

What Do Children Understand About Sin?

In the early years of our children's lives, parents struggle to help them learn the difference between right and wrong. Later, as children approach the age for first Reconciliation, the time comes to speak with them about sin.

When we speak about sin with our children, we first need to clarify one important issue: All that is wrong is not necessarily sinful. It is wrong for children to neglect to do their homework or their chores, but such neglectful behavior is seldom sinful. However aggravating these decisions may be, parents need to be careful not to speak of these actions as sins. For the most part, these wrong behaviors of childhood are simply part of the process of becoming a responsible person.

Likewise, accidents and mistakes are not sins. It is not uncommon for young children to confuse their accidents and mistakes with sinful behavior. Therefore, parents need to help children realize that sin is a deliberate act to choose something that we know is wrong. A mistake or an accident, even when it has harmful consequences, is not a sin.

Sin is something entirely apart from the petty wrongdoings and annoying mistakes that occur in the day-to-day life of childhood. It is good to remember that sin is always a *deliberate* action.

In order for an action to be sinful there are four requirements:

1. It must be a sin.
2. You must know it is a sin.
3. You must stop, think, and decide to commit the sin. This is what we often refer to as *adequate reflection*.
4. You must act to commit the sin; in other words, make a deliberate choice to sin.

These four conditions are required for sin, whether you are an adult or a child.

Young children may also have difficulty recognizing what qualifies a particular sin as serious. Primary grade children usually base their judgment of serious sin on two things: First, if the sinful action involves a large quantity or volume of something, a child will think the sin qualifies as serious. Second, the child takes a cue from the parent's reaction. If a parent gets very angry or upset over something, the child logically concludes that it must be serious. Fortunately, as children grow older, they develop a more appropriate yardstick for measuring the seriousness of sins.