

Six Ways to Inspire Confident, Contagious Faith in Your Kids

How do we help children and teens contend with the big questions? An apologist offers her take.

[Melissa Cain Travis](#)

Last year [in an interview](#) with Christianity Today, first-time Olympian and gold medalist swimmer Maya DiRado reported that when she started “questioning [her] beliefs as a teenager,” her Christian parents “were supportive.” She went on to say that “through some investigating and lots of reading and talking with mentors, I came to know and follow Christ and make my faith my own.”

According to William Wilberforce, “authentic faith cannot be inherited,” which means we have to help our kids grow into full ownership of their faith in the same way that DiRado’s parents did. As our kids grow up in a post-Christian age, we need to help them understand what we believe and also the excellent reasons we have for those beliefs.

It’s not a question of *if* our children’s views will be challenged, but *when*. My kids both encountered objections from non-Christian peers before the age of 10, and they’re both homeschooled. I’m hearing from public-schooling families that kids tend to start talking to each other about religious beliefs somewhere between third and fifth grade. How should they respond when they encounter a skeptic who thinks the Bible is a collection of legends and fables? That the exclusivity of Christianity is intolerant? That Jesus never existed? Or that modern science has disproven Christianity once and for all? (Incidentally, my nine-year-old son heard one of these from a friend less than two weeks ago.)

1 Peter 3:15 says to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” Per this command from the apostle Peter, apologetics—which comes from the Greek *apologia* “to make a defense”—is not an optional practice but rather something we are *commanded* to do in a spirit of love and respect. Although apologetics is often denigrated as a blunt, antiqued tool, it can be used winsomely and powerfully to, [in the words of Holly Ordway](#), “help us lead people to know about, follow, and love our Lord Jesus Christ.” It can also help us shore up our own beliefs and those of our children.

With that in mind, here are six suggestions for parents, Christian educators, and youth ministers on how to inspire and cultivate a confident and contagious faith in your kids and teens:

1. Start early.

I’m frequently asked how soon we should begin incorporating apologetics into our kids’ spiritual formation. Kids start thinking independently about theological and philosophical issues at a much younger age than we might expect, long before the high school or college years, so the early elementary school years seem to be the season to start.

My older son was only seven years old the first time he questioned the truth of Christianity. Out of the blue one day he asked, “Mommy, how do we know all this stuff in the Bible isn’t just made up? How do we even know God is real?” In response, I gave him a simplified version of the [kalam cosmological argument](#), which explains that anything with a beginning must have a cause. Since the universe itself had a beginning and contains all matter and space-time, its cause must have been something immaterial, timeless, and very powerful—a characterization that fits beautifully with how Christianity defines God. My son understood and appreciated that explanation. It’s worth noting, too, that he’s not an anomaly—most preteen children can grasp basic apologetics.

As you think about where to start, first prepare yourself. Look for beginner’s resources like Lee Strobel’s *Case for Christianity Answer Book* or Doug Groothuis’s *Christian Apologetics*, a textbook that covers a broad range of topics. However, don’t expect to buy age-appropriate books and let them do the job for you. It’s important that you as the parent or teacher have a broader understanding of the subject matter than what the books or curricula present so that you’re prepared to facilitate additional discussion.

Second, anticipate the so-called “big questions”: How do we know that God exists? How do we know the Bible is trustworthy? How do we understand the problem of evil and suffering? Does science conflict with what the Bible teaches about Creation? Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead? And what happens

to people who die without ever hearing about Jesus? Those are some of the common questions that kids ask during the elementary school years.

2. Educate, don't indoctrinate.

As a child and young adult growing up in the church, I believed with all my heart that Christianity was true, but nonetheless, my faith was borrowed. It was borrowed from my parents, from the churches I attended, and from the rather insulated world I had grown up in. I was told *what* to believe but not *why* I should believe any of it—other than out of fear of eternal damnation—nor was I taught how to think about Christian truth claims critically so that I could take full intellectual ownership of my faith.

[Recent studies](#) indicate that this “borrowed faith” phenomenon has played a role in the alarming rate at which youth are leaving the church. However, the problem of borrowed faith isn't new and nor are the solutions to it.

How do we stop the gap? First, we need to equip our kids with extrabiblical evidence, including [writings from antiquity](#), [scientific evidence](#), and [archaeological evidence](#). Second, we need to equip them with critical thinking skills, which will help our kids detect and avoid poor reasoning and be able to analyze claims made for and against Christianity. Third, we need to teach them the basics of logical argumentation, since some of the best arguments for and against Christian truth claims are philosophical and often presented in logical forms.

If you're looking for resources for home or classroom settings, I recommend Lee Strobel's *Case for a Creator* and *Case for Christ*, which come in both kid and student editions; *The Thinking Toolbox* by Nathaniel and Hans Bluedorn; and William Lane Craig's *Learning Logic*.

3. Use a conversational approach.

As we disciple our students and kids, the goal is to stimulate their own autonomous thinking by talking with them rather than talking *at* them. This approach—sometimes referred to as the Socratic method of education—involves asking them deeper questions on a regular basis and giving them space to respond.

For example, if you're in the car driving home from school or sports practice and your son or daughter reports that a friend at school says that Jesus is “just a myth made up by the Bible writers,” you might respond with questions like “What do you think about that?” or “After thinking about it, what might you want to say in response next time?” or “Do you know how we know that Jesus is real?” Rather than dumping information on them all at once, provide them with one or two bits of good evidence and make sure they see how it supports the truth claim.

For younger kids and preteens, I sometimes use conversational apologetics in a verbal quiz game form. While driving in the car or at night before our bedtime prayers, I'll say something like, “Okay, who can tell me one good reason to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead?” or “Who can give me one reason why our universe had to have a creator?” Although some might find this approach too simplistic or overly scripted, I have found that kids love the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, and it builds up their intellectual muscles in the same way as Scripture memorization or catechism practice.

For resources on conversational apologetics, consider Natasha Crain's *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side: 40 Conversations to Help Them Build a Lasting Faith* and *The Defense Never Rests: A Workbook for Budding Apologists* by William Lane Craig and Joseph Tang.

4. Explain other worldviews.

Growing up, I was only vaguely aware of the existence other religions, let alone the fact that some people didn't believe in God at all. The few times I *was* exposed to non-Christian claims, Christians around me responded by saying, “Oh, that's just not true, the Bible says otherwise” or “That's one of Satan's lies. Don't fall for it.” As a young adult, then, I wasn't able to respond meaningfully to those with other worldviews, including my Hindu, Muslim, agnostic, and Universalist friends and coworkers. I missed several opportunities to be a voice for the kingdom, and I still regret that.

Now as a parent and a teacher, I'm convicted that our kids need to have a basic knowledge of other world religions—and how their teachings compare to Christian teachings—and they also need to be acquainted with atheism and agnosticism. If our sons, daughters, and students have a working understanding of competing

views, then when the time comes, they'll be equipped to have competent conversations (and friendships) with nonbelievers.

Starting in elementary school, we can gradually build their awareness that other people often have views different from our own, and not everyone is a Christian. The middle school years are a good time to have more detailed conversations about other belief systems. However, be cautious when choosing resources that compare world religions, not just because of the pluralistic bias that's prevalent but also because of common mischaracterizations of different faiths.

If you're looking for a place to start, try *World Religions: The Great Faiths Explored and Explained* by John Bowker, a respected Anglican priest and Bible scholar.

5. Don't freak out about doubt.

I can't help but wonder if DiRado's story might have turned out very differently if her parents hadn't lovingly supported her through her period of skepticism and doubt. Sooner or later, most kids and teens voice doubts about some aspect of Christianity, and although our parental instincts might lead us to panic, we should remember that it's perfectly normal to question. In fact it's a very good indicator that our kids are maturing intellectually when they begin to analyze their own beliefs.

As parents and teachers, we want to encourage our kids' and students' critical thinking by honoring their questions. For example, you might respond by saying, "Wow, I'm really impressed that you've thought of such a deep and important point. Let's talk about that." Or if they're simply expressing doubt about a biblical claim, you might ask them, "What do you think is problematic about that?" If they continue to harbor doubt after you've provided them with good answers, give them space. This will show them that you respect their spiritual and intellectual autonomy. You might revisit the conversation from time to time and/or point them toward helpful people, pastors, books, or online resources. When you do talk, try to avoid making them feel as if they're forced to agree with your conclusions to avoid upsetting you.

My four basic tips for dealing with doubt are: (1) express interest and loving concern, not distress, (2) compliment their critical thinking, (3) calmly discuss the evidence and ideas, and (4) revisit the conversation when you've prayed and read more deeply.

6. Lean on the Holy Spirit and other believers around you.

Remember that the burden of building a confident and contagious faith in your kids or students is not all on you. Think of yourself as an obedient emissary of the Holy Spirit: Trust him to guide you in your parenting and teaching, yes, but also trust him to do the work that is exclusively his. At the end of the day, kids are individuals with independent minds; we cannot force them to believe anything, nor should we try. Our greatest confidence should be in the agency of the Holy Spirit.

It's also crucial to realize that one of the greatest blessings of living in a community of believers is that we sharpen one another. Sometimes our kids benefit from hearing good answers from spiritual mentors who are not their parents. A trusted pastor or an older student who has a mature, informed faith can offer valuable spiritual and intellectual encouragement to our kids. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of community-based discipleship.

As we build up our kids in community, we build up the church too. "[Churches that help young people](#) grow seem to experience missional, spiritual, relational, and often numerical growth across the board," write Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin in *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*.

Discipling the next generation is one of the greatest contributions we can make to the body of Christ, so let's teach them to love the Lord with all their hearts, all their souls, and all their minds. The future of the church depends upon it.

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