What are some practical ways we can allow young children to start praying?

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Remember what Jesus’s disciples asked him?  “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Those are profound words.  All of us need to be taught by Christ and by the Church how to pray.  And parents, in turn, teach their children how to pray. **We are to introduce our children to prayer, to the way that they approach the living God.**

1. It is hard to teach children to pray if we are not praying ourselves.  Get your family into the habit of gathering in the icon corner twice a day for morning prayers and evening prayers. Family prayer time may feel fruitless and lead to frustration when toddlers try to run away, babies cry, and young children grow restless. However, I want to encourage you to keep it up. Go to the icon corner whether you feel like it or not. Shorten the prayer if you’d like. But pray. Together. Your children are watching, listening, and absorbing far more than you may think.
2. During the Divine Liturgy either in church or at home via livestream point out familiar prayers.  Say, “We’re singing (or saying) ‘Lord have mercy’ now.  Can you sing along?”  Or, “It’s time for the Lord’s Prayer.  Let’s pray this together.”  As children get older, have them follow along in your liturgy book.
3. In the Eastern Church, one of the simplest yet most profound prayer is the Jesus Prayer “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”*Giving the children this foundational prayer at an early age, and encouraging them to pray it daily, introduces them to the ideas of mercy, repentance, forgiveness, and intercession. Pray this prayer with them even if they can only pronounce some of the words, but pray.
4. Try to include the Lord’s Prayer every time you have family prayers. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, this is what he taught them. As children get older, talk to them about the meaning of the phrases.  Explore the ideas with them. “What do you think it means when we say, ‘Thy will be done’?” Or, “Why do we ask God to give us our daily bread?” If your church sings the Lord’s Prayer, do so at home.  Music helps children (and adults) remember.  In the wisdom of the Church, our entire Liturgy is sung causing the words to penetrate our consciousness and infuse our very beings.
5. Children love to imitate their parents, so be an example of prayer that your children can imitate.  If you are driving down the road and see an accident, pray out loud, “Lord have mercy.  Keep your servants safe and help the doctors and other medical workers that will come to help.”  If you are taking a walk on a gorgeous summer day, you can make the sign of the cross and pray, “Father, thank you for creating all of this beauty.” Encourage the children to say grace before meals, praying the Lord’s Prayer or any other prayer that your have taught them. Incorporate prayer naturally into your everyday lives.

Above all, in order to teach our children to pray, we must ourselves be a student of prayer.  St. John Chrysostom said, “For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mold of their parents’ temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for the same ends.”