

# How Do We Help Kids Who Have Left the Faith?

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Perhaps the toughest question parents ask me is how they can help their wayward kids. The difficulty of this question stems not solely from the intellect, but from seeing the pain in the eyes of parents who are genuinely hurt and disappointed in the choices of their kids. *What can we do?* Here are some humble thoughts from my work with students:

**Pray.** Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This first step may seem obvious. After all, which Christian parents *don’t* pray for their kids? But remember, while prayer is for our kids, it is also for *us*. God wants us to pray as an act of trust in Him, and he promises to guard our hearts as a result.

**Work on the relationship.** It’s no secret that I love apologetics. Yet despite the critical need to train our kids in defending and articulating the faith, there’s often relational and emotional pain at the heart of why kids reject faith. In a massive study of faith transmission between generations, USC professor Vern Bengtson revealed that the primary factor is a “warm relationship” with the father. If this relationship in particular is broken, or other key relationships, faith is far less likely to be passed on from one generation to the next. Rather than first trying to reason your kids back to faith, or force them to go back to church, be sure they know you love them unconditionally. After all, God said to Israel: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (Jer 31:3).

**Remember that God’s heart is broken more than yours.** It’s hard to think of a more passionate and committed love than the love of a mother. But God loves us and yearns to see our kids come back to faith more than we do. Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34). And Peter said, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). We can pray to God knowing that he yearns to see our kids return to faith too.

**Have a long-term view.** Many young people who return to the faith often endure a length, arduous journey. And this journey is often filled with pain, regret, and consequences. I have seen this with many of my students and some of my personal friends. While we certainly want their return to be quick, and we want to save our kids from unnecessary pain, many have to learn the hard way. If we have a long-term view, we will tend to be more patient with our kids and count our blessings along the way.

**Trust God. Don’t blame yourself.** It’s natural to blame yourself for the choices your kids make. As tempting as this is, *don’t do it*. There’s nothing wrong with reflecting on your mistakes and learning from them. I do it all the time. But don’t dwell on them. All of us make mistakes. The question is whether we will learn from them, accept God’s

forgiveness, and trust God regardless. Ultimately, our kids are responsible for their own lives. I have seen kids from crummy families develop a vibrant faith, and I have seen kids from great homes walk away. There are always many factors tied to a young person's faith development. We can't take too much credit, nor can we give ourselves too much blame. If your kids have walked away, the most important question is, *Am I trusting God through this process and responding in the way He would desire me to.* If the answer is "yes," then whether your kids return to the faith or not, you can rest assured that God is please with *you*.

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