

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

Basic Training: Structure, Objectives, Parenting Gifts, Legacy

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I. Biblical References

Eph 6:4 ~ And now a word to you parents. Don't keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the *loving discipline* the Lord himself approves, with suggestions and godly advice. TLB

Prov 20:7 ~ The godly walk with integrity; blessed are their children after them. NLT

Prov 1:7 ~ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. NIV

II. Healthy Family Structure

Healthy families begin with two components: 1) A solid spiritual base, and 2) a solid family structure. Spiritual formation in children is addressed in the chapter by that title (see www.stlfamilyinstitute.com, *Spiritual Formation In Children*). The first section in this chapter focuses upon helping parents understand what a healthy family system structure looks like, and how it functions.

In its most simple form, a healthy family structure exhibits the following three-level hierarchy:

Parents
Kids
Everyone Else

Let's develop these components one at a time.

Parents: This part of the family system is called the “Executive Subsystem.” There’s room for only two people in this subsystem: Dad And Mom. If the family is a single-parent family and the child’s other parent is not involved at all with the family, then there’s only one person in this slot: The Single Parent.

This sounds so simple, but it’s honestly not simple at all. It’s not simple because others constantly try to squeeze their way into the “Executive Subsystem.” Kids do it all the time, by trying to tell Dad and Mom how things ought to be run in the family. In-laws frequently attempt to butt in, telling Dad and Mom how to raise their kids. Grandparents are often known to stick their heads in and give their directions.

But it’s important to keep this subsystem clear of external pressures. Dad and Mom can listen to others’ input, but the final decision must always be theirs, because they are the “Executive Subsystem.” If kids, or in-laws, or grandparents, or anyone else tries to exert too much presence or pressure, then Dad and Mom, or The Single Parent, need to draw a firm boundary.

If the child’s parents are divorced, and if the ex-spouse is involved in the child’s life on anything like a regular basis, then in the best of all worlds, both spouses will occasionally collaborate as to what’s best for their child. They’ll set goals, make rules, and will support one another’s parenting. However, more often than not divorce just makes the parents’ relationships with one another worse than they were during marriage. When this happens, the kids are often confused as to who’s in charge, or whose rules they have to follow. Complicating this is “divorce guilt,” which often makes a parent feel that they must give in to their child’s every whim, because “the child has already suffered enough.” This is a mistake. Kids need boundaries and rules.

It’s also important to note that if there is tension between Mom and Dad, or if Dad and Mom disagree on some point of child-rearing, then kids will almost always sense the crack and try to squeeze in to the “Executive Subsystem.” When this happens, “triangles” are formed as kids side with the parent of their choice, against the other parent. This is unhealthy for both parents and kids, and the only ones who can stop it happening are Dad and Mom. They stop it, by thickening the walls around the “Executive Subsystem.”

Kids: The next subsystem is the “Children’s Subsystem.” It may sound silly to say, but the only people allowed in this subsystem, are the family’s kids. Mom and Dad have authority over this system, but they are not part of it. Healthy families are not democracies, in which everyone gets an equal vote. Healthy families are benevolent dictatorships, in which those at the top love, protect and encourage the children, but who have veto power, and set the family’s agenda. During the years of child-raising, it’s more important for parents to be parents, than it is for them to be “best friends” with their kids. Soon enough the kids grow into adults, and then the relationship between parent and child will change to a more peer-like relationship.

One can usually tell a lot about the quality of Mom's and Dad's relationship with one another, by observing the functioning of the kids in the "Children's Subsystem." If there's a lot of bickering, triangling and power conflicts, the place to first look for answers is in the relationship between Dad and Mom, because what happens at the top of the system usually leaks down into the rest of the system. All kids are born lawyers. They naturally know how to argue a point, and bring pressure in a way, that gets what they want. This being so, once again we state: Healthy families are not democracies. Dads and Moms have a responsibility to oversee, guide, and direct the functioning of the "Children's Subsystem."

Everyone Else: The third subsystem incorporates everyone else in the rest of the world. Certainly, one may prioritize the input given by one's own parents (the children's grand-parents), or one's in-laws. But even these people are outside the boundaries of the Executive and Children's Subsystems. The buck doesn't stop with Grandpa Jack, or Uncle George, or In-law Sally. The buck stops with Dad and Mom.

As a general rule of thumb, if grand-parents or in-laws of any stripe try too diligently to exert their influence in the family system, it is the responsibility of one of the people in the Executive Subsystem, to go to their own family member, and gently but firmly draw a boundary. For example, if Mom's sister, or her mother, begin having "Executive" authority within the family system, then it is Mom's responsibility to go to them and draw a boundary. If Dad's grand-mother starts telling Mom how to do things, then Dad needs to go to his grandma and draw a line. The point is, in most situations it's best for each parent to deal with their own extended family when it comes time to draw boundaries. And remember, nobody but Dad and Mom are allowed in the Executive Subsystem.

As far as "Everyone Else" is concerned, let's add another category: "**Everything** Else." This is to say, **Nobody**, and **Nothing Else**, are allowed into the Executive Subsystem. And Nobody, and Nothing Else, are allowed to crowd into the family in a manner that someone in the family gets crowded out or pushed aside. Things that often try to crowd into family systems include parental career pressures, athletics (e.g., Dad's golf; Mom's tennis; kids' sporting teams), friends, church activities, clubs, etc.

Many of these outside activities can enhance and strengthen the family system. Dad's career may provide for a comfortable home. Athletics may give family members a fun outlet and positive source of identity. Church can be very helpful in providing strength and guidance. Friends can add much to the qualities of life. However, in a healthy family there are two subsystems: 1) The Executive Subsystem; and 2) The Children's Subsystem. And Everyone else, and Everything else, are outside the Family System.

(For a more comprehensive understanding of this paradigm, go to the Marriage section of this course and read the chapter dealing with "Healthy Family Structure.")

Ten Minute Reflection

Draw a large circle. Inside that circle draw two smaller circles ~ one on top, one on the bottom ~ that fill the large circle. In the top inside circle write, “Executive Subsystem.” In the bottom inside circle write, “Children’s Subsystem.” Then share with each other, stories that come from your own childhood regarding either outsiders crowding into the family system, or else one of the children trying to step up into the Executive Subsystem.

III. Four Major Parenting Objectives

The task of parenting is complex and demanding. It would be so much easier if there were one single, all-encompassing parenting book that held all the answers. Among the challenges of parenthood three major objectives emerge. Each of these represents a building block upon which subsequent steps will be built.

A. Attachment

The first critical task of parenting is helping a child form a meaningful attachment to the parents. It begins with bonding, but is a far larger discussion than bonding. A strong sense of attachment and personal value is an essential building block whose consequences often last a lifetime. The field of psychology provides numerous theories and interventions aimed at helping people cope with and recover from growing up in families where there was little or no sense of attachment.

Attachment is basic to self-identity. We understand who we are through our attachment to people we love. Next time you have a chance, watch how a little boy patterns after his father. Observe how a little girl patterns after her mother. Children mimic the significant adults in their lives as they identify with them. That’s how children gain a sense of who they are. People whose early attachment needs are not adequately met often tend to enter life with coping methods aimed at gaining attachment. Attachment hunger is one of the primary drivers behind promiscuity. It is also a driver behind over-achievement, as an attachment hungry person attempts to connect with others through over-the-top performance. One can frequently observe the attachment level of children through the way they play with others, and how they interact with adults. More often than not, kids who demand a great deal of attention are attachment hungry. Very often, kids who are sexually abused are the attachment hungry ones which perpetrators somehow identify.

Attachment is basic to self-esteem. We gain a sense of our value and significance in life through our attachments. A child who feels ignored during his/her growing up years will likely struggle with what psychologists call “abandonment issues,” or “rejection issues.” Rejection and abandonment issues reflect the sense in a person that they were unloved by a significant person who ought to have loved them ~ unprotected by a significant person who ought to have protected them ~ uncared for by someone who should have cared for them. Rejection and abandonment issues are often directly linked to a child’s lack of self-esteem resulting from being left in a relational vacuum.

And it's not only rejection or abandonment that cause downlink problems in children. Anxious attachments cause problems too. How are these relationships formed? A few examples may help. In one case, a mother would hide in closets, so when her child came home from school, the child couldn't find the mother and would become terrified that mother had left. In another situation, a mother would leave the family, unannounced, for a few days. The children would fear she would never return. In other situations, parents may choose to demean and scream at their children rather than talk with them, thereby elevating the anxiety in the relationship. A child who grows up with generalized anxious attachments with mother and/or father, is prone to forming anxious attachments with their spouse.

In one case a child's mother died and her dad was a dairy farmer, which meant he was up at 4:30 a.m and working with cows and farm-related demands until 9:30 p.m. when he fell into bed exhausted. In another case a child's father was a very busy professional and took his wife along to many professional functions, thereby leaving the child with babysitters, or with other families who'd take care of the child for a week at a time. Another child's mom was an alcoholic, frequently too drunk to care for the child. Another child's parents divorced and the nasty battle that followed left the child in an emotional vacuum.

Children who grow up "attachment hungry" or "attachment anxious," often struggle with self-esteem issues for decades. Indeed, attachment issues can be some of the most difficult challenges in therapy.

Attachment is basic to values formation. If one has little sense of attachment to others whom they love, then there is little reason to value the personhood of others. Children form values through having a caring attachment with others. Within this relationship children learn to care about the values and feelings of others. The "sociopathic" personality ~ the person who has no feelings, and no value for the rights, feelings and property of others ~ is almost always a kid who has little or no significant emotional attachment to adults. This is the kid who can rob or assault someone, with no feelings or concern for what happens to the other person.

Values are always tied to significant relationships. If a child grows up with little or no meaningful attachment within significant relationships, then that child will likely struggle with values formation. The child may give a wooden obedience to rules if someone is looking, but in their heart they have little reason to value anything other than their own desires. Teenage gangs are often filled with kids who have little sense of attachment outside the brotherhood of violence. To these kids, the suffering of others during a crime is meaningless. There is a strong correlation between a child's own sense of attachment, and that child's value for the lives and worth of others. All kids need a strong sense of being attached, loved, valued, and warmly connected.

B. Boundaries

Definition/examples: Boundaries are basically limits within which a person is called to live. For example, speed limits represent boundaries. Credit cards have upper limits, which are a form of boundaries. When a mother tells her daughter to be a good girl on a date, she's implying the boundaries of sexual purity. When a person goes fishing or hunting, the legal limit of game allowed is a boundary. When a sign says, "No skateboarding or roller-blading," that's a boundary. The actual amount of money one has in a checking account, is a boundary beyond which they'd better not spend.

Much of childhood and adolescence involves learning about boundaries, as parent says, "No, you may not pound your metal toy truck on the piano," or "Yes, you have to eat your peas." Or, "No, you may not drive the car to Birmingham this weekend," or "Yes, you must do your homework before playing tennis."

Testing: All children test boundaries. It's a normal part of growing up. So when mom says, "You may not pound your metal toy truck on the piano," a normal, healthy child's mind asks, "Why not," and, "If I do anyway, what will happen?" The testing changes form when kids become teenagers. All teenagers are born lawyers. They can argue from fifteen different sides on any issue. Here are some common adolescent arguments against boundaries:

- That's old fashioned ~ kids don't do that any more.
- You're too old to remember what it was like being a kid.
- You don't know me any more.
- You don't love me if you....
- None of my friends have to
- Or, conversely, all of my friends are allowed to....
- I have to be home by when!?!?
- You expect too much of me.
- There's no way I can carry a 3.0 and play sports as well.
- You want me to study how many hours a day?!?!?
- Come on, lighten up ~ you're so rigid.
- Nothing bad is going to happen ~ you worry too much.
- You can't make me do this ~ or make me not do this....

Setting boundaries: Until they're obviously old enough to do it well, kids should not set their own boundaries. In fact, one of the basic questions of all parenting is, "Who's in charge here?" And the correct answer to this question ought to be, "Mom and dad are in charge here." One of the prerogatives of being in charge, is that you set the values and the boundaries.

Homes in which children are allowed to set their own boundaries before they are mature enough to do the job well, are usually chaotic homes with underperforming children. This is so because until a child learns the difference between freedom and anarchy, and between the gratification of success versus the pleasures of sloth, they're not ready to set

their own immaturity will lead them to underperformance and failure. Here are five examples.

First example: Three-year-old Billy “doesn’t want” to go to bed at 7:00. He wants to stay up until 10:30 p.m. He says he “can’t sleep,” and has learned that if he screams long enough, the door will open and he’ll be allowed to stay up later. So it’s no surprise that Billy is a crabby little brat. He’s not getting enough sleep. And worst of all, he’s learned that if he puts up a big enough fight, his parents will back down. (That’s a dangerous lesson for any child to learn.) Children need more sleep because their bodies are growing. When our children were between ages 2 and 10, they generally went to bed at 7:00, or perhaps 7:30 p.m. Once in junior high, they could stay up until 8:30 or 9:00. In high school they went to bed by themselves, by 9:30 or 10:00 p.m. They’d waken anywhere between 6:00 and 7:00 a.m., which showed us they needed all that sleep. Our boundaries helped them grow healthy bodies and healthy minds. By contrast, many of their peers were staying up until 10:30 p.m. and coming to school dog tired. Three-year-old Billy needs some firm boundaries, and more sleep than he’s getting.

Second example: In this home the adolescent child set the boundaries. He cleaned his room if he wanted to (which was seldom). He went to school if he felt like it. He ate whenever he wished rather than when the rest of his family was eating. He hung out with whatever kids he chose, no questions asked. And he watched whatever TV, movies, etc. he wished. If his parents ever questioned him, he put up a fuss and the parents backed down. What sort of life success would you expect of kids from this home? You’re probably not surprised to learn that he “accidentally shot” and killed a high school friend, did drugs, sold drugs from his home, and got so far afoul of the law that he had to flee to Mexico to stay out of jail. Boundaries help set up success.

Third example: When my grandson Jake was five years, he started kindergarten. On the eve of his first day at school, while he was at the supper table, he asked how much longer he had to go to school. It was an innocent question. After the laughter ended, his sister Callie who is two years older, said, “Jake, you haven’t even reached the 100 day mark yet.” Jake wailed, “A hundred days!! But I don’t want to go to school for a hundred days!!” If Jake had his way, he would have dropped out right then. Because he’s a child, the same conversation may happen when he’s in 5th, 9th grade, or even 12th grade. But if his parents let him “set his own boundaries,” they’ll obviously be doing a huge disservice to Jake. He may not understand it yet, but Jake is destined to at least 12 years of education, and probably 4 years of college. Boundaries help set up success.

Fourth example: When our three daughters were teenagers and starting to go out with friends on weekend evenings, they’d ask, “When do we have to be back home?” They were wondering if Marcia and I were going to set boundaries for them. But by the time a child reaches age 16 or more, the parenting objective is to teach both the freedom and the responsibility of adulthood boundaries. Marcia and I would respond, “Use your own best judgment. If you’re going to be out later than 10:30, we want a phone call telling us who you’re with, and where you’ll be. Then, wake us up when you come home

and we'll talk about where you were and what you did." Our objective at that point was to transfer the responsibility of adulthood onto their shoulders. We wanted them to set their own boundaries. They never once abused the privilege. If they had, we'd have set arbitrary boundaries for them and made them come in by, say 11:00 p.m. or some such time. And then we'd have set up ways in which they could once again "earn" the freedom to exercise their budding adulthood by handling the privilege responsibly once again. Boundaries help set up success.

Boundaries are symbols of maturity. We want our children to learn to live within them, and then to learn to establish them for themselves. Obviously, boundaries have everything to do with children learning how to handle authority ~ both by being under it, and by learning to manage it as adults.

Fifth example: In her junior year, one day over breakfast my oldest daughter said, "You can't make me go to school, you know." I replied, "Yes, I can." She said, "No, I'm 17 now, and I don't have to go to school any more if I don't want to." This was a theoretical discussion, I knew, because she was a 3.3 g.p.a. scholar, a big jock, and a popular kid. But the boundary was being tested. I said, "If I have to, I'll take you to school myself." She said, "I'll walk out the other door." I said, "OK, if you need this level of parenting, I'll get handcuffs, handcuff you to myself, and then sit in class with you." She said, "You wouldn't do that!" I said, "I promise you, I will." I actually had a set of hand cuffs and I would have used them. Both she and I knew I would. Neither of us wanted to go there. That was the last time we needed the conversation. The boundary was clear. Boundaries help set up success.

Boundaries and relationships. Helping a child learn about appropriate boundaries, and then helping a child achieve life within them, is best accomplished through a close and loving parental relationship. And the older the child, the more boundary establishment is dependent upon the quality of parental relationship. For example, when a child is 4 years old and says, "But why can't I have a cookie before supper," it's sometimes sufficient for a parent to say, "Because I say so." That statement implies parental authority and power, and the child knows that a swat on the behind may be just an inch away.

However, as children mature, boundary enforcement becomes a greater power struggle, and if mom and dad have not *established and maintained* a sufficiently close and caring relationship with their child, then the point will be reached at which mom and dad can no longer exert enough power to control their child's behavior. The phrase, "Because I say so," begins to lose meaning by the time a child reaches age 6 or 8.

The older the child, the more critical it is for parents to be connected through love, because *in the end it is respect for parents plus a sense of loving attachment, that is most powerful in controlling the behavior of a child when they walk out the front door.* I once asked my wife, "Why didn't you rebel and do bad things when you were a kid?" Her response exemplifies the principle being taught here. She said, "Because I didn't want to hurt my mom and dad." Parents, you have no greater source of strength in helping your

children live within appropriate boundaries, than the bond of love you maintain with them. And this is one of the core objectives of parenting.

Ten Minute Reflection

Talk about establishing boundaries through use of power, as contrasted with use of love and relationship. Why does the effectiveness of power diminish as our children get older?

C. Setting Goals

Each child has his or her own unique level of goal-orientation. Some kids come out of the womb with a keen interest in setting high standards and seem to naturally have the ability to achieve high goals. Others seem to be born with no greater desire than to lie in bed and contemplate their navel. This means that in some cases, the parenting challenge is to help their kids learn how to throttle back and not burn out, while in other cases the parenting task is to light a very hot fire and stick it directly down the child's pants.

Competency in life is generally built by setting and achieving goals. Track and field athletes aren't just a group of people who naturally know how to run fast. They are a group of people who have set goals, watched what they ate, taken coaching, reduced their times, and then won races. College graduates aren't just a bunch of people who were smart and so were given a sheepskin. They are people who studied hard, did research, wrote papers, read books and articles, and learned the disciplines necessary to achieve an academic standard. In both athletics and academics, therefore, goals are important.

One of the most important things parents can do for their kids is to help them set goals that will utilize the child's natural abilities, and enhance the child's probability for success in life. One of the worst things parents can do is to let their kids aimlessly drift around with no focus and no goal.

Anyone in athletics or business knows that those who set goals always perform better than those who do not. So as a parent, talk with your children about their goals. Help your kids set goals in numerous areas of their lives. Post them on the refrigerator, and when they reach those goals, pour on the praise. In so doing you'll be accomplishing two things: **1)** You'll help them succeed at something; and **2)** you'll help build their confidence (and as a byproduct, their self-esteem also).

D. Separation/individuation

Successful childhood is at least partially measured by a young adult being well launched as an adult. In clinical terms this is called "separation and individuation." Separation involves the parents' objective of launching the child. An eagle never becomes all it can be until it leaves the nest. The child never becomes all he/she was created to be until leaving home freely and comfortably with the parents' blessing, knowing that Mom's and

Dad's home will always be warmly open in case of need ~ but knowing also that it's time to launch. We all need to separate from our parents' identities and control. This is "separation."

The *objective* of separation ought to guide parents' thinking from the earliest days of their children's lives. Significant markers along the way include the child's first day at kindergarten, the child's first overnight away from home, the day the child leaves home for summer camp, or college, and finally the child's wedding day. Each of these markers, and hundreds of others, reflect a process of gradual but inexorable separation from mom and dad. One verse in the Old Testament captures this concept: ***For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Gen 2:24 ~ NIV).*** One of the core tasks of parenthood is to prepare a child for the moment when they will leave home.

The word *individuation* comes from the field of Jungian psychology. It has to do with a gradual process of integration and unification of the "self." In laymen's language, this happens as a child matures through successive and deeper levels of wisdom, growing more mature and stable, learning to grow even through conflict. Individuation involves a child growing up, becoming his/her own person with his/her own values, dreams and a unique identity that is different than the parents.

It doesn't necessarily mean becoming a clone of one's parents. Mom may be a Democrat and the individuated child may choose to be a Republican. Dad may be a union guy while the individuated child may be more oriented toward management. Mom and Dad may be Presbyterian and the individuated child may choose to be nondenominational. Yet in these three examples the *values* of democracy, career, and faith remain intact while the individuated child adopts his/her own ways of living those values. The child becomes "his own person" or "her own person" as an adult.

Kids who are allowed to individuate, remain affectionately connected to their parents. Kids who are stifled in their maturing, often break away and often remain farther away from parents. Though different than his/her parents, the "individuated" adult remains warmly connected with them. This young adult is fully able to appreciate and celebrate his/her distinctiveness, having successfully worked through the many challenges and stages of maturity and now is a fully-formed, whole, independent adult fully capable of doing life as an adult, yet remaining lovingly attached to Dad and Mom ~ comfortable seeking their wisdom.

Sometimes it can help to see what something *is*, by seeing what it is *not*. A child has not individuated if they leave home in a rage, carrying unresolved hurts and bitterness. All they've done is to precipitate a "**cut-off**," which is presented at greater length in a different chapter. But the cords of bitterness and rage still bind the child to their dysfunctional family patterns. A child has not individuated if they can't make even small decisions without checking first with their mother or father. A child has not individuated if they rigidly adhere to their parents' value system, in fear that some slip may cause some

unknown catastrophe, or their parents' extreme disfavor. A child has not successfully individuated if every time Mom and Dad, or siblings, have a tiff they draw the child back into their family system, like a minnow seeking to swim from a drain pipe but constantly being sucked back into it.

A child *has* successfully individuated if they are able to comfortably hold some different values than their parents. A child has successfully individuated if they leave home peacefully and with affection between them and their parents. A child has successfully individuated if they can recognize their parents' weakness and limitations, without disliking or rejecting their parents because of them. A child has successfully individuated when a child is able to *redirect inappropriate parenting*, as when Mom phones to tell her adult child about a problem she's having with Dad, and her adult child responds by saying, "Mom, you need to talk to Dad about this, not me."

A moment ago a scripture verse was presented. Here it is again, this time using a different translation. ***Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*** (Gen. 2:24 ~ KJV). The ability to make successful adult attachments is directly correlated with one's having separated and individuated from one's family of origin. The more "unfinished business" we bring away from our family of origin, the more it will affect our successive relationships ~ the more we will bring our unfinished business into future relationships.

Ten Minute Reflection

Why do some parents try to keep the "apron strings" tied too closely to their children? Whose needs are being met when this happens? What are some of the outcomes one might expect from this lack of individuation?

IV. Three Significant Parenting Gifts

In the preceding section, three core issues were presented as being basic to the successful maturation of a child. In this section several new issues will be presented, but much more quickly. Each of these issues, presented as "tips," has the potential of dramatically affecting the maturation and success of a child.

A. Time

There is no substitute for quality time with parents. Our culture is so fast-paced, and there are so many dual-income families these days, that many children's formative years fly past without attachment to parents. Many parents use gifts of expensive "stuff" as a means of assuaging their own guilt, for putting their best shots into their corporate lives rather than into their kids. So today we see a generation of emotionally empty, unattached, wealthy kids. Undoubtedly this trend will continue to have devastating results in the lives of the children as they attempt to make their own marital and parenting

attachments. Our culture is paying the price in terms of high percentages of clinically depressed adults medicating their emptiness through booze and non-prescription drugs.

There is no substitute for quality time with parents. Time includes talking, doing things together, interacting, touching, and sharing. Kids need regular time with mom and dad. A common myth in our culture is that of “quality time” versus “quantity time,” as if one could compress several hours of “quantity time” into a few minutes of intense “quality time.” That myth may make parents feel better about spending less time with their kids, but it’s a myth. Kids need regular time with mom and dad. Kids who don’t have this often grow up believing something is wrong with them, because mom and dad never had much time for them.

There is no substitution for “family nights” during which parents and kids spend the evening together doing fun activities and talking. There is no substitution for meals together, during which the events of the day are processed. There is no substitution for moms and dads teaching their kids how to do the regular adult things they’ll be expected to do in a few years. When we die the enduring legacy we’ll leave will have more to do with our kids than with how much money we made or how high up some corporate, educational or social ladder we climbed.

Five Minute Reflection

How was time handed out in your family of origin? Did dad have time for you? Did mom? How did your parents’ giving of time to you, affect your self-esteem and emotional growth?

B. Grace

C. S. Lewis is quoted as once having said that the singular item which made faith in Christ stand apart from all other religions, was grace ~ unmerited favor. Kids need grace just as much as adults need it ~ perhaps more. Kids are going to make mistakes. They are going to experiment with identities, values and goals. They are going to push things too far ~ test limits. They are going to goof off and not get things done on a timely basis. They’re going to test the waters in dating relationships.

When they fail, as they are provided guidance back toward proper behavior, they’re going to need grace. Grace begins with an understanding of what we ourselves have received from God. St. Paul wrote, ***“God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins” (Rom. 3:24-25 ~ NLT)***. There’s nothing so freeing as to have failed miserably, and then hear a parent say, “OK, you screwed up. You’re forgiven. I love you. And I bet you can do better next time.” Christ demonstrated grace when the religious elite brought to him a woman who had been caught in adultery. After Christ chased off those wanting him to condemn her, he turned to her and said, “I don’t condemn you ~ go and sin no more.” (See Jn. 8:1-11). Guilt is damning. Grace is freeing.

In another text St. Paul reminded us that we have all been made “...*alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.*” Then he reminds us, “*It is by grace you have been saved*” (*Eph. 2:4-5 ~ NIV*), as if to say, “Mom, dad, don’t forget ~ God has forgiven and restored you because of His grace. Now, go do the same with your kids.

Most adults have been through difficult moments of failure in which have egg all over their face. During the darkest of these moments it is freeing to hear the words, “You are forgiven.” It creates a strong desire to do good when one is shown compassion. Rather than levying harsh judgment upon a child who has failed, it can be an unmatched opportunity for mom or dad to come along side the child and share a story of similar failure in their own lives, and then ponder what they may have learned from their own failure.

Let’s compare “ungrace” with “grace.”

Ungrace	Grace
Focuses upon criticizing mistakes.	Focuses upon affirming good behavior.
Rejects child when child has failed.	Accepts and loves child even in failure.
Admires only excellent achievement.	Admires the child as a creation of God.
Ties parental love to child’s performance.	Loves unconditionally.
Compares child to more successful kids.	Affirms child’s uniqueness.
Punishes failure.	Turns failure into opportunity for learning.
Uses guilt as motivation.	Uses love as motivation.
Keeps mental lists of child’s past failures.	Leaves past in the past; aims toward future.

The list could go on. The point is that when kids fail, grace can be a far more effective teacher than parental guilt-tripping or punishment. Certainly there are times when punishment is appropriate but all people, kids and adults, thrive better in a family atmosphere of grace.

It is reasonable to assume that one’s children wish to please them just like a puppy wishes to please its master. While there are going to be occasional inappropriate puddles and piles in the hallway, most puppies really wish to please their masters, and glow when they are petted and praised. The same thought is true of kids.

Research on animals in the 1950s found that an animal will learn a task if given purely negative reinforcement. In one experiment electrical shock was used to make white rats learn the way through a maze box. We’ll call the electric shock, “ungrace.” Researchers found that the learning curve was far longer for rats that were shocked when they took a wrong turn, than for rats given cheese when they made the correct turns and reached the end of the maze box. We’ll call the cheese, “grace.” This research found that it took the “ungraced” (shocked) rats two or three times longer to learn how to progress through the maze box than it took the “graced” rats that were given cheese at the end of the same maze box.

The next question these researchers asked had to do with “extinction,” or how long it took for the rats to forget the path through the maze box. The “ungraced” rats forgot the path far more quickly than the “graced” rats.

The next question had to do with how the rats fared in pens with other rats. The “ungraced” rats became neurotic and anxiety driven, fighting with one another and failing to preen themselves (take care of their coats). The “graced” rats got along with their other pen mates and their handlers.

Class Discussion: The field of clinical psychology has always treated the field of experimental psychology as a distant cousin. The question clinical folks tend to ask is, “What can we learn from rats, that applies to people?” What does this experiment with white rats teach about the family system functioning, the general atmosphere in the home, and the effect of that atmosphere upon the lives of their children?

C. Unique family identity points.

All families are unique ~ none are identical. It can be helpful for mom and dad to take time to help establish unique family identity points ~ to highlight and celebrate what makes *this family* unique and special. This idea is better caught than taught. Here are a few examples, broken down into three broad categories:

1. Special family traditions which define your family as unique.

- a. In one family, they take one of each person’s Christmas gifts each year, unopened, and give it to the Salvation Army (true story!).
- b. Another family has a red “birthday plate” on which they serve the birthday person’s favorite meal.
- c. Another family chops and stacks wood for poor families who have only a wood burning stove.
- d. One family jokes about how dad used to tie the kids to the ceiling, but fails to tell the listener that this was a rope-climbing exercise using technical rope-climbing tools.

2. Involvement with organizations which enhance family growth.

- a. Sitting together in church as a family and worshipping God together.
- b. Becoming involved in politics, as a family.
- c. Serving food together as a family, at a homeless shelter.

- d. Dad becoming involved with his sons in Scouting; mom doing Girl Scouts with her daughters.

One word of caution is important here. Wrapping the entire family around one child's sports, dance, vocal performance, etc., is unwise. Our culture today attempts to draw kids into high levels of performance. This dynamic can take over an entire family system. It's far better to have a family that's balanced and closely melded together, than to have a son or daughter who makes the sports headlines for a few of months in his/her life.

3. Involvement with extended family.

- a. One family always spends Thanksgiving with the grandparents.
- b. Another family attempts to have one week's vacation with the extended family system.
- c. One family works at getting together at least once a month with all the family members in town, for a "family meal" at one family member's home.

Five Minute Reflection

In what way did your parents help you gain a sense that your family system was unique and special? What stories come from your family of origin that still provide a unique sense of who you are as an adult?

V. Parenting Checklist

The following checklist is a partial review of the course thus far. This time instead of a written review, a parenting "scorecard" is provided. Take a few moments and go through these items, scoring yourself in each area. Use the following scoring code:

Always = 4
Usually = 3
Seldom = 2
Never = 1

- A. Do I provide clear instructions for my kids? _____
- B. Do I provide reasonable boundaries? _____
- C. Am I consistent in my instructions? _____

Basic Training

- D. Am I consistent in my follow-through? _____
- E. Do I treat one child with favor over another? _____
- F. Do I focus most of my parenting on reinforcing positive behavior? _____
- G. Do I actively seek God's wisdom through scripture reading and prayer? _____
- H. Do I seek alternatives to punishment? _____
- I. Do I offer grace for my children's failures? _____
- J. Do I "guilt-trip" my kids? _____
- K. Do I triangulate with any of my kids? _____
- L. Do I spend sufficient time with my kids? _____
- M. Do I have one kid who seems to get be in some sort of trouble most of the time? _____
- N. Are any of our kids allowed into the spousal sub-system? _____
- O. Do my spouse and I consistently play off the same page when parenting our kids? _____
- P. Do I allow ongoing conflict within my family? _____
- Q. Do we discuss our family's values openly? _____
- R. Do I guide my children's resistant behavior through providing options, which I establish? _____
- S. Is our family's #1 focus truly seeking and obeying God? _____
- T. Do I prioritize either my job or children above my spouse? _____
- U. Do I work *hard* at playing team ball with my spouse ~ being supportive of him/her? _____

- V. Am I quick to point out weakness or failure in my kids or my spouse? _____
- W. Do we provide meaningful identity points (traditions) for our family? _____
- X. Do I attempt to provide examples of positive role models for our kids to observe? _____
- Y. Do we align our family with organizations which will enhance our family values & goals? _____

These 25 items may be calculated into an overall score based upon 100 total points. If you wish to obtain this overall score, do the following:

- A) **Reverse** the numbers you gave for questions E, J, K, M, N, P, T, and V. On these items only:

If you gave yourselfthen change it to

1	4
2	3
3	2
4	1

- B) Then add all your scores from A through Y.

This checklist has not been tested for validity and reliability. It's just an anecdotal means of seeing a rough snapshot of your parenting style. However, you might use it as a goal for yourself, to improve certain aspects of your own parenting. Put your goal onto the refrigerator so everyone can see it, and then work toward achieving it. In so doing you'll teach your kids how to set goals, and you'll also show them how serious you are about parenting them to the best of your ability.

VI. Leaving A Positive Legacy

It is a general axiom of organizations that they tend to (a) remain the same, and (b) replicate themselves. This is no less true of family systems. Each family leaves behind it a multigenerational impact. Two ways of studying the multigenerational nature of family systems are through understanding "homeostasis" and "replication."

A. Monitor Family Homeostasis

Back in the 1970s someone noticed a similar dynamic between one aspect of the field of biology, and family system functioning. In the field of biology the dynamic was known as "homeostasis." Although it's a big word, it may easily be understood by observing the humble amoeba taken from swamp water.

Swamp water is nasty stuff. Ducks and geese use swamps as their toilets. So do muskrats, beaver, snakes and fish. And swamps are often fed by run-off from nearby farms. This run-off often carries chemical fertilizer residue, and the refuse of cows, pigs, chickens, and other farm animals. In the middle of this cesspool, our little amoeba thrives! He loves his swamp water. It's his home. He knows what to expect. It's his comfort zone.

One day a curious biologist-researcher removes our little amoeba from the swamp water and places him in a jar of pure, clear water. The amoeba is wretched. It's a new environment. His little amoeba eyes aren't used to the bright light of clear water. He can see too far, and the sense of infinity frightens him. His system is in shock from drinking pure water rather than that yummy nasty swamp stuff. He yearns for home. His primary task becomes figuring out how to either get back to the swamp water, or recreating the old swamp environment in his new jar. When either option occurs, he's happy again.

Family systems tend to create and return to their own homeostasis, whatever it may be. Each family system creates its own unique homeostasis. If triangling, gossip and innuendo are the way the family processes anxiety and tension, then after a brief journey into the realm of speaking personally and privately to an offending party, the family system will tend to normally, naturally drift back to its homeostasis of triangling, gossip and innuendo. If caring loving relationships are the homeostasis, then after a brief sojourn into being mean and rude, the family relationships will tend to drift back toward being loving and caring. Each system creates and maintains its own unique homeostasis.

Because this is true, parents need to study scripture and consistently apply it to their lives, and teach their children to do the same. Scripture says, ***“The godly walk with integrity; blessed are their children after them” (Prov. 20:7 ~ NLT).*** That's a snap-shot of the legacy left by parents who yield their lives to God. By contrast, the lethargy of sin draws one back into the homeostasis of dysfunctional relationships. Without consistent reminders from scripture and from the indwelling presence of God's Spirit, human beings and the systems they create tend to drift normally back into the homeostasis of sin and brokenness.

Five Minute Reflection

Have you ever attempted to make systemic changes in your family of origin, or in your own family? If so, have you observed the draw of homeostasis, pulling you back into old behaviors, attitudes and values?

B. Plant Seeds For A Positive Legacy

Systems not only tend to remain homeostatic. They tend to replicate themselves. There's a well-known dynamic that frequently occurs within institutional boards of directors. The first couple of years of a board's existence are pivotal in establishing that board's identity, culture, values, and format of relationships. From that point forward, the members of the

board may change but its identity, culture values and format of relationships will tend to remain fixed.

Family systems also tend to remain the same, and replicate themselves across generational lines. The family, being a system, tends to pass along that which it inherits, for good or for bad. This dynamic is observed within scripture when God says, ***“I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations”***(Exodus 20:5-6 ~ NLT. See also ***Exodus 34:7***).

This being so, it is wise for parents to continue working throughout their lives at building their faith and character, because at the end of a life the legacy which is most passed on to one's children has more to do with faith and character than with anything else. *The legacy we leave behind in our children's lives is that which we were, not that which we accomplished or owned.* We model that which we carry on the inside. Our legacy and children's inheritance is tied to our faith and character.

The parent who grows in their faith will pass along a substantially different legacy than will the parent who never dealt with faith and character issues. It takes wisdom to be a good parent, and to a greater or lesser degree we all come from somewhat dysfunctional families of origin. This is why it's so important for parents to study scripture and constantly apply it to their lives. It's not only the “norm” to which we return for centering, it's the best source of insight and training for parents. It's God's instructional booklet for moms and dads. It is the compass, the center of the whirling gyroscope.

Scripture not only moulds parents' faith and character, but in so doing it becomes the best *antidote* to passing along dysfunctional values and habits to one's children. Scripture says, ***“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline”*** (Prov. 1:7 ~ NIV). Ponder items in the following list, and envision the kind of legacy each contrasting dynamic will leave to one's children. As you consider contrasting each item, understand also that each reflects a spiritual value. Ponder the long-range, multi-generational impact of each item.

Negative Legacy.....			Positive Legacy	
1	2	3	4	5
1. Religion taught as something you do			Faith taught as that which you are	
2. Religion mainly “Sunday church”			Faith as daily personal walk with God	
3. Values of wealth & power			Values of servanthood, humility & integrity	
4. Lack of parental guidance			Clear, gentle, firm parental guidance	
5. Emotional distance or abuse			Emotional support and affection	
6. Withdrawing love to control behavior			Environment of unconditional love	
7. Lashing out, verbal abuse			Patiently talking through issues	
8. Placing career or hobbies above family			Prioritizing faith & family above all else	

Basic Training

9. Negatively comparing child vs. child	Valuing God's unique creation in each child
10. Parents using kids for self -identity	Preparing kids to mature and leave home
11. Environment of criticism	Environment of encouragement
12. Speaking negatively about spouse	Speaking only positively about spouse
13. Lack of physical touching	Constant sense of hugs and warm touch
14. Parental love tied to child's performance	Modeling parental love after God's love
15. Performance standards held too high	Helping child reach attainable goals
16. Frequent punishment	Frequent discipline; infrequent punishment
17. Atmosphere of bickering	Atmosphere of peace
18. Carrying grudges	Forgiving and moving on
19. Harsh enforcement of rules	Gentle but firm enforcement of rules
20. No time for relationships or play	Regular time given to relationships & play

Learning Exercise

Use the numbering scale (1 – 5) above, and give a number to each of the opposites. Since there are twenty items, the highest possible total is 100. Do this exercise twice. The first time, give each score as you remember how things were in your family of origin. The second time through, give each score as you currently function in your family with your spouse and children. Compare the two scores. Where are the differences? Why are they different? Can you identify any areas that need improvement?

Five Minute Small Group Discussion

Can you trace one or two multigenerational themes in your family system? They may be relational themes, values themes, identity themes, or other. For example, you might use #16 and #6 to talk about a family that was emotionally distant and punitive. Or you might use #3 and #10 to talk about a family that used each other rather than loving each other. Start your analysis of these themes, with your grandparents and continue the analysis through your own current family. If you have adult children, see if you can trace any of these themes into their system.

VII. Suggested Reading

There are numerous, excellent Christian books on the market to help parents. Here are a few of them.

Dr. James Dobson:

The New Dare to Discipline
The New Strong Willed Child
Temper Your Child's Temper
Bringing Up Boys

The Dobson organization, "Focus on the Family," is a superb resource for Christian parenting and overall family needs. It may be contacted on the web at: www.family.org

Preparing for Adolescence
Raising Teenagers Right
New Hide or Seek

[Ignore the crackpots who write negative articles on the web about Dobson or “Focus on the Family.” It’s a trustworthy and helpful organization.]

Dr. Donald Joy:

Parents, Kids, and Sexual Integrity.

Charles Shedd:

Letters to Philip
Letters to Karen

Robert Lewis:

Raising a Modern-Day Knight

Some of these books may be out of print. If so, go to the net and check used book resources such as Amazon.com.