



first community

# Kids and Faith

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Welcome to our Children and Youth Ministry programs at First Community. We offer many ways for your child to engage and become part of our community of faith. We created this guide to share the types of messages your child will learn in our programs. We also hope it will encourage you to support your child's faith journey at home. Getting the same message from both family and church will be less confusing and may help your child move beyond some of the messages they might receive from other sources.

This guide will cover information about faith formation, God, prayer, the Bible, and responding to hard questions.

## ***Faith ~ You are the most important person***

Faith can offer a foundation of strength and love throughout your child's life, and you are the person most likely to influence your child's beliefs. If you hope your child will have a faith that sticks with them throughout life, you play a starring role.

Be the adult you hope your child grows up to be. If you want them to be open-minded and honest, model these qualities in your words and actions. If you want them to be self-compassionate, show them how it is done by verbalizing your positive self-talk. If you want your child to treat themselves with grace, be honest about your mistakes or moments when your actions did not reflect your beliefs.

If you want your child to have a deep faith and understanding of the Bible, model this and share your own faith journey with them. If kids wonder why faith should be important to them, tell them why it is important to you. If you want your child to participate in church activities, model this by attending church and volunteering for church programs. Being a role model for your child's faith development does not mean you need to be perfect or become a Biblical scholar; instead, it means treating yourself and others with love. Your example is the greatest teacher.

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## ***God ~ An always-present source of love and light***

"It's something you know is there, but you cannot see."

— Harold Kushner, *When Children Ask about God: A Guide for Parents who Don't Always have all the Answers*

Children are born with an innate sense of spirituality and connection with God, something many children unlearn as they get older. We hope your child grows up to view God not as an old guy on a cloud with a beard who decides what should (or should not) happen to us. Instead, we hope your child will come to know God as an always-present source of love and light. One description of God's expansiveness comes from Acts 17:28, "In God we live and move and have our being."

A way to discuss the concept of God with your child is to ask, "What is something you know is there, but you cannot see?" They will likely

come up with ideas like wind, air, or love. God is like all these things. In the Bible, God is described in many ways: shepherd, potter, bread of life, teacher, hen, rock, artist, father, mother, and more.

Culture tells us God is a “He.” In our children and youth programs, we mindfully avoid using gender-specific pronouns to describe God. Instead of using gendered pronouns, we simply use “God.” For example, instead of saying, “God loves us, and *he* is always with us,” we would say, “God loves us, and *God* is always with us.” We hope the children in our programs come to learn that all people are lovingly made in the image of God; there is not one type of person or gender more like God than any other.

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## ***Prayer ~ Connecting with the Divine***

“Stories, quiet times, and prayer all help prepare children to experience God’s presence.”

— Sasso, S., *Talking to your Children about God*

Many of us grew up reciting rote prayers when our family gathered for a meal or at bedtime. It is our hope that you will be mindful and open-minded about the prayers you teach your children as well as when and how your child prays. Prayer can be done in many ways: words, movement, and art can be a wonderful way to connect with God, as well as a time to share hopes and concerns.

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso writes, “Help your child understand that prayer is less about asking and more about wonder, thanksgiving, and blessing. Prayer is not about bargaining or magic: it is about becoming aware of what really matters in life.”

\* See examples of prayers for children and families at the end of this guide.

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## ***The Bible ~ To be taken seriously, not literally***

When we hold the Bible in our hands, we often forget that it was not written as one continuous story. Instead, the Bible is a library of books written by an unknown number of people over the course of 2,000 years—and whose opinions often conflicted! What holds our sacred text together is that each book is the story of a person’s faith. When

we think of it this way, the Bible can become an invitation to see our own stories and our own relationships with God as a sacred text we are currently writing.

Our current Protestant Bible contains 66 books divided into two main sections – the Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament. People who practice Judaism also use the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text.

The Old Testament includes books written by a variety of people, from a variety of places and times, using a variety of genres including history, law, poetry, and prophecy. The Old Testament contains the stories Jesus would have learned as a child.

The New Testament contains stories and teachings about Jesus's life and ministry. Like the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament was written by a variety of people over many years. It includes gospels, history, letters, and prophecy. New Testament stories tell of Jesus's birth, life, teaching, and death. It also includes letters written to guide new Christian communities.

We recommend using a children's Bible to introduce Bible stories to young children. Some of the more difficult texts will not be included and the stories will likely be told in a way children can understand.

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## ***Reading the Bible with Children ~ Stories can mean different things to different people.***

"The Bible is less a book of answers than it is an invitation to wrestle with stories and meanings."

— Caldwell, E. and Wehrhem, C. editors, *Growing in God's Love*

It is not unusual for people to be raised with the understanding that the Bible should be read literally; many believe that if "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!" It is also not unusual for those who experienced such an upbringing to later question this thinking and to struggle sharing stories of faith with their children. They might find the Bible (and church generally) to be triggering. If this describes you, please don't let this hold you back! There are many meaningful, open-minded, and diverse ways to explore the Bible. We are here to help you talk through these issues if needed.

The Bible is full of stories of goodness, kindness, and justice. It has heroes and heroines, songs of praise, and miraculous tales. It is also full of stories of terror and brutality; these more difficult stories will not make their way into a Bible specifically written for children. All these stories were written by people who lived at certain times in history and in certain cultures that we may not understand. Events take place in some Bible stories that baffle us today, but that people of that time would have had the cultural context to clearly understand. If you grew up going to church, you likely have your own memories of stories that made you question the character of God or what the story was meant to teach you about your connection to the Divine.

The Bible is challenging but sharing stories from it with your child is a wonderful way to talk about what you believe and why faith is important to you. It is best to leave your judgments behind so you can share the stories with an open mind, allowing your child to figure out what it means for them, rather than telling them what a story is meant to teach or how it should be interpreted. In other words, you don't need all the "correct" answers to explore the Bible with your child.

"Bible stories don't have to mean just one thing. Despite what you may have heard from a pastor or Sunday school teacher along the way, faithful engagement with Scripture isn't about uncovering a singular, moralistic point to every text and then sticking to it. Rather, the very nature of the biblical text invites us to consider the possibilities."

— Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*

When you are discussing Bible stories with your child, we encourage using open-ended "Wondering Questions," such as:

- I wonder what you think of this story.
- I wonder where you would be if you were in this story.
- I wonder what this story can teach us.

We also encourage you to use empathy-building questions when discussing Bible stories:

- I wonder how (a person in the story) felt when (an event) happened.
- I wonder how you would have felt if (an event from the story) happened to you.

For example, “I wonder how Zacchaeus felt when Jesus knew his name,” and “I wonder how you would have felt if Jesus was walking past but you weren’t tall enough to see him” are great ways to practice having empathy for the character of Zacchaeus. This strategy can be used when discussing any type of literature or event with your children.

**\* Information about how to look a specific verse up in the Bible can be found at the end of this guide.**

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## ***Answering Hard Questions ~ It’s okay to say you don’t know***

Kids wrestle with the same big questions adults do: Why are we here? Is God real? Why do we die? What happens after we die? Why did that horrible thing happen?

Avoiding hard questions will not take away your child’s fears. Processing these questions can be much scarier when your child feels alone or if it seems like the adults in their life are too afraid to talk about them (it must be really, really scary if my parents are too afraid to talk about it!)

Here are some responses you can use when faced with a hard question about life or the Bible.

- That’s a great question. What do you think?
- I’m not sure, but what I think is...
- I don’t know the answer. Maybe we can learn about that together.
- A lot of smart people have wondered the same thing.

The most important things you can give your child when they ask hard questions are connection, more listening, less speaking, and your willingness to stay open to having hard conversations.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. We are here to support you and your child as you move through this important journey of faith. Please reach out to us with questions or concerns.

## Prayers for Your Family

From *Prayers for Faithful Families* by Traci Smith

### Mealtime prayers:

*For the food we eat  
and the love we share,  
we thank you God*

*At our table we love.  
At our table we  
welcome friends.  
At our table we tell the truth.  
At our table we forgive.  
All are welcome at our table.*

*Here, at the table,  
we come to eat  
and share God's love  
with all we meet.*

### Bedtime prayers:

*The day is done.  
It is time to sleep.  
I take a deep breath.  
I breathe in joy and peace.  
I breathe out worry and fear.  
In and out I breathe.  
I sleep in joy and peace*

*Before I go to sleep, I pray.  
I let my worries float away.  
I rest with peace and hope and love.  
And happy dreams flow from above.*

*At night we stop. We go to bed.  
We rest our body. We rest our head.  
We say good night. The day is done.  
We pray God's peace for everyone.*

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## How to Look up a Verse in the Bible

### Book, Chapter, Verse

If you want to look up a specific verse in the Bible, there is a system for doing so. Most Bibles have a table of contents toward the beginning of the book. You can look at the table of contents to figure out on which page the particular book you are looking for begins. Be warned, sometimes the numbering starts over at the beginning of the New Testament so there can be a page 1 in both the Old and New Testaments.

After you figure out where the book begins, you will look for the chapter. The books of the Bible have large numbers throughout to divide them into chapters. Chapters are divided into verses marked by tiny numbers that will lead you to the verse you are looking for.

For example, Matthew 25:35-40 means you will find the book of Matthew, then go to big number 25, and finally find little numbers 35-40.

If you would like to find a verse based on what you remember it saying, but do not know the book, chapter, or verse there is an online system available called Biblegateway.com. On it, you can search a phrase, word or topic then sort through the options that come up. In BibleGateway, you can pick the version (New Revised Standard Version, King James etc.) of the Bible, you want it to search. You will be surprised by how many versions there are. In Sunday school at First Community, we typically read from the New Revised Standard Version or the Common English Bible.

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## Recommended Children's Bibles

***Deep Blue Kids*** – Common English Bible (older children)

***Children of God, Storybook Bible*** – by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

***Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*** – Edited by E.F. Caldwell & C.A. Wehrheim

***The Mystic Bible*** – by Alexandra Sangster

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