



the messy family project™
FAMILY RETREAT



the
messy family
project

with mike & alicia heron

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www.messyfamilyproject.org

Written by Mike & Alicia Herson

Book design by Anna Guerin

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a Family Retreat is something that we have developed within the Hernon family over the past fifteen years. It grew out of our desire to reconnect intentionally with our children when our two oldest were entering junior high. With the growth of activities, social connections, and burgeoning independence, we wanted to reaffirm in our children their bond with us, with their siblings, and most especially, with Our Lord Who is the Source of life. So in 2007, we did our first family retreat and we have continued to make it a priority in our lives ever since.

When we started talking publicly about this retreat in our podcast and speaking engagements, people were immediately interested. Parents would ask us when to have a retreat, what it should include, and most importantly, how to do it. Leaders of family ministries affirmed us and encouraged us to promote this idea. They thought it was genius! But since our retreats had grown organically from our family's needs and our own ideas, we didn't exactly have anything written out that we could share. As we have become more aware of the desires of families to host their own retreats, we have become convinced even more of its importance. This is why we are now offering this to you.

Every family will have their own way of approaching this time alone together. We hope to empower parents to make this retreat your own: customize it for the needs of your family. Every year our own family's retreat looks different. That's because the format of the retreat really depends on the ages of the children and the particular challenges the family is experiencing at that time. Like we say in our podcast, we are here to empower YOU to lead your family. We can't give you all the answers or give you a perfect road map. We can give you ideas, outlines, and our experience so you can fashion a retreat that will serve the needs of your family. As parents, you are the spiritual heads of your family and we exhort you to step into that role with confidence. You may not do it perfectly, but the good news is that God does not ask us to be perfect. **He asks us to show up and to try.**

why do a family retreat?

Many times, we parents don't know how to share the faith with our children. We value our relationship with God and our life in the Church, but we don't always know how to express this faith or communicate its value with our family. This retreat is a time for you to be intentional with your kids. You are showing them through your actions AND your words that you prioritize your relationship with them and with God. The amazing thing about family life is that it is a natural means for a relationship with God. Children's experience with the family provides a foundation, strong or weak, for their life of faith. When you strengthen family life and those bonds, you will be strengthening the faith of your children. Also, children need witnesses of faith. They need to see you live your faith through prayer and relationships with others. The Church outlines for us Spiritual AND Corporal Works of Mercy because it is crucial to put our faith into action. So this retreat is a combination of prayer and works. Both are important aspects of sharing faith.

You are also modeling for your children healthy living. It is important for all of us to unplug, get away, and focus on the bigger picture, the big questions of life. Carving out time in our lives for spiritual growth and refreshment is important and you are modeling this for your children. In addition, separating yourself from the outside world—work, social media, even household responsibilities—to focus on your family relationships demonstrates that family is your first priority. You are making the sacrifice that you are asking them to make. Simply taking time for them and for God in this way sends a message more powerfully and clearly than words ever could. Proverbs 22:6 reminds us, "Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it."

CHALLENGES

As with anything having to do with children, there are challenges that will arise in planning and executing your Family Retreat. First, we have to emphasize: there is no perfect plan! Do not get discouraged when things do not go as smoothly as you would like. Keep focused on your goals, but make sure you are flexible and willing to adapt to the needs of your family. The goal is not to stick to the plan: the goal is to have time alone with your family to focus on God and each other. Here are some common challenges that we ourselves have faced:

Kids who don't want to come.

This is common with teens and thankfully, there is a simple solution: you make them come. Part of communicating that this family event is a top priority is leaving behind everything else —sports, school, friends, work. In the "big picture" there are no relationships or commitments that are more important than your family. When you insist they come, you are underlining that for them. Also, we have found that most kids come around pretty quickly if you play your cards right.

Money.

The biggest expense of doing this retreat is really the place that you choose to go. Other than that, the financial commitment is what you want it to be. Most Christians should be tithing their money, or giving a portion of our income to the Lord's work. A retreat is certainly helping the Lord work in our family. So during the times when \$100 in gas money to drive to a borrowed cabin was a stretch for us, we would use our tithe money for this spiritual work for our family. We spend money on things we value. Make this retreat a value for your budget.

Time.

Competing schedules in a family can be the biggest obstacle in making this retreat happen. There have been some summers when there was literally only one weekend that worked for all of our children! This is why good planning and a commitment of the entire family is important. Everyone must realize that prioritizing time together is essential. A sports practice or even a big game is not more important than a family retreat. A teen working an hourly paid job on a Saturday is not more important than a family retreat. The key is to give everyone enough notice to plan and make expectations clear for their employers, coaches, and friends. The older your children are, the more lead time they will need to plan. Make sure to respect that.

Couple Disunity.

It is very important that the couple leading the retreat (mom and dad!) are on the same page. One maxim that we use a lot is "It's better to be wrong together than right alone." This means that it is better to have an imperfect plan that you both agree to than having the "perfect plan" that was made and executed by one person only. Your unity also sends an undeniable signal to your children, and they will know very quickly if mom and dad are (or are not) together on this. You must work together on this retreat plan. It's better to make it as simple as possible and work as a team than have an elaborate idea without collaboration and support of your spouse. And it's okay if one spouse does more preparation as long both spouses are fully on board.

Infants and Toddlers.

Yes, they are a challenge and a joy, aren't they? When we did our first retreat we had five kids between 13 and 7 years of age and three kids under 5. If we wanted to pray together or have a discussion, we had to decide what to do with the little guys. We simply had to be very creative with our scheduling and flexible in our goals. We would schedule talks later in the evening after an early bedtime, or during naptime. Sometimes one of us would do a talk or discussion with the older kids and the other parent would play outside with the littles or have a special age-appropriate activity (Make a table fort with Dad!). We made sure to include the younger ones in all activities that they could participate in. Littles bring great value to the family life and teach lessons by their innocence and dependence on the family.

Screens.

During this retreat it is essential that there is little to no contact with the outside world. That is part of the nature of a retreat. We have allowed a movie or two as a family or as “electronic babysitters” for the littles as needed, but the connection to the outside world needs to be severed for the weekend. If you ask this of your children, that means you need to ask this of yourself as parents as well.

AGE APPROPRIATE

Parents have asked us when to start doing this family retreat. Since children under the age of 6 are mainly formed by the environment of the home, a retreat is really not necessary for them. It is when children are between 6 and 12 that this need arises, and it becomes greater the older your children become. We first became aware of the need for this retreat when our oldest was getting ready to enter junior high, but we could have done it earlier. So we suggest waiting until at least half of your children are over the age of 7 and when your oldest is at least 10.

Little children do not learn well through straight information or discussion. But children over the age of 7 (or those who have received First Holy Communion) have moved to a different place in their lives spiritually and mentally. We use that sacrament as the dividing line for those who participate in our talks and discussion and those who are allowed to play or go to sleep. Spiritually, those who take communion are more fully incorporated into the Body of Christ and it is appropriate that they take on more knowledge and responsibility for their faith. Plus, including a 7-year-old with older siblings informs them of the standard that you expect them to live up to.

It's very important as you **plan this retreat with the overall maturity of your children in mind**. When you make decisions on the schedule, types of activities, and even types of prayer, be sure to accommodate them as best you can. Kids are very adaptable. Older kids can enjoy messy, silly games with their toddler siblings, and younger kids are capable of entering into quiet prayer in the right environment. Bear in mind the ages of your children, but don't let it shackle you. One very important thing to remember is that your children are CHILDREN. They are not adults. Let go of the “adult retreat” ideas that you are coming in with. This is a FAMILY Retreat.

essential elements

FUN

It is very, very important that this retreat is fun for your kids! Buy the sugar cereals or candy that you never get, allow them to attack you with silly string, buy new crayons or markers, all in order to work to make this time special in small ways. Every family has fun differently. If you don't know what your kids consider to be fun, ask them! Take some time to prepare for the retreat by investigating the "fun factor" with your children. The enjoyment of the activities you do serves as "grease in the wheels" for the bonding and prayer that you will do together.

One qualifier: **We suggest that you try not to leave your retreat space for this fun.** It's important that your family is focused on each other without the distraction of other people or other environments. (I.e: do NOT do retreats at Disneyland!) Create your own "home-grown" activities with those you are with. The space that you leave in your schedule for "fun" should sometimes be optional to give those introverts in your family some time to recharge, and to have some time that is open for the children to create their own memories even apart from mom and dad. The focus doesn't always have to be on you. Your children can create their own fun!

Part of having fun is the freedom to make choices. **Kids should be able to choose who they want to hang out with and what they want to do.** This is one reason that access to water can be helpful. Swimming, boating, fishing, and canoeing are all activities that most people enjoy doing together, so getting a cabin by a lake or a weekend beach house might be a great option. Or maybe your family enjoys a pick up game of basketball or football, creating music, reading, or playing board games. Leave the screens behind and enjoy true leisure. Have a talent show, put on music and dance, read aloud to each other, make a blanket fort, have a pillow fight, build with Legos, or play charades. Whatever your family likes to do, make sure you bring the equipment and provide the time to do it together. This will take some thinking and planning on your part before the weekend, but it is an essential element of the success of your family retreat.

FAMILY BONDING

The next important element of the family retreat is family bonding. You can think of this as the "team-building" aspect of the weekend. **These activities are not optional.** They are meant for every member of the family to participate in so you strengthen the bonds you have with each other and also your identity as a family unit and your family unit is incomplete without every member. Identity and belonging is incredibly important to young people. Even if your child remembers nothing of what you say during the weekend, the bond that you are creating with them and between them and their siblings can last a lifetime.

Bonding also opens the hearts of your children to what you have to say. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, **before a person can become who they are meant to be and achieve their full potential, they need to have a sense of belonging.** This need should first be fulfilled within the family. When you take time to strengthen these family bonds through activities, you are satisfying the need for identity and belonging, so your child will then be able to quench the thirst for self-esteem and self-fulfillment. And family life is just easier when you are unified!

So what kind of activities are we talking about? You can find many team-building activities on the internet that you can repurpose for your family. Just keep in mind the age of your children and the number of children you have. Always remember the goal of the activity is growth in the relationship between family members. Make sure the following elements are present in your activity:

1. trust and vulnerability,
2. active communication,
3. an end result,
4. every person has to make a contribution.

This could take the form of creating something together, accomplishing a goal together (even by forming two small teams that compete against each other), or a discussion in which you come up with a common idea together. Family bonding gives your family a chance to experience joining forces and becoming more aware of the giftedness of each family member.

PRAYER

Your family's connection to God is essential to your survival and unity. The time you have for community prayer and individual prayer is very important and should really be at the center of your time together. When you pray to God, the Trinity and the first Family, you are acknowledging that your family is trying as best you can to reflect that perfect Family. When you lead your family to pray together, you are modeling for your children humility before God and showing them how to pray. There is no greater gift you can give your children than the gift of a relationship with a loving God Who will never fail them or leave them. The time you dedicate to prayer should nurture each family member's individual relationship with God as well as your communal relationship with Him as a family. When our family prays together aloud in song or speech, it is a taste of heaven. It is standing together before the One from "whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (Eph 3:15)

Set up a sacred space.

No matter where your retreat is, you can set up a sacred space, even just an end table with special family crucifix or holy image that you bring from your home. When you pray together,

God is present. "... where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20) You want to invite the Holy Spirit to come into this retreat because He can do what you simply cannot. Give the Lord the room He needs to move in the hearts of your children and accomplish His plan, not yours.

Every family has a different way of praying and a different spirituality. Before the retreat, talk to your children about how they like to pray. **Come prepared with different types of prayer, and be open to trying something new.** Do your research and find Mass times. Look for an adoration chapel. Pick out an icon, picture, crucifix, or statue from your home to bring along on retreat, and pack it reverently in a parent's suitcase. Icons and sacred pictures travel well, especially when wrapped carefully in a beautiful tablecloth or a shawl which can be used to make a prayer altar. Your family can decorate it with candles from home or flowers or nature decorations gathered from the place where your retreat is. Print song sheets or morning and evening prayer. Bring Bibles and journals for everyone in the family. Make a playlist of worship songs that you like to sing together or come prepared to lead the singing yourselves. Pray the scriptural rosary. Provide times for individual prayer and time for communal prayer. We have usually found that 10 to 15 minutes of communal prayer is sufficient for most children. Always remember, it is better to "end on a high note." Observe your children and as soon as you see them losing interest or getting restless, quietly close your prayer and move on to something else. Praying with your children is an art, not a science.

A word about music.

Music is a very powerful tool for creating unity in a group of people. It stimulates not only the entire brain, but the spirit as well. Singing together also works to create unity between people. And as St. Augustine said, "Singing is praying twice". It lifts the heart and the mind to God in a way that other spoken activities simply do not. Find songs of prayer that your family can sing together to praise God. Open each time of prayer with a song or hymn. You can sing before meals or after a teaching. Sing a night-prayer song before bedtime. There are tracks and playlists you can download and use to sing along to, and there are many simple worship songs and hymns that you can sing without music. Ask your children about their favorite sacred songs and add them to your family culture . However you need to do it, we highly recommend using music in your prayer to form unity and to increase the power of your prayer.

TEACHING

"By virtue of their ministry of educating, parents are through the witness of their lives the first heralds of the gospel for their children. Furthermore, by praying with their children, by reading the word of God with them and by introducing them...into the Body of Christ—both the eucharistic and the ecclesial body—they become fully parents" (Familiaris Consortio,#39).

The teaching time of the retreat is really where you as parents have the opportunity to

express the heart of the matter you want to share with your children. God has given you this responsibility and you should not shirk it out of your own insecurities, self-doubt, or laziness. The teaching time should reflect the theme or focus of the retreat.

How do you decide the theme of your retreat? Talk with your spouse and decide together. Take time to look at your family and the challenges that you are facing. Ask yourselves where you want to be and where you are. Pray together and ask God to show you where your family needs to grow. We have often made the focus of our retreat spiritual growth, but maybe there are some serious relationship problems in your family that you need to deal with. Maybe there has been a tragedy or death that needs to be discussed. There is a time to deal with issues in a “back-door” manner, but this teaching time is really the opportunity to provide clarity in a direct manner. A good place to begin is the basic “Kerygma” or gospel message of salvation. We have included a book for you in our Family Retreat Box as a resource for you to use.

When our family does a retreat, **we make sure to have at least three talks during the weekend**, and sometimes we have done four. These talks are between 15 and 30 minutes long, depending on the subject matter and the ages of your children. The younger they are, the shorter the teaching! We have created talks ourselves but we have also used videos in place of our talks, such as the Wild Goose series by Fr. Dave Pivonka, Bishop Barron’s videos, or those done by Chris Stefanik. If you choose to do the talks yourself, make sure that you share your passion and your story, as well as give information. Don’t just read to them: engage them. You could even do a short teaching and then move directly into a discussion time. Depending on the size of your family this could be as a whole group or in small groups. Showing respect and openness to all the members of the family, their ideas and their learning styles can transform your time together. Focus on the needs of your family and be creative!

To warm kids up to the teaching time, it’s nice to have an **introductory activity or sharing**. As our children got older, we invited them to share some of their own spiritual journey with their siblings by talking about a time when they turned to God in their need or discovered God in their life. This is always inspiring and beautiful! You could also do a skit, like acting out a Bible story or a parable or fable that teaches a lesson. You could even tell a joke or narrate a funny story from your childhood or past that’s connected to what you want to share. The introduction can be something that makes them laugh or makes them think, but it should be something that will get their juices flowing so they are ready to receive the information you have on your heart to give them.