



Part II.

Tips for Teachers

IN A NUTSHELL

Repetition is vital. Keep repeating the instructions and reinforcing the vision behind the homework sheets.

One excellent way of communicating the vision of Walking Together in Faith is to share 'success stories' in the school newsletter.

Seek feedback from parents and children and use this to help refine your homework strategy.

Tips for Teachers

Communication tips

Introducing *Walking Together In Faith*

Repetition is vital. Don't expect parents to 'get it' immediately. People take time to adapt to new procedures.

Explain the 'new R.E. homework sheets' simply and clearly. Then be prepared to repeat your explanation over and over again, in different ways, in different forums. For example:

- Through the newsletter (see 'Part 1. Application: newsletter samples');
- At parent-teacher interviews;
- During informal chats with parents at drop-off and pick-up time;
- In the notes to parents on the homework sheet itself;
- When giving instructions to the children in the classroom.

Repetition is important, not only to impart clear INSTRUCTIONS (the 'how'), but also to communicate the VISION (the 'why'):

- This is about you and your child (not school grades);
- Your home is the most important 'school of faith';
- A loving, faith-filled Catholic Church is built on loving, faith-filled Catholic homes.
- Your faith is important to your child - here are some simple steps which may assist you in sharing this faith;
- Life is busy - but we must never be too busy to share faith with our children.
- Faith is 'caught', not just taught. What faith messages (verbal and non-verbal) are our children 'catching' at home?

Monitoring *Walking Together In Faith*

Various ways to seek parental feedback (some or all of these methods may prove useful):

- Do nothing - let the feedback come to you!
- Include a feedback section in the corner of the homework sheet.
- Raise the matter in parent-teacher interviews.
- Raise the matter with parents who stop to chat before or after school.
- Send home an evaluation sheet.
- Target a few parents who are representative of different cultures, family circumstances, faith experiences, etc and ask them about their experience of the new homework sheets.
- Hold a meeting for parents to come together to discuss their experience of the R.E. homework strategy.

IN A NUTSHELL

In their role as educators, affirm parents, reassure parents, and challenge appropriately.

Tips for Teachers

Supporting parents

Look for every opportunity to AFFIRM parents in their role as faith educators:

You are vital to your child's faith development.

God works through you!

In the eyes of the Church you have a special, irreplaceable role.

You can teach your child like no other teacher can.

You can do it!

and to ease them of any anxieties:

We are not going to 'mark' your faith-sharing quality;

We are not going to 'pry' into your spiritual life;

We just want you and your child to share some precious time together, and to invite God into that time together.

At the same time, don't be afraid to be bold and assertive when necessary:

In choosing a Catholic school for your child you chose a school which is committed to a Catholic ethos. This R.E. homework strategy is part of our pledge to live up to our commitment, and to support you, as parent, in yours.

You will notice that the homework sheets in this folder have a section on the left hand side which provides parents with some basic Catholic information (e.g. Why do we celebrate Advent? What are the Stations of the Cross?) This will help to equip parents to talk to their child about the topic (and relieve some parents of the anxiety of feeling 'ignorant'). It is also a way of educating the parents themselves.

The supplementary leaflets in Part IV of this folder are also designed to broaden parental awareness of their Catholic faith. Send them home as 'background reading' for parents; or use snippets in the bulletin or in letters to parents.

If a parent is not available to undertake the homework with the child, another family member can step in. In some exercises (e.g. the family meal) the participation of the whole family unit is desirable.

Be sensitive to families with multiple children - all receiving R.E. homework! It may be more practical, and more spiritually effective, for parents to focus on one activity (e.g. a family meal) with the whole family. Bring this option to their attention. In other words, a child in grade 3 might participate in her grade 5 sister's Advent homework exercise rather than the one set for grade 3. The child shouldn't feel penalised or excluded by this. On the contrary, they can bring a fresh perspective to the class. ('Did anyone join in their brother or sister's Advent activity? What did you do? What was that like?... So you see, there are lots of special things we can do at home to celebrate Advent.') If teachers are aware of the different homework exercises being assigned by different classes they can pick up on these themes and naturally incorporate them into class feedback/discussion. Alternatively, a common homework task assigned to all grades may prove to be more practical and conducive to family unity.

IN A NUTSHELL

Model (or discuss) an exercise in the classroom before assigning it as homework.

Be flexible and sensitive to family circumstances.

Consider choosing a particular homework task (e.g. an Advent family meal) for the whole school community.

Look out for opportunities to link the homework task to the activities of the wider parish.

Tips for Teachers

Classroom tips

The homework sheets could be assigned on a weekly, monthly or seasonal basis as determined by the school. It may be best to start gradually, say, one homework sheet during Lent, one during Easter, and work towards a more frequent pattern.

Your selection of homework sheets can be guided by:

- the flow of the liturgical year;
- important parish sacramental celebrations (e.g. First Communion);
- the flow of the R.E. syllabus.

Where possible, model (or discuss) the homework activity in the classroom before sending it home. e.g. If the homework is to create a 'sacred space' in the home for Advent, then create a sacred space for Advent in the classroom. The children's familiarity with the task in the classroom will assist implementation at home. This may be especially helpful for parents without English as a first language, or for parents who are unfamiliar with Catholic practices.

Upon completion of the homework task, invite class feedback. Of course, respect the privacy of families. For example, there is a difference between inviting children to share a poster they have drawn with the words 'Jesus forgives us' and asking them for personal details about a parent-child forgiveness exercise.

When assigning seasonal homework tasks, such as a sacred space in the home for Lent, keep the exercise alive by referring to it from time to time during the Lenten season (e.g. 'Don't forget to place your palm at your sacred site on Palm Sunday.') In this way you are gently reminding the family to persevere with their faith rituals in the home.

Time the homework to accommodate family circumstances such as custodial arrangements. e.g. Assign a weekly homework task for the period Wednesday to Tuesday rather than Monday to Friday so that the child has the opportunity to share it with the non-custodial parent on the weekend.

Some schools find it helpful to assign a whole school homework exercise. (e.g. Every family in the school is asked to hold a well-celebrated family meal during the Advent season.) A homework task like this has the advantage of bonding a whole family with minimum effort.

There may be the opportunity to link the homework task with a parish effort beyond the school. (e.g. If the school is urging all their families to hold a well-celebrated family meal during the Advent season, the parish priest might urge all parishioners to do the same.)

IN A NUTSHELL

Have confidence:
in your own goodness,
in the goodness of the parents,
in the openness of the children,
in the power of God's grace.

Tips for Teachers

Personal tips

It takes time to adjust to a new way of assigning homework. Patiently persevere.

Learn as you go - what works with this class, what doesn't. Be flexible. Don't hesitate to adapt the homework sheets in this folder (or to design your own).

Remember: this kind of homework is not meant to be a chore, but a joy! Within reason, choose homework topics that appeal to you, which 'speak' to your own heart and faith story. Your enthusiasm is catching. The children and parents will pick up your own natural energy for what you are asking them to do.

Model the homework by sharing your own faith experience. e.g.

If the homework is about family Christmas traditions, tell the children about how you celebrated Christmas with your family as a child.

If the exercise is about the Sign of the Cross, show them the cross around your neck and share why it is precious to you.

Don't make families jump through hoops unnecessarily. Let them tackle the homework tasks from where they are 'at', whether this be a very basic stage or a very developed stage of religious practice. Some families will be deeply immersed in their own style of Catholic spirituality in the home. Reassure them that the school wishes to affirm and encourage their efforts, (and to support them by bringing other families to a similar level of awareness/practice).

On the other hand, deeply religious families may also welcome a fresh challenge. e.g. *'That's great that you pray together every night as a family. Perhaps you would like to introduce a new prayer or try a different style of prayer just for a change. Expose your child to the wide range of spiritualities and devotions within the great Catholic tradition.'*

Remember that as a teacher you are in a privileged position to make a difference in the lives of the families in your school community. See yourself as a catalyst, igniting some potent elements:

The graced openness of a child's heart;

The desire of parents to nourish their children spiritually (even if they do not always know 'how');

A practical resource package that can help to teach parents 'how'.

Trust that God's grace will bring great good out of your homework efforts!

Gird all your efforts with prayer.

IN A NUTSHELL

There is no resource like the wisdom forged at the 'coal face' of school life.

These are just a few of the comments received from the teachers from the five pilot schools in Broken Bay Diocese.

Tips for Teachers

Testimonies

'We chose "family meals" during Advent as our R.E. homework. To my surprise, the Year 6 children and families whom I had thought "least likely" to do the homework were the most enthusiastic. One child organised the whole family to go on a Sunday picnic together. They loved it.'

'My class asked their parents and other family members about the ways they pray and to place some things in a "prayer box". They came back to school with some beautiful prayer symbols to show the class, such as rosary beads, well-worn bibles, great-grandpa's prayer book. Some of these were precious heirlooms and for the rest of the day we teachers lived in terror that they would get lost!'

'As R.E. homework we asked children to interview their family members about their experience of Christmas traditions. We asked them to make a collage based on their findings. Some children came back with fairly simple productions. Others went to great lengths with photos, Christmas decorations and items from national costumes. They had obviously interviewed everyone from Great-Aunt Margaret down to the baby sister. We found this homework a great way of celebrating ethnic diversity as well as faith.'

'My class took on Advent homework at the end of last year and they were all buzzing with enthusiasm at school. I tried similar homework with my class the following Lent with less feedback forthcoming. I think this partly reflected the level of trust in the classroom. At the start of a new school year not all the children know each other. They're not as willing to open up.'

'Our homework task was to create a Prayer Garden during Holy Week and then transform it into an Easter Garden for Easter Sunday. It fired our imaginations. First, we discussed the idea of a Prayer Garden in the classroom and the children sketched a plan of how they might go about it when they got home.'

'As you might expect, the younger classes were much more forthcoming with feedback, as were their parents who had regular contact with us before and after school. The older ones (Years 5/6) were more inclined to just go and do it without comment. It seems that more effort is required on our part to elicit feedback from the Year 6 children and their parents.'

'We chose the Gifts of Self homework exercise because it tied in well with our annual class Kris Kringle (KK). Over the years a subtle materialism had crept into Kris Kringle. The children were supposed to spend no more than \$5 but some were going over the top and others were just slapping \$5 in a mate's hand and saying "There you go". The Gifts of Self allowed us to transform KK by changing the focus from a store-bought present to what I can give of myself (e.g. a gesture of kindness, a smile, a prayer). It worked really well.'

IN A NUTSHELL

As you develop your homework strategy, draw on the insights of other teachers, of parents and of the children themselves.

Tips for Teachers

More testimonies

'The response to our "family meals" homework was positively overwhelming. I received comments from parents like:

"This is the first time in years that we've actually sat down together as a family and had dinner together."

"Over the meal we had to listen to each other... I never realized our son had such a great sense of humour!"

"For a change we actually turned off the TV and talked to each other over dinner."

"Our meal lasted much longer than usual because we were enjoying it so much.'

There was one negative comment from a parent who said something like they couldn't see the point of the exercise. I thought that was really sad.'

'During Lent we were learning about the sign of the cross. We took the children for a walk around the school and the parish church looking at all the different kinds of crosses. As a Lenten homework task the children went looking for crosses at home. Then they drew a picture or took a photo of a cross in their home and brought it to school. Some children brought the actual cross to show the class.'

The beauty of this R.E. homework strategy is that the children become the evangelizers in the home. Said one parent: 'My son came home and said with great enthusiasm "Mum, we must have a prayer table in our house!"'

'The children loved hearing their parents tell them the story of their baptism. Some brought in photos to show the class, others brought their baptismal candle or white garment.'

'We designed a classroom Advent calendar with little actions and prayers to do each day. We would cut out the task and stick it on the calendar for each day of Advent. If one day I happened to forget, the children would always remind me: "But we haven't filled in our Advent calendar today!!" Then we made a similar calendar for each child to take home and do with their family. It was clear that they were taking great interest and pride in their Advent journey at home too.'

'We were studying rainforests this term, so the "Prayer Garden" homework sheet tied in beautifully with our environmental theme.'

'I found the homework idea quite straightforward. There was a bit of work preparing the sheets for Advent, Lent and Easter but after that you have them on file for next year. Easy!'

IN A NUTSHELL

The majority of parent evaluations showed support for the new style of R.E. homework, an indication that this approach is worth pursuing, refining and developing further.

Tips for Teachers**Parent feedback**

Feedback from parents about the new R.E. homework was formally sought during the trial period. The following is an **excerpt** from the final AGQTP report of Sue Bull:

Towards the end of Term 1, 2004 schools sent an evaluation form to their parent community and at the time of writing this report, 228 responses had been received.

Parents were asked: As a result of this project: Have you noticed a difference during Term 4 last year and Term 1 this year in your child's R.E. homework? Results indicated:

My child is:

- Showing more interest in R.E. homework activities
1%strongly disagree 20%disagree 71%agree 8%strongly agree
- More eager to share activities with us at home
1%strongly disagree 20%disagree 68%agree 10%strongly agree
- Happier about the new R.E. homework
1%strongly disagree 15%disagree 74%agree 10%strongly agree

As a parent I feel:

- The R.E. homework is developing more conversation between us
1%strongly disagree 27%disagree 59%agree 13%strongly agree
- I have a greater understanding of my child's R.E. work
1%strongly disagree 19%disagree 68%agree 12%strongly agree
- More positive about this form of home-school learning activity
1%strongly disagree 19%disagree 69%agree 11%strongly agree

How would you now rate this school in assistance given to your child in Religious Education? 1 being lowest and 5 being highest. *1(0%), 2 (0%), 3 (6%), 4(35%), 5(58%)*

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It is evident from the feedback [collated in the overall evaluation] that over 84 % of respondents positively affirmed the value of the project from the perspective of their child's learning outcome and over 86% of the responses agreed that parent involvement in home-school learning activities had improved. No negative comments were written in the evaluations. The following quotes provide a typical example of the affirming responses

Love the new approach. Our family has greatly enjoyed the new style of homework, keep it up please, I now know more about what is happening in my child's schoolwork, the notes to parents section is really helpful for me and gives me background understanding about the worksheets.

I have learnt so much, we are talking lots, about (child's) work now. When can this happen in other subjects? Please!

(Child) loves the activity sheets and I love being involved with her. Even (child's) brother is involved in the discussions and activities we have worked on. We have all learnt so much together.

IN A NUTSHELL

Don't let a problem eclipse the vision (of spirituality in the home). However remember that the steps to actualizing the vision can vary enormously.

The challenge is to find the appropriate steps to address the difficulty.

Talk over a difficulty with others. Two heads are always better than one.

Take it to prayer.

Draw on the experience of others - e.g. teachers, parents, children, schools, CSO personnel.

Turn a complaint into a resource. Enlist the help of the complaining parent!

Don't let one bad experience spoil it for everyone else.

Stay focussed on the positives. (Sometimes a positive attitude, in itself, is the solution. The negatives will sort themselves out.)

Even tiny steps are powerful steps if they are taking us towards the vision.

Persevere!

Tips for Teachers

Trouble-shooting guide

No strategy is immune from obstacles and resistance. Here are some 'trigger points' to stimulate your ideas for devising constructive responses.

Parents are finding it burdensome.

- Are there too many questions or tasks on your homework sheet? Try simplifying the tasks or reducing the number.
- Remind parents that they are free to adapt the sheets.
- Tactfully talk with parents about over-commitment as a general social problem - do our children need to be doing all those extra-curricular activities? Life is busy, but we should never be too busy to share faith with our children.
- Your own best tip.....

Parents are confused.

- Check that the teaching staff are all communicating the same message. Understandably, it takes time to become familiar with a new procedure.
- Clarify the central message/task and keep re-stating it clearly and often (in conversation, in the weekly newsletter, in staff meetings, etc).
- Streamline your efforts so that the same home activity is the focus for all classes.
- Stay with a common theme for a while (e.g. a sacred site for Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, etc.) until parents get the hang of it.
- Simplify the homework tasks.
- Your own best tip.....

Little feedback forthcoming from children/parents.

- Seek out feedback on a one-to-one.
- Model the homework activity in class to help explain, demonstrate, enthuse.
- Refer to ideas in 'Communication Tips'.
- Your own best tip.....

Some parents resent being asked to share their faith.

- Is this the real issue or is there another agenda at work here? (Relationship tensions at home? Fear of being ignorant?) A listening ear may help to defuse objections.
- Remind them that the homework is flexible; they can approach it in their own way.
- Tactfully remind them that in choosing a Catholic school they chose a school committed to a Catholic ethos which includes a parent-school-parish partnership in communicating faith to the young.
- Your own best tip.....

(continued)

Tips for Teachers

Trouble-shooting guide

(continued from previous page)

The exercises presume too much Catholic knowledge which many of our parents simply don't have.

- Each homework sheet should contain enough information for any Catholic parent to be able to use it. Check the lefthand column for 'notes to parents' and add further notes or an accompanying 'Catholic fact sheet' if required. (Refer to Part IV for possible supplementary materials.)
- View this problem as a golden opportunity to catechise Catholic parents, and to reach out to parents who are not Catholic.
- Introduce a 'buddy system' where parents can help each other out.
- Your own best tip.....

The children who are not Catholics feel left out.

- Ascertain why. It may well be that the children are recognising the reality of a Catholic identity. Yes, through the sacraments Catholics do share a special bond!
- Don't 'water down' your approach in a way that would undermine the Catholic ethos of the classroom, but do help students/families who are not Catholic to adapt the tasks appropriately to their own faith tradition/beliefs. e.g. a quiet word; an added note to their homework sheet.
- Is the feeling of being 'left out' indicative of a religious awakening happening in this child/parent/family? Are they being drawn to the Catholic Church? Sensitively listen, respond, explain, witness... Perhaps invite them to consider becoming a Catholic.
- Your own best tip.....

Homes are too busy. There are many absent parents.

- Do what you can.
- Try to tailor the homework sheets accordingly. e.g. give families a more flexible task or a longer period to accomplish the task.
- Is it time to raise the problem of 'busyness' as a challenge to be addressed by your local church community? Raise it in the appropriate school-home-parish forums.
- Your own best tip.....

'Our family is already deeply religious, we don't need it.'

- Agree with them and praise them in their efforts. (No one is so religious that they can't benefit from a bit of encouragement!) Point out that their child can still join in classroom feedback about family faith practices.
- See their strength as a resource. Ask them for ideas for homework sheets.
- Ask them to support a parent who is less familiar with Catholic faith practices and who may need help/encouragement with the homework sheets.
- Suggest that they might like to vary their family rituals for a change - e.g. expose their children to the variety of prayers and spiritualities in the great Christian tradition.
- Your own best tip.....