

Helping Children Experience God's Mercy

by Dr. Joseph D. White

God has created us in his image, and he has created us for good things. Sadly, we do not always live up to the goodness we were made for, but God loves us so much that he can't give up on his. He extends his mercy to us, forgiving us when we are truly sorry and giving us grace to do better. Pope Francis has proclaimed a Jubilee Year of Mercy beginning December 8th, 2015. This is an important time to remember, celebrate, and experience God's mercy in our lives, and especially in our families.

Around age 6 or 7, children enter what we call the "age of reason." They begin to get a better grasp on cause and effect and they learn that the world works according to rules. When kids learn God's commandments, usually around age 7 in Catholic parish and school religion programs, they also realize they have broken some of God's rules. They need to be assured of God's unconditional love and experience his forgiveness.

We might sometimes be reluctant to discuss sin with young children, but it's important for kids to learn how to handle the sin we all experience. It's important for children, at the beginning of their lives, to have a sense of what God has planned for them – what he made them for. Children cannot rise to standards that we do not set.

Here are some practical tips for helping children understand God's forgiveness and mercy:

- **Look for natural opportunities to discuss God's rules, sin, and forgiveness in the context of family life.** We have ample opportunities to do this in our relationships with one another (parents, siblings, etc.). Practice forgiveness and reconciliation even in difficult family situations.
- **Help your child understand the difference between a sin and an accident.** We sin when we choose to do wrong. Make an extra effort to be patient with your child's mistakes, but hold him or her responsible for wrong choices.
- If possible, **implement logical consequences when your child has wronged someone.** For example, fighting over a toy may result in temporarily losing the privilege to play with that toy. In addition, **assign your child a "good deed" to help repair the damage** that is done to a relationship after a conflict. Coach the child who was wronged in receiving this good will mercifully.
- The life and the parables of Jesus are full of surprising examples of God's mercy. It's important for parents to be consistent with rules and consequences, but **every once in a while, consider surprising your child with mercy.** For example, in a situation in which your child has already experienced a natural consequence for a wrong that was done, empathize with her, and let your child know that although the choice was wrong, you feel said that she is hurting. Or, if your child is already "beating himself up" over a wrong choice, remind him that God made him for good things and will help him do better, and give him a hug instead of a consequence – just this once.
- **Attend a communal reconciliation service as a family** (Many parishes offer them during Advent and Lent). This helps children become more comfortable with the sacrament and allows them to see others celebrating it. Emphasize that confession is not a punishment, but a way to experience God's mercy and forgiveness. It is a reminder that "God loves us no matter what."