

Choosing godparents

Recently I hosted a discussion in this parish about godparents. Nearly everyone who was a godparent felt that they were fulfilling the role poorly. We didn't really know what we were meant to be doing, and, unsurprisingly therefore, had little confidence we were doing it well. Perhaps this is because the role of godparent is changing such a lot in our society today, at the same time as there are enormous changes in what it is to be a family. With children coming along later in life, with re-marriage and stepchildren more and more common, with some families having to move house more frequently or living in other countries, it can be hard to form close bonds. So I offer these reflections in the hope that they will be helpful as you are choosing godparents.

These are some of the things that others see as key to the role of godparent. No-one can be expected to fulfil all of these; and you might disagree with some. It would be delightful to hear from you with your ideas so that I can improve and add to this list.

1 Stay in touch with your godchild.

Being present at birthday parties, Easter or Christmas can be important at a young age. Even more important is to keep this relationship going. There is no need to finish the special bond when a godchild gets confirmed, passes his/her driving test or reaches 21 years old. I've heard many stories of there being a special intimacy with a godparent after 25 years or more.

2 Offer gifts that are different.

One godmother told me that she sent an Advent Calendar (with chocolate, of course) to her godson every year. When the godson was 25 years old, she said 'perhaps it was time to stop'. The godson was horrified; Advent Calendars (in his mind) always came from godmothers and he wanted that to continue. Another person said that he always sends an Easter card rather than a birthday card – or, why not, a card on the anniversary of their baptism? Another did hardly anything for 18 years, but then bought his goddaughter a ticket for a Ball while she was at College, each year, for three years. Godparents are not substitute parents: be imaginative and distinctive.

3 Be around in moments of crisis.

If ill-health strikes, or moving home, or a family bereavement, it can be enormously helpful (both to the godchild and to the family generally) to have another adult around. You will bring sympathy, strength, and a slight detachment that may make the situation much calmer. Some parents choose godparents to be legal guardians as well, though the two roles are distinct. Yet it is reassuring to know as a child that you have another adult who is committed to you, even if tragedy strikes at home. Without being morbid, a godparent can convey this with words or presents in advance: many will know the story "Footprints", or be familiar with the image in the Old Testament where God is described as carrying us even through the desert, and bearing us up even in times of drought.

4 Support the parents.

As a godparent, you are undertaking promises on behalf of a godchild, but it is always helpful to recognise that you have a moral and spiritual connection with the parents as well. Especially when children are young, you can love your godchild by taking care of the parents: offer a meal, a holiday, or some babysitting. But actually this is as true (though your support may be done differently) as the children become teenagers, and then when they leave home, and so on.

5 Pray.

Many people feel that they don't know how to pray properly, yet actually do it at home regularly for those they love. Pray for your godchild month by month. What does that involve? It includes thinking of them, holding them clearly in your mind's eye, seeing what is good about them and thanking God for that. Most English people find it hard to talk about their religion. This suggestion is: don't talk about it, just do it! Pray for your godchild. And, maybe, in 15 years' time you can tell them this is what you have been doing. I am absolutely sure that that will be well-received.

6 Family members.

Some parents specifically like to choose family members as godparents, brothers, or aunts or cousins. Others like to do the opposite. There is no right way of approaching this, but it is worth talking about the advantage of each approach.

7 Explore expectations.

Parents can help by having a conversation at the outset about what is expected on each side. It's so much easier for all to feel fulfilled if everyone knows what is expected. One person told me that they made sure the godparents of her son all knew each other. They can be even more supportive if there is a good link between godparents. I often joke at baptisms about one godparent being 'the rich one', one 'the spiritual one' and one 'the kind one' ... but I am making the point that we can best do this together.

In our discussions what became clear to us all was how important the link between godparent and godchild can be. It is an honour to be invited to undertake this role. It is a gift to be connected with a young person in (potentially) such an intimate way. We hope that you will make the most of this moment of choosing godparents.

With our prayers and good wishes

Robert Cotton and the parish of Holy Trinity & St Mary.

PS This letter is available on our website at www.holytrinityguildford.org.uk, and you can send or copy another. We would be pleased to hear your stories or comments by email to rector@holytrinityguildford.org.uk