



BUILD

Leader Guide



Faith and Family Life
Catholic Ministries

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AN INVITATION

You have been invited to accompany young families as they develop the human skills needed to more fruitfully receive the gift of faith. *Build* is a family faith experience designed for parents and young children, especially ages 3–5, that uses simple hands-on activities, conversation, music, and prayer to help nurture the human and spiritual foundations of faith. Through 12 at-home Experiences, families build with blocks, engage in child-centered conversations, sing songs, and pray together, creating opportunities for children to develop hope, independence, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Grounded in an understanding of early childhood development and Montessori’s concept of the “absorbent mind,” the program emphasizes sensory learning, practical activities, and meaningful relationships. Through 12 at-church Sessions parents and children will grow in community, belonging, and the skills needed to have successful child-centric conversations at home. By participating together, parents and children strengthen their bond while fostering curiosity, wonder, trust, gratitude, and an embodied experience of faith that is “caught before it is taught,” laying a strong foundation for lifelong faith development.

Early childhood, or pre-school age, is a definitive time for the discovery of religious reality, during which children learn from their parents and from the environment of life an attitude of openness and acceptance or of aversion and exclusion toward God. They also learn their first bits of knowledge about the faith: an initial discovery of the Father who is in heaven, good and provident, how to turn to him with the heart and with a gesture of affection and veneration; the names of Jesus and Mary and some of the accounts of the main moments in the life of the Lord Jesus; religious signs, symbols, and gestures. In this context one should not underestimate the value of putting the main feasts of the liturgical year to good use, for example by having families set up the crib in preparation for Christmas, which can allow the child to experience a form of catechesis through direct participation in the mystery of the incarnation. When from an early age the child is in contact, in the family or in the other surroundings in which it grows, with different aspects of the Christian life, he learns and internalizes an initial form of religious socialization in preparation for the forms that come later and for the development of the Christian moral conscience. Rather than catechesis in the proper sense, at this age it is a matter of first evangelization and proclamation of the faith in an eminently educational form, attentive to developing a sense of trust, of gratuitousness, of self-giving, of invocation and participation, as a human condition onto which is grafted the salvific power of the faith.

(Directory for Catechesis 239)

A FEW TIPS

- By reading and experiencing the content yourself, you will be best equipped to accompany this program. We recommend first becoming familiar with the at-home and at-church content before implementing it.
- Families with young children are not ordinarily engaged in faith formation structures. You can personally invite families that have baptized their children recently and use the after Mass Pop-Up to interface with these families.
- Try to begin with a Visit with each family before you start. You can also do this over the span of the program to connect with and more deeply embed the families into the community.
- Participants can be placed into small groups of 3-5 families or 6-7 individuals to share this journey with. Companions can help weave together these small groups into a small faith community.

AT-HOME CONTENT

The *Build Bag* contains a resource to guide families through 12 at-home Experiences. These Experiences will be most successful with children 3-5 years old. Each Experience is designed to take an average of 10-15 minutes.

In this period of development, a child unconsciously absorbs language, culture, order, and beauty through the senses. They experience rapid physical and language development, a strong drive for independence, and sensitivity to order. This developmental stage is characterized by Montessori's principle of the "absorbent mind," which refers to the young child's incredible ability to soak up everything from their environment. This stage also has a heavy focus on reality. Young children are constantly asking: "What is this world?" They're infinitely curious about the universe around them and less interested in abstraction, which become more important in middle childhood (ages 6-10). This is why our approach to this age group includes so many practical life activities and sensory materials. Young children are most interested in what they can see and touch. After all, this is how they learn! They want to pour water, build with blocks, sweep the floor, and prepare their own snacks. To them, it's not tedious; it's deeply fulfilling. From the moment they're born, children crave physical independence. They want to learn how to move their bodies, refine their senses, and control themselves. And to do that, they must be able to focus on and interact with their surroundings. Faith at this stage is embodied before it is articulated, it is caught before it is taught. A child does not need full comprehension to experience participation.

Each Experience begins with a hands-on activity of building something specific with the blocks provided in the bag. There is a drawing on the first page of each Experience to show the families what they will need to build. Playing with a child builds essential life skills and a stronger emotional bond. It also supports healthy brain development, teaches them how to regulate emotions, and improves their social abilities. Families will then use what they have built together to process and learn through intentional conversation. Sprinkled throughout the activities are questions for parents to discuss together with their child. The most effective faith conversations are child-centered rather than parent-centered, in which children are invited to ask questions and share openly, while parents listen, guide, and connect faith to everyday life. These conversations foster understanding, encourage curiosity, integrate knowledge, and strengthen both a child's faith and the relationship between parent and child. Parents are able to hear the thoughts, feelings, and questions their children may have as you journey together to become more like Jesus.

Each Experience also includes a song about the theme set to the tune of classic nursery rhymes. The lyrics can be found under the song section of each Experience. Teaching children through song accelerates language acquisition and enhances memory retention. Melodies and rhythms engage multiple areas of the developing brain simultaneously, transforming complex concepts into accessible, natural learning experiences. Parents can find the recordings of each song by scanning QR code or visiting the URL included in the Parent Guide. They can use the recordings to sing along during the Experience and at other times throughout the day, like during car rides.

Each Experience concludes with a simple prayer. The time of prayer will begin with taking 30 seconds in quiet to talk to Jesus in the silence of their hearts. Children are highly capable of silence in prayer, often possessing a natural aptitude for quiet wonder and contemplation. After the moment of quiet, they will conclude by praying the same prayer each time. Families are encouraged to commit this prayer to memory. Parents are also invited to consider placing their hand on each child's head or shoulder while they pray together. The warm touch of a parent can be very reassuring and can also serve as a sign of God's love for each of us. Simple experiences of love, trust, wonder, gratitude, prayer, and belonging are laying the foundation for future faith.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Experience	Theme	Human Skill	Faith Focus	Block Activity
1	Community	Belonging	God calls us into family, Church, and community	Build a house, church, and school
2	Goodness, Truth, and Beauty	Wonder	God is Creator	Build a creation tower
3	Love	Attachment and Charity	God loves us first	Build a bridge
4	Communication	Listening and Expression	Prayer is conversation with God	Line up blocks by size

5	Trust	Reliability	God is always trustworthy	Build two towers on different foundations
6	Balance	Self-Regulation	God desires ordered lives	Build a balance beam
7	Gratitude	Thankfulness	Every good gift comes from God	Build a path
8	Imagination	Creativity	God speaks through stories and invites us into his story	Build two stories from the Bible
9	Forgiveness	Mercy	Jesus forgives us and teaches us to forgive others	Build a wall and a cross
10	Compassion	Kindness	Jesus notices and cares for those who are hurting	Build a playground
11	Courage	Fortitude	God gives us strength to do what is right	Build a cave
12	Respect	Human Dignity	Every person is made in God's image	Build a treehouse

AT-CHURCH CONTENT FOR PARENTS

It is important to have parents gathered periodically throughout the *Build* process. The goal of gathering is to:

- Meet and hear from other parents on a similar journey. There is wisdom in any room of adults, especially parents!
- Grow in the knowledge and integration of a human skill on an adult level.
- Prepare them for the next at-home Experience with any tips, inspiration, or information that will support them.
- Find out what is going well and what they are struggling with in the Experiences at-home.
- Pray together - for each other and for their families.

This resource has been provided to support you in facilitating 12 Sessions held at-church throughout the *Build* experience that are designed to complement and enhance the at-home content. The Sessions include different content for parents and early childhood (3-5) aged children and are sold separately. Parents and their children will be separated for the first part of each Session. Each Session ends with a closing prayer for the family together. There is plenty of content to fill a 1 hour time frame.

Before Session 1 you will find instructions to host an after Mass Pop-Up to help you connect with families with young children. This can be used for a few Sundays leading up to the launch of *Build* to grow in relationship with and invite parents into the experience. Session 1 will conclude by introducing parents to the at-home content for Build. Once the children return you will walk them through their first at-home Experience together to help them grow in confidence and to see how easily they can facilitate it with their families. Due to this addition, the first Session will need an additional 15 minutes of time.

There are some things that need to be pulled together to help bring these Sessions to life. We have given you supply lists. We can not over emphasize the impact of simple but beautiful decor, great hospitality, and intimate prayerful spaces. We feel it is critical to set holy spaces to lead parents into deeper intimacy with Christ and themselves. Your attention to detail tells everyone this is important, we prepared for you!

Each Session is intentionally designed to help families move from gathering as a community to living their faith, by practically applying each concept at home. Every Session focuses on a key aspect of human formation and intentionally bridges it to a life of faith. Parents gather in small groups with others whose children are at a similar age, creating opportunities to share experiences, discuss challenges, and learn practical best practices from one another. *Build* provides a meaningful environment for supporting young parents during a season when they are actively seeking guidance, encouragement, and authentic community.

Sessions begin with an opening gathering that explains the theme and fosters a welcoming environment where every family feels known and valued. The opening prayer helps participants become aware of God's presence and prepares their hearts to receive him. During the check-in, parents reflect on everyday experiences, creating a natural bridge between daily life and the Session's theme. The teaching then introduces the topic in an engaging and practical way, while the witness demonstrates how the principles being discussed can be lived out in everyday family life, making the Gospel tangible and relatable. The teaching discussion provides parents with an opportunity to process what they have heard, ask questions, and encourage one another as they consider how to apply the ideas in their own homes. Finally, the closing prayer reunites parents and children, inviting them to immediately begin a conversation about what they have learned, pray with one another, and prepare to continue the conversation through the at-home Experience.

As a Church we are just beginning the journey of calling parents into the opportunity of forming their children and themselves more deeply. We realize parents are in all different places and stages in their own faith journeys. We have written Sessions we feel best take into account today's parents. The majority of the parents we encounter have very little theological background, but have the wisdom of their own lives to reflect on. We have found that when given helpful prompts and time to process, they do very well in sharing with each other. It is our hope that these Sessions meet them where they are at and slowly lead them into something more. Feel free to scale the material up or down. It is most important that families leave with a positive experience of Church and community, feeling like they have a place in it.

ACCOMPANIMENT TEAM NEEDS

We realize each of our directors have different gifts; some are wonderful teachers, some are storytellers, others are better facilitating small groups, some are gifted in finding volunteers to present material. Use your strengths to lead the Sessions, and look for

others who can take the pieces you are not as confident in. It takes a team! Invest in time with your accompaniment team. Having a strong team of people committed to the same mission helps everyone. Offer time to get to know one another, provide skills training, and spend time in prayer together. We want our parents to feel like they are being invited into a group that has been preparing for them and enjoys each other. Our *Beside* resources can be helpful in forming and growing your accompaniment team.

Facilitator:

- Choosing a facilitator to lead your Sessions as an MC from the front is an important decision. This person will introduce and weave together the content for each Session. This person should be warm, engaging, confident, and it helps if they have a good sense of humor. This person needs to be open and non-judgmental. It will be their voice that will help the group grow together.

Companions:

- We recommend placing a companion in each small group if possible. Make sure companions feel comfortable with the flow of each Session. It is strongly suggested to have them walk through a sample Session together. Leave time at the end of each Session with the companions to evaluate the experience. To make this a great experience for all we must be checking in regularly, making any needed changes as soon as possible. The companions should be made aware of the following:
 - Make sure each group member has the chance to participate.
 - Do not allow any group member to control the sharing.
 - Do not make anyone feel forced to share. Parents can decide to “pass.”
 - Make sure all parents feel respected and listened to. Having cell phones put away will help with this.
 - Companions will set the tone for the sharing. If they want a deeper, more thoughtful response from parents, they will need to model that in their own sharing. The group will usually follow their lead.
 - Do not monopolize the sharing. It works well if companions begin the sharing and then pass it on to the other members.
 - Companions should be listening to all parent responses, and be ready to ask follow up questions that help expand parent’s answers. It is important that they remember information discussed and check in with parents in future Sessions: “How is your sick mother doing?”, “How was your vacation time with your family that you were looking forward to?”.
 - Each group sharing time is preempted by a journaling and reflection time for processing. This should help the parents be prepared to share. No one likes to be put on the spot.

- If anything is ever discussed in small group time that is inappropriate or alarming it should be brought to the attention of the Director.

Hospitality:

- Hospitality is about much more than setting out cookies and water bottles. Great hospitality is the root for the growth that will take place. Having a team that interacts well together, and welcomes you into their community, will help the families get comfortable almost immediately. This will produce greater engagement in the Sessions. This type of hospitality requires that facilitators and companions become friendly with the families from the moment they arrive. It includes asking good questions, being vulnerable, and helping everyone feel seen.
- How the room “feels” is also an important part of the hospitality recipe. Covered tables, simple centerpieces, and the glow of a few candles will encourage the parents to lean into the conversation, like a great dinner party. Take the time to set the room in advance, so that families walk into a space that feels prepared for them. A prayer table up front with changing images each Session can also be a small voice speaking into the room. Find creative people in your community who have a heart for families and let them loose to work their magic.

Intercessors:

- Having intentional intercessors who are praying for your families and your ministry is an important step to staying on mission. Prayer always needs to be integral to the work we do. People in your parish community who take the time to talk with Jesus often and who understand the struggles and difficulties facing families are perfect to help in this role. These prayer warriors can be organized as a group, or can individually come before God for the needs of the parish families each day.

AT-CHURCH FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

It is important to have children gathered periodically throughout the *Build* process. The goal of gathering is to:

- To prepare them for the at-home Experiences by learning songs, nurturing imagination, and working with blocks.
- To have a positive experience with other children at-church.
- To pray together - for each other and for their families.

This resource has been provided to support you in facilitating 12 Sessions held at-church throughout the *Build* experience that are designed to complement and enhance the at-home content. The Sessions include different content for parents and early childhood (3-5) aged children and are sold separately. Parents and their children will be separated for the first part of each Session. Each Session ends with a closing prayer for the family together. There is plenty of content to fill a 1 hour time frame.

Session 1 will conclude by introducing parents to the at-home content for Build. Once the children return the parent facilitator will walk them through their first at-home Experience together to help them grow in confidence and to see how easily they can facilitate it with their families. Due to this addition, the first Session will need an additional 15 minutes of time.

There are some things that need to be pulled together to help bring these Sessions to life. We have given you supply lists. We have also suggested ways to set the environment. We feel it is critical to set holy spaces to lead children into deeper intimacy with Christ and themselves. We can not over emphasize the impact of simple but beautiful decor, great hospitality, and intimate prayerful spaces. Your attention to detail tells everyone this is important, we prepared for you!

It would be ideal if you can host the Sessions in a nursery or play room as there will be some free play time at the beginning and end of each Session. As the children arrive they can begin to work on the coloring sheet for the Session or engage in free play time if the room supports that. Once everyone arrives you will begin with a gathering in which you will welcome the children with a song. Next there will be an opening prayer where you will help the children talk with Jesus during a time of silence. Children are highly capable of silence in prayer, often possessing a natural aptitude for quiet wonder and

contemplation. You will then lead the Session song about the theme set to the tune of classic nursery rhymes. The lyrics are provided if you wish to lead it acapella or you may use the recorded song or lyric video linked in each Session. Teaching children through song accelerates language acquisition and enhances memory retention. Melodies and rhythms engage multiple areas of the developing brain simultaneously, transforming complex concepts into accessible, natural learning experiences. The teaching will center around a teaching table with blocks set-up before the children arrive. Images for what needs to be set-up can be found under the set-up section of each Session. You will lead them through the teaching that includes opportunities for intentional conversation. Sprinkled throughout the teaching you will find questions for you to discuss together with the children. The most effective faith conversations are child-centered, in which children are invited to ask questions and share openly, while catechists listen, guide, and connect faith to everyday life. These conversations foster understanding, encourage curiosity, integrate knowledge, and strengthen a child's faith. Next there will be a time for free play with the blocks, time to finish their coloring sheet, and an opportunity to revisit the Session song. Before rejoining the parents for the closing prayer, there is a transition time to clean up the room with the help of the children and take them to the bathroom as needed. Be sure to coordinate with the parent facilitator to bring back the children to the parent space at the appropriate time.

The purpose of the Sessions is to prepare the children to have a successful and meaningful intentional faith conversation at-home with their parents through a family Experience. The main teaching is the responsibility of the parents as the primary educators of the faith. What happens at-church is orientated toward the support of this. The at-home content is nearly identical to the Session material, but adapted for use at home. It is most important that families leave with a positive experience of Church and community, feeling like they have a place in it.

ACCOMPANIMENT TEAM NEEDS

We realize each of our directors have different gifts; some are wonderful teachers, some are storytellers, others are better facilitating small groups, some are gifted in finding volunteers to present material. Use your strengths to lead the Sessions, and look for others who can take the pieces you are not as confident in. It takes a team! Invest in time with your accompaniment team. Having a strong team of people committed to the same mission helps everyone. Offer time to get to know one another, provide skills training, and spend time in prayer together. We want our parents to feel like they are being invited into a group that has been preparing for them and enjoys each other. Our *Beside* resources can be helpful in forming and growing your accompaniment team.

Catechist:

- Catechists will be leading and guiding the children in their Sessions. This will include singing songs, building blocks, having conversations with a small group, managing group dynamics, and providing a safe trusted space for the children to feel a part of. The catechists should be made aware of the following:
 - How you lead, your encouragement and your undivided presence, will be your greatest gift.
 - You may have other helpers joining you, including older children. Make sure they understand the Sessions ahead of time and what you expect from them. This will ensure a better experience for all.
 - You will be assigned a group of children to journey with. You will be the glue that holds the small group together. Your leadership will be important as you are called to help facilitate conversations, share the passion you have for your faith, and witness through your own life experiences with the children.

Hospitality:

- Hospitality is about much more than setting out cookies and water bottles. Great hospitality is the root for the growth that will take place. Having a team that interacts well together, and welcomes you into their community, will help the families get comfortable almost immediately. This will produce greater engagement in the Sessions. This type of hospitality requires that facilitators and companions become friendly with the families from the moment they arrive. It includes asking good questions, being vulnerable, and helping everyone feel seen.
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