



# A HANDBOOK OF BIBLICAL PARENTING

Cultivating Citizens of God's Kingdom



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# Introduction

God instructs parents to talk about his Word with their children all the time: when they sit, when they walk, when they lie down, when they rise ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). Helping our kids learn to love the Lord and grow into his gifts as we send them into the world is, of course, the key job of a parent. And it's a lofty goal.

But God knows parents do a lot, day after day, of sitting and walking, lying and rising, coming and going, listening, speaking, and doing. Pouring ourselves into our children every day for years is exhausting and often bewildering.

Kids don't come with an owner's manual, so this booklet is an attempt to provide an overview of parenting advice from a biblical perspective. In it, we, the team of pastors, therapists, and authors at *Family Fire*, share scriptural instructions and the best pastoral advice we can find.

Read it all straight through or use it as a handbook and look up topics when you have a need or question.

- [Chapter 1](#) talks about biblical parenting principles with advice that applies to all ages
- [Chapter 2](#) addresses parenting younger children, generally before the age of puberty
- [Chapter 3](#) describes skills for life that kids cultivate from young ages through adulthood
- [Chapter 4](#) considers the challenges of parenting tweens and teens, through adolescence
- [Chapter 5](#) explores the strange world of parenting adults. Our kids do grow up! What then?

It's our prayer that this primer on parenting blesses your family as you raise your children into the next generation of God's people.

Grace and peace to you all.

*Revs. Steven & Deb Koster,* editors



# Chapter 1: Principles of Parenting

This chapter sketches some universal and overall ideas that undergird parenting at all ages. Children are ours to disciple for only a time; then we send them into God's world to honor him with their gifts. That's rather different from a marriage, which grows ever deeper until death do us part. Providing, protecting, and pruning with intention is God's call on parents as we show children how to be citizens of God's kingdom.





# Scriptural Truths for Parents

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

When I was handed my baby the first time, there was so much I did not yet know about being a parent. Most parenting I learned by living into being a parent and doing my best to do it biblically. Our children are not delivered with a detailed owner's manual of what to do in every situation, but the Bible does offer some valuable perspectives, guidelines, and encouragement.

Here are some scriptural truths for parents:

## They Belong to God

Our children are not ours; they belong to God. You adopted them, or gave birth to them, and you refer to them as “my kids,” but the truth is that our children do not really belong to us. They may have our looks or

*“God designed the marriage relationship to be lifelong”*

attitudes, but the ultimate image they carry is that of their Heavenly Father. God has made each of us in his image and called us to behave like his children. We all belong to our God and not just to earthly parents; “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from

*“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies”*

God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” [\(1 Corinthians 6:19-20\)](#).

## They are on Loan for a Season

Our children are on loan to us for only a time. Our children remain connected to our hearts for a lifetime, but they only live under our direct influence for a season. God designed the marriage relationship to be lifelong, but our hands-on parenting ends as children leave their parents' home and become one with their spouse. There will and should be a time when our kids move out. Some of those parenting seasons can feel overwhelming as we struggle with colicky babies, defiant toddlers, rambunctious tweens, or rebellious teens. Scripture tells us that there is a time for every purpose under heaven. If we can live in the moment and keep an eternal perspective, the difficult season is less likely to overwhelm us. It also means that as our children reach adulthood, we parents must become much more advisors and less directors of the choices

our children make. Particularly once a child is married or independently living on their own, parents are no longer directly involved in decision making.

## We are Disciplemakers

Our job is to introduce our kids to their Heavenly Father. The most fundamental job parents have is to show their kids who God is and who we are in God's world. We raise and release them to be citizens in God's world. We talk about God when we rise up, and when we lie down, when we are at home, and when we travel on the road ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). God desires that we love him with all of our being and that we spill that love over to our children. We represent God to our kids, and we are instructed to talk about our faith in our coming and going so that our children will learn God's commandments and experience his love.

## We Provide, Protect, and Prune

Like a gardener, we can't make things grow, but we can create the best possible conditions for healthy growth. We can nourish the soil, helping children mature by providing what they need physically, emotionally, and intellectually. We can pull weeds, protecting them as best we can from outside troubles and predators. And we can prune, cutting short the unhealthy growth of their own selfish and sinful tendencies.

## Discipline is Necessary

Discipline is one of the ways that we create disciples. God models for us the importance of discipline for molding our character for service in God's kingdom. "If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all" ([Hebrews 12:8](#)). Parents bless and invest in their children by insisting on good behavior. The writer of Hebrews goes on to describe that "discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" ([Hebrews 12:11](#)).

## God Walks with Us

You are not alone. God equips us for the challenges that we face and walks with us through every trial. Jesus promised to be with us to the very end of the age. He has placed his Spirit within us so that we are empowered and guided through whatever difficulties we face in this life. We can walk through the valley of the shadow of death because God is with us, comforting and encouraging. No parenting challenge is too overwhelming to the God who created everything out of nothing.

Parenting is never easy. It will bring us our greatest joys and our most painful heartaches. As parents, we come to understand through the Bible how much our Heavenly Father loves us and persists with us despite our defiance. The scriptures give us encouragement and guidance to navigate the challenges of parenting. Choose to listen to God's Word.

# How Can Boundaries Help My Family?

BY REV. STEVEN KOSTER

Good fences make good neighbors. Boundaries drawn lovingly around our marriages, kids, and families set limits that can bless all of those involved. Should your brother have a key to your house? Should your parents come for dinner every week? Is it okay for grandma to feed the kids ice cream for breakfast? Should your adult children live in the basement forever?

## Boundaries Create Healthy Relationships

Setting boundaries appropriately clarifies expectations of who is in charge of what (especially when those who should not be in charge have too

*“Each family faces their own unique set of boundary questions as they work to blend the cultures of their respective extended families”*

loud a voice). Each family faces their own unique set of boundary questions as they work to blend the cultures of their respective extended families. Sometimes

relationships that should change over time change too slowly. Sometimes relationships that should be top priorities become neglected. Sometimes people who should be in second or third place wield too much influence. We show our love for one another when we care enough to set limits to protect each other, and you'll be healthiest and happiest when you keep your priorities in order and are willing to draw a line.

## Boundaries Clarify Your Priorities

Our relationship to God should always be first in our lives, but how do we prioritize our human relationships? Families are intertwined webs of relationships, and each of us plays multiple roles—child, parent, cousin, spouse—often all at once. So it's hard to know which role to prioritize. Normally, your spouse gets your attention first, so that you're on the same page. Your kids' needs come second as you parent together. After that, everyone else's opinion comes third, including your parents.

## Spouse First

Generally, your first priority is your marriage. In marriage, your spouse becomes your new center of gravity. The Bible reminds us that we leave our father and mother and cling to our spouse ([Genesis 2:24](#)).



Second only to God, your spouse is most important—this relationship is intended to last a lifetime. Your spouse is your key decision-making partner, and your spouse's opinion outranks everyone else's. You might debate and negotiate in private, but to the rest of the world, you stand as one.

Prioritizing your marriage means listening carefully to your spouse's concerns. Having grown up in a particular family, we may have a comfort level with their behavior that our spouse does not share. What might seem normal to you may seem uncomfortable to your spouse. You might be okay with your parents dropping by unannounced, but your spouse might value having prior notice. You may not care if your friends want to plan the

*"You and your spouse will want to be on the same page about house rules. Your children don't get to set their own rules"*

only two weeks of vacation you get in a year, but that might not sit well with your spouse. Your first decision partner is your spouse, so understand how your spouse is experiencing those around you. Be willing to listen even if the words are difficult to hear.

Also, be honest about limits you would like to see set. Maybe you are feeling the stress of not getting time to connect with your spouse and you need a change of routine—a break from extended family, or a vacation not centered on your favorite sport. Maybe you want to reserve some limited time to be with friends, or even to be alone. Maybe your spouse is okay with your brother coming for dinner twice a week, but it is still valuable to talk with your brother about how often is too often. Whatever the limit, talk about it together, listen to how your spouse is feeling, and set a boundary together. You might disagree with your spouse and have to

compromise a bit, but to your children, in-laws, and friends, you want to be a united front. Don't disagree or denigrate each other in public. Apply your house rules consistently.

## Kids Second

And as you honor and respect your spouse, you also protect and honor your kids, raising them to launch eventually from your home and to serve with their gifts as citizens of God's kingdom.

Ideally you parent together, living by consistent house rules and discussing plans and discipline together. You and your spouse will want to be on the same page about house rules. Your children don't get to set their own rules, and their grandparents don't get to override you as parents. Your children need your guidance for now, but they are supposed to launch and likely cling to another person someday. Be prepared to take second or third place when the time comes. Also be prepared to nudge a reluctant adult child to take more responsibility for themselves.

## Everyone Else Third

You also seek to honor your parents and siblings, but they are not your key decision-making partners. They're also adults responsible for their own choices. You are free to say no, and so are they. This does not mean turning your back on your extended family—you are still called to love and honor them too—but their happiness and convenience are not your first concern. All of these relationships need boundaries to be healthy.

## Boundary Setting Works Best in Relationship

It is the job of each spouse to draw limits around their own people. Limits are more warmly received in the context of a loving and long-term relationship, so take the initiative with your family to have the difficult

conversation necessary to establish healthy limits with your family and friends.

It is easy to get defensive when it comes to our families, but that's a conversation you and your spouse should have in private. Appropriate boundaries are something you negotiate with your spouse and then inform others about. Choosing to defend a spouse can feel like betrayal of our parents, family, or friends, but sometimes the "rules" of the family need to be rewritten to reflect a new reality. Again, your spouse is your center of gravity and your key partner for decision making. Be unified with your spouse in front of others, and never blame or complain about your spouse regarding the boundaries you set together. And don't allow others to complain about your spouse either—you are one flesh before God in marriage. Discuss, argue, and negotiate with your spouse in private, but always stand up for each other in public.

## Grace is Needed for Boundary Setting

Limits need to be set graciously; everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect. Be direct about your concern but gentle in tone. Describe behaviors that are not acceptable, but do not attack someone's character. Saying "please call before you come over to see if it's a good time for us" is much better than saying "you're too controlling!" Affirm your love and affection

for your family, but state your limits clearly. If at all possible, seek some middle ground so everyone can feel respected. Other boundaries may need to be firmly held. "You may not visit if you have been drinking" or

*"Setting limits is one of the ways that we care for our families. Your marriage will be more secure when your spouse knows that you love enough to protect the relationship"*

"you may not call my spouse names." You might expect your family or friends will be upset with the limits you set, but that is okay. Eventually, your family system will adjust to your boundaries and everyone will be healthier for it.

Setting limits is one of the ways that we care for our families. Your marriage will be more secure when your spouse knows that you love enough to protect the relationship. Establishing boundaries demonstrates confidently where we stand in our relationships. We don't have to wonder if we are overstepping, we know clearly where the lines are drawn. Boundaries will give everyone more security in the relationship.

# Living into the Authority God Established for Families

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

Who's in charge at home? God cares about the flourishing of families, and calls us to be accountable to one another in our roles, in society and at home. Healthy families need structures of leadership, and we all have authorities in life to which we answer. Consider the authority that God has set in place and evaluate how your family is embracing a biblical model of authority.

## Everyone Answers to God's Authority

We are all accountable to God, and we should live in obedience to God's Word. "For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne" ([Psalm 47:7-8](#)). We serve in obedience under God's authority. Our lives should reflect an obedience to God's commandments. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" ([Matthew 28:18](#)). If we can recognize that the authority of this world is placed into hands that we can trust, we may more easily relinquish control.

## Honor the Authority God Has Instituted

In society, we have a responsibility to respect those with authority over us and model respect for those

God has commanded us to obey. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" ([Romans 13:1](#)). Parents have an opportunity to model respect for authority by how they live under the authority of the church and the government. Protest should be appropriate and leaders held accountable, for all people bear God's image, but it should still be respectful. The obedience and respect that we model will be the obedience and respect we'll see in our kids.

## Be the Parent: God Placed You in Charge

God has placed parents in a position of authority in the home (it's even one of the Ten Commandments!). The goal of parenting is to raise and release godly kids, so parents are responsible for using their power to help their children grow into healthy, productive, respectful adults.

Parents can feel helpless when a newborn is placed in their arms and entrusted to their care. When a child's behavior is baffling, parents may feel clueless about how to parent well. Parents may wish to remain forever young and not act like their own parents. But none of that alters the call of parenting or the position of authority that God gives parents in the home.



Exercising our authority and disciplining is a demonstration of love to our families. “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” ([Proverbs 13:24](#)). It is in your power, and even duty, to say no to things, to set limits, and to expect a basic level of respect and obedience from children. As those given authority, it is okay to say no to things that interfere with making God central in our homes. Parents can delegate age-appropriate responsibilities to help their children learn responsibility, but they should not neglect the role of being in charge.

You are the grownup, and help is available. Sometimes parents need each other. Sometimes we lean on God in prayer for strength. Sometimes professional resources through Christian counseling centers can be very helpful, whether seminars or counseling. God promises to give wisdom to those who seek it.

## Ignored Responsibility Is Harmful

Our culture has made an idol out of childhood. We are fixated on youth culture, averse to becoming adults like our parents, and tempted to defer to the wishes of our children. We love our children and desire that they would feel our affection, but can slide into the vanity of wanting to be the cool parents. We dote over children trying to provide them with every new opportunity. But when a child’s happiness, rather than their character, becomes the focus, children become entitled, expecting others to serve them. Children take on an authoritative role in the home as parents defer to their desires.

But this is not how God established the authority in the home. Parenting is not about meeting children’s expectations or giving them choices that are unhealthy for them. Parents should take into consideration the needs of everyone in the home, but ultimately it is the adults who exercise decision-making authority. Indulgent parenting is harmful to children in that it gives

them responsibility that is beyond their capabilities and fails to prepare them for a servant-hearted adulthood. God placed parents in the position of leadership in the home, and we should not neglect the responsibility God has given us as parents.

We harm kids when we do not serve them by being in charge. Children should have age-appropriate decision-making power, but they shouldn’t be responsible for parenting siblings or be left without resources for meeting their own needs. Absent or neglectful parents raise anxious and directionless kids since structure provides the support that children need for success. Children should have age-appropriate responsibilities without being put in a position to carry a burden that is beyond their ability. The brain of a child is still developing and is ill-prepared for seeing the consequences of actions, so do not give them authority that God did not entrust to them.

## Wield Authority With Love

We should not neglect our role as parents, leaving our children without leadership or abuse our role by being harsh or self-serving with our authority. It is important to listen to the voices of everyone involved and allow opportunities for other voices to be heard. As [Ephesians 6:4](#) says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Neglectful or abusive parenting is as destructive as indulgent parenting. Parents who exercise authority without love are too enamored with their own power. Our children should obey not just because we say so, but because they know that we love them and want what is in their best interest.

Negotiating the authority in the home can be challenging, but God has established his channels of authority to bless us. If we are all fighting for control then the result is chaos. Following God’s design brings us to a place of orderly function.

# Establishing Justice at Home

BY REV. DEB & STEVEN KOSTER

Family life is chaotic at times and sometimes even a little unjust. But as people who are made in the image of a just God, our hearts are wired with a desire for justice. God “loves righteousness and justice” ([Psalm 33:5](#)), and we intrinsically know that; our hearts are wired to recognize justice. God’s loving justice brings order to the chaos of our world, and as his children, our hearts should desire his passions.

*“Simple rules like ‘no hitting’ and ‘no name-calling’ set expectations about respecting one another”*

Often we think about justice on a mass scale, but we can create order under our own roof and guide our children to better understand equity for all. Discipline is all about helping our children become disciples of God and his merciful justice. In our own families, whose voice might we need to intentionally seek out in order for it to be heard? Do we need to be more proactive about mediating sibling rivalry or pay extra attention to the concerns of a small child? How can we pursue more justice at home?

## Establish Guidelines

Parents set expectations for acceptable behavior not only by what they say, but also by what they do. Bring order to your family by teaching children how to respect both God and others in your home. Basic rules, consistently enforced, are a blessing for families because they set the standard for how we are going to care for one another in community. It can start with treating others the way you wish to be treated. Simple rules like “no hitting” and “no name-calling” set expectations about respecting one another. Rules help us see beyond ourselves and appreciate how our behaviors impact others. It is easier for children when the rules are spelled out clearly and they don’t have to guess whether they are being disobedient or not.

## Enforce the Rules

Letting a child’s bad behavior slide isn’t good for anyone involved. It is hurtful to the child when a parent

*“When parents do not enforce consequences children can perceive it as permission to ignore the needs of others”*

lets bad behavior persist without correction. We benefit when we are redirected to live as God called us to live. Letting selfish behavior go unchecked will only lead to more of that behavior.

When parents do not enforce consequences children can perceive it as permission to ignore the needs of others. It is one thing to call out the bad behavior and choose a light, grace-filled response, but ignoring an offense communicates that you don't care enough about either the perpetrator or victim to follow through with consequences. A parent who is a push-over has neither their children's respect nor their obedience. And once you've established a pattern of poor enforcement in your home, it becomes even harder for the parent to intervene and redirect bad behavior moving forward.

## Three Strikes, Then Action

When a child misbehaves, call it out and calmly tell (don't ask) them to stop. Put it down, give it back, quiet

*"If they still persist after two warnings, take action. Follow through. Every time. Take it away, put them on timeout, intervene, etc"*

down, turn it off, leave them alone, etc. Maybe they just need a little redirection. If they persist, warn them again with a second chance, but now the behavior is edging towards defiance. If they still persist after two warnings, take action. Follow through. Every time. Take it away, put them on timeout, intervene, etc. But follow through. If you need to have a private conversation about why they needed to be redirected, have that conversation, but you should expect compliance, not

beg for it. When my kids were young, I would count their warnings, saying, "knock it off, that's a 1," and then "I said, knock it off, that's a 2!" It didn't take long at all for them to realize they didn't want to get to 3. Counting became a clear, and eventually humorous, way for us to communicate about expectations and their behavior.

## Practice Restorative Justice

When most people think of discipline, they think punishment. But disciplining bad behavior should always involve compassion and nurture. The difference between punishment and discipline is that punishment is not interested in fostering better future behavior or in repairing relationships. Instead, punishment is focused on retribution or revenge for past behavior.

Discipline, on the other hand, focuses on how to create better understanding so there is better behavior going forward. A child who has to face their victim, apologize, and make amends for their bad behavior is less likely to repeat their error than a child that simply receives a spanking. Everyone wins when the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated in our lives and practiced in our relationships.

## Listen Well: Empathy Is Your Secret Weapon

Empathy is a parent's secret weapon in enforcing the rules. Empathy is simply acknowledging your child's

*"Discipline, on the other hand, focuses on how to create better understanding so there is better behavior going forward"*



feelings, listening for and naming their emotions, even as you also enforce discipline. Paying attention to what your child is feeling is an excellent skill for parents at the best of times, but in the midst of conflict, it can mightily defuse resentment from a child who is misbehaving.

It doesn't have to take long and can be as simple as saying out loud what a child feels or wants. "I understand you want to stay up late and don't want to miss anything, but now is bedtime," or "I get that you're angry with your brother's behavior, but hitting is not an acceptable response." Misbehavior often emerges from a child's frustration, and acknowledging that original frustration can make it easier for the child to accept correction. Now they know at least that you noticed their experience that led to their misbehavior. Listening does not mean you have to change your rules and modify a consequence you've established, but it does show that you care enough to notice them and how they feel, not just their bad behavior.

A parent who simply demands blind obedience without allowing children to process their feelings will have a hard time maintaining control as children gain independence. Teens tend to rebel against authority when their voice isn't honored. Parents help children to live under God's authority by modeling God's love for his people. We are called to behave like God in our

relationships with others, and nowhere is this more important than in our relationship with our children. So choose patience and grace!

## No One Is Above the Law

Even parents need to obey the house rules and accept discipline when they mess up. You will make mistakes, and you can be a powerful model of restoration if you can receive correction with a generous heart. If mom or dad says a bad word, they should accept the same discipline they would give to their children. Sometimes a parent can benefit from a few moments in the time-out chair to remind them that they too need to live by God's rules for their life. Parents who follow the house rules and bear the consequences make a powerful statement about justice to their families. If we can create an environment where everyone is accountable for their behavior, then everyone's behavior improves.

Our homes can become places where we see God's justice enacted and where we all learn to live our lives with God's grace. It is a blessing to our families when we live according to God's justice. [Psalm 106:3](#) says, "Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!"

# Protecting Your Children After Divorce

BY MELINDA HAMMOND, PSY.D.

In God's perfect plan, marriage is forever. Unfortunately, we live in a fallen world and sometimes divorce is inevitable. When children are involved, divorce becomes more complicated, but there's hope. Studies have shown that how parents relate after a divorce can act as a protective factor for children and is often more connected than the pre-divorce relationship. Children whose parents maintain a cooperative relationship after divorce are protected from many harmful effects.

So, when divorce happens, how can you protect your children?

upon us. So when life feels out of control and your instinct tells you the other person deserves punishment for their failures, take a deep breath or a walk, and focus on what you can control. You can control the rules in your own home, the environment you create for your child, and the type of relationship you cultivate in demeanor and boundaries.

*"This is not the place to point out faults and shortcomings"*

## 1. Focus on Your Own Behavior

When we're in conflict, our first instinct is to focus on the other person: what they've done wrong, what they should change, or how they've hurt us. But you cannot change or control that person's behavior. You can control only your own. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" ([Romans 12:18](#)). God calls us to cultivate peace in the areas that depend

*"When we're in conflict, our first instinct is to focus on the other person"*

As you read this list, you may have the urge to point out where your ex-spouse has fallen short. Don't. Focus on your own behavior, since you cannot change anyone else's.

## 2. Communicate

Find a low-conflict way to communicate with your co-parent, but not through your children. This may be through a shared calendar, emails, texts, phone calls, or even a website set up specifically to facilitate communication. This is not the place to point out faults and shortcomings but to make a plan for the benefit of your children with minimal drama. If a spouse is

abusing a communication channel, like texting every few minutes and demanding a reply, put boundaries on when that channel may be used (“I’ll talk to you after work and not before”), or switch to another channel (“I’ve blocked you on text. I’ll call you after work”).

### 3. Avoid Talking about the Other Parent

Your child is a sponge; he or she soaks up what you say. Your child is made of 50% you and 50% the other parent. So if you speak ill of your ex-spouse, your child may feel like they inherited those bad characteristics. Kids are smart. If your ex is truly a bad person, your children will figure it out on their own. If what you have to say isn’t necessary (“time to go to your mom’s!”) or unequivocally positive (“your dad was really good at badminton, so I bet you’ll be good, too!”), leave it unsaid.

### 4. Keep “Grown Up Land” for the Grown Ups

Kids don’t need to know about child support payments or who is supplying their needs. Furthermore, children need to feel like the people in charge are confident in their choices. With few exceptions, visitation, living arrangements, and other adult topics should be left to the adults. Don’t be afraid of letting kids give input, but the ultimate decision should lie with the adults, and the adults should agree in front of the kids. Finally, your child cannot be your go-between. Kids should never be forced to bring messages, correspondence, or anything else between their parents.

### 5. Don’t Fight in Front of the Children

This one seems obvious but is much harder in practice. If drop-offs and pick-ups are full of tension, kids will have a more difficult time adjusting. Practice firm boundaries such as “we’re not talking about this now.” If an argument does break out, avoid calling your partner names or threatening him/her. Better to walk away and talk as adults later.

### 6. Stop Worrying about Who Is Right

No one wins a divorce. Unless you want to be stuck in that pattern forever, you’ll have to learn to let go of the ways you were wronged and the ways you might be wronged in the future. Put boundaries in place to minimize bad behavior, but you may never get an apology or vindication. God will have justice in the end. Move on, if not for your own sake, for the sake of your children.

### 7. Take Care of Yourself

Your children need you. Not only that, but they need the best you. If you’re not taking care of yourself, no one else will. Make sure you’re eating well, getting enough sleep, and exercising. Find some new hobbies that feed your soul. As parents, it’s often easy to forget about our own needs, but if our needs aren’t being met, it’s difficult to meet the needs of our children.

Divorce is difficult for everyone involved, and unfortunately its impact is often biggest on children. By providing them a safe, stable environment and caring for yourself, you can minimize their suffering.



# Establishing Discipline in the Blended Family Home

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

Blended families come together with unique challenges. Not only do they bring unfinished business from previous relationships, they also face the stress of blending two families into a new one. The new relationship has to mesh the traditions and parenting styles of two different families and often in a pressure cooker of emotions. So here are some thoughts on parenting in blended families:

## Strive to Keep a United Front and Work Together

There needs to be excellent communication between parents. If you as parents disagree on an issue, do so behind closed doors and not in front of the kids—parents need to support each other in front of the kids. It will undermine both the marriage relationship and the parenting if one parent rescues their children from discipline rather than following through with the consequences that you established together.

## Biological Parents Should Take the Lead in Discipline

First, check your own biases. It can be very difficult for a parent to support their spouse if they have an enmeshed relationship with their biological children.

Parents who are too close to their kids can endanger their marriage by supporting their kids over their spouse. Second, rules will be more readily accepted when established and reinforced by the biological parent who already has an established, loving relationship. It is difficult to make or enforce rules outside the context of a relationship. The stepparent

*“Parents need to be on the same page about how they are going to handle discipline. Discipline should be discussed prior to entering into a relationship together to assure you have compatible parenting philosophies”*

needs to be empowered to act as a parent and intervene when needed, but as much as possible allow the biological parent to take the lead with discipline. Having the biological parent handle discipline will prevent the new stepparent from being vilified as the bad guy. Third, since discipline is better received within

the context of the relationship where trust has already been established, let the stepparent take time to invest in the children and their interests so trust can be built. Listen to your stepchildren's fears and concerns about the new family structure.

## Consistency Is Important for Discipline to Be Effective

Parents need to be on the same page about how they are going to handle discipline. Discipline should be discussed prior to entering into a relationship together to assure you have compatible parenting philosophies. If one parent is strict and another is a push over, work out a compromise so all children have consistency to feel secure. Be careful to enforce the rules for all kids at an age-appropriate level. If the rules are always changing, children never know where they stand, producing much anxiety within the family.

## Prayer Will Be an Essential Ingredient

Prayer is a powerful tool for impacting our families. Prayer guides us to turn over to God the things that we are unable to change. God can soften hearts, build

bridges, and impact things outside of our control. We free ourselves when we give God control. Prayer is also very beneficial to our marriages. Couples who pray together significantly reduce their risk of divorce. Praying together for your children will unite your heart with that of your spouse. We are blessed when we can share the concerns on our hearts with God and with one another.

## Seek Support

Seeking support from a trained counselor can be very beneficial in managing the delicate balance in blended families. Couples need to seek support early on in the relationship before animosity is burned into the fibers of the relationship. Children and parents enter these marriages still carrying the baggage from the previous relationships and benefit from professionals guiding them through the unpacking. Connecting with a small group or joining a book study can provide valuable support. Many resources are available at [SmartStepfamilies.com](http://SmartStepfamilies.com).

In short, the rules for parenting are not fundamentally different for blended families (unity, consistency, relationship), but the webs of blended relationships present pointed complications which need to be handled with wisdom.

# Spiritual Parenting: Catch the Passion

BY REV. STEVEN KOSTER

In scripture parents are told, “Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” ([Ephesians 6:4](#)). Our mandate as parents is to help our children grow into their identity as citizens of God’s kingdom and to inspire them to live a life of faith, using God’s gifts to reflect his love. But how do they come to know this as their identity?

*“Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”*

In studies like Christian Smith’s [Soul Searching](#), it’s clear that parents are the most influential people in a child’s life, especially when it comes to spiritual

*“It’s clear that parents are the most influential people in a child’s life, especially when it comes to spiritual formation”*

formation. More than pastors, youth leaders, or the friends they hang around with, a parent’s spiritual beliefs are the most formative for children, and that influence continues into young adulthood.

## Children Are Passion Detectors—They Care about What You Care about

Some years ago, our family joined a mass bike tour. My kids were so excited about biking across Iowa as a family. You would not think that pedaling hundreds of miles in the hottest week of July would be something teenagers would anticipate gladly. So why were they so excited to spend a week in the heat of the Iowa sun? They caught our enthusiasm for the adventure! They had heard us talk often about previous trips. They saw all of our pictures. They knew our biking friends. They heard us laugh about the fun times and brag about some of the challenges we had weathered over past trips. We had shared our love for this place and activity, and they wanted to experience it for themselves. Our passion became their passion.

## Make Your Faith Visible

Can your kids see what excites you? A sports team? Gardening? Maybe a favorite vacation spot? What

would they name as the thing that gets you excited? [Deuteronomy 6:5](#) calls us to love the Lord with every part of us—our heart, soul, and strength! Maybe you should ask your family to name your top five favorite things and see where your faith ranks. If faith isn't at the top, it is time to reprioritize.

*“We can’t expect our kids to embrace spirituality if we are spiritually malnourished”*

## Feed Your Soul

We can't expect our kids to embrace spirituality if we are spiritually malnourished. You simply can't give what you don't have. If you are uninterested in belonging to a community of faith, why would they? If you are uninterested in spiritual matters in the everyday, why would they? [Deuteronomy 6:5](#) continues by telling us to put God's Word into our hearts. Get into your Bible, and get excited about what you are learning. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with a passion to learn more about him! Get curious and dig deep into God's Word. Let it

become the guide for the way you live your life.

## Share Your Learning

After you dig into God's Word yourself, the next step is to let what you learn spill over to your children. [Deuteronomy 6:7](#) tells us to impress God's Word upon our children by sharing it with them throughout the day. Talk about how God is at work in your life if you want your kids to catch your spiritual passion. Talk about your quiet time, talk about your worship, talk about your life of service, talk about how God shines in through the cracks of the day. If you can share from your own learning, you can grow in faith together.

## Build a Community

While it's clear parents are the greatest single influence, children that feel included by a group of adults develop powerful bonds to that community. In other words, encourage your children and your church friends to get connected. Intergenerational connections is another great predictor of children who grow strong faith as adults. On a given Sunday morning, are there other adults at your congregation with whom your kids would be comfortable having a conversation?

Let your kids catch your passion!

# Building Blocks of Faith

BY REV. DEB & STEVEN KOSTER

What do kids need to cultivate a strong and growing faith? It depends somewhat on the child and their current developmental stage of relating to the world. And yet, all kids need some of the same elements to grow fully into a multidimensional faith.

In a series of books, Robert & Laura Keeley have described faith-formational building blocks—four fundamental elements out of which faith is woven that help children grow spiritually into age-appropriate levels.

## Identity: I Belong

Faith is developed in the context of relationships, so children seek out places where they feel a sense of belonging. Obviously, children are bonded to their parents, and parents remain the most influential element in forming faith, particularly fathers who take

*“Obviously, children are bonded to their parents, and parents remain the most influential element in forming faith, particularly fathers who take their faith seriously”*

their faith seriously. Yet also, children need to connect with mentors within a wider community of faith for that community to feel like theirs, and not just their parents' church. Christian mentors also serve to guide young

*“In a safe place of belonging, children are free to learn and grow in their understanding of who God is and what role they play in his big story”*

people through life's challenges. Children who connect to other adults in a faith community will feel welcomed and accepted and come to consider the congregation their own. In this context they feel safe to stretch themselves and explore their gifts as they participate in the life of the church. If your faith community engages all generations to participate together, mentoring can happen naturally as people connect with those outside of their peer groups.

## Knowledge: I Understand

In a safe place of belonging, children are free to learn and grow in their understanding of who God is



*“Young children, who tend to process experience through stories can be key to helping children know a God who is mysterious and who knows them for who they are”*

and what role they play in his big story. Children come to a knowledge of both the mystery and closeness of who God is and develop a relationship with him that will grow over the years. For young children, who tend to process experience through stories, recounting Bible stories can be key to helping children know a God who is mysterious and who knows them for who they are. For older children, some will want to debate theology as they wrestle with abstract ideas, but many mostly just want to know that they belong to the people around them. The story of God and his love for his children is heard in many different ways such as testimony, singing, and scripture reading. The rituals of sacrament are guides to point the congregation to the work that God has done and is continuing to do for his people.

## Vision: I Hope

In the faith that we embrace, our hope becomes anchored in something that is bigger than ourselves. God himself is the King of the universe, yet he wants to know us closely. God shows himself to us but remains tantalizingly impossible to understand. In the gospel we find our hope for our lives and a future that moves us beyond the despair of this world. In the gospel promise we have hope for our relationships with one another as well as the world in which we live.

## Calling: I Serve

God has gifted each of us with unique talents for serving his kingdom. As we connect in our faith community, we are encouraged to use our gifts to serve others. Offering children the chance to participate in worship, service projects, and other congregational activities communicates that they are part of God's team. The church becomes a place where we are challenged to see beyond ourselves to care for one another, our neighborhood, and beyond. In this setting we discover that God equips us for the tasks that he places before us.

# Chapter 2: Parenting Younger Children

This chapter explores the unique joys of disciplining children in their first decade or so, before puberty begins. Not only do kids grow quickly in these years, but this is also when new parents learn the craft of providing, protecting, and pruning, and big patterns of family life are laid down for decades to come. Parents need unity together to help plant the seeds for great learning, discipline, and faith formation for the years to come.



# New Parents!

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

When a new baby enters your house, joy, chaos, and sleepless nights tend to follow. We all enter parenthood with anxieties about how to face the task of parenting. Will I bond with my child? Will I be a good parent? Will I mess things up? Should I pick up and comfort the baby every time he cries, or is it good to let the baby cry it out sometimes and learn to self-soothe a bit? All of this uncertainty can cause conflict in the house, especially if the parents take different approaches to parenting.

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't tell us how to handle all the minute-by-minute issues of parenting, and kids don't come with a guidebook. [Psalm 103:13](#) says, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." We are made in the image of our compassionate God, and we follow his lead of demonstrating love in all of our relationships. This is true in all the relationships that God has given to us; we should let love be the guide. Whether that is in-laws, parents, spouse, or infant, love should characterize each interaction.

## Be a Team with Your Spouse

An important place to start is staying on the same page as your spouse. Talk about concerns, and find strategies on which you both agree. There is no perfect way to parent. God chose you for the job, and he will equip you for the task. Recognize that we all parent

out of past experiences and that every approach will be different. If a wife felt neglected by her parents, she may be adamant about picking up the baby every time he cries. A husband on the other hand, may think that it's all right to let the baby cry at times to avoid spoiling the baby, especially if that was the way his parents raised him. We will never parent in exactly the same way as our spouse, but it's important to communicate with each other and understand each other. Establish the habit of working out compromises and keeping a united front so you can navigate the challenges of parenting as a team.

## Set Boundaries Together

How much should the in-laws visit? How will you manage outside commitments? How will you navigate household chores? Life with a newborn will involve reprioritizing commitments. Hobbies and outside relationships may need to take a back seat for a time. Life may seem quite different, so how can you find the best way to parent as a team?

## Sleep When the Baby Sleeps

When the baby quiets down, it will be powerfully tempting to use the opportunity for some uninterrupted time on chores—moving the laundry, cleaning the kitchen, reclaiming a little bit of orderly space. But

chances are you should nap instead, because when the baby wakes up, your chance to catch up on lost sleep will disappear. Sleep when the baby sleeps, and you will have the energy and clear-mindedness to do the chores later.

## There Is No One Perfect Way

The most important thing to learn when taking a new baby home is finding true priorities. The house can feel completely off balance when the baby comes home for the first time. There are skills to learn and routines to establish while still running a household. Sleep is disrupted causing exhausted parents to stumble through the new experience with less than ideal capacity for reasoning. You are in uncharted territory, and the landscape changes daily. What soothed the baby yesterday may not work today. The nap routine may be completely discarded by a sick infant or outside demands for your attention. So how can you navigate life with a newborn?

- Remember your job is not to make other adults happy, but to care for your baby and yourselves first, until you have capacity to deal with the desires of others.
- Work as a team. Tag-team parenting can allow each spouse a chance to rest and recharge.
- Be kind to yourself. It is never easy to give so unconditionally, and sometimes you just need a shower. If you don't care for yourself you will have little to give to your family.

- Cut your spouse some slack. They are new at this too and need your support. Remember that you are on the same team and they might be your one hope of getting rest!
- Lower your standards. Perfectionism does not belong in the house with a newborn. Life does not need to be perfect to be enjoyed.
- Talk about your feelings together. Discuss what boundaries you can set up to ensure that your spouse does not experience feelings of neglect with the arrival of a new baby.
- Ask for help. Everyone loves a chance to care for a new baby, let them help. An occasional babysitter and a date night can rejuvenate your marriage!
- Keep perspective. Life with a newborn does not last forever. They eventually do sleep through the night and even let you rest now and again.
- Rely on God. There may not be time for lengthy devotions, but prayer can always be on our breath. God will equip you for the challenges that you face.
- Focus on the joy. There are so many lovely moments that you might miss if you are focused only on the challenges.

New infants take a lot of time and energy, but they also bring much joy. It is easier to find the joys when you are working together. "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" ([Psalm 127:3](#)).

# Advice from an Experienced Parent: Five Things Empty Nesters Never Say

BY KIM SULLIVAN

Many of my children's friends are now married and having babies. Life feels like it's come full circle as the babies I once held now have babies of their own.

Recently, as I held a newborn, a new mother asked for some advice from me as an experienced parent. Of course there is all the practical advice about diaper types, nursing vs. bottles, and which baby monitor works well, but I wanted to concentrate on the more important matters of raising a child in a way that gives them every chance to become a godly person. In doing so, I reflected on conversations I've had with my empty-nester friends and thought of five things I have never heard an empty-nester say:

*"Being a parent is very time consuming. It is easy to wake up distracted"*

## 1. I Wish I Had Spent Less Time with My Kids

Even those of us who have home-educated our children and have had them around 24/7 don't feel this way. Those families who have done well with family time still wish they could have spent more individual

time with their children. Family time establishes a corporate code and clanship, and individual time helps a child to distinguish how they are unique and called as an individual to greatness.

## 2. I Wish I Had Freaked Out More

Some of the most regrettable memories I have are those when I was impatient with my family about things that really didn't matter. Improperly made beds, spilled milk, and imperfections are not reasons for losing tempers. In fact, if our children lost their tempers over such things with their friends or siblings, we would correct them. If I had to do it over again, I would live out the saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff...and it's almost all small stuff" in every room of the house. Before you get agitated, ask yourself how much of this problem will matter in five years.

## 3. I Wish I Had Prayed for My Children Less

Being a parent is very time consuming. It is easy to wake up distracted! But one of my heroes in the faith, Martin Luther, once said, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." Making sure that you are filled up with personal devotion time can



*“God made the best use of their service by training them in each of their futures”*

be like putting on spiritual glasses to see the events of your day with spiritual eyes. Without that time in God's Word and heavenly conversation, we allow our schedule to determine how we view the day rather than being led by the Holy Spirit. Another powerful way to implement more prayer time for your children is to sneak into their rooms while they are sleeping and lay hands on them speaking a blessing into their life.

*“What I will be held accountable for is to provide opportunities for my family”*

## 4. I Wish I Had Taught My Kids to Eat Less Healthy

This one might seem more trivial than the others. However, because so much of our adult life is spent on dieting, exercising, or learning to be healthy, I wonder how much more time we would have to devote to godly pursuits without this relearning process. Recently, I found myself telling a young person to enjoy an unhealthy dinner and dessert while they were young and thin. Immediately, I was convicted. Why should I encourage poor eating habits to someone knowing how much harder it will be to discipline their body later?

## 5. I Wish My Kids Were More Involved in Extracurricular Activities and Less Involved in Church

This is a big one! So many of my friends became ridiculously involved in running their children here and there to activities that were good but not best. As each of our children's gifts and talents became evident, my husband and I would prayerfully choose activities that would groom them in their interests and gifts. Many times these opportunities came in serving at our local church. One of my sons is a gifted leader, and at the age of 16 he was the director of a group of young puppeteers who ministered in parks and nursing homes. My other son was interested in techy things. He ended up being the sound technician for our children's department at age 13. He even had several adults under his leadership! My daughter has the voice of an angel and was the youngest worship leader in our adult services. Our focus as a family was service to the body of Christ. God made the best use of their service by training them in each of their futures.

A few years ago, my oldest son interviewed my mother. One of the questions he asked her was, “What do you feel is your biggest accomplishment?” Her answer humbled me. “That I raised a daughter who is passionate for the cause of Christ.” As a parent, I will not stand before heaven's throne regarding perfectly made beds, running to sporting events, or even perfectly behaved children. What I will be held accountable for is to provide opportunities for my family to watch me walk out my beliefs in a tangible way, ultimately placing their hands into the hands of the Savior.

# To Spank or Not to Spank

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

Tantrums, defiance, and blatant disobedience from your child are behaviors that merit discipline. What is the most effective way to redirect your child's behavior? Is spanking a biblically sanctioned approach to discipline? Many parents wrestle with questions like these as they discern the best way to correct their child.

## Biblical Grounds

When supporting their position, proponents of spanking often cite biblical evidence like, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" ([Proverbs 13:24](#)) or "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol" ([Proverbs 23:13-14](#)). These verses show us the importance of pruning bad behavior. Discipline is one of the ways that we show love to our children. We do it because we care enough to confront and redirect our children's bad behavior into something better. These texts make clear that discipline is an essential component of nurturing our children, and they show how discipline can guide children to righteousness or at least curtail some destructive behavior. But the Bible does not prescribe spanking as the only way to discipline. So, should we spank? Is spanking the best way to accomplish discipline? And what are the challenges of using spanking as a means of discipline?

*"Obedience produced by spanking rarely changes a child's behavior over the long haul, because the obedience is motivated by fear, not understanding and remorse"*

## Spanking Provides Only Short-lived Benefits

Spanking typically provides immediate results. When we spank a child who threw a toy at a sibling, the child does tend to immediately obey and refrain from throwing the toy again. However, obedience produced by spanking rarely changes a child's behavior over the long haul, because the obedience is motivated by fear, not understanding and remorse. When spanked, a child changes their behavior because they fear being hit again, not because of any internal motivation to change. Spanking may be effective for short-term results where the consequences are high. Swatting a toddler on the backside to keep them from going into traffic or giving a slap on a hand about to touch the hot stove may be effective ways to keep a child safe until they are more capable of understanding danger. If you are only interested in the short-term result there is merit

in a spanking. However, in the long term, it is important for parents to allow their children to experience the natural consequences of their actions. This creates a link between their bad behavior and the negative consequences, and it internally motivates children to change their behavior.

## Spanking Can Cause Confusion

Children who experience natural consequences connect their behaviors with the results of their actions and begin to internalize better choices. In contrast, when parents step in and spank, the child's focus moves off their behavior and onto the parent. Often, children will become angry at a parent for inflicting pain. They lose the connection between their behavior and its consequences because the pain they experience comes from outside of the situation instead of from within it. It is hard for children to see the love behind a spanking; to a child it looks and feels like violence.

*“When a child experiences natural consequences of their poor choice, the parent can walk alongside them through it with some empathy”*

## Spanking Can Fracture Relationships

Spanking can undermine the trust and love in the parent-child relationship and instill distrust and fear. [Ephesians 6](#) instructs children to be obedient, but it also cautions parents not to make children angry and exasperated. When a parent spanks a child, the

parent is at the center of the punishment. When a child experiences natural consequences of their poor choice, the parent can walk alongside them through it with some empathy. Other forms of discipline allow parents to be empathetic about the consequences their child will experience. Removing privileges, setting limits, reflecting on the bad choice, and requiring apologies or making amends are all options available for parents to redirect behavior. A parent can say “I am sure it is disappointing to lose your computer privileges” or “I know it is no fun to sit on the time-out bench and think about your bad choice.” These expressions of empathy show solidarity with the child and clearly reflects the parent's love and care.

## Spanking Can Become Abusive

Spanking has the potential to evolve into physical abuse. Spanking can too often become an impulsive lashing out of anger by a frustrated parent. Striking a child offers a release of the parent's pent-up anger, and it can be easy for self-control to fall away as emotions take over. This can make it difficult for an angry parent to know when to stop. When we spank, we can be tempted to discipline out of rage and revenge rather than reason.

## Other Forms of Discipline Are More Effective

Discipline is necessary for guiding our children, but not all forms of discipline are equal. It makes sense that we would want to use the most effective means to discipline our children and avoid causing unnecessary harm in the process. Establishing consequences for disobedience is a very effective way to help children make the mental link between their behavior and its effects. Removing privileges as a means of discipline protects the parent-child relationship. When children are warned in advance what the consequences will be,

then they begin to recognize the results of their actions when they occur. “If you don’t clean up your room, then we will remove some of the toys so that you don’t have such a hard time keeping it clean.” “If you can’t get your homework assignments turned in, then we will help you clear your calendar to make time for school work.” Experiencing these consequences can effectively guide children to make better choices without risking harm to them or to our relationship with them. It is our role as parents to guide our children. “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” ([Proverbs 22:6](#)).

Children will test the limits of what is acceptable or unacceptable to determine when a parent will actually follow through with consequences. It is how they discern their boundaries and discover their place

*“Discipline is necessary for guiding our children, but not all forms of discipline are equal”*

in the world. Our role as parents is exercising effective discipline to guide children to choose wisely moving forward. So as you decide whether or not to spank, consider the options available and choose the best way to redirect your child’s bad behavior. Spanking may be effective in the short term, but remember that our role as parents is to lovingly think long term about how our approach to discipline will empower our children to make good decisions for life!

# Discipline Is About Making Disciples

BY NADIA SWEARINGEN-FRIESEN

While walking through a big-box store, I was suddenly accosted by a small child with a styrofoam sword. He looked to be about age 5, and he growled as he repeatedly struck me, a stranger, with this toy he had found in a nearby aisle. I glanced around for a parent as I tried to walk away. Sir Swashbuckler followed swiftly and continued with his attack. I glanced around again. Slowly, a woman came around

*“Don’t ever let yourself believe that there is nothing you can do. Your voice, your lessons, and your discipline are building into your children and helping them to learn to navigate the world around them”*

the corner and saw her son striking me the sword. She said nothing to him, but smiled at me. “What can you do?” she began. “He is just spirited.” With a final whomp to my waist, he ran off to find a new victim. I stood stock-still, mouth open in shock. As a matter of fact, there is so much you can do!

## Don’t Abdicate Responsibility

As a mom to four children, I am well-acquainted with the reality of a “spirited child.” While my children may look well-behaved when out and about, this is not the way they came. It is, instead, what they have been taught. And when the teaching is difficult, which it often is, I remind myself that helping them learn to behave is actually a gift to them that will open doors and build connections as they grow into the life that will be their own. Don’t ever let yourself believe that there is nothing you can do. Your voice, your lessons, and your discipline are building into your children and helping them to learn to navigate the world around them.

## Set Appropriate Limits

All children have moments where their endless energy will win the battle, but if we are offering appropriate locations for this to occur, we are teaching our kids to channel that enthusiasm to places where it can be expressed. Truth is, there is nothing wrong with a foam sword battle. What a perfect activity for a backyard or basement! But attacking strangers with toy weapons in public is nothing for us to accept. Choose to set limits that teach respect for others.



# Don't Give a Choice when There is None

Scripture calls children to obedience, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” ([Ephesians 6:1](#)). But how can we make obedience happen? As a college student working at a Christian camp, I was taught a simple mantra to help with the behavior of campers. This simple sentence was repeated so frequently that I still hear it more than 20 years later in the voices of the coordinators who first shared this wisdom: “Do not give a choice where a choice is not given.”

I remembered this statement when it was time to guide my children to change activities, begin devotions, head to bed, or listen in church. We will find ourselves in far fewer power struggles if we refrain from offering a choice when choice does not exist. There are times in each day when we need our children to simply obey. We need them to follow a direction in a timely fashion. We do not need them to evaluate the direction or to choose a response.

However, if we are not clear in our communication, we may be offering them a choice where a choice is not given.

- “Can you please finish your spinach?”
- “Will you get ready for bed?”
- “Would you like to pick up your toys?”

Implied in these questions is a choice. The result will likely be spinach uneaten, pajamas not donned, toys left out.

## Claim Your Authority

It would be better to speak instruction with the authority that God has given to you. Children are to honor their father and mother ([Ephesians 6:2](#)). God put parents in charge, not children, so parents should assume the lead. It is a parent's job to teach their

children how to listen and obey, and how to wisely choose. If you really want to see an obedient response, remove the choice so that your voice carries authority instead of asking your child's permission.

- “Please finish your spinach.”
- “Please get ready for bed.”
- “Please pick up your toys.”

*“It's training for the day when they are on their own and need to care for themselves and others”*

## Offer Clear Expectations

Direct and clear statements communicate what we would like our children to do and reduce the chance that they will choose differently. Teaching children to clean up after themselves and to exercise responsible behavior are not unreasonable expectations. It's training for the day when they are on their own and need to care for themselves and others. Basic responsibility should not be a choice. All children need to learn to discern, but not every decision contains a choice. There are times to offer choices, but there are also times when immediate compliance is necessary.

## Give Direction with Warmth

Being clear in your direction toward good behavior doesn't have to be cold or in a vacuum. You can also make things a game—“who can pick up the toys the fastest?” You can use routine schedules to your benefit so that patterns set the expectations automatically—“First we pick up the toys. Then it's bath time. Then we read a story. Then it's bedtime, every night.”

## Give Options within Your Expectations

Meeting your expectations is not really a choice, but there may be options so the child can exercise some control. Cleaning up is an expectation, but you might give a choice of either putting away laundry or putting away toys first. Getting ready for bed now is an expectation, but putting on PJs first or brushing teeth first is an option. Do not give a choice where a choice is not given, but give options you can live with.

## Exercise Wisdom

As parents, we can exercise wisdom so that our children know when obedience is expected. Wisdom is a gift from God that he freely gives to his children ([James 1:5](#)). We can respond better to our children when we slow down enough to be responsive rather than just reactive. So take a deep breath before issuing instructions. As we lean on God's understanding rather than our own, he will make the path clear.

## Help Them Practice

Strategically offer choices each day so that children can practice decision-making while the decisions are small. Let them learn to process decisions while understanding that there are non-negotiables that they must respond to in a way that is responsible and clear.

Teaching our kids to follow directions and choose with wisdom has spiritual implications as well. Our desire as parents is that our children recognize God's voice and respond with obedience. The day will come when they will hear, "Take up your cross and follow me," or "Choose this day whom you will serve."

All children will not learn in the same way. But we have been entrusted with these little lives and with the job of preparing them for what is to come. You are the perfect parent for your child. All of the work you do today will prepare them for the place they will play in the kingdom. The discipline you are offering will help them to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit that is developing in their young lives.

# Six Steps to Inspiring Spiritual Growth in Your Family

BY KIM SULLIVAN

In the passage [Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#), sometimes called the “Shema” (a Hebrew word which means “listen”), Moses invites God’s people to hear and pay attention to God’s instructions. He was concerned with how to transfer faith to the next generation. The instructions he gave are still relevant for us today. Here are a few ideas from the Shema on how to teach your children the ways of God and transfer faith to the next generation.

*“Let God’s commands grow in your heart before you expect them to grow in the hearts of your family”*

## Put God’s Word in Your Heart

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart” ([Deuteronomy 6:6](#)). Even within our home, experience breeds credibility. In other words, children will be much more likely to believe our words if we have lived out the principles we are attempting to communicate. When our family sees us poring over the Bible and submitting to its commands, they are far more likely to respond when you expect them to do

the same. In other words, lead by example. Let God’s commands grow in your heart before you expect them to grow in the hearts of your family.

## Teach God’s Commands to Your Children

“You shall teach them diligently to your children...” ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). Teaching calls for some intentionality. There are so many ways to teach God’s commands to our children. You can:

- Teach and memorize the Ten Commandments
- Play scripture memorization games
- Listen to scripture memorization music CD’s
- Read and pray scripture together
- Memorize the Lord’s Prayer or other scripture
- Talk about God’s Word at Your Table

“[A]nd [you] shall talk of them when you sit in your house...” ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). Reading the Bible at the dinner table is an old tradition for good reason. [ReFrame Media](#) has a wonderful short daily devotional called [Today](#). You can sign up to receive this great tool to make it very easy to discuss God’s Word together. There are tons of family devotional materials out there that are age appropriate.

## Talk about God's Commands as You Travel

"[W]hen you walk by the way..." ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). There were seasons when the bulk of our family time was spent in the car, running errands to soccer practice, to church, to school activities, and on and on. This is a great time to play Christian music or a podcast, with a range of age-appropriate offerings. In doing so, you are introducing your children to expressing their walk with God through music. Time in the car can also be a great time to go over scripture memorization. But I think that the most important thing I saw happen in my car was when I seized opportunities to discover teaching moments. It was in the car that I prayed a prayer of repentance with my son, when I explained scripture passages and how they relate to real life situations, and when we prayed together as a family for a church member who was in the hospital.

## Make Bedtime Prayer Time

"[W]hen you lie down..." ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). When your children are young, this is a natural thing to do. As you tuck them in you can pray with them. As they get

older this discipline can prove more difficult, especially when they may be up later than you are! However, you can still pray for them before you go to bed, or stop in their room and ask for requests. Asking for prayer requests lets your children know that you are bringing them before the throne causing them to be more aware of God's workings in their lives.

## Greet Your Children with His Grace on Your Lips

"[A]nd when you rise up" ([Deuteronomy 6:7](#)). Perhaps you are able to share a scripture with your children over breakfast before you all go your different ways. Pray for their teachers, classmates, and their studies. You could also put a note in their lunch letting them know how special they are to you and their Heavenly Father. They may act like they don't like it, but don't let them fool you! Words of affirmation are one of the greatest things we can do for our children. God's Word always inspires transformation; it does not return empty! Not only will you see spiritual fruit in the lives of your children by committing to train them up in the way they should go, but you will also see growth in your own walk with God!

# Spiritual Disciplines for Family Life

BY DR. ROB TOORNSTRA

Last weekend, my parents brought me a few of my old toys to pass along to my kids. Included in my childhood treasures was our family storybook Bible, dating to my toddler years. As I flipped through the pages and enjoyed anew the full-color illustrations, memories flooded my mind—memories of sitting around the dinner table each night as my dad read the well-loved stories that make up the grand story of scripture. I could even make out the faded pen marks where he had recorded the dates we began and finished our way through the Bible. God used this Bible to shape my faith from an early age!

*“Learning to pray means learning to enjoy being in the presence of God”*

As parents, we have the privilege and responsibility of shepherding our children into a love for Jesus. [Proverbs 22:6](#) urges us to “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” While this is no guarantee that doing our part as parents means that our children will automatically exhibit strong faith, this wisdom reminds us that habits that we teach our children become deeply embedded in their hearts. Faith is a gift only God can give, but the Holy Spirit is pleased to use certain disciplines as the means to create that faith.

Many useful practices can help you form the faith of your children. The following are three basic building blocks for nurturing faith in your family.

## Read Scripture

At a young age, one of the most important things you can do is read and re-read the stories of the Bible. Even more important than grasping the “moral” of the story is simply learning the story! There are many good children’s Bibles that tell stories in an easily accessible way. In particular, [The Jesus Storybook Bible](#), written by Sally Lloyd-Jones, is especially good because it connects each story to the person and work of Jesus. Consider asking age-appropriate questions meant to teach careful listening to scripture. Questions can start by looking for content, and as children grow older, can help them understand meaning, and finally, can help them connect a particular story with the bigger story of the Bible. Encouraging children to read the Bible on their own is also a useful way of helping them grow in their faith.

## Practice Praying

Learning to pray means learning to enjoy being in the presence of God. As early as two, we taught our children a simple prayer to say at bedtime. At about the age of three or four, we’ve encouraged them to

pray before bed, simply talking to Jesus about their day—concerns they have for friends, worries about school, reasons for giving thanks, and expressions of love for Jesus. Prayer is not mastered in a short span; it is learned by doing it, in the everyday, through the crucible of crises, within moments of sadness, and as a spontaneous expression of thanks. Such moments can be occasions to model turning to God in prayer, and expressing gratitude, dependence, sadness, or happiness. As a family, we've also practiced saying the Lord's Prayer together each morning before breakfast and sharing prayer needs with one another around the dinner table. This has the added advantage of keeping us connected to one another as a family.

## Participate in a Worshiping Community

It is sometimes said that children are “the future of the church.” While this is true, it is equally true that children and youth are the church of “right now.” Children ought not to wait until they are older to get involved in the life of the church—in fact, involvement now is vital for their long-term spiritual health. Children learn the rhythms of worship as they sing and pray with

the body of Christ on Sunday morning. You can help by explaining the meaning of the various elements of worship. For example, listening to a sermon isn't just “Hearing a pastor teach us,” but is actually learning to listen and understand “what God says to us.” Equally important is helping children play an active part in the life of the church. This could include serving as a helper in the nursery, reading a scripture passage, participating in a church-wide service project, taking a meal to a family in need, or praying for members with specific concerns. If your church doesn't yet offer ways for children to participate, why not talk to your pastor about age-appropriate ways for your children to get involved? In doing so, children begin to see that they belong to the church, and that they are not passive observers, but active participants.

There are, no doubt, many more ideas that will help nurture your children in the faith: singing together, learning the Apostle's Creed, writing to missionaries abroad, or learning to share about Jesus with others. It's important to remember that faith-nurture is not a sprint, but a marathon! The signs of growth will often not be recognized immediately, but by God's grace, these disciplines will help shape the faith of your children, and when they are old, they will not depart from it.



# Chapter 3: Life Skills

A great deal of parenting is teaching children how to do things and modeling which things are important. Like sponges, children will absorb what overflows from our hearts, so in a sense, there's no faking our true priorities. Yet there's so much intentionality parents should bring to helping kids become self-sufficient stewards of the gifts God has given them. Too often we underestimate their abilities or find it quicker to do it ourselves. But teaching with intention from the earliest ages will pay big dividends for years to come.



# 8 Things Your Kids Will Thank You for Later

BY KIM SULLIVAN

Children complain. They are children after all. But valuable skills and character are formed when children are prodded to do things like music lessons or household chores. It may seem easier at the time to manage things on your own, but teaching these life skills benefits everyone in the family and sets patterns for ongoing participation. Teaching children how to contribute to the family gives children both a sense of accomplishment as well as a sense of belonging by having a positive role in the family. Children feel good when given opportunities to contribute to family life. Here are just a few meaningful life-long habits to help your children cultivate:

## 1. Encourage Your Children to Have a Creative Outlet

This may not seem like something to complain about, and often it isn't at first, but later when there's practice to be done or projects to be finished (or cleaned up) you may experience some resistance. It is important for every human being to imitate our Creator by regularly participating in creativity. After all, we are created in his image ([Genesis 1:26](#)).

## 2. Teach Your Kids to Cook

I can't tell you how often my grown children's friends and significant others have benefited from the fact

that they know how to cook and bake! It also helps to include menu planning and grocery shopping to the mix. Whether your child ends up living alone, with roommates, or gets married, they will appreciate this ability later in life. Like many other chores, often this task is welcomed at first but eventually loses its luster. However, the benefit to your child later will be great. They will save time and money with these skills, and their families will thank you!

## 3. Teach Your Kids How to Do Laundry

Many of my friends' kids have gone off to college to spread their wings and to accidentally tie-dye and shrink most of their clothes! Cultivating good laundry habits gives you help now, saves money in the long run, and teaches good stewardship over what God has given.

## 4. Teach Your Kids to Be Hospitable

Encourage sleepovers, tea parties, and bonfires, but encourage your kids to do the planning and preparations themselves (with your supervision of course). Plant this idea by showing them great hospitality in practice. We used to make a hotel suite

for grandma & grandpa when they came to visit. We would place our prettiest towels on the bed, arrange a small coffee service table, and even place mints on the pillows! It was such a pleasure to see my kids do the same for their friends when they would come over. Hospitality skills are valuable and surprisingly rare.

## 5. Teach Your Kids to Pray

Make faith part of the everyday, and expect participation. Ask them to lead in family prayer, out loud and in front of everyone. Ask about their daily prayer. Most of all, teach by example. Let your children see you pursue God's Word and presence. Allow them to see you turn to God for small things as well as the big stuff. Car won't start? Pray for God's wisdom, and try it again. Rejoice when God answers prayer immediately! Be patient when he doesn't. Establish a family worship time. This shows the family how to budget time for God into our daily schedules. According to scripture, we are to thread our conversation about God and his commands throughout our daily tasks, proving him to be important in every detail of our lives. "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" ([Deuteronomy 6:7, NIV](#)).

## 6. Encourage Your Children to Show Gratitude

Ask your children to write thank-you cards, bake cookies, write an email, and do other acts of kindness in order to express appreciation for others. Make sure that this isn't only done in response to a gift, but also randomly as a result of the gift of friendship. This will prove to offer multiple benefits as your children get older. For one thing, displaying gratitude will set them apart from their peers and co-workers allowing for promotion and appreciation in every area of life. Even more importantly, the habit of gratitude leads to a joyful

life! What better gift can we give to our children than that of a life full of joy?

## 7. Teach Your Kids How to Budget

Your future children-in-law will thank you for some fiscal thoughtfulness. Especially when your kids include charity and a savings account in the spending plan. Even as adults we often cringe at the idea of a "budget," but when we have a car repair we haven't counted on, a home improvement to be completed, or a dream vacation opportunity, we will rejoice that we have planned for these things.

## 8. Teach Your Children to Be Generous

It is important to know how to budget and stick to it, but I feel it is even more important to know when to give to the point of sacrifice. There are key moments in life when God moves us to give up our vacation fund, or dip into our savings in order to benefit the body of Christ, or fill a specific need elsewhere. In order to prepare for a Christian conference, I once had the kids help me organize a garage sale for the sole purpose of being able to give more in the offerings. It is good for us to give not just our leftovers, but things we love and value as well. God always blesses in return, and we learn to trust God on another level as a result.

Teaching our children these kinds of lessons can be difficult now, but the fruits of these teachings will follow them the rest of their lives. These things hold value that children will appreciate and thank you for down the road. Pushing through the heavy sighs and eye rolls will be worth the success and joy your children will experience later. "No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way" ([Hebrews 12:11, NLT](#)).

# Teaching Children Respect

BY DEBI MITCHELL, MS, LMFT

“**T**rain up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” ([Proverbs 22:6 KJV](#)).

My pulse races faster than an Indy 500 driver when I see a child act disrespectfully in public. I confess I desire to meddle in someone else’s situation, knowing it would likely become messier than a toddler eating Spaghetti-O’s. I hear people grumble, “Kids these days...” and I know I’m not alone.

No child is perfect, yet respectfulness should be a baseline behavior for everyone. Respectful children, teens, and young adults do exist. When children act disrespectfully, parents can often feel helpless as to how to redirect behavior. Understanding what respect is and sharing some respect-teaching tools can guide us to healthier relationships.

## Understanding Respect

We know respect when we see it. Webster’s dictionary defines respect as: “to regard as worthy of special consideration; to consider worthy of esteem; or, to regard with honor.” Respect sends a message that someone is valuable; he or she has worth.

Most people consider respect something given and something earned. This is biblical. Paul reminds us, “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect,

then respect; if honor, then honor” ([Romans 13:7, NIV](#)).

However, if we believe that everyone is made in the image of God, and that Jesus valued all of humanity enough to die on the cross for them, we should also value all people. In fact, God commands us by saying, “Show proper respect to everyone...” ([1 Peter 2:17a, NIV](#)). In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul describes it this way: “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too” ([Philippians 2:3-4, NLT](#)). This is the attitude that God calls us to cultivate, motivating our choices and priorities.

*“No child is perfect, yet respectfulness should be a baseline behavior for everyone”*

## Respect Teaching Tools

Everyone needs these respect teaching tools:

1. The most basic form of respect is not to belittle others. Within families that can mean simple rules like no hitting, no name-calling, no ridiculing. No

belittling a fellow child of God. Don't allow it at home, and it will seem wrong in public.

2. Be sure the family is on the same page. Respect looks different to different people. For example, I consider eye contact while speaking respectful, while in some cultures it is considered challenging and disrespectful. If the parents don't agree, children become confused and sometimes resentful ([Colossians 3:21](#)).
3. Keep expectations in line with ages and abilities. People become more capable with age. Expecting a lively 2-year-old to sit quietly in the church pew for an hour without something to do is probably asking for trouble, but a 12-year-old is a different story.

*"Sometimes we try and it feels like nothing gets through, but we can't give up"*

4. Be consistent with respect rules and consequences. Just like other types of rules, they are only taken seriously if expectations and consequences are consistent. Many parents fear disciplining. If you fear losing your child's love, take comfort! God said discipline works! "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it" ([Hebrews 12:9, NIV](#)).

5. Model it. The saying, "Do as I say, not as I do" doesn't work. Jesus called those people hypocrites ([Matthew 7:3-5](#)). Kids will do what we do, particularly before middle-school when peer influence increases. Modeling respect includes body language: no eye-rolling, texting, or emailing work while she is talking. Let him know you are listening by occasionally nodding and responding.
6. Apologize—without excuses. This means no: "I'm sorry, but..." Healing happens when we confess, both within ourselves and within relationships ([James 5:16](#)).
7. Teach consequences, good and bad. And start young! Point out how one choice affects others (e.g.: "You chose to hit your sister and take her toy. How do you think you can make it right?"). For kids 7-12, it helps to draw the connections, helping the child to work out the consequences. Only use real situations. For kids over 12, you can discuss hypothetical situations or possible future choices (e.g.: "Suppose you attend a job interview and choose to hold the door open for someone, who turns out to be your new manager").

Sometimes we try and it feels like nothing gets through, but we can't give up. The world fights for our children's hearts and attitudes. Study God's Word for ways to improve. Get on the same page with your spouse, and show them what respect looks like. Be real and accountable about weaknesses. Apologize when needed. Teach about the consequences of disrespect and rewards of respect. And someday, when our children are old, they will not depart from it.

# Teaching Children Empathy

BY JESSICA PARKS, MSW, LCSW

“Love one another: just as I have loved you...”  
([John 13:34a](#))

Parents spend much energy teaching social skills for living. We teach children manners, to say “please” and “thank you.” We teach them hygiene, to brush their teeth and wash their hands. We teach them diligence, to do their homework and do their chores. Teach them skills, to tie their shoes, to drive a car, to dress for a job interview. Throughout their lives, we are modeling and teaching countless techniques as building blocks of life.

## A Skill Everyone Needs

There is one skill that is necessary in every phase and every situation in human life, yet parents often overlook it or are unsure of how to teach it. That skill is empathy, or the ability to perceive, understand, and share the feelings of others. It is the foundation of emotional intelligence. It is simply wondering and caring about another’s feelings and experience. It starts simply, with wondering “how do you feel about this?”

Teaching children empathy results in their increased capacity to see the face of Christ in others. Children who cultivate the skill of empathy are more respectful, thoughtful, and kind. Empathetic children are less likely to bully and less likely to tolerate bullying behavior in others. “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”

([1 Corinthians 12:26](#)).

## Teaching Emotional Intelligence

How do we begin to teach this crucial skill? Here are some ideas:

- Help children label their own emotions. If your child is crying, you might say, “I see you are feeling sad.” Or, if upset, you might say, “You seem disappointed.” This prepares the way for your child to be able to identify and understand their own and others’ emotions.
- When kids recount stories, ask them how they thought people in their stories were feeling. This encourages not only identification, but asking the question in the first place.
- Run scenarios with them and ask how they think others may feel. You could do this with characters in books, in discussing their day at school, in watching the news, or in any other situation where you are discussing other people.
- Remain calm when your children have strong emotions like anger or grief, but be quick to name those emotions. Model for them being a non-anxious presence when others are upset. Even if they’re mad at you, stay calm and say, “You seem very angry with me. Tell me about that.”
- Make a game out of making exaggerated facial



expressions and having them guess what emotion you are feeling. Then have them try it and you guess!

- Help them identify what they have in common with others. Kids often are curious about differences that they see (like when a friend uses a wheelchair or a stranger dresses differently than they are used to). Acknowledge these differences, and work with them to identify traits that they share (“Yes, she uses a wheelchair to get around. And I notice that she has a rocket ship on her backpack. I wonder if she likes science like you do?”). This helps them see that we share more than divides us as children of God.
- Model kindness and empathy in your behavior toward others. Children are always observing the

adults around them. Let them hear you identify the feelings of others in conversation.

- Help them “zoom out” from simply trying to understand the emotions of family and friends. Talk with them about people impacted by persecution, violence, etc. Encourage them to explore their own emotions about these things, then help them to think about the emotions those impacted may experience.

Empathy is an essential skill for living a life that embraces kindness, calls out and stands up to bullies, and connects with others. Through helping children develop the capacity to understand and experience others’ emotions, you equip them to join the worthy calling to “do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” ([Micah 6:8](#)).

# Teaching Children to Manage Conflicts

BY DR. ROB TOORNSTRA

Conflict happened again this evening. In those hectic few moments while dinner was coming from the oven to the dinner table, two of our children dashed to the kitchen and arrived at the same chair at the same time. A minor disagreement soon flared into a quarrel. “This is my spot—I want to sit here!” “Well, I set the table, so I get to choose who sits where!” Why the competition? Each child desperately wanted to sit at the place with a favored plastic juice cup.

## Mentoring Matters

Managing conflict between children is never easy, but with our mentoring they can navigate conflict effectively. Life will never be conflict free, and unity matters to God, so learning to manage conflict is a virtue. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesian church, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” ([Ephesians 4:1-3](#)).

It’s probably happened in your family too. Your kids bicker over who gets to play with a particular toy—a toy that, five minutes earlier, no one much cared about. They spend ten minutes arguing about who will sit in which seat in the family van. They spend so long

fighting about what to watch on TV that the program ends before they’ve figured it out.

## Empower Them

What can you do to help your kids navigate their conflicts so that they not only resolve the immediate disagreement, but also learn the skills to work through conflict on their own? The last thing my wife and I wanted was to eat a meal under the storm clouds of such a trivial argument. We took four specific steps designed to mentor our kids in the art of conflict management.

## Don’t Fix The Problem For Them

The biggest temptation when faced with arguing kids is to put a stop to the conflict. Many times, we’ve given in to the temptation to jump in as an umpire, deciding who is right and who is wrong. Rendering a verdict by saying, “You had the cup yesterday, your sister gets it today!” would have ended the immediate fight, but it would have had the undesirable effect of short-circuiting the opportunity for growth. Instead, we had the two children involved to step away from the table, to a place where they could work through their conflict together, without disrupting everyone else.

## Ask for a Resolution

Rather than giving vague instructions to “just figure it out,” we asked them both to talk together to find a solution to their problem that would be fair to the both of them. I have to confess to a bit of craftiness here. When we asked this of our kids, my wife and I knew that a 9-year-old and a 5-year-old probably wouldn’t be able to sort the problem out on their own. Instead, our goal was to get the two to communicate with each other in a constructive way and have them wrestle with ideas of fairness and compromise. Shortly after their bargaining session began, they returned to our dinner table. It seemed clear that a solution had been reached. “It’s fine,” my older daughter sighed. “I don’t care. She can have the cup.” It was clear from her voice, however, that their solution was anything but fine. The argument had been “fixed,” but the underlying issues hadn’t been addressed, meaning that the underlying issue had been simply ignored. We sent them back to the bargaining table, with a second instruction.

## Seek the Root of the Problem

My wife had a stroke of brilliance. “I want you to come back here when you can answer why it is so important for you to fight over this cup every day.” Once again, they returned with a few ideas. “This cup is different from the others.” “This cup is from our favorite restaurant.” “I don’t want to be left out.” Finally, with a hint of exasperation, my daughter got it. “It’s because I want to put myself first,” she said. This was the gold we’d been searching for, and she was immediately affirmed for her honesty. If children are going to learn to

manage their conflicts, it’s important for them to learn to see themselves honestly, and this means learning to identify the way that our selfish, sinful nature works in our hearts and minds. Challenging them to recognize their own brokenness should be met with gracious affirmation that creates a safe place to be honest about sin, but also allows an opportunity to hear a message of grace.

## Call for Renewal

Hearing our daughter admit that she was motivated by a desire to put herself first opened the door to talk about how Jesus treats us. We reminded our girls of the way that, rather than putting himself first, Jesus loves us by being a servant and by putting others before himself. We explained that not only does Jesus love us like that, but he also wants us to love others in the same way. We concluded our discussion by asking our kids to look for specific ways to love each other by putting their needs before their own.

Shortly after dinner, another potential conflict came up—this time, between our son (who had only been an eyewitness to the earlier conflict!) and his sister. Immediately, he caught my eye, watching him without a word. A thoughtful look passed over his face, and he changed his mind. “It’s okay,” he said to his sister. “You can choose the TV show this time.”

These steps of mentoring conflict resolution have the benefit of empowering children to manage conflict productively and help them develop skills of self-examination, empathy, and negotiation. Then we can share the words of the psalmist, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” ([Psalm 133:1](#)).

# How to Help a Grieving Child

BY MIMI LARSON

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a place where nobody ever dies or gets sick, a place where school shootings do not exist and natural disasters do not destroy? Yet the reality is that we live in a broken world where there is death and tragedy, and sadly, children are no strangers to loss and grief. While dealing with loss and grief can be difficult for anyone, children's reactions may differ from those of adults. Here are some suggestions to consider when helping a child who is grieving.

*"A grieving child might have a physical symptom of grief like a loss of appetite, or emotional symptoms like mood swings or severe crying"*

## Explore the Child's Level of Understanding

The age of the child will affect the way they understand loss and grief. Younger children might not understand the permanence of death or may believe they are somehow responsible for a tragic event. Older children engage in concrete thinking and might ask for more details if they want to know more. They will understand the consequences of a loss and that a person who dies will not be around anymore. Different ages will need differing levels of explanation.

it's in their best interest to either wait or spare them bad news, it is important for children to hear as soon as possible so they can start facing the loss. Silence is seldom helpful, though often tempting.

It is also important to prepare them for what lies ahead. If this is the beginning of a long illness, telling children early helps them prepare. If there is a funeral coming up, explain what they will encounter in the days ahead. Even if a child was not directly exposed to a tragedy such as a school shooting or natural disaster, he or she may have heard the news or adult conversations and still feel stress or anxiety. Make a point of raising the topic to a depth appropriate to their level of understanding.

## Prepare the Child

Children need to know they are safe and secure, so it is best to hear hard news from someone they feel safe with, someone they trust. While you might think

## Listen to the Child

Children often go in and out of grief, so be patient. Answer any questions they have, even if they are

hard questions. Some children might ask a lot of questions, some might communicate without words through actions and reactions. Some children might communicate in pictures and could draw for you what life looked like before, what it's like now, and what it will look like someday. A grieving child might have a physical symptom of grief like a loss of appetite, or emotional symptoms like mood swings or severe crying. It is not uncommon for a child to revert to an earlier stage of development and suck their thumb or wet the bed. Children might become aggressive when angry or clingy when scared. Recognize bad behaviors as symptoms of underlying grief, and address the grief more than the behaviors.

## Talk to the Child

When you do say something, be direct and especially honest so that there is less confusion for the child. Use simple, concrete language, avoiding euphemisms, with an age-appropriate amount of detail. And always provide reassurance, letting the child know you care. Acknowledge the feelings of hurt, sadness, and fear. Here are some guidelines when you talk to a child:

- Remind the child that someone will care for him or her. It is helpful to name that person if at all possible.

- Emphasize that it is okay to feel sad or angry about what happened, even if others do not feel that way. And point out that these feelings might last a while and that is okay.
- Assure the child that God is always there to comfort us, and that we can take all our sadness and pain to God in prayer.
- Reassure the child that he or she is not at fault for this situation. This situation is not the result of something they said or did.

## Allow Yourself and the Child to Grieve

If someone is dying, encourage children to say goodbye and express their emotions. And don't feel you need to hide your own grief. Remembering the person who died is part of the healing process. Share memories and pictures, talking about the loved one. If a traumatic event means there are changes, involve children in those decisions as appropriate. Giving children choices whenever possible helps them regain a sense of control.

Grief is a natural consequence of losing something or someone important. Acknowledge that pain as appropriate, validating your and the child's feelings of loss. May your shared loss let your relationship grow stronger.

# Teaching Children about Chores

BY NADIA SWEARINGEN-FRIESEN

I am one of those moms who makes my children work. All four of my kids do chores in our home nearly every single day. Chores are a part of caring for one another as a community. “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” ([1 Peter 4:10](#)). Our family works together to steward the gifts that we have been given.

When my children were very young, I found myself cleaning up their messes, working hard to keep our home clean, and feeling a bit frustrated that so many jobs were left for me. Over time, I began to realize that my frustration was a nudge to look more closely at what was happening in our family. It seemed faster and easier to do things myself, but they also had lessons they needed to learn.

*“Our family works together to steward the gifts that we have been given”*

## All Homes Require Work to Run

As we thought about our goals for our kids, we realized we wanted to raise children who take

responsibility for their own needs and messes. We want to raise children who understand what it means to work and to do so diligently. We wanted to raise children who understand that all homes take considerable work to manage, and this home we share is a blessing that runs most smoothly when we all do our part. Having chores not only helps us to spread out the work it takes to enjoy the life we love, it’s part of belonging to the team.

## Doing Chores Curbs Entitlement

When my son would leave his cereal bowl on the table for me to clean, there was a hint of unstated entitlement there that bothered me a lot. He was able to clear it himself, yet he knew that if he left it there, I would swoop in and pick it up for him. Since he did not have to work, he chose not to. He relied on a parent to clean up his mess. This laziness wasn’t good for either of us.

## Doing Chores Shares the Burden

The burden is heavy when only one person is working, but many hands can make the workload light. It may take some time before they learn to do a chore



well, but with patience and persistence progress is made. So each day we all do chores. We pick up our messes, and we clean the house. From the time my kids were little they fed our pets, put away their shoes, cleaned up toys, and emptied the dishwasher.

## Doing Chores Creates Belonging

As they got older, they vacuumed carpeting, changed bed sheets, cleaned the kitchen, and dusted bookshelves. Our teens and tweens now mow the lawn, shovel snow, wash vehicles, and even make meals. As our children have gotten older, their chores have grown more complex, but every one of my kids understands that what they are doing in helping at home makes a world of difference to our family.

## Doing Chores Enriches Fellowship

My husband and I have also found ourselves working side-by-side with our children and enjoying conversation as we get a job done. Working shoulder to shoulder can be as intimate as talking face to face. The distraction of a chore is often helpful in allowing space to let our kids open up. As we plant the garden, clear the table, or straighten a room, we hear their stories and listen intently to the experiences of our kids.

## Doing Chores Builds Life Skills

I have become one of those moms—and I am really okay with—teaching life skills with intention. As we go through the day, I know that I am enabling and equipping my children with tools they will need later on in life. They are contributing to our lifestyle and taking the time to communicate with their parents. They are developing competence that will serve them well as they move into adulthood. They can feel good about all the skills they have mastered and can share with others when they move on to new living arrangements.

## Doing Chores Is Part of Our Design

From creation, we have been given jobs to do, cultivating the gifts God has given us. God designed us for more than idleness, “for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). We are God’s handiwork, designed so that we could accomplish good things.

And yes, there are days when they fuss. But, if I hold steady and remain consistent, the fussing will fail, the chores will get done, and my children will grow into adults who do not take for granted a home well kept and a job well done. This is a gift to their future roommates and spouses, and to their momma as well.

# Whose Homework is This?

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

It's hard for parents to watch kids struggle, including with school homework. The homework might be difficult, it might take a long time, it might be an emotional wall kids don't want to scale. We want our children to do well, we don't want them hurting, we want to fix it. We are tempted to step in, help them along, and take over, but that's a lot about what parents want, rather than what kids need. Homework is an area where boundaries are needed. We can guide our children by structuring time for homework. We can acknowledge that the work is not always fun. We can be available to give advice. But our children need to own their own responsibilities. Taking over for this hurdle only makes all the other hurdles harder.

## Small Victories Build Bigger Victories

It is unhealthy to take charge of your child's homework or projects—these tasks are their studio for developing both skills and responsibility for their work. Managing challenges is a life skill they will need forever. It might be heart-wrenching to watch, but we don't want to be managing their homework in college, so it is wise to let them have control and responsibility from an early age. This is the beginning of parents moving to an advisory role as your kids grow. We need to let our kids do their own work, even if it sometimes means that they fail.

## It is Not about You

This is not about you, neither your reputation as a parent nor your anxiety at having unhappy kids. It might rip at your heart not to step in while they are miserable. But not all protecting is beneficial to our kids. Sometimes our over-helping actually hurts our kids and interferes with their learning from a situation. When we continually rescue our kids, they learn that they are not capable of handling things on their own. It impairs their path to growing competence and independence. “But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load” ([Galatians 6:4-5](#)). God has given each of us tasks to do that belong to us and not our neighbor.

## Responsibility Grows with Ownership

Responsibility is learned when kids have ownership in the project. If we step in and interfere, our kids no longer have ownership—their homework becomes your job. They lose investment in a project in which they might otherwise have taken pride. Having ownership of a project is important. It is better for your child to get a lower grade on their own than to get a perfect grade with a parent taking over the project.

## Growth Happens When We Are Stretched

When we are stretched, we discover what we are capable of achieving. If parents step in to do everything for our kids, they lose the opportunity to struggle on their own and discover their true gifts. You will not always be able to help your child, so you need to equip them with the skills to manage—even managing frustrations—without you. Those skills are learned through struggle. It is very hard to watch our children struggle, but it is where God grows us.

*“Acknowledge the struggle, hug the frustration, but don’t let them off the hook”*

## We Learn through Consequences

Natural consequences are great teachers. Having to stay after school because of incomplete work or taking a bad grade for poor work can be huge motivators. Do not step in to rescue, but allow kids to experience the natural consequences of their actions. Don’t say “I told you so,” just let the consequences be the teacher. Use the leverage of consequences. If your child doesn’t care

about the low grade, you can help him find more time to study by thinning his social calendar. Your response should be, “We agree that you are responsible for your grades. As long as you are pulling at least B’s you are in control. If your grades fall, we will help you clear your calendar to make more time for studying.”

## Low Stakes Learning Costs Less

The stakes are low at young ages, so don’t be afraid of failure. They will learn valuable lessons—that they are responsible, they need to take control to be successful, that some things are just plain hard work, and that you love them even in failure. Failure makes clear where we need to change and improve. Be empathetic about their struggle, and encourage them to see this as a learning opportunity.

Bless your children by letting them take charge of their own homework and projects. Take joy in their responsibility, following a project through to completion. In times where they fail, empathize with their pain while allowing the natural consequences to teach them. Don’t do the work, but hear the heart. Acknowledge the struggle, hug the frustration, but don’t let them off the hook. Don’t be angry, but be firm and resolute. Later you can celebrate success and a job well done. Let them discover their capabilities and stretch themselves. This is the way God works with us. We are not rescued from challenges, but God walks alongside us through them all. Through all of our struggles, God is growing us. Don’t miss the opportunity to grow your kids.

# Teaching Children Stewardship

BY REV. JOEL VANDE WERKEN

“Mine! It’s mine!” What parent hasn’t heard these words? We human beings, it seems, are naturally wired to hoard and grasp after the things we set our hearts on.

The Bible tells a different story: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it; the world all who live in it” ([Psalm. 24:1, NIV](#)). Our time, treasures, and talents do not belong to us but to God. This means that parents have an important responsibility to teach our children what it means to be good stewards of all that God has given.

*“Our time, treasures, and talents do not belong to us but to God. This means that parents have an important responsibility to teach our children”*

Though there are a variety of perspectives on whether the Old Testament principle of tithing (see [Leviticus 27:30](#), [Deuteronomy 14:22-29](#), [Malachi 3:10](#)) still applies to Christians, the New Testament clearly calls God’s people to be generous with what they have ([2 Corinthians 8:1-15](#), [1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)). How do we

teach this to our children?

I’d suggest a few basic tasks that can help develop a generous spirit in our families:

## Teach Thankfulness

In a materialistic culture, advertisers constantly bombard our children with the message that they “deserve” more than what they have now. Take time each day to identify three or four things that they are thankful for—dollhouse furniture, Lego, the food on the table. Then teach them to say “thank you” to God and to others for what they’ve been given.

## Teach Servanthood

Giving of ourselves is not natural. Young children need to be taught how to give to others. Find a service project that you can do as a family, even something like washing toys in the nursery at church, and talk about how to give back from the time or treasure God has given you.

## Be Generous as a Family

If you’re looking for hands-on ways to model generosity for your children, identify a cause you can pray for and support together. Christmas is an

especially good time to do this, as your local church or a national mission organization would have programs to share with those in need.

Take time with whatever cause you support to discuss as a family how your service is an act of stewardship of what God has given.

## Teach Biblical Money Management

On their fifth birthday, my wife and I have given our children a coin bank with three slots, one for spending, one for giving, and one for saving. It helps them begin to think about money with purpose and to understand that their money doesn't belong only to them. With each allowance or birthday gift, we help them divide what they receive into savings, spending, and church. You may also want to allow your children to participate in the offering during a worship service: first with your money, then as appropriate with their own.

A while back, my church began a fund-raising campaign for a building project. One Sunday morning, the deacons discovered an envelope with a dollar bill and a handwritten note. In the note, a parent explained

that as their family had discussed the church project after dinner, their daughter had grown so excited that she went to her room and came back with a dollar from her piggy bank, exclaiming, "If the church is doing something so exciting, then I want to be a part of it too."

*"Take time with whatever cause you support to discuss as a family how your service is an act of stewardship of what God has given"*

The amount of our children's gifts may not be large. But we don't have to wait until their gifts are significant in the world's eyes to teach them the importance of a generous heart through which God does his own work ([Luke 21:1-4](#)). God has given us an infinitely great gift in the person of his Son, Jesus. He did not hoard heaven for himself but offered all of himself for us. It's never too early to begin teaching our children to respond with thanks and generosity to that greatest of all gifts ([2 Corinthians 9:15](#)).

# Teaching Children about Sex

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

Sooner or later, your kids will ask about the birds and the bees. And it will probably be in public.

## Be the Safest Place for Awkward Questions

Conversations with children about sex can be uncomfortable. But sex education is not the job of the school or the church; it is the responsibility of the parents. Our kids will certainly look for answers at some point, so we parents want to be the first, best, and safest place they want to go for answers. Getting flustered tells the child that you don't want to talk

*“Parents want to be the first, best, and safest place they want to go for answers”*

about this and that they should look elsewhere. When children lack answers, they'll Google it, and our culture will fill that gap with its own answers. It is best to step up, early and lightly, and have these conversations from the beginning, even if they make us uneasy.

## Give Biblical Answers from the Beginning

God's design includes sexuality, so it's a good topic at age-appropriate levels for all ages. In our family, we've tried to have these conversations with our kids in simple and relaxed ways at young ages so the pressure for the “BIG TALK” never had a chance to build up. You don't have to talk about being found under a cabbage leaf or dropped off by the stork. Just give them straight answers without excessive detail.

## Overreaction Communicates Shame

All too often the most intimate questions happen at inopportune times. A comment gets made in the grocery store or in front of the company at the dinner table. My son once asked what a tampon was in front of my parents. Avoid overreacting. Be careful not to embarrass or shame your child for asking a question—it is important that they feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns. If we panic or grow visibly uncomfortable, we might say things that we don't mean to say just to avoid embarrassment in the grocery checkout line. Much worse, our negative, embarrassed, stammering reaction tells our kids that we parents are not safe places to ask questions.



## Be Calm, Warm, Direct, and Simple

When questions come, stay calm and answer simply and directly in age-appropriate language; if they've asked an honest question, you should give them an honest answer with zero drama. Give only enough information to satisfy the question, and move on.

## Conversations Can Be Moved

Give a simple answer on the spot if you can, and offer to talk more about the question later when you can have more time to talk. If it's truly not a good time, praise your child for asking a great question. "I want to give you the best answer, so let's get back to that question when we're home and I can give you my undivided attention." Then follow through, and give them the information they seek. This honors the question and gives you time to think thoughtfully about your answer without trying to, for example, explain what the word "raped" means in front of the librarian.

## You Will Get Another Chance, Lots More

Talking about sexuality is not a one-time conversation, but an ongoing dialog from a young age about God's care for every aspect of our lives including their bodies and their sexuality. If you don't explain things perfectly, you will have more chances to build on the last conversation in the next conversation. And you don't have to explain everything from romance to anatomy to childbirth all at once. Just answer the question simply, truthfully, and at an appropriate level.

## Guidelines for Answering Hard Questions

So how should you respond when your kids ask uncomfortable questions?

- Don't freak out. Answer questions about sex in a relaxed way, without translating anxiety onto our kids.
- Answer truthfully, if simply. Talk honestly to your kids when they are asking questions.
- Don't feel the need to explain everything you know. Let your answer be as simple or complex as the child is at this age.
- Seize these teachable moments without shying away from the issue. It shows you're invested and interested in what your child is thinking.
- Give a brief answer when the question comes at an inopportune setting, and postpone if needed. Be sure to circle back to the question at the first opportunity. It is okay to defer as long as you come back to it.
- God is the hero in the story. Sexuality is a gift from God. He has lordship over this area of life as well.

## You Are the One God Chose

God picked you to parent your children. He equips you to guide them lovingly towards understanding about God and his world. Culture promotes a distorted sexuality that is not in agreement with God's Word, but you are there to share the truth. Be clear with kids that God designed sex to be good, and he placed it within marriage for our benefit.

# Chapter 4: Parenting Tweens and Teens

This chapter considers how to guide older children through their Tween and Teen years. The transition to adulthood begins with puberty and extends through adolescence, and is marked by a lot of mixed signals. Sometimes they are children and adults at the same time. We as parents have to navigate giving up control in appropriate amounts. We remain in the role of providing, pruning, and protecting, but more and more collaboratively with our children as they find their own place as citizens of God's kingdom.



# Parenting with the Grain

BY DR. ROBERT RITZEMA

When Lucas married Jessica, he believed he could make a difference in the lives of her two sons, ages 9 and 7. Lucas was an athlete and thought he could turn the kids from sedentary video-gamers to active, energetic boys. Conner, the youngest, liked the wrestling, basket-shooting, and biking that Lucas introduced, but older brother Joshua resisted. Lucas began teasing Joshua about his flaccid arms and stomach. Eventually he remarked that Joshua was lazy and weak. Joshua remained silent, but, after one such episode, he tearfully blurted out to Jessica that he couldn't stand Lucas and wished he would just leave.

## Be Aware of Your Vision for Your Child

Parents (or, as with Lucas, stepparents) have a vision of what their child should be like. Effective parenting takes into account a child's natural inclinations. Yet many parents may encourage a child to pursue

activities or interests the parent prefers. When the child resists, parents may be tempted to ramp up pressure, possibly to the point of manipulating or denigrating the child.

## Think about Where Your Vision Comes from

What's the origin of the vision we have for our children's lives? It can come from cultural standards of what constitutes a good life. It can be derived from our understanding of what God wants us humans to be like. It can be based on the character strengths of someone we particularly admire. It can be an expanded version of some quality we've noted in the child. It could be in opposition to characteristics we dislike or fear. Or it can represent what we wanted (or still want) to become ourselves.

Lucas' vision for his children came from the last of these sources. As a child, he had been sedentary and uncoordinated. Some of his more athletic peers teased him when he didn't perform well in childhood games. Around age 10, he had a Little League coach who took a particular interest in improving Lucas' athletic prowess. He spent long hours with Lucas, developing his skills. Lucas was grateful for this help. Unfortunately, the coach also talked incessantly about the importance of being tough and of competing fiercely. He made critical comments or looked on

*"Parents or stepparents have a vision of what their child should be like. Effective parenting takes into account a child's natural inclinations"*

disapprovingly when Lucas' efforts weren't up to his standards. Lucas internalized the coach's emphasis on toughness. He was proud of his improved performance in games. At the same time, he inwardly feared that if he didn't push himself constantly he would lose the gains he had made. As an adult, he still took a great deal of pride in his success at competitive sports. His relationship with the coach and subsequent athletic accomplishments greatly influenced the vision he had for Conner and Joshua. But this was about him, not his kids.

## Consider What Your Child Is Already Good at

The writer of Proverbs advises parents to “train a child in the way he should go” ([Proverbs 22:6](#)). To some extent, this means developing qualities that every person needs in order to flourish—qualities like honesty, responsibility, and kindness. There are so many qualities whose value is uncertain, though. Does every child need to be gregarious? Orderly? Assertive? Genteel? Athletic? Had Lucas observed Conner and Joshua carefully, he would have noticed that Conner was already more active than Joshua and that Joshua particularly liked reading and learning. Conner was ready for Lucas' sports regimen. Joshua wasn't receptive, but could be drawn away from video

games and into activity by reading about birds, trees, and insects, then going with Lucas on nature hikes to observe the things his books had taught him.

## Avoid Manipulation, Denigration, and Teasing

The danger is, of course, pushing a child to be someone they are not, and doing so in a negative way. Scripture cautions us, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” ([Ephesians 6:4](#)). You can create inviting opportunities, plan group adventures, set boundaries around unhealthy behaviors, and generally encourage kids to develop their gifts. What is less healthy is demanding development of gifts they don't have, name-calling, ridicule, withholding approval, and belittlement.

Wood carvers are taught to examine the wood before starting to cut, looking at the way the grain runs. When they start cutting, they work with the grain, rather than against it. Similarly, child-rearing can either be done against the grain of the child's natural inclinations, or with it. Children are more likely to recognize and appreciate their strengths, and parent-child relationships are more likely to be effective and harmonious, when parenting is done with the grain.

# Parenting Introverted and Extroverted Children

BY KATIE DEYOUNG, MA, LCPC, LMHC

Parents, have you ever wondered, for example, “my daughter is spending too much time in her bedroom; should I be worried?” “I am concerned because my son is constantly engaged in some sort of activity and seems unable to just sit and be by himself.” These concerns reveal a fear that a child may be experiencing developmental or emotional issues. Rather than seeing excessive time spent in one’s room or the inability to be alone as automatic cause for concern, I’d suggest these behaviors may stem from a child’s personality.

## Understand Their Uniqueness

Understanding the personality traits of extroversion and introversion may provide clarity on concerns and situations. These specific traits are about how people experience their world and how they are best able to recharge their emotional batteries. Thankfully, God did not create everyone the same. Rather, he created various personality traits in order for his creation to glorify him with diversity and show himself to the world in countless amazing ways.

## It’s Not about Social Skills, It’s about Recharging

Society today often confuses extroversion with

being social, loud, fun, and outgoing. As a result of this stereotype, many feel that extroversion can be seen as a “healthy” trait that one should seek to acquire. While some extroverts may have great social skills, it fails to address the core issue. Introverts and extroverts can both be equally socially skilled and charismatic. Whether or not someone “is good with people” is not the difference between extroversion and introversion.

The difference is where people go to re-energize and recharge their emotional fuel tanks. Extroverts gather energy from being with others and find it draining to be alone. Introverts spend energy to be with others and recharge with some time alone.

## Extroversion

So putting aside the assumptions and stereotypes about charisma, here is what you need to know about the extroverted child:

- An extroverted child pays attention to the outer, physical world, engaging first with things around them.
- When emotionally drained, an extroverted child recharges by being around family and friends. They thrive on attention from others.
- Conversely, having unstructured “alone time” can prove to be very tiring for the extroverted child.

These social aspects provide a helpful direction toward figuring out what makes this particular child thrive—providing structure and social interaction in appropriate amounts is a gift for this child.

## Introversion

On the other hand, the word “introversion” has often been misidentified with social timidity. The stereotype is that introverts are quiet, withdrawn individuals with limited social skills who avoid public interactions at all cost. Some may think that introverts are socially awkward or social outcasts. Putting aside these misconceptions, let’s unravel the truth about introverts. Again, social charisma and skill is not the difference between extroversion and introversion. Many introverts are great with people, and are even great public speakers, but then need time alone to recover.

- An introverted child focuses on his/her inner, mental world, reflecting on how they feel, puzzling ideas, or conceiving new approaches to problems. They thrive on time to think.
- Being alone, having unstructured, uninterrupted time is when the introverted child rests, gets re-energized for the day ahead, and does some of their best creative work.

*“Parents have a key opportunity to help their children thrive by both knowing themselves and knowing their children”*

- Interacting with a group of people (small or large) can be draining for the introverted child, even if it’s a fun time for all involved. This does not mean that introverted children dislike spending time with

family; it may just be tiring for their personality, and enough is enough.

Protecting appropriate amounts of free time for self-engagement (being in their own head) is a way for introverts to flourish in their personalities.

*“God has made us all different. Ask yourself these questions. Who are the extroverts in my family? Who are the introverts? How do these personality traits impact my family’s dynamics and how each member might flourish?”*

## A Range of Recharging

To varying degrees, one of these personality traits is present within all individuals of all ages. One person may be clearly one or the other, others are more of a mix. Clearly, no trait is better than the other. There is no right or wrong way to approach life as it relates to extroversion and introversion. And tendencies may change depending on time and circumstance. If your work demands much isolation, for example, even an introvert may need some social time to re-balance.

## Lead Them to Flourish

Parents have a key opportunity to help their children thrive by both knowing themselves and knowing their children. Parents should identify where on the spectrum of extroversion and introversion they fall and note how different each of their children may be. It may



be tempting to parent your child out of your personal preferences and experiences as an extrovert/introvert. However, doing so will not benefit your child insofar as their needs are not your needs—one approach to what “recharging” looks like does not fit all. Be a learner of your child; allow them to flourish in their own unique personality. The beauty of this “flourishing” can be seen, for example, in Christian men and women who have owned their personality traits and have become great chaplains (more extroverted) and great writers (more introverted). Everyone has a role to perform in the body of Christ, and our personality traits can uniquely qualify us for certain ones.

## Find the Balance

Still have concerns? Having a healthy balance between alone-time and people-time seems to be the best solution. The Bible speaks to this balance by providing examples—Jesus performed miracles with large crowds of people, he had fellowship with a small gathering of close friends, and he went off alone to

pray. Jesus was intentional to spend time alone during the busy years of his ministry. He also did not shy away from breaking bread with hundreds of people. So encourage your introverted child to participate in family time, recognizing that, although your child may enjoy time with family, it can also be a draining experience. Help your extroverted child in developing the necessary skills he will need to spend time alone.

## Ask the Important Questions

God has made us all different. Ask yourself these questions. Who are the extroverts in my family? Who are the introverts? How do these personality traits impact my family’s dynamics and how each member might flourish? Can some of my previous areas of concern be answered by taking my child’s personality trait into consideration? Taking a moment to recognize how God has uniquely shaped you and how he has uniquely created your son or daughter will equip you to help them flourish.

# Daughter, You Are God's Warrior Princess

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

Daughter, you are a warrior princess. You are adopted as a child of the King of the Universe and made in the very image of God himself. So maybe you can see how that makes you a princess, but a warrior? Did you know that you have a warrior in your design? It is absolutely true.

*"We are not equipped to do the job like God does, but he equips us with his power. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us"*

## Follow God's Design

Being a warrior is part of the way that God designed us girls. God designed us to be a mighty ezer. You may not be familiar with the word ezer, but it is the word that we often translate as "helper." [Genesis 2:18](#) tells us, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"

Helper is a word we think we understand. The helper stays in second-place to assist and bring their skills and

efforts to help make something happen. The helper is not a main character, but plays a lesser or supporting role. This, however, is not a good understanding of the word ezer.

## Discover Your Strength

As we look at how the word ezer is translated across scripture, we can gain a much richer understanding of what the word really means. The word ezer is used to refer to military power and strength, as well as to God himself as defender and protector.

- Who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty ([Deuteronomy 33:26](#)).
- He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword ([Deuteronomy 33:29](#)).
- We wait and hope in the Lord, he is our help and shield ([Psalm 33:20](#)).
- You are my help and my deliverer; Lord, do not delay ([Psalm 70:5](#)).
- You who fear him, trust in the Lord, he is their help and shield ([Psalm 115:9-11](#)).
- I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth ([Psalm 121:1-2](#)).
- You are destroyed, Israel, because you are against

me, against your helper ([Hosea 13:19](#)).

These are not images of weakness or second place, but of strength. Survival and salvation depend on the ezer. It is not good for a man to be alone—he needs help. God is the mighty deliverer riding on the clouds. God does not enter battle as an insignificant helper, and we share the ezer job description with him.

## God Will Equip You

We are not equipped to do the job like God does, but he equips us with his power. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us ([Phillipians 4:13](#)). God will equip you with his armor to face whatever comes your way. The apostle Paul tells us to, “put on

the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” ([Ephesians 6:11](#)). You are never left to fight alone.

So be the warrior princess facing the battle; help those who need. Sometimes the warrior in us comes out against the people we love instead of defending them. Remember that you and your spouse are a team, working with and for one another. Your children need you to protect them and guide them. You will stand strong through many challenges in life.

Daughter, warrior princess, be a strong ezer for your God, your family, and your community. You are God’s daughter, made in his image, designed to defend your faith and your family. Live as the warrior princess that God designed you to be!

# Independence and First-Time Drivers

BY NADIA SWEARINGEN-FRIESEN

Standing in the driveway, I watched the van drive slowly down the street. I waved. Again. My hand paused high in the air. I would not move to go back inside until it was completely gone from view. This step needed to happen.

## Grant Freedom

I could not let my fears limit my son's opportunity to take the next step of independence. I needed to let go. With tears in my eyes, I took a deep breath. For the first time ever, my 16-year-old boy was driving to soccer practice without an adult by his side. Instead, his little brother rode beside him. Both boys wore big grins. The feeling of freedom was palpable.

## Recognize the Path

Still outside, I stood awash in the memories that led to this moment. I could see my firstborn learn to crawl on our apartment floor, take tenuous first steps toward our old denim couch, balance and bobble on his black two-wheel bike, step high into the school bus on his very first day. He has been moving toward this moment since the first day of his life, and there is more independence to come, by God's design. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" ([Genesis](#)

[2:24](#)). From birth our children are on a trajectory to leave us—it is part of God's plan.

*"I have come to believe. And while it may bring tears, I am not sad but grateful for God's provision at every turn. Recognizing the blessing of navigating life together"*

## Celebrate Accomplishments

And while I can mourn the loss of what is familiar to me, my tears can mean something else. There is a gift in watching kids grow up. These scenes of him have added richness to my life. As his momma, I have been present at so many moments of joy and growth and laughter and tears, and all of it is wonder and miracle to me. Because this 8 lb. 5 oz. God-given gift began so helpless and small and has somehow grown into a teen who is taller than me and capable of so much compassion and wisdom. It happened so slowly that I can only understand it in the remembering.

*“There is a gift in watching kids grow up. These scenes of him have added richness to my life. As his momma, I have been present at so many moments of joy and growth and laughter and tears, and all of it is wonder and miracle to me”*

## Live in Gratitude

Here, while my baby drives my van down the street. I know that I will be grateful for this important new skill. But for today, I am also deeply aware of how often I am left standing, watching my boy's back: as he toddles away, rides his bike down the street, or drives his brother to soccer on a summer night. It is the calling of

motherhood, I have come to believe. And while it may bring tears, I am not sad but grateful for God's provision at every turn. Recognizing the blessing of navigating life together.

## Trust God

I am struck by the beauty of my boy growing up. I'm mindful of how blessed I am to see all of this; mindful of how reliant I have become upon my God to keep my son safe as he ventures forth. Our children may leave our home, but they are never outside the view of their Heavenly Father. We can trust that God loves our children even more than we do. “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” ([Deuteronomy 31:6](#)). Our children gain independence from us but they are never independent of God.

It's a lot for a momma to take in as she stands in the driveway with her hand still in the air. Watching him go, every breath a prayer for him.

# Five Don'ts of Family Rule Making

BY KIM SULLIVAN

You've set a curfew for your teenage child, and every time they return they have a wonderful excuse as to why they are late. You've set a dating standard for your home, and your kids seem to want to debate as to why it doesn't apply to their current situation. Perhaps you have an adult child living at home who challenges your decision to make church attendance a requirement for remaining in your home. Whatever the case may be, it seems like standards, whether big or small, are challenged almost before they are set. How does a parent navigate this process, and how does one know if and when to reassess?

*"How does a parent navigate this process, and how does one know if and when to reassess?"*

## 1) Don't Create New Standards on a Whim

If we are constantly setting new rules or drastically changing them, our kids won't believe us when we set a new standard. Their reaction might be, "I'll wait and see if this blows over," or "If I apply some pressure on this

standard, it will surely break." Pray with your spouse and talk with peers before coming to a determination of what is right for your household. Then stick to your convictions and consistently enforce it.

## 2) Don't Keep Your Kids in the Dark

It's essential to explain to your kids why the new rule is necessary, probably on several different occasions. This is especially true if you have tweens, teens, and college-aged children. By providing the facts that led you to your decisions, you are teaching them how to set standards for their own lives and future families.

And take some time to think through your explanation. The times I've blurted out a new standard without thinking about how best to communicate it, no matter how righteous the standard, I've often come across as judgmental and arrogant. However, if I wait on God for an appointed time, I can set the bar with meekness, gentleness, and kindness. The psalmist describes God's leadership, which is a model for us: "He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" ([Psalm 25:9](#)). Try to anticipate what objections might be presented at the time the standard is communicated. This way, you will be prepared to calmly and objectively respond to any arguments rather than reacting to them.

### 3) Don't Be Surprised when They Resist

"Rules are made to be broken," or so the popular adage goes. Certain personalities resist standards and rules just because they exist. Just as it is wise for you to wait for the proper time and way to communicate, it is wise for you to allow your kids time to react negatively before you react to them. Remember, we are not to walk according to our sinful nature ([Galatians 5:16](#)). The flesh doesn't like to be told what to do. You've taken some time before presenting the standard to them, so allow them a little time to digest it. This does not mean you are not to enforce the new rule, but rather give them time to work on their attitude about it.

### 4) Don't Be Moved by the Reactions of the Participants

Your children may be upset about your decision for some time; that doesn't make your standard incorrect. Assuming you've prayed and sought godly counsel, it is not likely that you've made a wrong choice. Parents love to please their children. However, pleasing our children isn't our mandate. In fact, children pleasing

their parents is a more biblical response. You are called to lead, and that can make you unpopular at times. In the end, you must walk in the confidence that God is directing you as the parent to lead your family on a godly path.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" ([Proverbs 3:5-6](#)).

### 5) Don't Give Up, but Rather Stand Firm

Your children, and those around you, are watching to see if you will stand by your convictions. The world is crying out for those who live by what they say they believe. In the end, they will respect you for being resolved to not compromise. "If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace" ([Exodus 18:23, NIV](#)).

Setting and living by standards is a powerful way to share your convictions with your family. Whether they end up agreeing with those convictions and standards or not, the respect and admiration they will eventually have for you—for sticking to your guns—will benefit all.



# Lazy or Depressed?

BY LASAUNDRA GORDON, MA, LCPC

**H**ave you ever called your teen lazy or thought they were unmotivated? You are not alone. But it could be more than just apathy. The lack of drive and motivation are also symptoms of depression, and those with depression are often perceived as lazy at first glance.

As a therapist, I frequently see teens suffering from depression. Often the biggest struggle is getting the teen, as well as their parents, to understand what is going on—what depression is, what it is not, and what to do once it's diagnosed.

## One Example

Let me begin with a story of a 15-year-old girl who

*“Depression is a medical condition; with a professional’s help, it can be treated! God is faithful to walk with us through every season of life, and there is no challenge beyond his capacity to heal”*

is having a hard time in school. She is unmotivated and irritable. Her parents can’t seem to ever say the right thing to her. She hates going to school and seems annoyed all of the time. She spends a large amount of time alone or in her room, withdrawn from those around her despite having many friends who want to socialize. She spends a lot of time crying but never talks about what is bothering her. She doesn’t seem to care about anything that used to be important to her like hanging out with her friends or playing sports. Her parents wonder, “What happened to our sweet, fun-loving daughter?”

## Recognizing the Symptoms

Depression, like the flu, has symptoms. These symptoms can be no more willed away than the muscle aches or fever that come with the flu. Before you diagnose your child with depression, there are specific criteria that need to be met. Here are some warning signs:

- Sadness (or Irritability)
- Change in weight
- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Energy loss
- Feelings of worthlessness

- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Loss of interest or pleasure in things
- Isolating

## What Makes Teens Susceptible?

Additionally, research has shown that young teens and young adults suffer from depression more than older adults. The reasons often circle around the normal physical and social development of adolescents and the stress that comes with it:

- Sex hormones and puberty
- Navigating romantic social pressures
- Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Navigating independence from parents
- Pressure to make big choices about the future
- Problems or failing in school
- Death of a family member or friend

Moreover, teens with low self-esteem, high levels of self-criticism, or a family history of depression are at a greater risk for depression.

## Tune in to Emotions

If you are concerned that your teen may be showing signs of depression, breathe, and then have a talk with them. Identify any changes in their environment that may have contributed to their change in mood. Let them know that you love and support them and that they can talk with you at any time about anything.

Finally, do not self-diagnose your teen; get professional help. Schedule an evaluation and assessment with a qualified therapist. God works powerfully through gifted professionals. The 15-year-old in the example above was suffering from depression, and in talking with her therapist, she learned healthy ways of coping with and managing her depressive symptoms and started to re-engage with her friends and family over time. Depression is a medical condition; with a professional's help, it can be treated! God is faithful to walk with us through every season of life, and there is no challenge beyond his capacity to heal.

# How Do I Raise My Child to Embrace Faith?

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

James Dobson said, “Children are not casual guests in our home. They have been loaned to us temporarily for the purpose of loving them and instilling a foundation of values on which their future lives will be built.” Developing authentic faith in our children is the desire of most Christian parents, but how do we get there? How do we raise kids who embrace their faith and choose to follow God intentionally and passionately?

## First, Set the Example

It all begins with us. We cannot give what we do not have. Faith begins in others as we let our faith leak out to those around us. We start with loving God with all we have and then letting that love overflow to those around us. Your identity—what you love and serve—is your legacy. Ask yourself what your true passions are. Is your love for your Savior as evident as your passion for your hobby or your sports team? True passions cannot be hidden. Our delight overflows, and it becomes contagious.

Research has shown that parents are the most influential factor in the faith formation of their children. Our children are always watching us, which is both good news and bad news. They pick up our bad habits along with our good ones. They say apples do not fall far from the tree because children emulate their parents, including our faith practices. Author Christian

Smith puts it this way, “When it comes to kids’ faith, parents get what they are.” The apostle Paul says, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice” ([Philippians 4:9](#)). How excited are we for our children to adopt our spiritual habits? Living out our faith does not mean pretending to have things together, but rather an honesty about our own brokenness, the challenges of living the Christian life, and a diligence for faith to matter. Paul said to his followers in Corinth, “Follow me as I follow the example of Christ” ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). Are we brave enough to say that to our children?

## Second, Cultivate the Soil

As we practice our faith, how can we convey our faith to others? What are the crucial elements kids need to embrace faith and to make it their own? In the National Study of Youth and Religion, Kenda Creasy Dean has identified four characteristics that structure the lives of youth who maintain a consequential faith into their adulthood. They have a creed to believe, a community to belong to, a call to live out, and a hope to hold onto.

## A Creed to Believe

Our culture has a watered down view of who God is. Teenagers who evidence consequential faith as adults

have received a personal and powerful “God story” that imparts identity (“a creed to believe”). Christian Smith breaks down the shallowness of the faith of typical American teens into what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” In other words, a vague belief in a distant, uninvolved God who wants me to be happy and, if I am good, will take me to heaven someday. This watered down view of God does not inspire consequential faith.

If we want to raise children who embrace their faith then we need to introduce them to the God of the Bible. God is more than a Band-Aid to use in times of crisis. He is the God who created and sustains the universe and yet knows and calls you and me into relationship with him. They need to know that God in Christ loved them enough to die for them and that he has called us by his Spirit to live for him. He is with us and claims lordship over every aspect of our lives.

## A Community to Belong to

Faith does not flow from one generation to the next without the conduit of intergenerational relationships. Teenagers who keep a consequential faith as adults found a significant sense of belonging in the life of their congregations (“a community to belong to”). Children need a community of adults who are invested in them and their faith. Authors Chap Clark and Kara Powell share research in their book *Sticky Faith* that shows young people need five adults who are intentionally invested in their faith lives. “More than any single program or event, adults making the effort to get to know the kids was far more likely to make kids feel like a significant part of their church.” How many adults do your children know by name? How many adults would your children be comfortable engaging in conversation? Cultivate your children's

relationships with adults of faith!

## A Call to Live Out

We all wish to be useful. Everyone wants to contribute and use their gifts to serve others. Teenagers who evidence consequential faith have a sense of divine vocation or purpose to their lives (“a call to live out”). Service opportunities help them to see their role in bringing in God's kingdom. We gain a sense of calling as we discover how God has gifted us and how we can use those gifts to serve others. The apostle Peter wrote, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms” ([1 Peter 4:10](#)).

## A Hope to Hold onto

Teenagers who keep their consequential faith have a keen interest in the future (“a hope to hold onto”). Faith anchors us, knowing that we have a God who holds our future no matter what challenges we face today. Hope flows naturally when we experience God's love and forgiveness and turn over our lives to his leading. When we believe that our loving God is in control, we can face the future with hope instead of worry.

How are you nurturing faith? Are you helping your children find a creed to believe, a community to belong to, a call to live out, and a hope to hold onto?

Ultimately everyone will have to decide for themselves what they will believe. The best that we can do to help our children embrace Christianity is to live out a genuine faith in the context of authentic community. When our faith community challenges its youth to live out the Christian life, they will develop a hope in a God who is much more than themselves!

# Teaching our Children How to Respond to the Voice of God

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

How can we help our children hear and respond to the voice of God? How do we give them ears to hear? We pray our kids will recognize God's loving voice and obediently follow his leading in their lives, but it probably starts with us and our voice.

*"We are placed in a position of authority over our kids. God tells us to use that authority in a loving way, because really it is his authority, and we are only stewards"*

Chip Ingram says in his book *Effective Parenting*, "Whatever attitude children have toward your voice, that's probably how they will respond to God's when they are older." We parents are what God sounds like to our kids. So what qualities of God's voice should our voice echo so that our children are drawn into a relationship with their Heavenly Father?

## God's Voice Carries Authority

We are placed in a position of authority over our

kids. God tells us to use that authority in a loving way, because really it is his authority, and we are only stewards. So we use our power to serve and shape our kids, never to abuse. When exercised in love, parental authority leads our children to be led and inspired, not beaten down and discouraged. We are responsible for training our children to know their spiritual identity as God's beloved child. We encourage them and help develop their gifts. We correct bad behavior and train our children to be responsible citizens of God's kingdom; this requires limit setting, redirection, and discipline at times. We are not called to be our child's best friend; we are placed into a position of authority to train up our children in the way they should go.

## God's Voice is Overflowing in Love

God loves us sacrificially and unconditionally. God extended his unconditional love to us while we were still sinners. He did not wait for us to have our act together before he loved us. Can we show love and compassion to our kids even when they mess up? God's love reminds us that we belong to him and that we are precious to him. Do you validate your kids so they know how much you love them? We want our children to recognize the love of their Heavenly Father in us and to seek out an active relationship with him.

## God's Voice is One of Challenge

God accepts us as we are, but he also transforms us into who we are to become. God does not leave us to wallow in our sinfulness but rather challenges us to be transformed into his likeness day by day. We all have been gifted by God and carry his image. We have a responsibility to use the gifts that we have been given to serve God and his kingdom. Scripture tells us that we are created to do good works that he has prepared in advance for us to do ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). We can get very comfortable in life and forget that God has called us to transformation. Wonder and pray about how God might like to stretch you and your family beyond your comfort zone.

## God is the Voice of Comfort

God offers comfort for all the hurt we face in this world. We want our children to see God as the place

where they take their problems, so we need to model taking all of our concerns to God's throne. God is able to listen to all of our messes, so we should get comfortable talking to our kids about challenging topics. God hears all of our emotions, from joy and thanksgiving to rage and lament. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" ([Galatians 6:2](#)).

We want our children to respond in obedience to God, so we need to require obedience to our voice of loving authority. We teach that obedience by being clear with our expectations and following through with consequences when poor choices are made.

It is a huge responsibility to represent God to our families. We will never do it perfectly, but that should not keep us from trying. God equips us with what we need. Day by day we are building a foundation with our kids, showing them the faithfulness of their loving God. As our voices resonate more and more with the sound of God's voice, our children will come to understand God's character and be drawn into a relationship with him.



# Chapter 5: Parenting Adults

This chapter explores the strange world of parenting adults. When our offspring are no longer children, our roles change, and eventually nearly reverse. Parents slowly become only advisors, no longer making decisions for their young adults; they are to be honored, but not necessarily obeyed. Acknowledging and fostering those moving boundaries of independence is a key struggle in these years. You want your children to fly the nest, but learning to fly often involves painful lessons for both child and parent.





# Nine Conversations to Have with Your College-Bound Child

BY REV. DEB KOSTER

As your children prepare to head out on their own, bless them with some good conversations to prepare them for the road ahead. Before they fly the nest, take time to prepare them for flight. Some great discussions can help your child get a glimpse around the corner and hopefully hit the ground of their college campus more prepared. Pick one topic at a time and make a date of discussing these things over coffee, breakfast, or ice cream. The goal is to start the discussion and empower your child to take the lead in building their plan toward independence.

*“Don’t put your spiritual life on hold while you pursue academics—you will need the strength of your faith to weather various challenges”*

These are meant to be discussion topics, not lecture points. Keep in mind that you are handing your child the responsibility of managing these things for themselves, while you step into a consulting or advisory role. Feel free to offer insights, but let your child think their way through how they will manage things. They can always consult you on any of these concerns, and hopefully

these topics will be integrated into your ongoing discussions throughout their college career.

## Studies

Academic work is supposed to be the main focus of the college experience. So how might you structure your time to prioritize your academics? Consider finding a study partner in classes that seem challenging. It never hurts to have a friend with whom to share notes or study for an exam. Where are quiet places you can go to study? Consider how you will manage study time with your roommate. How will you set boundaries around study time to keep it from being swallowed by social time? What social and extracurricular activities are you willing to give up to keep your grades front and center? What academic support is available if you have challenges? When should you consult your academic advisor?

## Social

Friends and social activities are another major focus of the college experience. Friendships we form in college often last a lifetime and can significantly influence academic success. What approach will you take for making friends? How can you be a good friend? How will you handle challenges with roommates? What activities would you consider trying to stretch yourself

and make connections? How can relationships help you grow in faith or be challenging to your faith? How much contact do you want to have with friends from home? How often do you want contact from family?

## Spirituality

Don't put your spiritual life on hold while you pursue academics—you will need the strength of your faith to weather various challenges. Consider how you will foster spiritual growth in your life. What Bible studies and church services are available to keep you growing in faith? There is great blessing to be found in God's Word. Consider learning a new scripture each week to strengthen and encourage you. How will you structure your time to make talking with God a priority? What about texting a prayer request regularly to your family to take before God's throne? Or subscribing to a [daily devotional](#)?

## Physical Health

College dorms are pretty much a Petri dish of diseases, and college life tends to run down the immune system. Staying healthy requires good habits. How will you insure you get enough rest? How will you take care of yourself nutritionally? What are your plans for getting exercise? What happens when you get sick? How will you handle medication refills or reordering contact lenses? What happens if you need to see a dentist or doctor? How does our insurance plan work? How would you cope with a roommate having a serious illness such as an eating disorder? And please never eat food without first washing your hands or using hand sanitizer—really, you will thank me later!

## Emotional Health

School brings a host of different stressors. How will you care for yourself emotionally? What are your

biggest concerns about college life? Talking with a friend, getting rest, or getting some exercise are great first responses to stress, but what if you start feeling overwhelmed? How will you manage stress to avoid burnout? Most college campuses offer free or cheap counseling, so consider when you should take advantage of that resource. A bad break up, failing a class, or just needing a listening ear are great reasons to utilize these resources. We all need some life coaching now and again; consider the benefit from seeing a counselor just to process life. How would you help a friend who seems depressed? How might you direct a friend to use counseling resources?

## Serving

College can be a me-focused time, but that is not how God calls us to live. How might you find ways to care for others beyond yourself? Consider your gifting and explore ways to use your gifts for God's kingdom. What might God be calling you to do?

## Specialty

Many start college undecided about a major, but there comes a point when it's important to focus on some specialty. What gifts do you see God developing in your life? What areas of study gets you excited? What career paths interest you? What are the next steps on that path? If your career counseling center offers testing to help narrow your focus, plan a visit to their office to explore your options. Choose an academic advisor or mentor to help you explore some possibilities.

*“College can be a me-focused time, but that is not how God calls us to live”*

## Savings

College can be an expensive proposition. How are you planning to manage your finances? How will you go about finding student employment? How many work hours do you need to keep you in cash to cover your expenses? How can you be a good steward of your financial resources? What does your budget look like?

## Significant Other

College is often the time when we meet our future spouse. What qualities will you look for in those that

you choose to date? How will you honor God in your physical relationship? When you sense it's not working out, will you have the courage to call it off?

Many adventures await our children as they step into college life. Hopefully these ongoing conversations can help guide parents and prepare students to make a healthy transition into this new phase of life in God's kingdom. Review each of them every summer. Our children may leave our home, but they will never leave our hearts. God feels the same way, and he will continue to watch over our children and guide their journey no matter where they go. Trust that our God who loves our children best will hold them close through whatever lies ahead.

# Treating Children as Adults

BY REV. STEVEN KOSTER

**H**ow long should we consider our children as children? After all, they've been children their whole lives, right?

As parents, we love our children from infancy, investing years into nurturing them into becoming independent citizens of God's kingdom. The challenge comes in that they don't become adults all at once. We have to shift to viewing them as adults over time and treat them accordingly as they grow. And even then, when they fly the nest, how do you parent an adult?

## Understand the Journey

The transition is not a clear one. Adulthood emerges over years. Even as we struggle to find our new role, our children will wobble in their roles. They vacillate in what they want. It may feel as though they desire all of the freedom with none of the responsibility! They want more control over choices, but still need or desire our financial help. They don't want our direction, but neither will they take the initiative themselves. They don't quickly see the steps that they need to take to reach the career and educational aspirations that they have. Those variations make it so very tempting to stay in the role of commander rather than consultant for too long.

## Encourage Responsibility

As children navigate their entry to adulthood,

parents likewise navigate giving up a directive role, no longer telling them what to do but helping them see the options (and consequences) for their own decisions. We want to step up as consultants who have their best interests in mind, while still allowing them to be in charge. We can suggest ideas for them to consider, but the choices that they make need to be their own. When our daughter could not choose between two colleges, she wanted us to make the decision for her. We redirected her to weigh the pros and cons of both choices to evaluate which choice would be best for her. We were happy to inform her decision, but the final decision needed to be hers. Learning to make decisions is an important part of becoming an adult.

## Allow for Failure

Everyone has to learn to make decisions. Rather than insulating your children from failure, allow them to make mistakes that will result in learning opportunities. Preventing young adults from making their own decisions effectively stunts their growth into adulthood. They may remain dependent on (and perhaps grow resentful of) parental direction.

The trick is, of course, to allow failures on low-stakes decisions if possible. Hair-color choices may be embarrassing for a while, for example, but they're far from permanent. A tattoo might call for a more stringent standard. Financially supporting a young

adult, through college for example, should make you partners in the student's growth. You might set some conditions for your support (say, decent grades to show good faith and progress), but choices of direction, such as major or career preparation, should be the student's.

That's not to say it won't sometimes be painful to step out of the driver's seat and be relegated to an advisory role. It's hard to allow our children to make their own choices, especially if they are not the choices that we would have made. As parents, we are so invested in protecting our children, it breaks our hearts to see them struggle, make mistakes, and even fail. Our protective instincts are tough to turn off. But loving them as adults means allowing them to make their own choices and to deal with the consequences of their actions. Throughout, we can be good listeners, and when asked, respond with helpful navigation advice, but they need to drive their own lives.

## In-Laws Take a Backseat

Genesis says when a child is grown, the young adult will leave father and mother and become one flesh with a spouse. This is an important re-setting of bonds and boundaries. When the time comes for an adult

child to marry, that adult's human center of gravity becomes the new spouse, by God's design. The center should no longer be parents, friends, or anyone else. The decisions the couple makes are theirs to make, and not yours. They will blend traditions from two families into a new tradition. If you want to love and care for your adult-married child, honor the boundary around them as a couple. Encourage them to take their emotional energies, complaints, and celebrations back to their spouse first and everyone else second. Ask their permission before you take action on their behalf. You want their marriage to be strong, in service to your whole family (and perhaps your potential grandchildren) well into the future.

## Trust God's Lead

God loves our children more than we ever could. God cared for our children before we knew their name, and he will accomplish his purposes in their life. The apostle Paul wrote, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" ([Philippians 1:6](#)). Believe that their Heavenly Father is still at work in your adult children, and continue to pray for them to make wise choices.

# Fences and In-Laws: Honoring Your Married Children

BY REV. STEVEN KOSTER

As Robert Frost wrote, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Clear boundaries are essential for keeping relationships healthy. As Dr. Phil likes to say, “You teach people how to treat you,” which is another way of saying, “being clear about your expectations is how healthy relationships are managed.” Whether it’s your kids, your boss, or your mother-in-law, it’s essential to name what’s okay and what is not okay.

*“When a marriage begins, it redefines the surrounding relationships”*

## Why Marriage Boundaries Matter

When a marriage begins, it redefines the surrounding relationships. Our parenting relationships clearly move from having authority to being advisory. For young couples, setting boundaries with parents and in-laws is a critical piece of establishing a healthy new home. For parents, honoring the young marriage becomes the new goal—we can help them best by honoring their unity. Having children become adults means the foundations of the family system are shifting, and the rules must be rewritten.

## Encourage Them to Cling to Their Spouse

Once married, our child’s first loyalty becomes their spouse. In the earliest chapters of the Bible, [Genesis 2:24](#) lays out God’s plan for marriage in terms of leaving one’s parents and clinging to a spouse: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Your daughter’s husband is now her center of gravity and the most important human being on the planet to her. Your son’s wife is someone he must honor always; she is his key decision-making partner. The two are bound together by covenant until death. In God’s eyes they are one flesh, a reality into which they will try to grow over a lifetime. Honoring a spouse comes second only to honoring God. Marriages can break or become abusive, but that’s a different issue; normally, marriage is the relationship to which we are called to cling and others are called to honor.

## Your Default Way Isn’t Always the Best Way

We tend to act as we have been taught. How we as parents handle time, money, difficulties, and decisions models for our children how they should act in marriage. Our model becomes their default. But your child’s spouse was raised differently and will have a

different default. A whole lot of honeymoon troubles are about blending assumptions of what is the default way—the “normal” way—ranging from how to squeeze toothpaste to how to have an argument. As parents of married children, we need to honor them as they forge new patterns of managing life together.

In new marriages especially, there is often tension between the couple that is blending together their own household over against both their families of origin, who may resist having their primacy sidelined. Some parents-in-law still want first place and a vote on the decisions their married children make. But we don't get a vote—the couple need to make allowances for each other and make decisions together; and they should do it alone. Our role in our child's marriage is advisory, not participatory. We are consultants, not commanders, and that only after we've been asked.

## We Parents Must Take a Backseat

Sometimes we parents are needy, or demanding, or simply just close-knit and used to calling the shots. But a too dependent or demanding relationship with our children can interfere with the young marriage. An unhealthy demand for our child's attention and allegiance can cause jealousy, anger, and resentment in the marriage. Enmeshed parental relationships can undermine marriages with disastrous results.

Honoring their parents is the fifth commandment and rightly important, but our married children are not one flesh with their parents. They can still love and

respect us, but their primary allegiance is no longer to us—it lies with their spouse. They may still desire our parental affirmation and want to make us happy, but our happiness is not their first responsibility.

## Allow Them to Claim Their Parental Authority

Boundaries apply in our children's parenting, too. When our children become parents, they need to be the decision-makers concerning their children. When they visit, it may be tempting to fall back into the parent and child relationship and try to be in charge. But grandpa and grandma don't get to overrule our kids' decisions about their children's diet, bedtime, or discipline. We can give valuable advice when asked, but ultimately our son or daughter and their spouse need to set the guidelines. This is part of accepting and honoring the authority that God has given to them as parents—that they may care for those whom God has entrusted to them.

## Redefining Relationships in Love

A few good fences will strengthen your child's relationship with their spouse. These healthy boundaries will likely improve the couple's relationship with extended family as well; the family system can relax once everyone understands where the lines are. Removing confusion and setting expectations allow everyone to settle into the new normal.



# Setting Boundaries with Adult Children

BY KATHY KONRATH, MA, LCPC, LMHC

**B**oundaries can be hard to set with anyone. It feels like we're restricting others. However, when we set boundaries, we also allow the other person to live and grow within their own space. But, if we fail to set boundaries, we let others behave badly, and we are prone to resentment. That's not a recipe for serenity!

## How Do You Set Boundaries with Your Adult Child?

[Genesis 2:24](#) says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife," but sometimes the child won't leave. They might even be taking advantage of their parents' generosity. Signs that you may need to set boundaries with your adult child include doing things for them that they would have to do themselves if they were on their own. If you are doing their laundry, paying for their gasoline as they borrow your car, or allowing them to live at home without a financial or service agreement (aka, rent and chores), they may need limits.

*"If you want something different in your relationship with your adult child, then you need to change something"*

Author Allison Bottke helps you regain your "S.A.N.I.T.Y." in her book [Setting Boundaries with Adult Children](#). Doing the same thing over and over again

*"Communicate clearly what the rule or boundary is as well as the consequence of not honoring the rule or boundary. This allows your child to make a choice. Having a choice is freedom. Once you have clearly established your limits, implement and maintain them"*

while expecting different results is a popular definition of insanity. If you want something different in your relationship with your adult child, then you need to change something. You cannot change your adult child's behavior, you can change only your own. Take a look at Bottke's quick start guide to setting boundaries:

## S.A.N.I.T.Y. for Setting Boundaries

**S**—Stop enabling and stop the flow of money! Enabling may be useful when you are helping someone grow. Enabling that is harmful seeks to solve someone's problem or "help" (often with the best intentions) to the point of not allowing them to take responsibility for their life and the changes that are needed. Stopping the flow of money is simple—just stop giving them money! If they make it, they can spend it.

**A**—Assemble a support group. Setting boundaries is not easy, especially when the person is someone you love dearly. Sometimes all we need is permission to do what we know is best. Find people who will support you and not co-sign your enabling behavior. Look for someone who will challenge you, give you wisdom and guidance, and offer you their strength and hope.

**N**—Nip excuses in the bud. An excuse is "a reason or explanation that defends or justifies a fault or offense." Reasons don't change behavior. Behavior changes behavior. Learn to identify an excuse when you hear it, and then call it out for what it is.

**I**—Implement rules and limits. Consider what your boundaries are, what you are comfortable allowing, and what is non-negotiable. Write it down. Get specific. Next, communicate clearly what the rule or boundary is as well as the consequence of not honoring the rule or boundary. This allows your child to make a choice. Having a choice is freedom. Once you have clearly established your limits, implement and maintain them.

**T**—Trust your instincts. Setting boundaries in relationships is not like solving a mathematical equation. You will need wisdom and guidance. Ask God to give you a right thought or action. Listen, and then move forward with what you believe is best. You know that voice inside that tells you something isn't right? That same voice can also tell you what is right. Take the risk and trust it. God's got your back.

**Y**—Yield everything to God. It is an act of surrender and acceptance to turn your child over to God. He knows what your child needs in order to realize things need to change in his or her life. He knows how to help them change, if they are willing. Yielding your child to God allows them the opportunity to open themselves to real change. Get out of God's way, and let him work. Pause, and surrender your child to him (over and over again).

# When Your Child Chooses a Different Standard

BY KIM SULLIVAN

Every parent fears the moment when your young adult child drops a bomb on you. They have made a life choice completely contrary to the standards you have set before them. On top of this blow, they seem to flaunt their decision before you at every opportunity. You feel hurt and betrayed, and maybe even a little foolish. How would Christ want you to respond?

For whatever reason, it seems common that our children test our reactions to situations. Will we lose our cool? Turn our backs on them? Will we ignore confrontation and choose our relationship with them even over the standards we have chosen as a family? Here are some thoughts on how to react when your child makes a poor choice:

## Lead with Love

Many times our kids either consciously or subconsciously push our buttons just to see how we will react. If they fear losing you, they may unconsciously try to push you away before you get the chance to leave them. Getting angry only justifies their behavior and feeds into their feelings that you don't understand what they are going through. So keep calm and promise you will always love them. This isn't to say that you are not allowed to have strong emotions over wrong decisions they may make. On the contrary, that straying sheep should touch your heartstrings enough to make you seek out the lost lamb and carry them home to

a place of safety. Even though the frightened and confused sheep may try to bite or kick the rescuing hand, love compels the shepherd to press on. Further, the shepherd isn't afraid to use the crook to draw a lost lamb back to the fold. Firm confrontation may very well be necessary, but it must be love that motivates every conversation and consequence, not anger. It is the love of God that draws all people to repent.

*"Firm confrontation may very well be necessary, but it must be love that motivates every conversation and consequence"*

## Set Limits

There may be times when we have to momentarily change our fellowship with our children. Although our relationship with our Heavenly Father is not altered by our sin, our fellowship can be. For instance, if an adult child is living completely recklessly and bringing total disorder to a family's home, you may have to ask them to leave if they are not compliant to the law of the land (both literally and figuratively!). When this is

done in love the child has the opportunity to observe not rejection, but rather your priorities and the reality of your relationship with Christ.

## Stand by Your Beliefs

There are relationships we are to remain more loyal to than that of our children. The most important relationship is the one with our Heavenly Father. The world around us, especially our children, are watching our reactions to see if we really believe what we say that we believe. Standing by our beliefs even while those we love most challenge those beliefs speaks loudly of the reality of our commitment to our Heavenly Father. After all, how can we expect our children to obey or honor our advice against that of their peers if we change our standards in order to keep from confronting them? If we are unwilling to obey our Heavenly Father even at a cost, how can we expect them to overcome the pressures of society in their own lives? We are not to conform to this world ([Romans 12:2](#)). What better way to walk that out before our family than to face their opposition of biblical standards?

## Anoint Them in Prayer

The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective ([James 5:16](#)). There is precious little influence that we can have over another person's choices, but we can team up with God in prayer. Our God loves our child even more than we do. He can do beyond what we could ask or imagine ([Ephesians 3:20](#)). Turn every anxiety for your child into a prayer for their relationship with their Heavenly Father ([1 Peter 5:7](#)). Pray God's promises over your child and hold God accountable to fulfill them. Trust that God who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion! ([Philippians 1:6](#)).

The reality is that everyone is looking for something to live for that is worth dying for. If we cannot even risk relationships with our loved ones in order to remain faithful to God and his requirements, then we are not living what we say we believe. The Holy Spirit leads us as parents and gives us wisdom and peace when family storms hit. Remain faithful to him. You may be the only glimpse of Christ they see, so respond with his grace. In doing so, you will be serving your family to the highest degree.

# About the Authors



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Deb Koster is the Senior Producer, editor, writer, and speaker for [Family Fire](#). After more than 20 years as a Registered Nurse, she followed her passion for family ministry and completed a Master of Divinity degree. She has since been ordained as a pastor in the [Christian Reformed Church](#). Deb and her husband, Steven, enjoy leading marriage retreats and family seminars to encourage people in their most intimate relationships. The Kosters are the parents of three awesome young adults and reside in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



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## About Family Fire

[Family Fire](#) is a Christian ministry committed to fanning the flames of the Holy Spirit in our family relationships. *Family Fire* hosts an active [Facebook community](#) and offers a library of deeper resources on our [website](#). We also offer live teaching events such as marriage and parenting retreats. Together we explore spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy and how we should live as members of a Spirit-fed family.

[Romans 8:14-17](#) teaches us how the Holy Spirit connects us in our relationships:

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Discussing God’s design for marriage and parenting, *Family Fire* is produced by Pastor Deb Koster in collaboration with her husband, Pastor Steven. The Kosters are passionate about using God’s Word to help families nurture faith formation and navigate relationship challenges.



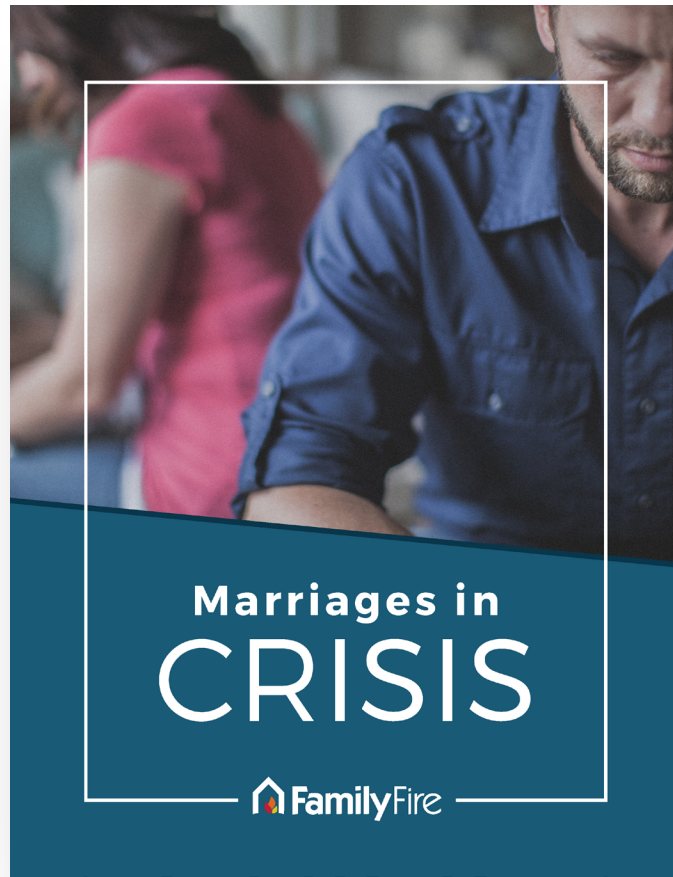
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equips you to heal and repair your relationships through God's gift of forgiveness.

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