

# A Future Full of Hope: Keeping Kids Catholic

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## The Challenge

- According to Pew Research studies, 53 percent of adults in the US have left the faith of their childhood. 9% leave and return.
- Only 30% of those raised Catholic even attend Mass once a month.
- 10% of all adults in the United States are ex-Catholics
- 79 percent of those who have dropped the name "Catholic" and claim no religious affiliation of any kind, have done so by age 23
- 63% say they stopped being Catholic between the ages of 10 and 17 (CARA, 2016)
- 23% say they left the faith before age 10 (CARA, 2016).

Most young people attribute their disaffiliation from the Church to one of these three Causes:

- Painful events
- Lack of perceived connection between faith and daily life
- Disagreement (or perceived disagreement) with the Church on a key issue or issues

## 1. START YOUNG

Sherry Weddell points out that the lack of *attachment* to one's childhood faith is particularly significant among Catholics. The "God Gene" and the development of attachment and relationship

- The "God Gene" (VMAT2: Dean Hamer vs. Carl Zimmer)
- Attachment: An alternative explanation
- Preschool years: An introduction to Christ and the Church

## 2. Work Toward Family Integrated Catechesis

- Children and teens are more likely to remain in the faith when they experience their faith as the primary source of joy and stability in their families.
- Pay attention to the developmental stages of family life
- Engage the family from the beginning
- Involve the family in the formation program
- Build a community that supports families in struggle or crisis.

## 3. Use Developmentally-Responsive Catechesis To Engage Learners and Avoid Misunderstanding

**“heresy by methodology”**: The use of teaching methods that are inappropriate for the learner, resulting in a misunderstanding of the material being presented, with the net effect being that the learner comes away from the lesson believing something other than Church teaching.

#### Scientific Basis for a Developmental Approach

- Vygotsky and “zones of proximal development”
- Perry: Neurosequential brain development

#### Early Childhood Faith Formation

- An introduction to Christ and the Church
- Connect with and support families in integrating family and faith

#### The First Grade Child

- First graders are beginning to move into a cognitive stage of rule-based thinking, so this is a great opportunity to provide them with the basic teachings of the faith.
- Because this is the beginning of formal religious education for many children, and because the aim of catechesis is “communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ” (GDC, 80), it is logical to focus first grade catechesis around the person of Jesus.
- First graders are just beginning to move beyond the developmental self-focus of the preschool years, so an introduction to relationship with Jesus and the Church community is appropriate.

#### The Second Grade Child

- Children this age are in the Piagetian cognitive stage of “concrete operations.” They understand cause and effect and know the world works according to rules. Therefore, this is a great time to introduce God’s rules and guidelines for living.
- Because they have reached the age of reason, second graders are better able to understand that the Eucharist is not ordinary bread and wine, because Jesus said it was His Body and Blood.
- Second graders are concrete thinkers and need many hands-on activities and practical explanations. Our approach to teaching the sacraments should be step-by-step and very concrete. This is a good time to learn the steps of the rites, parts of the Mass, and basics of what the Church teaches about the sacraments.

### The Third Grade Child

- Children this age have entered what social/developmental theorist Harry Stack Sullivan called the “chumship stage,” when same-age peers become very important and children often have “best friends.” For this reason, it is an ideal time to focus on the parish community.
- Third graders are more aware of the larger world, so this is a good time to talk about the larger worldwide Church and how it is organized.

### The Fourth Grade Child

- Fourth graders are beginning to internalize standards of behavior. Their consciences are growing quickly, and they are gaining a sense of “right” and “wrong” that goes beyond just what might bring them punishments or rewards. This is a great time to work with them on what it means to be disciples of Jesus.
- Fourth graders are good at using their reasoning skills, but they still don’t have a firm grasp on hypothetical reasoning. This means they have difficulty imagining things or situations they haven’t experienced. Acting out making good choices in a moral dilemma will be especially effective, since all of us are more likely to do the things we practice.

### The Fifth Grade Child

- Fifth graders are growing in their ability to understand symbols and signs. This makes 5<sup>th</sup> grade an ideal time to take an in-depth look at the sacraments and rites of the Church.
- Fifth graders are also in a stage of identity development in which they begin to seriously consider who they will be when they are older. This makes this age an important time for learning about vocation and the Sacraments at the Service of Holy Communion.

### The Sixth Grade Child

- Children in sixth grade are growing in their abstract thinking ability and have made great strides in reading and writing ability. This makes sixth grade a great time to study Sacred Scripture and begin to connect the events of salvation history.
- Children in sixth grade are also becoming young adolescents, so this is an important time to strengthen Catholic identity through study of our faith ancestors and basic doctrines.

### Middle school

- Physical growth brings identity issues and questions
- Middle schoolers are often VERY insecure and self conscious
- They are looking for a sense of belonging
- They want to see the faith is relevant to them

## High School

- High school students are becoming more independent
- They need to wrestle with questions of faith to make the faith their own
- They continue to work on identity issues and vocations can be presented in this context
- Parents of teens report high levels of parenting stress

## 4. Proclaim the Kerygma

• Frequently, many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion. ...In the context of "new evangelization" it is effected by means of a "kerygmatic catechesis", sometimes called "pre-catechesis", Only by starting with conversion...can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfil its proper task of education in the faith. (*GDC*, 62).

- Proclaim the Gospel story often, and offer an opportunity to respond to it.
- Offer your own personal witness, and ask others to do the same.

## 5. Integrate SCIENCE and FAITH

- Many youths feel a disconnect between the faith and science. However, the Catholic Church has little disagreement with modern science (see *CCC*, 159). And historically speaking, the Church has been a patron of the sciences.
- Georges Lemaitre, the physicist who developed the Big Bang theory, was a Catholic priest.
- Gregor Mendel, the father of genetics, was an Augustinian friar.
- The Church does not teach that Genesis 1 is meant to teach science. The Catholic Church has never had a problem with the theory of evolution. In 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed there was no opposition between evolution and Catholic doctrine. In 1996, St. John Paul II endorsed Pius' statement.

## 6. Don't Forget THE THREE TRANSCENDENTALS

- Many who have left the faith (or become only marginally active) have not had a meaningful **encounter** with God.
- The classical philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, called truth, beauty, and goodness "the

transcendental properties of being,” or the things that make us look outside ourselves towards something higher. These three transcendentals originate in God and lead us toward God.

- “Think about this carefully: putting your stakes on the great ideals, the ideal of making a world of goodness, beauty and truth” -Pope Francis.
- “I affirm the path of truth and the path of beauty. But I also recommend, as a means of propagating the faith, the third of the transcendentals, namely, the good” - Bishop Robert Barron.

## 7. Give Them Heroes

- Kids look up to teens/young adults who are slightly older
- This is why older kids are used in commercials for children’s products, and why young adults are used in teen roles in movies and TV shows
- For kids and teens, highlight young saints, such as:
  - St. Dominic Savio
  - St. Clare of Assisi
  - St. Jose Sanchez del Rio
  - St. Therese of Lisieux
  - Saints Francisco and Jacinta Marto

## 8. LET THEM QUESTION

- It’s part of making the faith their own.
- If they are asking questions, they are at least engaged.
- Listen.
- Don’t shut them down or offer oversimplified answers.
- It’s OK to say, “I don’t know.”
- Invite them to continued conversation.