

# Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

## Spiritual Formation In Children

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### I. Biblical References

Prov. 22:6 ~ Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old he will not depart from it. NASV

Deut 6:4-9 ~ Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. Tie them to your hands as a reminder, and wear them on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. NLT

Prov 6:20-23 ~ My son, obey your father's commands, and don't neglect your mother's teaching. Keep their words always in your heart. Tie them around your neck. Wherever you walk, their counsel can lead you. When you sleep, they will protect you. When you wake up in the morning, they will advise you. For these commands and this teaching are a lamp to light the way ahead of you. The correction of discipline is the way to life. NLT

### II. Many Paths

For at least the past 100 years in the United States, the spiritual formation of children has been left primarily to the church. Within Protestant churches this responsibility has fallen primarily upon each church's "Sunday School." The Sunday School is an American creation. According to one source, "the first Sunday School was started in Lexington, Mississippi, by Professor L.W. Lee in 1908. Professor Lee was the Principal of the College at Natchez, Miss."<sup>1</sup> But before that date, children somehow learned the faith in other ways.

Some churches have added another format of spiritual formation, that they call "Confirmation," or "Catechism" classes. These approaches have become so entrenched in many churches, that it is assumed a child cannot understand the faith, and may not even be a Christ-follower, without going through the course. In some denominations it is

also assumed that once a child has gone through the class, they are ipso facto, a Christ-follower and are guaranteed eternity in heaven with God.

Yet in spite of the tens of thousands of churches offering Sunday School, Confirmation, and Catechism classes, each successive generation of America's children is reported to become less attached to both Christ and his church. This is to say, the "system" is not working very well. While there will always be families who require their children to jump through the religious hoops of their denomination, and while there will always be children who will try to please their parents by doing so, the fact remains that this system is losing ground.

There are at least three reasons the "system" is failing. First, the objective of the system in many churches is to teach religion. It might be Lutheran religion, or Catholic religion, or Baptist religion, or Methodist religion. But it's religion. Now if anyone actually said that to a pastor of one of the churches offering these classes, the pastor would disagree. He or she would say, "We're teaching faith in Christ!!"

To make this point clear, simply ask what is the goal of many churches' Sunday School, Confirmation, or Catechism classes? Is it to lead a child to Christ and then take him/her along the path of Christ for a few miles (A.K.A. "discipling" the child) ~ to teach servanthood, humility, self-sacrifice and compassion? In some cases it is. However, in many churches, the factual goal seems to have more to do with teaching the child "how we do religion" as Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, or whatever. Complicating this, we're now in a culture that doesn't care much about what flavor a particular church is.

A second reason the system is failing us is that many children coming from self-described "Christian homes," are not seeing credible Christian leadership from their parents. Many parents hand faith formation over to their church, an act which in some ways discredits what the church hopes to accomplish in the first place since many parents don't do much to personally share their faith with their kids. It's probably safe to say that *most* parents don't do much in the way of leading their own children in faith formation.

A third reason the system is failing, is that faith formation has become an academic exercise rather than an applied experience. For example, going through ten years of Sunday School, or a year of Confirmation or Catechism, almost never has anything to do with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting people in prison, welcoming strangers into one's home, actually forgiving one's enemies, etc. That is to say, *it is the application of faith, not the academic memorization of religious tenets, which provides the credibility of faith in Christ.*

And many churches' academic approaches don't teach children to pray in ways that lead children to the heart of God. Prayer has become something to be studied, not something to be desperate about as one launches their soul toward God and cries out, "Oh Father, I am sinful, but in Your great mercy please forgive and cleanse me!!" So the system fails our children, by teaching that faith = academia, not personally applied spiritual relational

experience with God. This phenomenon was Isaiah's first word of complaint against Israel, as seen in Isaiah 1:3: ***The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manager, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*** It is a 21<sup>st</sup> Century reflection of the same dynamic that plagued Israel hundreds of years before Isaiah. In Judges 2:10, scripture states, ***After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers*** (that is, after Joshua and his generation died), ***another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals.***

There's a mathematical thing to understand. A church may have a child for an hour a week. In most cases it's less than that, but in a good case we'll say an hour a week. By comparison, mother and father have the same child for 168 hours a week. If the child's in school, subtract 7 hours a day, leaving a total of 119 hours. If the child's involved in sports, subtract another 15 hours a week, for a remainder of 104. If the child has a job, subtract another 15 hours a week, for a remainder of 89 hours a week. Assuming kids sleep 8 hours a day, subtract another 56 hours, leaving a remainder of 33 hours a week. *But no matter how many items one may throw into this equation, parents have at least twenty-to-thirty times as many hours of access to their children, as any church has.*

Yet for a century in this country, most parents have abdicated spiritual formation to the church, assuming that an hour a week, or perhaps two hours a week, will somehow get the job done. It used to be that if churches didn't do a good job of this, parents would gripe. But in today's religious climate, most parents are too clueless themselves to know whether a reasonable job is being done, because the parents themselves don't know the Bible, don't pray much, don't have a vital walk with Christ, and certainly are not taking the time to put their faith into action by serving others in the name of Christ. I mean, who has time for that!!? So kids today are not seeing credible Christian leadership from their own parents.

Speaking as a once-kid myself, I hated all the religious education that was thrown at me. It was boring. I found teachers dull, repetitive, controlling, and sometimes downright mean spirited. My mind was a million miles away from what they were teaching me. And if you think I'm unique in this, then ask yourself, what specific lessons, or information, do **you** remember from **any** of your Sunday School, Confirmation, or Catechism classes? The fact that generations of adults have endured these well-intended attempts at spiritual formation, is not sufficient reason for parents to give the primary task of spiritual formation to the church. This is not to say that Sunday School, Catechism and Confirmation classes are bad. They're just not nearly *enough*.

Spiritual formation must begin and be nurtured within the home. Mother and father are the primary faith-role-models. If it doesn't happen there, then eventually the children will assume that faith is a charade ~ something you "do on Sundays, if there's nothing better to do," and they'll either treat it as they saw their parents treating it, or they'll reject it as having no meaning in their lives. The latter option appears to be the option of choice in today's America.

**Five Minute Reflection**

Give a one-minute synopsis of your spiritual journey. How did you first hear about the love of Christ? If you responded by yielding your life to Christ, what led you to respond? If you have never responded, what has held you back?

Consider this research by Thom S. Rainer:<sup>2</sup>

- Builders (born 1927-1945): 65% Bible-based believers
- Boomers (born 1946-1964): 35% Bible-based believers
- Busters (born 1965-1983): 16% Bible-based believers
- Bridgers (Or Millennials, born 1984-present): **4%** Bible-based believers.

Do you see a pattern here? And this pattern has as its foundation, a nation steeped in the sub-culture and traditions of churches providing the primary spiritual formation of our children.

Furthermore, several incredibly destructive elements have pushed their influence into the family system. Each of the items that follow below has the potential to play a major role in our children's spiritual formation or lack thereof.

**Television:**

One of the most destructive, is television. Millions of parents have abdicated having regular, deep, significant conversations with their children, in favor of watching TV. American kids spend more time watching TV than they spend on anything else other than sleeping. Our children average 16-17 hours per week watching TV,<sup>3</sup> and if we add video games and video movies, research finds that our teens spend as much as 35 – 55 hours a week in front of a screen.<sup>4</sup> Consider the following research:<sup>5</sup>

1. Time per day that TV is on in an average US home: 7 hours, 40 minutes
2. Amount of TV that the average American watched per day: over 4 hours
3. Time spent daily with screen media for US children age six and under: about 2 hours
4. Percentage of US families with children age 0-6 with at least one TV: 99
5. Percentage of US households with 3 or more TVs (2003): 50
6. Percentage of parents who say that if they have something important to do, it's likely they'll use TV to occupy their child: 45
7. Percentage of Americans who always or often watch TV while eating dinner: 40
8. Time per week that parents spend in meaningful conversation with their children: 38.5 minutes (Note: This figure may be high. Other research finds five minutes per week, in which parents and children are involved in significant communication.)
9. Percentage of 4-6 year-olds who, when asked, would rather watch TV than spend time with their fathers: 54

The same research organization found that TV harms children, it hampers education, it promotes obesity, violence and over-consumption, and it squelches political awareness. Now ponder the trends: American families moving away from spiritual formation; American families replacing deeper relationships and communication, with TV.

Now add the messages being transmitted through TV. Consider that in the 1940s, a movie was made in which the female star took off her dress. She was still wearing a full slip. She then jumped off a boat into the water. This act was considered so risqué that the movie was banned by many theaters. Today on TV one can find full frontal nudity. Now extrapolate that trend as you ponder other common TV topics such as abortion, homosexuality, adultery, murder, rape, drinking, drug abuse, Satan worship, sado-masochism, masturbation, oral sex. *Can you name even one TV show where there is a healthy family, and godly values are taught?* And this is the medium we invite into our homes several hours each day. It shapes our children's values. It silences discussion, overriding deeper conversation about truly significant issues such as faith, servanthood, chastity, and character development. It inhibits adult/child relationships (except during commercials, of course) and it actively promotes an amoral, immature, destructive lifestyle.

### **Computer games:**

Now add computer games, many of which are rated "M," meaning for "mature" players, but are played by children from grade school up. Grand Theft Auto; Doom 3; Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of war; EverQuest II; Half-Life 2; Halo 2, Limited Edition; Resident Evil: Outbreak. Mom, dad, if you have any computer games in your home, you need to know about their content.

And even if the computer games are simple and morally clean, they still can take hours of our children's time away from other conversation and family activities.

### **The internet:**

Now add the internet. Can you name a single vice that even a young child cannot find and participate in, on the internet? Research finds that one-in-five children ages 10-17, who regularly use the internet, have received a sexual solicitation while online! <sup>6</sup> Is your child one of these? How do you know? How would you know?

### **Popular music:**

Now add the impact of popular music. Not all pop music is gross and evil, but some is. Musical artists like Eminem, Green Day, Nelly, Snoop Dogg, Ron Isley, and Kidd Rock incorporate every known four-letter word into their music. Are you in touch with the songs and lyrics that your child listens to every day? Those songs and lyrics influence your child's values formation.

### **Performance ethic:**

Now add our nation's *insane* pursuit of athletic, musical, dance, and other forms of "performance" by our children. Consider how even one child in one sport or other performance medium, can control the entire family's nightly and weekend agenda, for months! Double the impact if a child's in two sports, or if two children are in different sports, or if dad is coaching. These activities routinely take families away from home and church, and the message is not lost to our kids: performance activities trump both family and God.

**Here's the bottom line:** If you're a parent, you dare not leave the spiritual formation of your child up to your church. No matter how terrific your church may be, they only have your child for an hour a week. *God's Word places the primary task of spiritual formation of children, within the parents' hands.* God's original intention was that mom and dad would be the primary conduits of His love, His will, and His character.

When your children are at home, you dare not ignore or blow-off the time-erosion and moral influence of TV, computer games, the internet, pop music, and athletic, musical, etc. performance schedules. *The pace, priorities and values of your family are your responsibility to manage.* Each of those items seriously affects your children's faith and values formation. And if you choose *not* to manage these things, *the options within this culture will eat your family alive.*

The path of spiritual formation in the family system, flows through mom and dad. Nobody else is more responsible. The research is warning us. *The options are numerous and the effects are showing themselves to be stunning and deadly.*

### **Ten Minute Reflection**

This Small Group Discussion has two questions:

1. In your family, with your children, how do you manage the amount of time the TV is on, what your children watch, where the computer is placed, what video games your kids play, and what access they have to the internet? How much of your family's time is taken up with performance activities like sports, music, etc.
2. What do these factors have to do with the subject of spiritual formation?

### **Parenting Tips:**

1. Limit TV time to one hour per day.
2. Keep the computer in the kitchen, or in some area where anyone can easily walk into the room and see the screen.
3. Learn how to monitor your children's use of websites and chat rooms.
4. Put a "lock" on any websites that show porn.
5. Warn your children about chat rooms, pornography, and other dangers.
6. Require that your children play any video game, with you in the room the first



- couple of times they play it.
7. Warn your children about pop music.
  8. Monitor the kinds of TV programs your kids watch.
  9. Don't buy cable TV packages which bring R & X rated movies into your home.
  10. Be extremely careful not to wrap your entire family around sports, or dance, or musical performance.
  11. Be very careful not to prioritize children's performance, above church.

### III. Values Formation

The theme of "Values Formation" has been a hobby-horse topic in the world of education, for years. There are several variations of the following dilemma:

*There are five people in a life-boat lost at sea. The life-boat boat only has room, food, and water for four people. Someone has to go. Which of the following five people do you throw out of the boat, and why do you choose this person?: A scientist; a sailor; a pastor; a doctor; a U.S. senator.*

The decision of which person to throw out, is supposed to help people "clarify their values." The problem with this exercise is that there is no basis for the decision other than each individual's personal preferences. So for decades now, junior high and high school students have shared their ignorance by deciding to throw out the senator, or the pastor, or whatever. This is values "formation?" Not really.

Our culture is in the grip of a philosophy known as "Post-Modernism," in which each person is allowed to define his/her personal "truth." All truth is seen as being situational ~ perhaps true in one situation but not necessarily true in another. Whatever a person wants to believe as "their truth," is allowed, and it's politically incorrect to challenge anyone's belief system because individuality, pluralism, and tolerance are the values of the culture. (The only thing that's not tolerated in this tolerance-oriented culture, is faith in Christ.)

The parenting problem in raising children within this cultural philosophy, is that there *are many competing value systems*. Yet we have not been left on our own to decide whether sexual abuse of children, murder, and robbery are OK simply because someone holds them as personal values. God has made it clear that these things are wrong. A key parenting challenge, therefore, is to lead our children to the source of all values ~ that is, to God's Word ~ and help them understand that God defines values ~ God defines right and wrong. We need to teach our children that God is like an anvil ~ one may hammer against it as much as they like, but in the end it is the hammer that is broken, not the anvil. God defines truth.

#### Five Minute Reflection

Do you believe that God defines truth? What difference does it make whether He does or does not? Is the whole world of religion just a bunch of theories developed by men and women? If so, how is it possible for anyone to define truth?

Years ago on the TV news program “*Nightline*,” reporter Ted Koppel stated that the “Ten Commandments” were never intended by God to be the “Ten Suggestions.” It is important for parent to not only teach their children what scripture says is right and wrong, but to teach the children the wisdom of why things are right and wrong. These conversations may take place over the dinner table, or while dusting the furniture; in the back yard while gardening, or in the forest while hunting. God says that parents are to, ***“...commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. Tie them to your hands as a reminder, and wear them on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut. 11:18-21 ~ NLT).***

The bottom line of all value systems, is the God of the Universe, and His instructions. Anything else, whether spoken by an educator, a philosopher, or a politician is mere opinion. Parents are given the responsibility of teaching these things to their kids. Churches hope to help parents, but church cannot be the sole, or even the main source of values formation. The main source must be mom and dad, and their personal walk with God, as guided by His Word.

#### **A. Boundaries and values formation:**

From time to time, parents have to say, “No.” “No, you may not play kick-ball on the freeway.” “No, you may not shoplift.” “No, you may not drink until legal age.” “No, you may not use drugs.” “No, you may not sleep in on a school day.” “No, you may not treat your sister rudely.”

At other times, parents have to say, “Yes, you will go to school.” “Yes, you will study and do your math homework, and it doesn’t matter that you ‘hate math.’” “Yes, you will go to bed when the rest of the family goes to bed, and get up when the rest of the family gets up.” “Yes, you will eat the same food as the rest of us eat.”

Boundaries are dealt with elsewhere in this course, but in this chapter it’s important to note that boundaries are part of spiritual formation. They address the “rebel” that is within each of us. The bottom line of spiritual formation has to do with the issue of who’s in control. It’s either God, or it’s his enemy. We are the battle ground, and so are our children. Just as it’s in our best interest for us to obey God, so it’s in our children’s best interest to be under their parents’ authority. The human will must learn that it is called to submit to authority. If it does not learn this spiritual lesson, then the lesson doesn’t go away ~ the stakes just get higher and the lessons harder.



Homes in which children are allowed to set their own standards and rules are often chaotic. This is true for two reasons: First, children don't have the maturity to determine whether it's in their best interest to learn things like addition and subtraction, or reading and writing. Kids by nature are too immature to decide whether they should go to school, tell the truth, and obey their parents. To allow them to make this level of decision is often to freeze them into a position of under-achievement that will later harm them deeply and put them at a real disadvantage in the real world.

Second, children don't bring the long-range vision that adults have gained through simply growing up. Children tend to respond emotionally to situations which adults have learned to "plow through." Mature adults utilize a skill known as "logical thinking." Children, by contrast, tend toward "emotional thinking." This is precisely why 16-year-olds pay a lot more for auto insurance, than 35-year-olds. A 35-year-old that is cut off in traffic is much more likely to slow his car down and let the jerk in. A 16-year-old facing the same situation is much more likely to blow a gasket, floor dad's car, and put the other jerk in the ditch. The more that children are allowed to rely upon their own "emotional thinking" process, the less mature they will become.

Boundaries help this process of maturation. At the adult level, when the Ten Commandments say, "Do not commit adultery," the immature response is, "Oh rats! Why not?!? I mean, what's wrong with having a little fun?" God's response might be, "Well, you could get yourself shot, when your neighbor finds out about your being with his wife. You could catch a host of diseases, many not curable. You will alienate your own spouse. Your children will lose respect for you. It'll probably cost your marriage. Your character may never recover from such a breach. You will tamper with your ability to make and sustain intimate attachment. You will set the pace for your own children's divorces. And your Heavenly Father will definitely not approve."

Hearing that response, the immature person may say, "Oh, I didn't realize it was *that* complex and destructive." *In the moment of the immature person's obedience, they mature.* That's the lesson of boundaries. That's why spiritual boundaries are so significant both in the adult's life, and in the spiritual formation in children. Boundaries aren't about guilt and negativity. They're about freedom.

### **Five Minute Reflection**

Why are boundaries about freedom, and what does that fact have to do with faith formation?

### **B. Parenting tips:**

1. Have occasional conversations about values, and how they're formed. Be sure to teach your kids about how the bottom line of values simply must be God, or otherwise it's all just a bunch of "man's opinion."
2. Discuss other value systems you see ~ perhaps in other families ~ perhaps in

public education ~ perhaps on TV. Discuss what makes things right and wrong. Who decided something was right or wrong? What makes it so?

3. When watching the news on TV ~ talk about the values of warfare ~ the values of rape ~ or burglary, murder, or whatever comes on the screen. Show your kids how self-centered values lead to problems, while other-centered values lead to praise.
4. Never hesitate to let your children know of ways in which you have messed up, and how your faith helped you get back on track. Your kids need to hear you say what they know already ~ that you're not perfect ~ that you make mistakes ~ and how your faith helped you get back in line.
5. Talk about how maintaining values helps create freedom.
6. When your children resist boundaries, ask them to give you three reasons why such a boundary might be given by parents who deeply love their kids. That is, help your kids think through the rationale for boundaries.
7. Teach your children that mom and dad are under the same spiritual boundaries, since God is no respecter of age when it comes to obedience.

## IV. Spiritual Formation

In one of the most widely known parenting texts scripture states, *Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old he will not depart from it (Prov. 22:6 ~ NASV)*. In this process of “training up” a child there are two absolutely critical elements: Attachment, and duplication. Let's look at each item.

**A. Attachment:** Psychologists have long known values are a product of attachment. Young children don't understand why mommy says that biting one's pesky little brother is bad. It seems so reasonable to chomp down on the little punk's arm when he steals your cracker.

Yet as time passes, and mommy spends the time with her kids, holds them close to her heart and shows them her love, the values message changes from “This is wrong and you'd better not do it *or else*,” to “This is wrong and if you do it, your brother is going to be hurt and mommy's going to be sad.” There's a universe of difference between these two perspectives. In the first example, a child may weigh the consequences of punishment and either try to hide his bad behavior through lying or trickery, or the child may decide that a spanking is worth the opportunity to bite his brother's arm.

In the second example, no matter what, mommy's going to be sad if the bad behavior is done, and little brother might be sad too.... *And where there's a loving attachment between mommy and the child, the child will **value** not harming mommy, and perhaps also **value** not harming little brother, more highly than valuing biting the brother's arm.*

I recently spoke with a professional woman who shared that she had once considered suicide. When I asked why she didn't kill herself, she said, "Because it would have hurt mom too much." As the conversation developed it came out that two of her brothers had also considered suicide. One has told her that the reason he didn't kill himself, was that it would hurt mom too much. The other brother said he didn't kill himself because it would hurt his little brother too much. The point to see in this example, is that in spite of a family system obviously struggling with massive emotional issues, it was the loving attachment to one another that kept the children from killing themselves. Attachment is a basic principle of values formation.

If parents make and maintain loving, solid, consistent relationships with their children, it will be through those attachments that values formation will happen. It's not enough to simply "lay down the rules" and assume everyone will obey them. Rather, it's necessary to spend the time, develop the bond, and build the love ~ and it will be through this process that children will adopt the values that mom and dad have.

One of the most sad and difficult diagnoses in the field of psychology, is that of the "Sociopath." This is the person who sees others only as tools for his/her use. There is no sense of attachment. Others exist only to be used, and when their usefulness has ended, they may be rejected, beaten up, or even murdered, because there is no value other than the self. Sociopathic personalities have no values other than self-preservation.

So it's not a surprise to learn that sociopaths have a very common family history. Most grew up in homes where there was no attachment. Somehow, love and bonding didn't happen. It might have been due to parental alcoholism or drug abuse. It may have been due to parental abuse of the child. Both parents may have worked 70 hours a week and just left the child to his/her own ways. But somehow, parental love never happened in a way that the child could feel it, and buy into it, and trust it. So the child learned that if he or she had any needs, then nobody but the child was going to take care of the need. And in some cases, this child figured out that human beings were dispensable. Once that message is in place, then harming a person is about as meaningful as squishing a bug.

It is through attachment, that values are transmitted from parent to child.

### **Five Minute Reflection**

Why is "attachment" so important in having our children adopt our values? What happens to values formation when parent/child attachment isn't there?

### **B. Duplication:**

Everyone knows that kids duplicate what they see, and hear. A terrific TV ad for "Wally Winkie's Wonder Whip Cream" will lead a child to say, "Mommy, I really like "Wally Winkie's Wonder Whip Cream." The kid may have never tasted the product, but that's incidental to his desire for it. Children are easily influenced. In the movie, "Return to

Me,” actor Jim Belushi played the role of a dad who didn’t watch his mouth when around his kids. He used a lot of foul language, and the movie did a great job of showing his little son using the very same four-letter words he heard his dad use. Kids duplicate what they see, and hear.

The same is true in faith formation. Kids will more likely duplicate what they see in their parents’ lives, than they will through their parents’ instructions. That is to say, having a “family altar” time is not going to impact a child nearly as much as watching dad tell the truth about the things that don’t work in an old car he’s trading in, as he chats with the salesman. Memorizing the Ten Commandments is a good thing, but it’s not nearly as powerful in a child’s value-formation as watching mom and dad deliver \$400.00 to help pay for heat in a poor person’s home. Going to Sunday School is good, but watching mom cook up daily food for an elderly next-door lady dying of cancer speaks louder than any teacher could. As children observe their parents praying, children learn to pray. As children observe their parents studying God’s Word and then applying it to their marriage and parenting, children learn the value of scripture. As children observe their parents serving others in the name of Christ, children learn to value the faith of their parents.

Children intuitively learn the difference between cultural Christianity, and the real thing. Going to church can be just the religious or social “thing to do on Sundays,” or it can be a time of heart-felt worship and spiritual filling. Money can be used to build power and security, or it can be used to minister to others in need. Time can be used for self-centered activities, or it can be used to help others. Kids watch. And they duplicate what they see.

This parenting task of teaching our kids about God is the major task of all parenting responsibilities. It supersedes all psychological developmental functions, because it leads kids to having a relationship with a Father who is able to guide, heal and mature them in ways that even the best parents could never do, and to empower them in a way they could never do alone.

Kids are very open to faith when they’re young, and it can be an enormous privilege for an adult to lead a child to understanding God’s love. Parents can help children learn the difference between religion and faith. Religion is an externalized system of rules ~ something one puts on or takes off depending on the situation ~ something one “does” on Sunday morning. By contrast, faith is built upon a relationship between person and God ~ something that is internalized ~ something that is lived out in daily relationships and activities.

Not long ago in our church, the children’s ministry decided to pull together money to buy a goat for a family in Haiti. One five-year-old child went home and took out all her toys. She separated them, and sold many of them in order to raise money for a child whose family needed a goat. This child has undoubtedly seen Christ in the lives of her mom and dad. Children duplicate what they see. Another child was asked what made her Christmas most special to her. She replied, “Going with my folks to give a meal to a guy who was living in his car.” Guess what she has been seeing in the lives of her parents.

Faith is significant in children's lives because it is not only tied to God's love, but it is tied to authority, and to authenticity. It is important for mom and dad to be able to teach that values are ultimately tied to God's purposes and instructions. In so doing, mom and dad teach that they are under the same authority, and that authority is a far greater issue than merely wielding temporal power. They also teach that faith is something to be lived and breathed, not just "believed."

Even a young child can experience the difference between religion and faith. And a child's values and relationships *are* affected by that difference. More often than not, religion per se has little impact upon a child's identity and values formation. Even if a child goes to church every week, if it's just religion that's being taught, the child will remain dull to the message and basically unchanged, their character ungoverned.

By contrast, if a child is introduced to Christ and makes the decision to invite Christ into his/her life, then that child will be changed on the inside ~ and the inside changes brought about by God's Spirit will affect every facet of the child's attitude, perception and behavior. The parental picture painted in scripture, is that of a parent with an arm around their kid's shoulders, walking side by side and sharing deeper things. Here's what scripture says:

***Prov 6:20-23 ~ My son, obey your father's commands, and don't neglect your mother's teaching. Keep their words always in your heart. Tie them around your neck. Wherever you walk, their counsel can lead you. When you sleep, they will protect you. When you wake up in the morning, they will advise you. For these commands and this teaching are a lamp to light the way ahead of you. The correction of discipline is the way to life. (NLT)***

#### **Five Minute Reflection**

If you were the enemy of God and wanted to destroy the picture painted in the text above, what methods would you use? (Hint: Several have been given in this chapter already.)

Research finds that after a child passes their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, the probability of yielding their life to Christ is lower. Perhaps young adults identify faith with childhood, and as they walk away from their youth, they assume that maturity equates with non-faith. It is important, therefore, that parents provide numerous opportunities for their children to encounter Christ while they are young. It's important that parents not only send their kids to church, but that they go to church together as a family, discuss faith issues over meals, pray together regularly, and seek to implement scriptural teaching into their lives, values, marriages, and relationships. That's what "training a child up" is about, according to God's Word. And kids duplicate what they see.

#### **C. Parenting tips:**

1. Watch a video movie together as a family. At various times, pause the video

and ask what moral messages are being played out by this character, or that character. Ask the kids how they'd solve moral dilemmas being portrayed on the screen.

2. Bed-time for younger children is a terrific time to read a chapter from Christian story books, and pray together. For younger children, children's Bible story books are great. When the kids get to 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the "Chronicles of Narnia" or "Lord of the Rings" series are great reading.
3. Point out successful models of Christian life. Perhaps there's a babysitter (call her "Lucy") that's really solid in her faith ~ point this out to the kids ~ say things like, "When you grow up, if you can be like Lucy is with her faith, it'll be a good thing."
4. Invite your children to point out any areas in your own life in which they see inconsistencies in what you teach versus how you live.
5. Teach your kids how to pray, by praying with them ~ not just at bedtime, but during the day as well. Let them see you praying. Let them see you reading scripture. If you're married, let them hear you use scripture to guide your relationship with your spouse.
6. Adopt one or two scripture verses as representing your family's ideals. Post them on the refrigerator or elsewhere. Bring them into occasional conversations with your kids, especially showing your kids how you have personally adopted them and are living them out in your own life.

### Five Minute Reflection

How did your parents attempt to influence your spiritual formation? Did they hand it off to the church to do for them? Did they ignore it? Or did they teach it in the home, and if so, how? How do you intend to influence spiritual formation in your children's lives?

## V. Building Internal vs. External Values

Faith formation has a lot to do with the location of the motivation ~ internal, or external. Let's unpack this thought. If a parent wishes for their child to not eat cookies before a meal, which of the two following motivations represent the wiser choice?

**Motivation A:** "If I take a cookie before supper, and if I'm caught, I'm going to get a spanking and I might be sent to bed without supper." *The motivation here is to avoid punishment ~ hence, external.*

**Motivation B:** "If I take a cookie before supper, I might not be as hungry and might not eat a very good meal. This will negatively affect my health. It will



also make mom and dad disappointed in me.” *The motivation here is to take good care of oneself, and to honor parents ~ that is, internal.*

If a parent wishes for their child to know and love God, to be motivated to serve God by serving others, to hold to God’s ways and to develop God’s character in their lives, which is the better motivation?

**Motivation A:** “Mom takes me to church sometimes on Sundays. Dad doesn’t go because all Christians are hypocrites. Mom only takes me if she feels like it. I guess church is OK. All that religious talk is boring and sort of confusing, but it’s probably the right thing to do, at least until I leave for college.” *The motivation here is to get along with mother’s occasional religious wishes ~ external.*

**Motivation B:** “I see mom and dad praying now and then. I also see them reading the Bible. I hear them talking about how to make their marriage better by implementing scripture into their lives. When I bring problems to them, they often check out scripture for answers. Sometimes I see them cry when singing worship songs in church. And we don’t have quite as much money to spend on bicycles and cars because mom and dad give some of our money to the church, and to help others. I want to know God like they do.” *The motivation here is to know and love God ~ internal.*

Obviously, option B is the better choice in each example. But what makes it the better choice? The difference between options A and B, are that options A represent external motivation, while options B reflect internal motivation. Here’s how powerful this is: Religious people who are primarily externally motivated, tend to either ignore religion except on Sundays, or else become like the Pharisees of Christ’s time. They see faith as being either irrelevant, or else “the law,” ~ i.e., a set of rules to be obeyed, and if a person doesn’t obey the rules, they see punishment as the option of choice.

By contrast, those who are internally motivated, tend to focus on “grace.” They are motivated to become like Christ, out of hearts of gratitude for what Christ did for them on the cross. They see faith as a way to express their love for Christ, their attachment to Christ, and their obedience to his instructions. Their motivation is to please the ones they love ~ whether it’s mom and dad, or Christ.

Let’s apply this to parenting. The parenting task for Christ-followers is to lead our children to the point of appreciating the love that God showed for them in Christ. That parental leading is best accomplished through mom and dad discussing and practicing their faith in the home, where it’s “normal” ~ not just in church where it may be more of a mask.

*The downside of relying upon external values formation in our children, is that the level of power needed to **enforce** our values, is eventually overcome by our children’s ability to resist us. One of the tasks of parenting is to, little by little, let go of power and control over our children’s lives, in favor of giving them the responsibility. In that transaction,*

the best hope is that our children will have adopted our value system and our faith by the time we can no longer use power to guide them. That is to say, kids must truly adopt and accept their parents' faith and values, or mom and dad will eventually lose their ability to guide their kids.

Ultimately, a parent's highest goal is to reach a point with their own child in which they say, "Years ago I gave my life to Jesus Christ, and it's my highest hope for you that you will do what I did. It's changed my life forever. I love and serve Jesus Christ." Then to invite the child to receive Christ as the child's friend and savior. And then to show many ways in which the child can learn about Christ, and can please Christ. If this happens at home, then it's better than all the religious education any church can provide. If it doesn't happen at home, then even the best religious education will have difficulty in piercing through the child's skepticism and doubt.

Churches can be terrific allies for parents, as together they raise the children in the ways of the Lord, and together they lead toward having a personal relationship with God. But the greatest strength in faith formation in children, is found in the home.

### **Five Minute Reflection**

Which of the two, extrinsic or intrinsic, is the stronger method of guiding a child through faith formation? What are some of the challenges of parenting in this regard?

#### **Parenting tips:**

1. Make it a goal to always explain to your children why you value what you value, and expect what you expect.
2. Evaluate how you generally tend to motivate your children ~ using extrinsic ways (i.e., power, force, threat), or intrinsic ways (relational connection, explaining why).
3. If you're married, discuss with your spouse what you believe to be the most appropriate balance of extrinsic versus intrinsic means.
4. Consider the role of intrinsic value formation, and your children's relationship with God. Do we wish to obey God more because if we don't, He'll squish us like a bug? Or because we love and trust Him, and know He truly has our best interest at heart?
5. What are one or two of the costs to parents, in the faith formation of their children? For example, time may be one cost ~ having to give more time to the kids, perhaps less time to the career. What are one or two other costs?

## **VI. Recommended Reading**

Although it may feel that way sometimes, parents are not alone in the battle of raising children who love and obey Christ. A few excellent parenting resources include:

**Books:**

Battle Cry for a Generation, by Ron Luce, published by Cook Communications Ministries, Colorado Springs, CO ~ 2005.

Children At Risk, by James Dobson (1990).

The New Dare to Discipline, by James Dobson (1992).

The Wonderful World of Boys, by James Dobson (2003).

Bringing Up Boys, by James Dobson (2005).

New Strong-Willed Child, by James Dobson (2004).

**Internet:**

[www.family.org](http://www.family.org)

[www.christianitytoday.com/parenting/](http://www.christianitytoday.com/parenting/)

<http://209.61.174.53/fullarmor/home>

**Resources:**

1. [www.cogicsundayschool.com/history](http://www.cogicsundayschool.com/history)
2. Rainer, Thom S. (1997). The Bridger Generation: America's Second Largest Generation, What They Believe, How To Reach Them. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997.
3. [www.tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/FactsFigs.pdf](http://www.tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/FactsFigs.pdf)
4. Luce, Ron (2005). Battle Cry for a Generation. Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, p. 45.
5. [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org)
6. Luce, Ron (2005). Battle Cry for a Generation. Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, p. 43.