

Bonus material 8.2. Interfaith families

Children and faith: how to tackle the topic and why later isn't wiser

Religion is a loaded issue for couples. Not only is it a personal choice, it also has generations of tradition and family pressure behind it. So differences in religion can be difficult to sort out. If you put off the decision, it will only become worse later. If you come to a deadlock, you should have a consultation with a member of the clergy or get counselling. If the problem is a religiously rigid family on one side, you can make your decision and provide a united front.

The last thing you want is for the religion decision to be the source of arguments and family struggles. This can begin as early as deciding whether to have a baptism or not. If you have this worked out in advance, you can support each other when the greater family tries to interfere, and you won't fight about it. If you don't work it out, every holiday, family tradition and religious occasion will be a source of struggle.

A list of questions to help you to make the right choice for your family

To begin the religion conversation, approach it as a way to deepen intimacy and create a deeper understanding of the place of religion and spirituality in your family, not as a way to prove that your religious views are the right ones. Some discussion questions:

- What religion do I consider myself to be?
- Is this the religion I want for my children?
- Is it my religion or my culture that I want to pass on?
- How religious am I and how involved am I in my faith?
- How important to each of us is our own religious faith?
- How involved does each of us want to be in our child's religious formation?
- What is important to me about my religion?
- What have been the gifts of religion in my life?
- If I could pick any religion for our child, what would it be?
- What do I want to tell our child about religion/spirituality?
- How involved in religion do we want our child to be?
- What do I find of value in my partner's faith?
- How cooperative will our family and friends be with our plan for our child's religious upbringing?
- What am I willing to contribute to our child's religious development in a faith different from my own?
- How much freedom to choose a religion am I willing to give our child?
- How would I feel if our child's religion was different from mine?
- What would it mean to me if we left the choice of religion/not being religious up to our child?

Your choices

You can make whatever decision you want - to raise the children in a faith or keep them away from it. If you're lukewarm about religion or if you are more spiritual, it shouldn't be too big a question. But if religion is important to one or both of you, or if one is an atheist or averse toward the other's religion, you have a couple of choices. You can – for example - blend your religions into a new version that suits both of you or find a new faith that will accommodate both of your beliefs. Here's a summary of the choices:

- Practice your own religions, but do not teach your child either of them. When your child is old enough they will choose their own way.
- Practice your own religions and teach your child about both of them. When your child is old enough they will choose their own way.
- Practice your own religions and make a decision that one of you is responsible for your child's religious education (for example the parent to whom religion means more).
- Make a decision that one of you converts to the other one's religion and that this family religion is the one you will practice as a family.
- Switch to a third religion that becomes your family religion.
- Take a secular, non-religious view to your family life and teach your child about norms, values and ethics in another way.

Remember: No matter what you and your partner agree, your child will eventually find their own way and once that happens you must respect your child's choice.

Ultimately, you need to be comfortable with your family's faith. Your religious beliefs or lack thereof will affect your parenting styles.

The two religion route

As the world becomes more culturally diverse and traditions and cultures blend, new challenges arise for even the most open-minded families. The prospect of raising children according to two faiths may seem daunting to some; it may also seem a natural expression of a family's togetherness for others.

For interfaith families, whether by first or second marriage ("blended families"), raising children presents not just challenges but ways for parents to celebrate both faiths while avoiding the awkward choice of having to choose one spirituality over the other. For the children, a dual-faith childhood can present some confusion if inexpertly handled by the parents; it can also be a richly rewarding experience if handled well.

Children thrive on stability and structure, and the presence of two faiths in the household is sometimes a cause for confusion and uncertainty. Parents can avoid such emotional difficulties by presenting a clear and

organised explanation for both faiths. Parents should also provide the same explanation consistently, so that if the child asks more than once they will be reassured by the same answer.

It's also important to realize the two faiths will eventually be judged and evaluated by the children themselves. Children's' minds love to organise and prioritise, so one faith will likely become the "favourite" while the other becomes "the second." Parents can be patient and realise that the judging is often simply a phase.

To be fair, even moderately devout members of one faith do not observe and practice all the rituals or holy days of one faith. Attempting to celebrate the days of observance for two faiths may seem at least equally unrealistic.

Parents need to consider what days from each faith they wish to share with their children, and which days can be simply recognized. While parents shouldn't feel free to ignore or neglect the obligations of their faith, they may wish to discuss with themselves and even with the child which days are comparatively more important.

Finally, it's vital that parents raise the child to understand that their dual faith is something to be celebrated and valued, and not as a source of shame. If the child perceives that his status is a blessing, he or she will have a much easier time reconciling the teachings and practices of both faiths.