



Shepherding a Child's Heart

Revised and Updated

T E D D T R I P P



A Shepherding the Heart Resource



SHEPHERDING
A CHILD'S
HEART

Revised and Updated

Second Edition

TEDD TRIPP



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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

*I*N THE TEN YEARS since *Shepherding a Child's Heart* was published I have taught the material in this book hundreds of times. I have conversed with scores of young people who are in the throes of childrearing. These opportunities have left me more and more convinced of some biblical underpinnings that are essential for making sense of the childrearing task.

God is concerned with the heart—the well-spring of life (Proverbs 4:23). Parents tend to focus on the externals of behavior rather than the internal overflow of the heart. We tend to worry more about the “what” of behavior than the “why”. Accordingly, most of us spend an enormous amount of energy in controlling and constraining behavior. To the degree and extent to which our focus is on behavior, we miss the heart.

When we miss the heart, we miss the subtle idols of the heart. Romans 1 makes it clear that all human beings are worshipers; either we worship and serve God, or we make an exchange and worship and serve substitutes for God—created things rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-25). When parenting short-circuits to behavior we miss the opportunity to help our kids understand that straying behavior displays a straying heart. Our kids are always serving something, either God or a substitute for God—an idol of the heart.

When we miss the heart, we miss the gospel. If the goal of parenting is no more profound than securing appropriate behavior, we will never help our children understand the internal things, the heart issues, that push and pull behavior. Those internal issues: self-love, rebellion, anger, bitterness, envy, and pride of the heart show our children how profoundly they need grace. If the problem with children is deeper than inappropriate behavior, if the problem is the overflow of the heart, then the need for grace is established. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life and died as an infinite sacrifice so that children (and their parents) can be forgiven, transformed, liberated and empowered to love God and love others.

When we miss the heart, we miss the glory of God. The need of children (or adults) who have fallen into various forms of personal idolatry is not only to tear down the high places of the alien gods, but to enthrone God. Children are spring-loaded for worship. One of the most important callings God has given parents is to display the greatness, goodness, and glory of the God for whom they are made. Parents have the opportunity, through word and deed, to show children the one true object of worship—the God of the Bible. We know that the greatest delights our children can ever experience are found in delighting in the God who has made them for his glory.

Many times when I have taught the things found in this book people have come to me and said, “These truths you are teaching are not just about our children; they are about me.” We need to incarnate these truths for our children.

So, welcome to the second edition of *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*. What you find here may be a paradigm shift for you, but it will bear good fruit in your life and in the lives of your children.

My prayer for you is expressed by King David in Psalm 78, that not only would you teach and model these truths for your children, but that even generations yet unborn would arise and teach them to their children, so they might put their hope in God.

Tedd Tripp
July, 2005

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

I HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED to write on this subject because I believe that our culture, and therefore the church, is in great need of a biblical focus on the task of parenting.

I have sought to apply the principles which I have seen bear good fruit in my life and in the counseling and pastoral ministry God has given me.

Thanks are in order. My family has been of great support throughout this arduous writing process. It is no easy task for a preacher to become a writer. My dear wife Margy has read this book more times than either of us care to remember. If you think it is too long, you should thank her for chopping words as she did her “Strunk and White” simplification several times. My now-adult children, Tedd, Heather and Aaron, have been willing to be named and analyzed as illustrations. Tedd’s wife, Heather, has been a willing and valuable help in the final steps before publication. Their vitality and ardent love for God has encouraged me many times when I would have given up in this task.

The people of Grace Fellowship Church, whom I have loved and learned from for 21 years, have had great influence on my walk with God as well as on the content of this book. They have helped

me refine the things taught here through countless times of teaching. My fellow elders and the deacons who serve us faithfully have encouraged me to “get away” to work on this on many occasions when I would have let the project die.

There have been many faithful readers: Daniel Boehret, Gene Cannon, Marcia Ciszek, Jon and Jose Hueni, Kelly Knowlden, Jean Neel, Ted Vinatieri, and Jay and Ruth Younts. The cogent comments and observations of these people have clarified and focused the content.

A special thanks to David Powlison and Jay E. Adams of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. David’s teaching is a model of true spirituality I have sought to emulate and apply to the task of childrearing. Jay Adams has sharpened me “like iron sharpens iron.” I am in his debt.

May God bless these things to raising up a holy seed for his church.

Tedd Tripp
July 1995

FOREWORD

THIS IS A MASTERFUL BOOK. Tedd Tripp knows what he is talking about and he knows whom he is talking to. He knows children, he knows parents . . . and he knows the ways of God.

Most books on parenting give you advice either on how to shape and constrain your children's behavior or on how to make them feel good about themselves. Either control or self-actualization is deemed the goal of parenting. The former makes parental wishes supreme; the latter makes childish wishes supreme.

Shepherding a Child's Heart contains something very different. The book teaches you what your goals as a parent ought to be, and how to pursue those ends practically. It teaches you how to engage children about what really matters, how to address your child's heart by your words and actions. It teaches you how communication and discipline work together when parents love wisely. It teaches you how your objectives shift as infants grow into children and as children grow into teenagers. *Shepherding a Child's Heart* will humble you. It will inspire you to become a different kind of parent. It will teach you how by precept and example.

Most books on parenting actually don't understand what children—or parents—are really like. Their advice builds on a foundation untrue to Scripture, untrue to human reality. Their bits of good advice mingle with bits of bad advice because the overarching

vision is faulty; their bits of good advice totter or misfire because the balancing elements of wise parenting are neglected. Tedd Tripp's book on parenting is different. The cornerstone is accurately aligned. *Shepherding a Child's Heart* understands you and your children truly, so it leads in straight and wise paths. Tripp gives you a vision and he makes it practical. You can't ask for more.

Tedd Tripp is a seasoned parent, pastor, counselor, and school principal. But more than that, he is a man who has listened well to God and has wrestled out what it means to raise children. Listen well to him, and wrestle out what it means to shepherd your child's heart.

David Powlison
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INTRODUCTION

*J*ENNIFER WAS FAILING to do her homework. Her teacher called Jennifer's folks to solicit help. But her parents could not help. Twelve-year-old Jennifer would not obey them. Jennifer was not under their authority. They had hoped that school would provide the direction and motivation they had not been able to provide for their daughter.

This story is not unusual. By age ten to twelve, scores of children have already left home. I am not referring to the tragic "Times Square kids" in New York City or your community. I refer to numbers of children who, by age ten to twelve, have effectively left Mom or Dad as an authority or reference point for their lives.

Our culture has lost its way with respect to parenting. We are a rudderless ship without a compass. We lack both a sense of direction and the capacity to direct ourselves.

How has this happened? Several problems have converged at this intersection in our time and culture.

Many people have children, but do not want to be parents. Our culture has convinced them that they need to quench their personal thirst for fulfillment. In a self-absorbed culture, children are a clear liability.

Thus, parents spend minimal time with their children. The notion of quality time is more attractive than the old idea of quantity time.

Today's parents are part of the generation that threw off authority. The racial and antiwar protests of the 1960s powerfully shaped their ideas. The protest movement took on the establishment. It changed the way we think about authority and the rights of the individual.

As a result, it is no longer culturally acceptable for Dad to be the "boss" at home. Mom doesn't obediently do what Dad says, or at least pretend she does. Dad, for his part, no longer lives in fear of the boss or of being fired through caprice. Yesterday's bosses used authority to accomplish their goals. Today's bosses use bonuses and incentives.

What is my point? Simply this: Children raised in this climate no longer sit in neat rows in school. They no longer ask permission to speak. They no longer fear the consequences of talking back to their parents. They do not accept a submissive role in life.

How does this bear on parenting? The old ways of parenting no longer work. Old authoritarian ways are ineffective, but we do not know any new ways to do the job.

The church borrowed the old "you listen to me, kid, or I'll cuff you" method of raising children. It seemed to work. Children seemed to obey. They were externally submissive. This method fails us now because our culture no longer responds to authority as it did a generation ago. We lament the passing of this way of rearing children because we miss its simplicity. I fear, however, we have overlooked its unbiblical methods and goals.

Today's parents are frustrated and confused. Children don't act like they should and parents don't understand why. Many have concluded the job is impossible. Some simply turn away in frustration. Others keep trying to make the old 1950s John Wayne approach work. Meanwhile, a generation of children is being wasted.

Our evangelical culture is nearly as lost as the society at large. We are losing our children. Parents of little children live in mortal fear of adolescence. Parents of teens continually remind them that their day is coming. When I had three teenage children, people would console me. The expectation is that the problems grow with the children.

This book, however, asserts hope for the situation. You can raise children in godly ways at the beginning of the 21st century. You need not—indeed, you dare not—cave in, concluding that the task is impossible. Experience may tell you failure is inevitable, but experience is an unsafe guide.

The only safe guide is the Bible. It is the revelation of a God who has infinite knowledge and can therefore give you absolute truth. God has given you a revelation that is robust and complete. It presents an accurate and comprehensive picture of children, parents, family life, values, training, nurture, and discipline—all you need to be equipped for the task of parenting.

God's ways have not proved inadequate; they are simply untried. The church mirrors the problems of the culture because we weren't doing biblical parenting a generation ago. We were just doing what worked. Unfortunately, we are still trying to do it, even though, because of changes in our culture, it no longer works.

Let me overview a biblical vision for the parenting task. The parenting task is multifaceted. It involves being a kind authority, shepherding your children to understand themselves in God's world, and keeping the gospel in clear view so your children can internalize the good news and someday live in mutuality with you as people under God.

Authority

God calls his creatures to live under authority. He is our authority and has vested authority in people within the institutions he has established (home, church, state, and business). You must not be embarrassed to be authorities for your children.

You exercise authority as God's agent. You may not direct your children for your own agenda or convenience. You must direct your children on God's behalf for their good.

Our culture tends toward the extreme poles on a continuum. In the area of authority, we tend either toward a crass kind of John Wayne authoritarianism or toward being a wimp. God calls you

by his Word and his example to be authorities who are truly kind. God calls you to exercise authority, not in making your children do what you want, but in being true servants—authorities who lay down your lives. The purpose for your authority in the lives of your children is not to hold them under your power, but to empower them to be self-controlled people living freely under the authority of God.

Jesus is an example of this. The One who commands you, the One who possesses all authority, came as a servant. He is a ruler who serves; he is also a servant who rules. He exercises sovereign authority that is kind—authority exercised on behalf of his subjects. In John 13, Jesus, who knew that the Father had put all things under his authority, put on a towel and washed the disciples' feet. As his people submit to his authority, they are empowered to live freely in the freedom of the gospel.

As a parent, you must exercise authority. You must require obedience of your children because they are called by God to obey and honor you. You must exercise authority, not as a cruel taskmaster, but as one who truly loves them.

Parents who are “benevolent despots” do not usually find their children racing to leave home. Children rarely run from a home where their needs are met. Who would want to walk out on a relationship in which he feels loved and respected? What child would run from someone who understands him, understands God and his ways, understands the world and how it works, and is committed to helping him be successful?

My observation after thirty-five years of school administration, parenting, pastoral work, and counseling is that children generally do not resist authority that is truly kind and selfless.

Shepherding

If authority best describes the parent's relationship to the child, the best description of the activity of the parent to the child is shepherding. The parent is the child's guide. This shepherding process

helps a child to understand himself and the world in which he lives. The parent shepherds a child to assess himself and his responses. He shepherds the child to understand not just the “what” of the child’s actions, but also the “why.” As the shepherd, you want to help your child understand himself as a creature made by and for God. You cannot show him these things merely by instruction; you must lead him on a path of discovery. You must shepherd his thoughts, helping him to learn discernment and wisdom.

This shepherding process is a richer interaction than telling your child what to do and think. It involves investing your life in your child in open and honest communication that unfolds the meaning and purpose of life. It is not simply direction, but direction in which there is self-disclosure and sharing. Values and spiritual vitality are not simply taught, but caught.

Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with the wise becomes wise.” As a wise parent your objective is not simply to discuss, but to demonstrate the freshness and vitality of life lived in integrity toward God and your family. Parenting is shepherding the hearts of your children in the ways of God’s wisdom.

The Centrality of the Gospel

People frequently ask if I expected my children to become believers. I usually reply that the gospel is powerful and attractive. It uniquely meets the needs of fallen humanity. Therefore, I expected that God’s Word would be the power of God to salvation for my children. But that expectation was based on the power of the gospel and its suitability to human need, not on a correct formula for producing children who believe.

The central focus of parenting is the gospel. You need to direct not simply the behavior of your children, but the attitudes of their hearts. You need to show them not just the “what” of their sin and failure, but the “why.” Your children desperately need to understand not only the external “what” they did wrong, but also the internal “why” they did it. You must help them see that God works from

the inside out. Therefore, your parenting goal cannot simply be well behaved children. Your children must also understand why they sin and how to recognize internal change.

Keeping the gospel in focus, you see, is more than helping our children know forgiveness of sin through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. In the gospel there is the promise of internal transformation and empowerment. Ezekiel 36 expresses well the fullness of the gospel, (*verse 25*) *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.* The grace of forgiveness is found in the gospel. (*26*) *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* The grace of internal change is found in the gospel. (*27*) *And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.* The grace of empowerment to live is found in the gospel. The gospel enables you and your children to face the worst in yourselves—your sin, your badness, and your weakness—and still find hope, because grace is powerful.

Parents sometimes give children a keepable standard. Parents think that if their children aren't Christians, they can't obey God from the heart anyway. For example, the Bible says to do good to those who mistreat you. But when children are bullied in the schoolyard, parents tell them to ignore the bully. Or worse, parents tell them to hit others when they are hit first.

This non-biblical counsel drives children away from the cross. It doesn't take grace from God to ignore the oppressor. It doesn't take supernatural grace to stand up for your rights. To do good to oppressors, however, to pray for those who mistreat you, to entrust yourself to the just Judge, requires a child to come face-to-face with the poverty of his own spirit and his need of the transforming power of the gospel.

The law of God is not easy for natural man. Its standard is high and cannot be achieved apart from God's supernatural grace. God's law teaches us our need of grace. When you fail to hold out God's standard, you rob your children of the mercy of the gospel.

Internalization of the Gospel

Ultimately, your children must internalize the message of the gospel. Each child in a Christian home will at some point examine the claims of the gospel and determine whether he will embrace its truth. Picture the process this way: The child holds the claims of the gospel at arm's length, turning it in his hand and determining either to embrace it or to cast it away.

The parent has a marvelous opportunity to help his young adult child pursue with honesty all his questions of faith. The Word of God is robust; Christian faith can withstand close, honest scrutiny. Everyone does not have the obligation to ask every question, but everyone has the obligation to ask every question that he has.

Mutuality as People under God

I recently had a conversation with my son. He was talking to me about the things God was teaching him. He shared new insights into himself and what it means to know God in more than theoretical ways.

As we talked together it seemed that I was talking not just with my son, but with another man. I wasn't instructing him. We were sharing the goodness of knowing God. I felt a wonderful sense of mutuality with this man (who was once a boy whom I instructed and disciplined and for whom I had strived in prayer). Thank you, God.

Part One

FOUNDATIONS
FOR BIBLICAL
CHILDREARING

Chapter

1

GETTING TO THE HEART OF BEHAVIOR

*T*HE SCRIPTURE TEACHES that the heart is the control center for life. A person's life is a reflection of his heart. Proverbs 4:23 states it like this: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

The word picture here is graphic. The heart is a well from which all the issues of life gush forth. This theme is restated elsewhere in the Bible. The behavior a person exhibits is an expression of the overflow of the heart.

You could picture it like this. The heart determines behavior. What you say and do expresses the orientation of your heart. Mark 7:21 states: ". . . from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." These evils in action and speech come from within—from the heart.

What your children say and do is a reflection of what is in their hearts.

Luke 6:45 corroborates this point:

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

These passages are instructive for the task of childrearing. They teach that behavior is not the basic issue. The basic issue is always what is going on in the heart. Remember, the heart is the control center of life.

Parents often get sidetracked with behavior. If your goal in discipline is changed behavior, it is easy to understand why this happens. The thing that alerts you to your child's need for correction is his behavior. Behavior irritates and thus calls attention to itself. Behavior becomes your focus. You think you have corrected when you have changed unacceptable behavior to behavior that you sanction and appreciate.

"What is the problem?" you ask. The problem is this: Your child's needs are far more profound than his aberrant behavior. Remember, his behavior does not just spring forth uncaused. His behavior—the things he says and does—reflects his heart. If you are to really help him, you must be concerned with the attitudes of heart that drive his behavior.

A change in behavior that does not stem from a change in heart is not commendable; it is *condemnable*. Is it not the hypocrisy that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees? In Matthew 15, Jesus denounces the Pharisees who have honored him with their lips while their hearts were far from him. Jesus censures them as people who wash the outside of the cup while the inside is still unclean. Yet this is what we often do in childrearing. We demand changed behavior and never address the heart that drives the behavior.

What must you do in correction and discipline? You must require proper behavior. God's law demands that. You cannot, however,

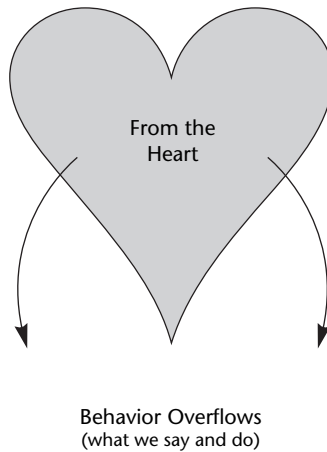


Figure 1 The Heart Determines Behavior

be satisfied to leave the matter there. You must help your child ask the questions that will expose that attitude of the heart that has resulted in wrong behavior. How did his heart stray to produce this behavior? In what characteristic ways has his inability or refusal to know, trust, and obey God resulted in actions and speech that are wrong?

Let's take a familiar example from any home where there are two or more children. The children are playing and a fight breaks out over a particular toy. The classic response is "Who had it first?" This response misses heart issues. "Who had it first?" is an issue of justice. Justice operates in the favor of the child who was the quicker draw in getting the toy. If we look at this situation in terms of the heart, the issues change.

Now you have two offenders. Both children are displaying a hardness of heart toward the other. Both are being selfish. Both children are saying, "I don't care about you or your happiness. I am only concerned about myself. I want this toy. My happiness depends on possessing it. I will have it and be happy regardless of what that means to you."

In terms of issues of the heart, you have two sinning children. Two children are preferring themselves before the other. Two children are breaking God's law. Sure, the circumstances are different. One is taking the toy that the other has. The other is keeping the advantage. The circumstances are different, but the heart issue is the same—"I want my happiness, even at your expense."

You see, then, how heart attitudes direct behavior. This is always true. All behavior is linked to attitudes of the heart. Therefore, discipline must address attitudes of the heart.

This understanding does marvelous things for discipline. It makes the heart the issue, not just the behavior. It focuses correction on deeper things than changed behavior. The profoundest issue is what happens in the heart. Your concern is to unmask your child's sin, helping him to understand how it reflects a heart that has strayed. That leads to the cross of Christ. It underscores the need for a Savior. It provides opportunities to show the glories of God who sent his Son to change hearts and free people enslaved to sin.

This emphasis is the fundamental tenet of this book: The heart is the wellspring of life. Therefore, parenting is concerned with shepherding the heart. You must learn to work from the behavior you see, back to the heart, exposing heart issues for your children. In short, you must learn to engage them, not just reprove them. Help them see the ways that they are trying to slake their souls' thirst with that which cannot satisfy. You must help your kids gain a clear focus on the cross of Christ.

This proposition will inform everything you do as parents. It will dictate your goals. It will inform your methods. It will shape your model of how children develop.

This book will address all the facets of childrearing. We will look at a biblical view of the parenting task. We will examine child development. We will focus on parenting goals. We will think through training methods. In all these topics the core issue will be shepherding the heart.

I am not offering simple, clever methodology here. I am not promoting a new three-step plan for trouble-free children. I am not

presenting a simple way to meet their needs so you can get on with your life. I am, however, willing to explore with you fresh ways of pursuing the training task God has given you. I offer these things as one who is not new to the task, but who hasn't grown cynical about parenting. I am more excited about this job than ever. I am full of hope and certain that God can enable us to raise from our homes a holy seed for the church.

I have seen families get hold of the principles in this book. I have seen parents shepherding happy, productive children who are alert to themselves and life. I visited such a home recently. The family was alive and vibrant. Teenage children were at home, because home was an exciting place to be. Father and Mother were held in high esteem and sought out for advice. The Bible and biblical truth blew through every conversation—not with stifling heat, but like a refreshing, life-giving breeze. In this home, five generations have kept the faith and a sixth is learning that God is the fountain of life in whose light we see light.

These are things worth striving for. This is a vision worthy of sacrifice.

If you are to sort through the welter of confusion about childrearing, you must go to the Scriptures for answers. I am committed to the fact that the Scriptures are robust enough to provide us with all the categories and concepts we need for this task. For too long the church has tried to integrate biblical and nonbiblical thought forms to answer the questions of parenting. The resulting synthesis has produced bitter fruit. We need to understand our task biblically.

You need to understand your child in relationship to the two broad sets of issues that affect him:

- 1) The child and his relationship to the shaping influences of life.
- 2) The child and his relationship to God.

In the next two chapters we will discuss these two arenas of child development.

Application Questions for Chapter 1

1. Explain the importance of dealing with the heart in discipline and correction of children.
2. Describe the centrality of the heart in directing behavior.
3. Why is it so easy to get sidetracked with behavior when issues of the heart are clearly so much more important?
4. What is wrong with a change in behavior without a change in the heart?
5. If the point of discipline is to direct the heart, how does that change the approach to discipline and correction?