invite children to sit quietly, comfortably and to be still. Initially, this may only be for very short periods of time but can increase with experience and confidence.
- On occasions it may be useful to encourage the children to slow down and focus on their breathing, taking long breaths in and letting them out gradually.
- Reflective music can also be used effectively to create an appropriate atmosphere.
- It is advisable that other staff in the setting should stop their work activities and engage in the shared prayer time - remembering the importance of role modelling and the deepening sense of community that develops through shared prayer.
- Begin by leading the children in praying the Sign of the Cross. Say the words and make the actions slowly, deliberately and reverently.

The Sign of the Cross

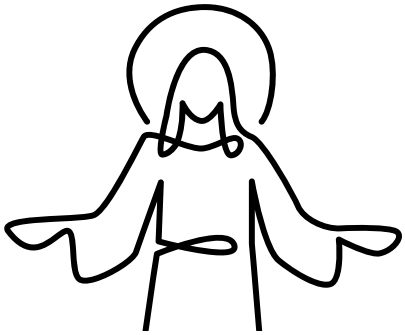
The physical gesture of the Sign of the Cross grounds us and is a reminder that we bring our whole self to God when we pray, body and soul. Remember that the words of the Sign of the Cross and their accompanying actions are a prayer in themselves.

For our youngest, or more inexperienced children, mastering the Sign of the Cross takes time and repetition. For very young children, it may be enough of a prayer to focus on this alone to begin with. The Sign of the Cross will later be used with automaticity, to open and conclude other prayers. (See Mission Together videos of the Sign of the Cross by children around the world and Sign of the Cross by priests around the world)

The early stages and development of prayer

An awareness of who our prayers are directed to is also important. This should reflect the understanding children have developed through their learning in the RE curriculum. For example, children should be introduced to Jesus before they are encouraged to pray to Him. This is a particularly important consideration for EYFS teachers.

In a school setting, a good place to start is often with daily prayers. Each marks an important part of the day and usually include a prayer in the morning, at lunchtime and before going home. Explain their purpose as you introduce each in turn. Remember it will take time for these prayers to embed.



When they are appropriate to use, there are a number of traditional prayers which are prayed by Catholics daily around the world. For example, the Our Father and the Hail Mary. A comprehensive list can be found in the Prayer and Liturgy Directory p47 and are supported by Mission Together Prayer Resources on our website.

Diocesan guidance will usually clarify that there is no expectation to know and recite such traditional prayers in their entirety for young children. Over time, make the children aware that there are many different types of prayer and ways of praying. There is no rush to know or experience all of these prayers. (See PLD p45-47)

Prayer in a more spontaneous and unscripted form can be modelled and shared with children when relevant opportunities arise. Such prayers use simple everyday language as we talk to God. These prayers could be linked with family life, current events or learning during RE lessons.

Children can be invited to create their own impromptu prayers which will also support them later when writing their own prayer intentions. (See 'Write your own prayer' on our Mission Together website.)

Over time children will become more aware of the liturgical seasons and key events within the year which will enable them to understand the use of particular prayers for particular occasions. Mission Together have a useful page for you to use with resources arranged by Month.

A note on children of other faiths

Children of other faiths cannot be compelled to take part in Catholic prayers. They may instead be invited to remain present and reflective, while learning how to live out their own faith with integrity. Opportunities for reflection — including moments to think about the day, express sorrow, or give thanks — can help children of other faiths engage meaningfully. (See Prayer and Liturgy Directory p23).

Please note: Mission Together have also produced *Preparing to Celebrate the Word – a brief guide.*
Click this link to download.