

Make bedtime sacred story time with your kids

Do you read religious bedtime stories to your kids? You can make those stories do double duty by weaving in practices from *lectio divina*, painlessly teaching your kids the foundational skills for this ancient prayer practice so that as they grow older, they will be better equipped to prayerfully contemplate sacred texts.

Lectio divina, or “sacred reading,” is an ancient method of praying with sacred texts that dates to the fourth century. Usually the text comes from the Scriptures, but other texts may be used as well, such as the writings of the saints. *Lectio divina* takes many forms, but traditionally it is divided into four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

When you read sacred stories with your children slowly, pausing to pray and talk about what God is saying through the story, you provide them with skills and habits for reading the Bible and other sacred texts more fruitfully as they grow older.

Here is one way to practice “sacred reading” with your children:

1. **Reading.** Use a short story (the shorter the better, but definitely less than five minutes long) from a good picture Bible, a Bible-based storybook, or a children’s book about the lives of the saints. Help your child prepare to hear the story by allowing a short settling down time, and explaining what you’re going to do: “Now let’s read a story about God. While I read, you listen for what God is doing in the story.” Don’t worry about

questions or interruptions: if they are about the text, then your child is already “meditating” on it; if not, address the distraction and gently redirect attention back to the story. You may want to read the story or parts of the story again, either immediately or during a later step.

2. **Meditation.** If your child doesn’t have questions or comments of her own, offer some comments and prompting questions: What is happening in the picture (or in the story)? Why? What are characters thinking or feeling? How is God acting in this story? (If God isn’t directly mentioned in the story, you may need to suggest some ways that God is quietly present.) Which character would you like to be? What would you do differently if you were that character? How would you feel?
3. **Prayer.** Invite your child to respond to the story in prayer: “You know, God gives us stories like this to help us grow closer to him. Let’s pray to God about this story. What would you like to say to God? Or what questions do you want to ask God about this story?” Provide guiding prompts, if necessary. Be sure to offer your own prayer response, both to make the experience prayerful for you and to model prayer for your child.
4. **Listening.** With young children, the contemplation step can be described as listening to God: “Now that we’ve prayed to God about this story, let’s be quiet so we can hear what God might be saying back to us, inside our hearts.” Take at least thirty seconds to be silent. If your child is restless or noisy, do your best to complete the period of silence yourself.
5. **Wrapping up.** You can finish by asking your child whether he heard God speaking to him. If he says no, you can reassure him that it’s okay—sometimes we aren’t listening closely enough, and sometimes God just likes to spend time quietly with us. End by blessing your child.

For ways of adapting this practice for older kids and teens, see the main [Lectio Divina](#) article.

This article is adapted from the book [77 Ways to Pray with Your Kids](#).