

Giving Presence this Christmas

By Viki Rife and Nicole Miller

I (Viki) will never forget the Christmas we spent with some friends when I was young. Their children received so many presents I could hardly believe it!

When the carry-out dinner they'd ordered arrived, everyone served themselves and carried their plates to different rooms to eat in front of their numerous TVs.

Then one of the boys, maybe about 13, yanked a chair up to the table and almost slammed his plate down in front of it. "I've had it!" he exclaimed. "I'll eat at the family table even if I have to do it alone!"

I looked at him inquiringly. He explained, "Every day we eat in front of the TV. We never talk to each other. Couldn't this one day of the year be different?"

The event sticks in my mind because over the years I've met many people, young and old, who were starved for interaction and real conversation with their families. They weren't as interested in *presents* as they were in *presence*.

Curious about what children really want, we've done a little research. What we find is very educational. Here are a few key principles.

1. Presence is powerful

God created us as relational beings. We desire relationship with Him and with others from the very beginning of life. The very act of being positively and healthily present with children helps them to develop their view of God.

"Whether children were part of a faith community or not, they had concepts of God, and these concepts strongly related to images of and relationships with parents The parent-child relationship, it seems, is key to understanding children's experiences of God as loving, powerful, caring, nurturing punishing, close or distant."ⁱ

Getting on the floor and playing, conversations about the artwork you can't decipher, or chatting about the inane day-to-day life of a child may seem insignificant to you. But by doing these things you are communicating to them that every single moment of their life, matters to God. Isn't it amazing that simply by crawling around on the floor driving toy cars with your 4-year-old can represent the love of an all-powerful God?

In fact, research has clearly demonstrated that, "One of the very best predictors for how any child turns out—in terms of happiness, social and emotional development, leadership skills, meaningful relationships, and even academic and career success—is whether they develop security from having at least one person who showed up for them."ⁱⁱ

Seven years ago, I (Nicole) and a few volunteers began teaching in a Sisters Mentoring with a Mission afterschool ministry. We talked about our lesson but also about their lives and what was happening. When the girls moved on to middle school, they wanted to continue meeting, so we arranged to do so. The girls who started as fourth-graders are now juniors in high school. We still meet regularly. Why? Because they want someone who cares, because we showed up each week for years and became women who mattered to them. We may never know the full impact these relationships have had.



2. Don't be afraid of showing up

We would love to say that showing up is always easy, but it isn't. It can be downright scary. If you are convinced of the importance of presence, though, you will still show up.

The authors of *The Power of Showing Up* encourage us: "When you're not sure how to respond in a given situation with your child, don't worry. Instead of worryingjust show up."ⁱⁱⁱ

Last year I (Nicole) wanted to start a new middle school program. To find middle school girls, I had to show up to their lunchroom and invite them to spend time with me. I was petrified.

A good friend said. "Show interest in their lives. Ask them questions. All they really want is to know someone is genuinely interested in them." I faced my fear and stepped into that space. I ended up meeting weekly with girls who were confused about their identity, who had no other grown-up they trusted, and who felt hurt by the church. I didn't always know what to say or how to act but kept showing up. They did too.

3. Family first

While it may be tempting to think that the children's ministry leader or church pastor are the primary source for informing a child's faith, it is really the parents. Tony Kummer states "Parents are uniquely positioned to spiritually shepherd a child."^{iv} This is based on the fact that 2/3 of Christians come to faith before the age of 18^v and 50 percent of Kummer's survey participants indicated that their parents led them to salvation.

A parent's role is not merely to bring a child to salvation. They must also to allow their child to see and know Christ through their interactions. Without this kind of genuinely interested presence, talking about Jesus is not as effective as it could be.

With the prevalence of technology, distractions can keep us from offering presence. "Showing up means being physically present as well as providing a quality of presence....Showing up means bringing your whole being, your attention and awareness, when you're with your child."^{vi}

When we use the name "Emmanuel," we can talk about Him bringing His divine presence into our human reality. He was a Prince of heaven. He lived in a place filled with joy, peace, and purity. Our world has sadness, hurt and pain. Why would He want to step down into our world? He came in the form of a baby and experienced every stage of development so He could be fully present with us in our humanness. He is our example and great high priest who has known temptation and pain.

Once a year we celebrate the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us. We have a chance to pause and rejoice in awe that our all-powerful God chose to give us the ultimate gift of His presence. We are called to give the same gift to those around us.

ⁱ Pehr Granqvist and Jane R. Dickie. "Attachment and Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence." In *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. 197-209. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Copyright 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. *The Power of Showing Up: How parental presence shapes who our kids become and how their brains get wired*. Balantine Books, New York. Copyright 2020. p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 3

^{iv} Tony Kummer. “Children’s Ministry Statistics: 5 Key Insights on Kids Coming to Salvation.” Accessed December 1, 2020.
<https://ministry-to-children.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Childrens-Ministry-Statistics-2019.pdf>

^v Barna Group. “Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids.” Accessed December 1, 2020.
<https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>

^{vi} Siegel and Bryson, p. 4