

How to Talk to Your Kids About God

Most young children have some concept of God. It is important to respond to their questions with sophistication and honesty.

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Even parents who tell their children that they can ask them about "anything" often change the subject when children ask about God. And they do ask.

"Who are God's parents?" "If God is so powerful, why doesn't God stop bad things from happening?" "Does God hear my prayers?" The questions are legion. In essence, they are the same questions that parents ask, although in another form. But they are questions we must address. After all, who among us is satisfied to give our children an intellectual, but not a spiritual education?

Our answers to these questions guide our children's view of the universe. What do we wish them to believe, that they are accidents of ancient chemistry or sparks of the divine? Whatever one's philosophy on these matters, we owe our children an honest and searching discussion.

Talking to children about God is a key component of their sense of self. Children are taught that they are important, but why are they important? Ask your children why they matter. I have asked thousands of children "why are you important." The usual answers are "I get good grades, I am good at sports, I have a nice job/boyfriend/girlfriend, my parents love me." All these answers spell trouble, because they are all based on something human, and everything human can change. Are we always going to be the brightest in the class, or have that boyfriend or feel our parents' love? Do you really want your child's self-esteem to be based on your emotional constitution? Is there no unvarying basis for self-worth?

The Bible has a deeper image. "God created human beings in the divine image" (Genesis 1:27). What if we could say "all your qualities are wonderful, but beyond all that you matter because you are in the image of God? There is an essence in you that is only yours— your divine spark. God loves you, and that love never changes." When we do that, not only have we given our children a constant basis of self-esteem, but a noncomparative basis. If I am important because my parents love me, what does that teach me about the child whose parents do not love him, or who has no parents? But all are special in God's eyes.

Teaching children about God is a way of giving a firm footing to their spiritual life. Below are a few guidelines for initiating a conversation that can be as intimate as any between parents and children:

Ask. Studies show that almost all children by the age of six have some developed concept of God. Ask them. Do not allow your own preconceptions to determine the range of their

curiosity. Let them think, speculate, dream, imagine. Children will grow in their understanding, but only if we do not cut off conversation by dictating the "truth" or by evading the issue.

Tell Stories. Stories encourage children to form concepts of character. To learn about God, tell the stories of the Bible, the midrashic or teaching legends, and incidents from your own life. Children are less adept at manipulating abstract concepts than they are at understanding concrete operational ideas. Along with stories, use descriptive language. Rather than "God knows everything" try to be specific: "God is the one who helps us to grow."

Bring God into everyday life. Tell your children that God loves them. Explain that the world is filled with evidence of God's concern and artistry. If the language seems alien or difficult, find ways to ease into it. "Who loves you?" Go through a list: parents, siblings, grandparents, and God. Remember that Judaism is filled with ideas of God's love in the prayers and in the Bible. And our best known prayer, the *Sh'ma*, exhorts us to love God back.

Do not be defensive at challenges. Thoughtful children, especially once they enter into adolescence, will challenge our religious ideas. That is a sign of thoughtfulness. When we are angry or defensive, we show our own insecurities, our unease with the religious ideas we profess. Welcome the challenge, recognize that there are many good reasons to doubt God's existence or benevolence. Engage in a dialogue, not a diatribe.

Learn good answers. There are no definitive answers to difficult questions, but there are good ones. Try not to fall into the trap of giving facile answers that may satisfy a six year old, but will be transparently unacceptable when the child is older and more sophisticated. It is better not to be understood yet than to misrepresent the complexity of the issues. Still, in many cases, hard questions can be addressed very early: "If God dwells everywhere, is God in my pocket?" The appropriate answer to this is to explain the difference between physical and nonphysical objects. The wind is invisible, but physical. Love is intangible. Ask a child, "Where is love?" You cannot point to it, but you can feel it. The same is true with God.

There is no one idea of God in Judaism. Our tradition is as rich theologically as it is culturally and historically. The mystics speak of God with very concrete imagery, talking about the ways in which human beings must repair breaches in God, and help God fix the world. The [midrashic tradition] of teaching stories talks about a God who needs us, who goes into exile with Israel, even a God who feels lonely. The philosophers espouse a God who is beyond human understanding or description, a God about whom we can only say that we are incapable of understanding God's true nature.

Some have spoken of God as far beyond us, others as largely inside of us. [One] midrash teaches that when God gave the Torah to Israel, it was like a mirror in which each person saw his or her own image reflected. Theologically, God relates to each in a unique way; God presents a different face to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of their descendents. We

do not have to get it "right." Ideas of God will always vary; our task is to struggle, to care.

Our aim is not answers but spiritual growth. Allow yourself to be open to the directions that spiritual exploration can take you. Once again, as so often, through teaching our children, we learn.