

THE NEW Family RETREAT



A DIFFERENT KIND OF RETREAT LETS PARENTS AND KIDS COME TOGETHER TO REFLECT ON FAMILY AND SPIRITUAL VALUES—AND SPEND TIME PLAYING ON THE BEACH.

Jessica Sroczynski stands in front of a Victorian cottage, no more than a hop, skip, and a jump from the ocean at Cape May Point, New Jersey. For a moment, it looks like the 28-year-old is going to grab a sand bucket and shovel, and hustle down to the beach to play, but today she's busy talking about her job as program director of the Cape May Marianists Family Retreat Center. It is her task to help the Roman Catholic Marianist brotherhood strengthen families and help parents transmit spiritual values to their kids through the center's activities.

"You don't have to be of any particular faith to come to a family retreat," she says. All that's needed is an openness to God, the willingness to reconnect with one's family—and the energy to build a lot of sand castles.

Finding time to hang out as a family, let alone talk about deeply held beliefs, is downright tough, but hectic schedules may be precisely why an increasing number of families are heading for the mountains or the beach to attend spiritually-based family retreats.

Family retreats not only help strengthen family bonds, they provide a supportive community of families who share similar spiritual values, and help parents grow in their own faith while providing their kids an opportunity to build theirs. "We create an intentional community," explains Cape May Retreat Center director Anthony Fucci.

BY ELLEN MICHAUD

WHERE TO FIND A FAMILY RETREAT

There are hundreds of family retreats in the United States, spanning almost all faiths and denominations. There are also hundreds of nondenominational or meditative retreat centers with a spiritual but not a religious orientation. Here are some to get you started. For more information, log on to www.findthedivine.com, and review over 1,200 retreat centers from around the country.



- Brandeis-Bardin Institute
Brandeis, California
805/582-4450
www.brandeis-bardin.org
Focus: Jewish
- Joni and Friends Family Retreats
California and other states
818/707-5664
www.joniandfriends.org
Focus: Nondenominational Christian; families affected by disability
- Luther Heights Bible Camp
Shoshone, Idaho
www.lutherheights.org
Focus: Christian (Evangelical Lutheran)
- Muslim Youth Camp
California
650/967-9000
www.muslimyouthcamp.org
Focus: Muslim
- Camp Lutherhaven
Albion, Indiana
260/636-7101
www.lutherhaven.org
Focus: Christian (Lutheran)
- UAHC Greene Family Camp
Bruceville, Texas
254/859-5411
www.greene.org
Focus: Jewish
- Cape May Marianists Family Retreat Center
Cape May, New Jersey
609/884-3829
www.capemaymarianists.org
Focus: Nondenominational Christian
- Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, New York
845/266-4444
www.eomega.org
Focus: Meditation and yoga
- Camp Maria Retreat Center
Leonardtown, Maryland
301/475-8330
<http://users.erols.com/campmaria>
Focus: Christian (Roman Catholic)
- Pococo Plateau Retreat Center
Cresco, Pennsylvania
570/676-3665
www.pocconoplateau.org
Focus: Christian (Methodist)

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For a weekend or a week, families pray together, sing together, and join in family-centered activities, such as plays or skits to improve communication, facilitate forgiveness, and nurture commitment.

A FAMILY IN CRISIS

Family retreats aren't only about strengthening bonds; they're also about healing from the wounds of life. When Patty Pirog from Clifton Park, New York, first attended a retreat at Cape May with her two daughters, she was 37 years old and a single parent. The girls—Eden, then aged 3, and Marissa, aged 5—had gone to a backyard party with friends. Somehow during the party, a hotdog stand filled with scalding water was knocked over on top of Eden. She suffered second and third degree burns over 40 percent of her body.

Patty, who had never been inside a church, found herself reaching out to a higher power. "I prayed with no holds barred," Patty says. Eden slowly found her way back to health and Patty found herself with an invitation to a Cape May retreat. When Eden was strong enough, the family took this step toward recovery.

"It was wonderful," Patty says. "It had all the spiritual components, with genuine faith and genuine people." Eden, who is now 11, messages her retreat friends nearly every day, and Marissa, now 14, has just begun attending weekend retreats on her own with other teens.

WHY RETREATS WORK

"Family retreats hit on a lot of levels," says Father Thomas Hoar, director of the St. Edmund's Retreat Center on Enders Island, just off the Connecticut coast. "They encourage the development of a child's faith and spiritual values in three ways: One is by bringing families together in a setting in which kids see their parents involved in religious stuff and having fun. A second is by hanging out with peers who share their spiritual values. A third is by seeing other families who value their faith and have integrated it into the family's life."

The retreat experience is particularly meaningful for kids who do not often experience groups of people who share their parents' spiritual values. One of the deepest experiences Harvard graduate student Asifa Quraishi had as a teenager was hearing the call to prayer at a Muslim family retreat in California.

"For families who are the only Muslim family in a community," Asifa says, "coming together and hearing the call to prayer when you wake up in the morning or walk together under the stars at night is a remarkable experience." That sense of coming together, regardless of religion, is what retreats are all about. ☺