

Module 3: Parents are your essential partners

Session 1: Children can't go to Kilimanjaro by themselves

Objective: Recognize the key reasons parents must be involved with their child's journey.

Can you imagine sending an eight, ten, or twelve-year-old child off by him or herself on a trip to Kansas or Kentucky or Kilimanjaro? Of course not! We'd expect their parents to go with them, or at least we'd have another adult accompany them along the way. Similarly, when children start a journey that leads them to the paschal mystery and new life in Christ, we don't send them alone.

And the parents are doing more than just walking along as observers. The parents are actively engaged in the faith formation process, developing their own lives of faith and helping their children develop theirs. In this session, we're going to discuss why it's so important to have parents involved in children's RCIA. In the latter sessions, we'll look at the important and varied ways to involve parents. And we'll address the difficult question of what to do if parents are not involved.

The unbelievable story of Stephen Oliver

I know this story may seem like I'm making it up, but I promise it is true. Remember the note on my desk that had the names of children who wanted to become Catholic? (See Module 2, Session 1.) Well, Stephen Oliver's name was on that list. He was second grader who attended St. Andrew Grade School. He was unbaptized. His mother was active in another Christian Church, and his father was unchurched. But Stephen wanted to be baptized Catholic because of his positive experience at St. Andrew. He especially wanted to share in the Eucharist.

After meeting with Stephen and his mom and dad, we decided that Stephen would begin the catechumenate process accompanied primarily by his father. Mom would come to occasional sessions as she was involved with her own church on Sundays. In general, mom and dad were supportive of their son's sincere desire but somewhat hesitant about baptism in the Catholic faith. They wanted to know "what we were teaching him," and they also knew that there was a great deal about God and faith that they could teach, even though dad was unchurched. Eventually, they allowed Stephen to participate in the catechumenate, but they were clear that they wanted no part of the Catholic Church for themselves. However, they did welcome the idea of having a sponsoring family from St. Andrew to help them along the way.

Fast forward to Easter season after Stephen is fully initiated. During the mystagogy sessions that followed the Easter Vigil, Stephen's dad said he wanted to be baptized. He was fully initiated at the next Easter Vigil. And the year after that, Stephen's mom was received into full communion!

Let's just baptize him

When we encounter an unbaptized child, it's easy to say, "He's only 7 [or 6 or 5]. Let's just baptize him, and then he can receive first Communion with everybody else."

This may seem like the easy solution, and many pastoral ministers want to go this route. However, children who have reached "catechetical age" and are unbaptized can benefit immensely from the full, gradual, and complete experience of the children's RCIA.

Sure, at times, if the child is very immature, it may be the right solution to baptize the child and delay Eucharist. But most children who are seven years of age—and some who are even younger—have reached catechetical age and therefore are "capable of receiving and nurturing a personal faith" (RCIA, no. 252, Canada no. 242).

If we think they are old enough to receive the Eucharist with a few months of preparation, then they are old enough to participate in RCIA. Besides, it is such a benefit for the child and family to experience the fullness of RCIA. It is often the better option. Remember, usually there is *a reason* the child is unbaptized, and the RCIA helps address the issues of evangelization and faith formation. Yet, in the end, it all comes down to discernment. We have to discern what is best for the individual child. We'll talk about discernment in a later session.

Key points

There are several points I'd like to draw from this story:

- Stephen's journey of faith affected the entire family.
- Mom and dad were primary catechists and walked with Stephen along the way.
- Mom and dad also needed guidance and support from other Catholic adults in the parish, that is, a sponsoring family.
- Stephen initiated the process. He sought baptism. Often, but not always, it's the parents or grandparents that bring children to church.
- The child and his faith were catalysts for the ongoing conversion of his parents. However, when Stephen started the process, there was no intention (on our part or theirs) of his parents joining the Catholic Church.
- In Stephen's case, both parents were involved in the process. Often only one parent is involved, and sometimes neither parent is actively involved.

We'll explore these points in greater depth in the next three sessions. For now, let's look at the questions that Stephen's story raises for you. Please go to Exercise 1.



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Session 2: Formation is a family affair

Objective: Discover why it makes such a difference that parents take an active role in their children's conversion process.

Let's start out this session by returning to Stephen and the Oliver family. Would it have been okay for the Olivers to drop off Stephen for church and baptism preparation class on Sunday? After all, Stephen was already comfortable at St. Andrew; his mom needed to go to her church; his dad worked some Sundays.

Why parents need to be involved

The answer is no—and yes, maybe. First, no, it's not okay to drop off Stephen on Sunday. Stephen needed his parents' involvement in the process.

But yes, we could have made the situation work if his parents had been unable to participate. In that case, a sponsor would have stood in for the parents (RCIA, nos. 260, 10). In the next session, we'll discuss what happens when parents are not involved.

So, why does Stephen *need* his parents to be involved? Kids go to class all the time without their parents, don't they? Well, the catechumenate is not a class. As you know by now, it's a journey of conversion. And, when we ask conversion of a child, we cannot expect this child to undergo conversion alone. When one member of the family experiences a change, it affects the entire family. Indeed, family systems theory tells us that we need to look at the family as an emotional unit, and any change in the family affects the family unit. (See *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions*, Roberta M. Gilbert, M., John Wiley Sons, Inc., 1992, p. viii.) Stephen Oliver and his family are the perfect example of a child's conversion affecting the entire family.

It's not just for the kids

Parental involvement in children's RCIA isn't just for the kids' sake. Although the child is certainly the focus of the initiation process, the parents grow in faith as well. The parents are there not just to help and support their children; they often deepen their own relationship with God also.

Often the children who come seeking initiation have parents who need to hear the good news as much as the children do! In many cases, the parents of these children are:

- Catholics who have been away from church and now want to become active again and have their children baptized

- from another Christian tradition and, because of marriage or any other number of reasons, they want their child to be baptized
- people who have never been a part of any church and are hearing God’s call for the first time, or they are hearing God’s call in a new way (sometimes that call is through their children)

Situations such as these make it essential that parents are involved in the process. Often, the parents need evangelization or re-evangelization.

When the RCIA talks about the importance of parental involvement it says, “The period of initiation will also provide a good opportunity for the family to have contact with priests and catechists” (no. 254.2, Canada no. 244.2).

This is a way of saying that the whole family needs formation.

Parents as witnesses

Another reason it’s important to engage the parents throughout the process is that they present their children at the liturgical rites and stand as their “witnesses.” The church looks to the parents and asks, “Is your child sincere and ready to be a follower of Jesus Christ?” To answer, the parents need to know very intimately what is happening in the child’s faith life and if their child is ready to participate in the sacraments.

More specifically, look at the Rite of Election in the RCIA chapter on children, paragraph 283. The presider of the rite asks the parents to give a “recommendation” on behalf of their children. This certainly implies that the parent has been actively involved in the preparation process and can witness to the grace of God working in the child’s life.

Fun Fact:

In the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the priest asks the parents, “Are you willing to do your part in their preparation for baptism?”

There are many ways for parents to be involved in children’s RCIA. We’ll give you a bunch of concrete ideas in Session 4. But let’s take some time to reflect upon the value of the parents’ role in the process of initiation. Please turn to Exercise 2.

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Session 3: Sponsoring families are the solution to uninvolved parents

Objective: Develop ways to support children whose parents are not actively participating in RCIA sessions and rituals.

Stephen Oliver was very faith-filled and very committed in his desire to be baptized and join the Catholic Church. Even if his parents were not actively involved, I cannot imagine turning him away or denying him baptism. Nonetheless, there are certainly times when parents simply cannot be actively engaged in the process. Life is just too complicated for them to commit to participating in the catechumenate. At the same time, they support their child's desire for baptism and membership in the church. So, what do we do when parents can't be involved?

Let's look at Juanita Jarvis and her daughter Katie. Katie was a sixth grader who wanted to go to church and had been asking her mom for months why they didn't go. Juanita, who was an inactive Catholic, decided it was time to bring her daughter to church.

However, as I talked with Katie and Juanita about Katie's desire to join the church, it became clear that Juanita was not able to be actively engaged in the initiation process. Juanita was a single mom with three other younger children. In fact, all four children came with Juanita for the "initial discernment discussion," and I could see how it would be difficult for Juanita to either bring the children to every session or to find child care. Plus, the kicker was that Juanita worked an irregular schedule that would not allow her to commit to catechumenate formation sessions. Life was just too hectic for Juanita to add one more thing to her schedule.

Yet, Katie's desire was sincere. We couldn't turn her away just because her mother could not attend with her. Plus, Juanita *wanted* Katie to explore baptism and the Catholic Church. Mom had given her permission; she just wasn't able to commit to regular attendance with Katie.

Sponsoring family

So, here is what we did. We paired Katie with a sponsoring family, the Walshes. In fact, Katie and Amanda Walsh, who was the same age as Katie, became good friends. Amanda and her mom came to most of the formation sessions with Katie, though sometimes just Amanda came. The Walshes walked the journey with Katie. They supported her, shared their faith with her, often provided transportation for her, and stood with Katie at the liturgical rites.

Although the church clearly prefers parents to be engaged in the process, the RCIA also allows for “suitable members of the Church” to act in the place of parents (no. 260, Canada no. 250). In the end, Ms. Walsh became Katie’s godmother, and the two families became friends. It was a life-giving and faith-enriching experience for all.

Other scenarios for RCIA families

Each child and family has their own set of circumstances—their own story. Here are some of the situations that create challenges for parents, along with some strategies for addressing the situation.

- “I have other kids at home.”
Solutions: Provide onsite childcare; include siblings in intergenerational sessions
- “I am willing for Katie to come, but I can’t get her there.”
Solution: Ask parishioners to help with driving. Be sure to have written parental permission, and always have more than one adult and one child in a vehicle.
- “I don’t mind if Joey becomes Catholic, but I am just not interested in coming myself.”
Solution: Pair Joey with a sponsoring family or with a single young adult or older adult. A young adult can be a great sponsor for a teenager. Older adults can be great sponsors, too. Just be sure to do some discernment before you pair sponsors with inquirers.
- “Back in my day, you just got baptized and received first Communion. Why do I have to do all this? I’m too busy.” Sometimes when a parent is unable to participate in the catechumenate process, it’s a red flag. It means that neither the parent nor the child is ready to make the commitment to the journey of faith. However, often when this type of comment is made, the parents need more of an explanation about the importance of their role in faith formation.
Solution: Parents are usually willing, once they understand their role.

Sponsoring families are for parents, too

Although this session is about what to do when parents of child catechumens are not involved, sponsoring families are great to have around even when parents *are* engaged in the initiation process. Here’s the main point:

- A sponsoring family supports, guides, and helps the *parent* as well as the child catechumen.

As we said earlier, usually the parent needs evangelization and formation as much as the child does. The parent has been away from church, or is new to the parish, or is unbaptized and seeking initiation. Thus, the parent often needs a sponsor as much as the child. A sponsoring family can guide, assist, and mentor the parent and the child.

Sponsoring families are a great support to families in the catechumenate, whether the parents are involved or not. And it’s a great way to get parishioners involved in the RCIA process. Lastly, sponsoring families can be a great help to *you*—the RCIA coordinator or catechist.

Let’s think some more about how a sponsoring family or an individual sponsor might help a child whose parent is not involved in the RCIA process. Take a look at Exercise 3.



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Session 4: Surefire strategies for involving parents

Objective: Develop effective methods for getting parents involved in lots of different ways.

Want to know the secret to involving parents? Talk to them. Seriously. Make it the first thing you do. Not by phone and certainly not by e-mail. Talk to the parents face-to-face. There is nothing more important than taking the time to have a personal conversation with a parent whose child is interested in learning more about God and the church.

This personal conversation tells the parent and the child that you are interested in them! Take time to listen to their story and find out what it is that they seek. This essential step will not only give you some basic information about the child; it will impress and begin to build a trusting relationship with the family.

A friendly welcome

Here are some tips for that first conversation:

- Don't delay. Contact the parent within 24 hours—sooner if possible— to show your interest and concern.
- Talk to the parent and child together. This shows you take a very personal interest in the child. Talk to the child directly, not just to the parent.
- Spend a few minutes talking to the parent privately. This allows for the parent to speak to you alone and give confidential insights or information that they don't want to say in front of their children.
Tip: Have an age-appropriate activity (and snack) for the child or children to do while you speak to the parent. And don't keep a child waiting too long.
- Make the conversation casual and comfortable. Sit in comfortable chairs, not behind your desk.
Option: Meet in the inquiring family's home. This can give you some good insights and may be helpful for families with young children.
- Wait until the end of the conversation to get detailed information like telephone number, address, and e-mail. Be sure to give the parent all of your contact info.

Ways for parents to participate

During your initial conversation with parents, give them a brief, non-threatening overview of your expectations. Be firm, but kind, about the fact that parents are expected to participate. Let them know if you expect them to come to every session or if there are only certain sessions that parents are expected to attend.

Intergenerational sessions

Yes, parents should participate in some of your formation sessions. Intergenerational family sessions are the best way for parents to be actively engaged in their child's faith formation. I'll give you a blueprint for this type of session in Module 6, but some of the activities include:

- One-on-one discussions between parent and child
- Small and large group discussions and activities
- A model art activity
- How to use music and video
- How to introduce prayer and meditation

In addition to family sessions, there will be times when you meet separately with parents. You may do this as a break-out group within your larger intergenerational sessions. And you may choose to have gatherings for adults only.

Here are other ways for parents to be actively engaged throughout the process of initiation:

- **Prayer**—In your formation sessions, model various types of prayer. Give parents suggestions and guidelines on how to pray at home with their children. Some parents will be very natural at and comfortable with this. Others will need more guidance.
- **Faith-sharing at home**—Give parents suggestions of ways they can share faith at home. Send home suggestions for activities and discussion starters they can do at home. I often make a "take home sheet" to go along with whatever we are discussing. You can also look at *Friends on the Way* for some good "take home" ideas. (To see more about *Friends on the Way*, go to TeamRCIA.com/Friends-on-the-Way.)
- **Discernment**
 - *Faith formation assessment*—Involve the parents in discerning the faith formation needs of the child. Has the child been baptized, and what kind of formation has he or she received? Go to Exercise 4 for more tips on discerning with parents.
 - *For the rites*—Prior to the Rite of Acceptance and the Rite of Election, parents need to have an intimate role in discerning the readiness of their child for the next stage in the process of initiation. We'll give you discernment guides in later modules.
- **Presenting and testifying at the rites**—As mentioned earlier, parents present their children during the major liturgical rites.
 - Preparation for the rites—the spiritual preparation before the rites is also essential for parents.
 - Reflection after the rites—the reflection after the rites helps parents to talk about the liturgical experience with their children.

Fun Fact

Jeanne Hunt provides fun and creative activities for families to do at home. Notice the title specifies "for Catholic Children," so you may not want to give this book directly to parents.

Celebrating Saints and Seasons: Hundreds of Activities for Catholic Children (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2010)



As we work through the other modules, we'll give other examples of how parents are constitutive to the process. For now, let's conclude this module on parents with Exercise 4.

