

Spiritual Practices for Children and Youth

By Debbie Kolacki of the

**PRC -
Practical Resources for Churches**



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Some background



The first Sunday schools focused on giving information.

Sunday school started in England in the 1780s and truly was school. Due to the Industrial Revolution, poor children were working six days a week in factories and were illiterate. Sunday schools started to teach the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic) using the Bible. Basic catechism, morality, prayers, and hymn singing were taught as well.

The movement spread to other countries, but by 1870 Britain and America had compulsory state education and Sunday school became limited to religious education. So Sunday school started with a focus on giving information and until recently this was still the case. Children were expected to memorize scripture and recite the answers to questions in a catechism. Anyone who went through a confirmation program more than 20 years ago can probably attest to this. Being confirmed meant learning your denomination's doctrine and youth weren't expected to question what they were taught.

Child development theories and stages of faith

Various child development theories were formed in the late 19th and the 20th century by people like Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. These experts studied children's cognitive, personality, and moral development.

There were also those who studied faith development. James Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith* suggested that there were six stages of faith. John Westerhoff who wrote *Will Our Children Have Faith?* listed four stages of faith. He also believed that faith is strongly influenced by personal relationships and that it's necessary to explore what we truly believe in order to understand who we are in our relationship to God. Westerhoff stated that children and youth need to experience faith, not just learn the facts about religion. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* was originally written in 1976 but a third edition was recently published in August, 2012.

Those involved in children and youth ministry today are looking at faith formation and which practices are best. Some important people in the field include Karen Marie Yust, Eugene Roehlkepartain, Christian Smith, Kenda Creasy Dean, Catherine Stonehouse, Mark Yaconelli, Dorothy Bass, and Ivy Beckwith.

LifelongFaith Associates is an organization which helps congregations develop Christian faith formation for people of all ages. An article from them entitled "[Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation](#)" by [John Roberto and Kathie Pfiffner](#) states:

Today, we know so much more about how children learn than we did fifty years ago, and the learning methods and activities that engage children today are unlike those of previous generations. We know that the world of their childhood has drastically changed, and adjustments are necessary to provide faith formation that forms the whole life of the child – head, heart, and soul. Churches that understand this shift have made fundamental changes in the way they do children's faith formation.

The article lists six best practices which include: learning experiences that involve the whole child, ministering to families, and involving children in the ministries of the church. Best Practice 3 states: "Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly."

Past and current issues of the Lifelong Faith journal are available as free downloads on their [website](#).

Spiritual practices enable children and youth to encounter God

When we minister to children and youth, we can create an environment that allows them to encounter God by teaching spiritual practices. Anyone who works with children knows they have an innate spirituality. They're full of wonder and see magic in the world. Through spiritual practices they can stay connected with their spiritual side as they grow and mature.

Traditional spiritual practices include such things as prayer, meditation, and fasting, but anything that helps us get closer to God can be a spiritual practice. When you're working with children and youth, look for ways to help them to be aware of God's presence.

Children and youth live in a world where they are continually bombarded with media, noise, and activity. We may think that more activity is the way to connect with them, but it can be a gift to show them how to slow down and quiet themselves. I've seen this in my own ministry with children and youth. When my husband and I were teaching a particularly active group of 4th and 5th graders, I decided I wanted to do a guided meditation with them. My husband was sure they wouldn't be able to be still for it. I had them sit with their eyes closed and concentrate on their breathing as I read to them a scene where they encountered Jesus. They remained quiet during the meditation and even when I told them they could open their eyes and the exercise was over they remained silent for several moments.



Suggested spiritual practices for children and youth

Prayer/mindful meditation

There are different ways to pray or meditate. Many children (and even adults) have an idea of prayer as something that is spoken or written where they communicate their thoughts and requests to God. But prayer should also be listening for what God wants to say to us.

One type of prayer that can help children and youth do this is centering prayer, where they choose a sacred word to say silently to themselves. When thoughts intrude they return to their sacred word. A beautiful book for children about this type of prayer is [*Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children*](#) by Frank Jelenek and Ann Boyajian

In breath prayer a short phrase, such as “God, make haste to help me” or “Jesus, my light and my love” is chosen or created. Children breathe in as they silently say the first part of the phrase and breathe out for the second part. This can be done during a specific time of prayer or throughout the day.

I’ve already mentioned guided meditations, where verbal instructions are given to relax and concentrate on breathing as a scene is presented for the listeners to imagine themselves a part of.

You can also take children and youth on a nature walk and have them meditate on the beauty and wonders of creation.

Physical objects

Having a physical object to touch and focus on can help children and youth connect with God.

Prayer beads have been used through the centuries by those from many different religions. Roman Catholics have the rosary but prayer beads are also being used more and more by Protestants. There are many different types of prayer beads with the beads symbolizing a specific prayer to recite or a topic to focus on.



You see depicted here the [*“Pearls of Life”*](#) which were invented by a Lutheran bishop. Each of the 18 beads stands for something to meditate on, such as the white bead for baptism, the blue bead for serenity, and the red beads for love.

Prayer ropes are similar to prayer beads, with knots instead of beads. They come from the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

There's a resource called *Praying in Color: Kids Edition* which uses drawing as a spiritual practice; this will be reviewed later in this booklet. Other art forms can be used as spiritual practices, such as painting, drawing, and working with clay.



I have a friend who colors mandalas with her grandchildren and they find the practice very meditative. A mandala is a geometric figure representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist symbolism; it is also seen as the traditional Rose window in churches. You can find patterns of mandalas to color on the internet or in books.

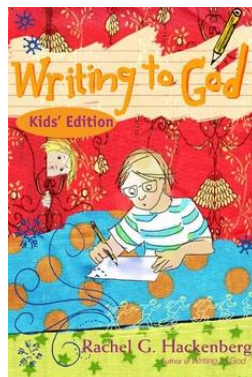
Prayer writing/journaling

Having children and youth write their own prayers can also be a spiritual practice. There are many different ways to do this. You can have children write letters to God or rewrite the Lord's Prayer in their own words. Acrostic prayers, where each line begins with a letter that forms a word, can be used with older children and youth.

Even children who are too young to read or write can create a prayer as a group using a simple repeating phrase. For example, the phrase might be "I have seen God" and the children complete the sentence: "God is in the ____" Examples might be flowers, smiles of friends, mommy's hugs.

Introducing journaling can lead to a lifelong spiritual practice. One possibility is to give children and youth journals and then use them for a set period of time in Sunday school. Eventually, the journals can be sent home to be used there. Besides written prayers and prayer requests, journals can also be used for drawing or pasting pictures or photos. A journal can even be used to record dreams.

A book called [*Writing to God: Kids Edition*](#) is available for children ages 5-11 and invites them to for 35 days to speak to God through their feelings, Bible verses, nature, and the ordinary events of life.



Prayerful movement

Most kids enjoy using movement in prayer. You can teach them about different prayer postures such as:

- *head bowed, eyes closed
- *head up, hands lifted up
- *holding hands
- *sitting
- *walking or running
- *kneeling

Prayer can also be done along with dance and yoga.

It's amazing how prayer postures change how we pray or feel about praying – try it yourself sometime!

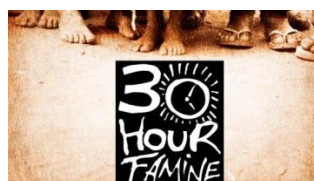
You can also teach your children how to do a well-known prayer, such as the [Lord's Prayer, using hand motions](#).

Fasting

Most of think about Lent as a time for fasting, or giving something up, but fasting can be done at any time. And of course we can fast from other things than food. Children might fast from a favorite television program and youth might give up the internet for a period of time.

I was speaking recently to a teenage girl from my church about a retreat she had attended and she mentioned that not using her cell phone was one of the things she liked best about the retreat; she felt a sense of freedom. Sometimes giving something up helps us to see how we are actually burdened by the things we consider good. Fasting is particularly meaningful if giving something up results in doing good for someone else. Perhaps children might be encouraged to give up a treat and then donate the money saved to a food pantry.

I'm sure those of you who work with youth are familiar with the [30 Hour Famine](#) program. Youth learn about hunger, fundraise, and then go 30 hours without food. The money raised goes to support World Vision. I have to admit I wasn't sure how youth would react to this program when I first heard about it, but my daughter and other youth from my church found that participating in it was very meaningful.



Labyrinths

Walking a labyrinth is another spiritual practice that can be done by people of all ages. For those of you unfamiliar with it, a labyrinth is not the same thing as a maze. Unlike a maze, you can't get lost in a labyrinth as it has only one path to the center. The path twists and turns back on itself and is symbolic of a spiritual journey. It's been said that there's no one way to walk a labyrinth. Generally a person walks slowly and meditates on a spiritual question or prayer and then spends some time in the center before starting to retrace their steps back out of the labyrinth.

You can look for a labyrinth where you live; a [world wide labyrinth locater](#) is available online. There are a number of them, both indoor and outdoor, open to the public on Long Island, where the PRCs are located. We also have portable, canvas labyrinths that we loan out.

You can even create your own labyrinth using tape or painting on a floor or rug, or using chalk or candles.

There are also finger labyrinths available, where one traces the paths with a finger instead of walking. You can [purchase one](#) made of wood or other materials or make your own with clay. You can also download [printed ones](#) from the internet. There are also [books for younger and older children](#) about walking a labyrinth.

Sacred space/prayer stations

Another way to encourage spiritual practices is to set up a sacred space in your classroom or meeting room. Get the children or youth involved in decorating the area with things that are meaningful for them. Having a candle (I prefer flameless ones for safety reasons) that you light when entering the space can symbolize God's presence with you and your students.

You can also set up prayer stations where the children and youth are encouraged to spend quiet time in prayer or other activities. Having music playing softly in the background can also be a good idea.

If you go to Pinterest and search for [Prayer Stations for Kids](#) or [Prayer Stations for Youth](#) you'll find plenty of ideas for prayer stations.

Sacred space at home

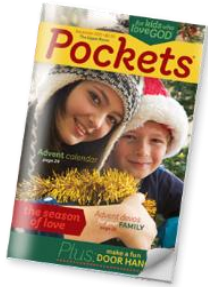
Since we have such limited time to spend with the children and youth we minister to, it's important to partner with families in their faith formation. Share information about the spiritual practices that you're teaching, either by sending home information,

emailing it, or inviting parents to attend an informational session.

Encourage families to set up a sacred space at home. Older children and youth might want to have their own. You can suggest ways to do this and what items to include; you can also have children and youth make objects for their sacred space. A simple light can be made by putting a flameless candle in a glass votive holder and decorating it with pieces of tissue paper and Mod Podge.

Devotionals

Another way to encourage the use of spiritual practices at home is through the use of devotionals. There are all kinds out there, for both children and teens. You can find online ones or purchase devotionals books. There are also magazines available.



One magazine is [Pockets](#) which is for 6 to 12 year olds and published by The Upper Room. It includes devotional readings, fiction, puzzles, games, activities and more. The website includes articles and activities for kids, families, and educators.



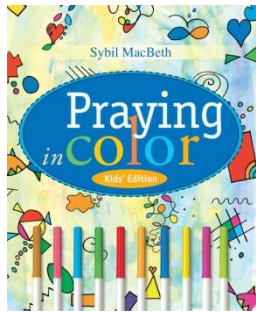
[Spark Family](#) is a quarterly publication based on seasons and themes from the Bible. It's recommended for children from preschool through 4th grade. It contains cut-out prayers, faith activities, and Bible trivia.



[Devo](#) is a bi-monthly magazine that focuses on weekly themes. It is written by youth as well as youth workers and states that its "purpose is to help young people 14–19 years old develop a lifelong practice of spending time with God and of reflecting on what God is doing in their lives." The website for the magazine has additional resources and allows teens to connect with other teens around the world.

Two books that I'd recommend include [Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens](#) which offers practical ways to live that put Christian faith into action. It combines ancient faith practices with contemporary realities. [The Barefoot Way](#) is a daily devotional written by those who have encountered God and is for older youth.

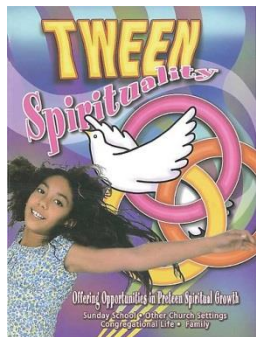
Review of selected resources



[Praying in Color Kid's Edition](#) is written by Sybil MacBeth and published by Paraclete Press. It's a follow-up to the popular book MacBeth wrote for adults called *Praying in Color*.

This very creative book for children has many different facets to it; there are ideas for kids to pray through the use of color, shape, ingenuity, doodling, and names for God. The author reminds the readers that one does not have to be an artist to create a prayer in color, but is instead an inventor of something special and grace-filled between them and their creator. The best part is that they can display their prayer for all to see. Shapes and objects come alive through each creation that is original, individual, and intimately personal. This is a do not miss book for Christian Educators.

There is also a companion DVD to the book that is a step by step guide to creating a simple workshop to teach kids how to pray in color.

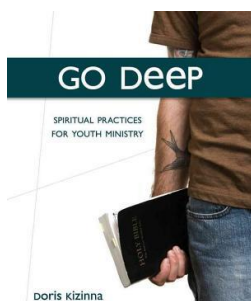


Another great resource to use with children ages 10-12 is [Tween Spirituality](#). It encourages preteen spiritual growth by giving great suggestions for activities to use in Sunday school, worship, and at home with families.

Tween Spirituality shows ways to use Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, journaling and teaching about missions with young people. There are also articles with ideas you can use right out of the book or as springboards to come up with some of your own unique ideas.

Some of the creative activities include making items such as a stole for the pastor, blessing cards, prayer boxes, and a prayer tree. Students can learn how to bake and present communion bread.

There are suggestions for field trips to walk a labyrinth or see other styles of worship and to plan events such as a Blessing of the Animals service or a World Communion Sunday event. There are family activity ideas along with handouts and reproducibles.



The book [Go Deep: Spiritual Practices for Youth Ministry](#) was written by Doris Kizinna. This book can be invaluable for youth ministers, both beginners and those who have been in youth ministry for a while. It asks them to reflect on such things as what motivates a leader and what a leader feels called to. It speaks to faith, belief and spiritual practice, as well as fear and commitment.

Go Deep includes ideas for developing sacred space, engaging the senses, reading and being with the Word, arts and crafts, body and movement, and compassion and community. It also includes worship services and prayers. There is a lot to work with in this book and it's a do not miss if you are involved in youth ministry.

There are three other books for teaching spiritual practices to youth. They're about ten years old but still available online.

Books for further reading

[*Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*](#) by Mark Yaconelli (Youth Specialties, 2006)

[*Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*](#) by Ivy Beckwith (Baker Books, 2010)

[*The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*](#) by Kenda Creasy Dean (Upper Room, 2005)

[*Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*](#) by Catherine Stonehouse (Baker Academic, 1998)

[*Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture*](#) by Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May (Baker Academic, 2010)

[*Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*](#) by Karen Marie Yust (Jossey-Bass, 2004)

[*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenager*](#) by Christian Smith (Oxford University Press, 2009)

[*The Spiritual Life of Children*](#) by Robert Coles (Mariner Books, 1991)

Devotional books for children

[*The Adventure Bible for NIV: Book of Devotions for Early Readers*](#)

This yearlong devotional includes fictional stories about kids finding adventure in the real world. Boys and girls will be inspired to live a life of faith--the greatest adventure of all.

[*Adventure Bible NIV Book of Devotions: 365 Days of Adventure*](#)

This book is similar to *The Adventure Bible for NIV: Book of Devotions for Early Readers* but is geared toward children ages 9 and up.

[*At Home with God: Family Devotions for the School Year*](#)

This devotional from the Upper Room Publisher is for families with children ages 6-11 and includes devotions for September through May.

[*Did You Know Devotions for Kids*](#)

In this one-year devotional, kids ages 8-12 can read a daily Bible verse and lesson while learning interesting trivia.

[*Family Time Story Devotions*](#)

This book from Augsburg Fortress, the publisher of the Lutheran Church ELCA, includes 150 devotions that emphasize God's love and forgiveness in Jesus.

[*Five-Minute Devotions for Children: Celebrating God's World as a Family*](#)

Each devotion in this book includes a story about an animal illustrating its dominant trait as created by God; that trait is then related to a child with questions to answer. Each devotional concludes with a short Bible verse.

[*Grace for the Moment: 365 Devotions for Kids*](#)

This book by Max Lucado is for children ages 6-10 and presents the message of God's grace in a way that children can understand.

[*Jesus Calling: 365 Devotions for Kids*](#)

These devotions are written as if Jesus is speaking directly to a child's heart.

[*Little Visits Series*](#)

There are a number of family devotionals in the Little Visits Series, including *Little Visits for Toddlers* and a series of daily devotionals for older children.

[*Max Lucado's Daily Devotional Bible*](#)

This version of the *International Children's Bible* includes 366 daily devotions as well as prayers and articles.

[*My Jesus Journal*](#)

This book from Buck Denver who created the "What's In the Bible" DVD series includes activities for families to make a Mustard Tree and Jesus Journal as well as other activities.

[*NIV Kids' Book of Devotions*](#)

This book includes devotions for every day of the year.

[*The One Year Book of Devotions for Boys*](#)

These 65 daily devotionals include Bible passages, a contemporary story, and a daily memory verse.

[*The One Year Book of Devotions for Preschoolers*](#)

Each reading in this book pairs a Little Blessings illustration with a short Bible verse and devotional thought.

[*The One Year Devos for Animal Lovers: Cool Things Animals Show Us About Our Creator*](#)

This one year devotion uses animals to point to spiritual truths. Each devotion concludes with an activity to do that day that relates to the devotion.

Online daily devotionals for children

[*Kids for Truth*](#)

This website offers daily devotions as well as other activities for children.

[*Truth for Kids*](#)

This website has daily devotions for children as well as separate preschool devotions. The devotions can be viewed online or downloaded and a mobile app is also available.

Daily devotional books for youth

[*Dare to Be Rare: A Christian Guide for Girls*](#)

This 24 chapter book comes from the Episcopal publisher. It has devotional readings with questions for reflection and discussion.

[*God's Story: Growing in Your Faith in 10 Minutes at a Time*](#)

This book from Group publishing includes thirty-one devotionals and works like a daily journal. Students will read a Bible passage, get some questions to chew on, some suggestions to help them pray, and then space to reflect.

[*Live Inspired: A 90-Day Interactive Devotional for Students*](#)

The publisher says that this is more than a devotional; it is a challenge to live inspired. Youth will explore Christ through drawing, writing, scribbling, building, talking, laughing, working, and giving. With beautifully designed pages, this devotional will lead you through activities that will shape your heart and mind.

[The Red Stuff: Exploring the Words of Jesus Ten Minutes at a Time](#)

Simply Youth Ministry publishes this resource which offers a month of 10 minute daily devotions. In this installment of the 10-Minute Moments series, students will get short but focused daily devotions that look at things Jesus said. This book is part devotional and part journal.

[The Simple Truth Bible: The Best Minute of Your Day](#)

This resource from Simply Youth Ministry features 365 daily devotions. Each devotion includes: thoughts on a specific passage of Scripture and how it relates to students' lives, insights to help teenagers turn their thoughts into prayers as they spend time with God, ideas to follow if students want to spend more than a few minutes each day with God, and a perspective on how that day's passage fits into the big picture of the Bible.

[Simply Youth Ministry Student Devotionals](#)

These 30 day devotionals are available for students entering each of the four years of high school. Each entry walks students through an important moment, issue, or opportunity that defines their year, along with ideas on living out what they believe.

[Teen Devotional Bible](#)

These 365 devotions are written by teens for teens

Online devotions for youth

[D365](#)

An online devotional experience that invites teens to pause, listen, think, pray, and go.

[Daily Devos](#)

Neal Bowes, who is the youth ministry consultant for the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, shares the devotions that he writes for the students in his youth ministry. You can download a PDF with a month's worth of devotions.



Visit our [website](#) and our [Facebook page](#) for more free resources.