

Caution Light: How You Feel about Reconciliation Affects Your Child

When your child is about to celebrate First Reconciliation, you may have your own unpleasant memories of past experiences. Put yourself squarely on the side of your child so that their experience can be different. Do whatever you must to resolve your old feelings or dilemmas about First Reconciliation or Confession as you might have called it; talk to whomever you must to get the answers you need. Only then will you be ready to help your child develop good feelings about the sacrament.

Show God's Kindness

Children preparing for First Reconciliation can build up a lot of apprehension. If a parent (or teacher or grandparent) yelled at them for something they did, they will be afraid that the priest will be mad when they bring it before him in confession. They may even figure that God is angry with them too.

Achieving reconciliation—oneness, unity, peace—has a lot to do with one's image of God. When your child approaches this sacrament, will she or he visualize God as understanding and accepting or as criticizing and judging? The answer depends on you since you help the child develop his or her own image of God.

When the day is long and the demands don't stop, a parent's fuse is short. That's when it's easy to come down hard on children for any annoyance—from teasing the dog, to interrupting you when you're on the phone. How you respond helps form your child's image of God—as a God of anger and force or of patience and love. Nurturing, patient, and loving responses are more difficult, but they communicate something wonderful to your child.

To create the image of God it also takes parents who...

- don't show preference for one child over another
- are always ready to forgive and forget
- explain the reasons behind their decisions
- try to be fair and just
- give hugs and lots of "I love you's"
- help their kids feel secure

Your feeling and emotional reactions, of course, do more than create an image of God for your child. They also shape your child's sense of what is right and wrong.

Children tend to confess things that have made a parent angry, even if they didn't do it on purpose. For example, a child may say that spilling milk is an accident, not a sin. But breaking the glass when the milk spilled might be a sin to a child, and accidentally breaking a stack of Mom's best dishes could even be a mortal sin!

Be Real

You really have to be careful about sending double message to your child. If you say, "It's wrong to use bad language," and then curse a driver who just cut you off in heavy traffic, the emotionally charged message is the one that gets through, because that's real life in action. If you say, "accidents and mistakes aren't sins," and then go super nova over the scoop of chocolate pudding that plopped onto the carpet, the real message you're sending is that accidents are sins, too. Your actions and reactions teach right and wrong much more powerfully than your words. Children need to learn that sins are wrong because they hurt a loving relationship with you, others, and God—not because they make a mess.

As your child is figuring out what God is like, and what is "good" and what is "bad," he or she is also forming an image of himself or herself. Children (and adults) who come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a negative self-image feel that they don't deserve to be forgiven. They live with a lot of guilt and punish themselves with their failures. A positive self-image lets a child see himself or herself as lovable; he or she will then be able to accept the mercy of God and do better next time.

Sorting through your own feeling about Reconciliation can be tricky, but giving your kids good feelings about God and themselves really helps them in life.