

Raising Christ-Centered Children

▼ Click on a study title you'd like to see ▼

- 2 Study 1: **LOVING DISCIPLINE**
Article
- 12 Study 2: **RAISING COUNTER-CULTURAL
TEENAGERS**
Article
- 22 Study 3: **FEAR FACTORS IN PARENTING**
Article
- 30 Study 4: **FRIENDSHIPS THAT BENEFIT PARENTING**
Article
- 40 Study 5: **PARENTING TOGETHER**
Article
- 49 Study 6: **MODEL SELF-CONFIDENCE FOR YOUR KIDS**
Article



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Loving Discipline

How can we discipline our children with unconditional love?

Biblical discipline focuses on heart changes, not merely outward behavior changes. It includes consistent training, calm correction, biblical teaching, and clear communication. It also includes punishment, but only in the context of unconditional love, according to Gary Chapman and Ron R. Lee in their article "Loving Discipline That Works," written for CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. This means we never withhold love when we discipline, but instead see discipline as part of love, just as God disciplines those he loves.



This study considers: How can we discipline in love? What are the components of loving discipline? Why is discipline an essential part of loving our children? How do we focus on heart changes instead of concentrating only on outward behavior changes? How do we model God's unconditional love and forgiveness?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6; Psalm 103:8–13; Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 29:15–17; Colossians 3:12–17; Hebrews 12:5–11

Based On: "Loving Discipline That Works," by Gary Chapman with Ron R. Lee, CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Loving Discipline That Works" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

The heart is the wellspring of life, according to Proverbs 4:23. The behavior a person exhibits is an outward expression of what is happening in the heart. Luke 6:45 tells us good and evil come from what is stored in our hearts, and our mouth speaks what our heart overflows. Current child psychology focuses on teaching our children to behave through external pressures. This includes methods like "behavior modification." Instead of following pop psychology, Christians need to discipline based on biblical methods. This means we must get to the heart issues of behavior.

Tedd Tripp, in his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Shepherd Press, 1998), says this means we focus our correction on deeper things than changed behavior. Tripp says we focus on unmasking sin and helping our children understand how their behavior reflects their heart. This also helps them realize their need for the Savior, Tripp believes. When a child changes his heart out of a desire to love and obey God, the behavior change follows.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What are the differences between a child who behaves only due to external pressures and a child who behaves out of a heart's desire to obey God? What long-term effects could each of these have? Why?

[Q] Love and discipline are often thought to be opposites, yet God says in Hebrews 12 that he disciplines those he loves. Why is discipline essential to loving our children? Why is it also essential to not withdraw love when we discipline? How can we affirm our love for our child during discipline?

[Q] What role does communication have in disciplining our children? Why is it important for parents to stay calm when disciplining?

[Q] What role does forgiveness play in discipline?

[Q] What is unconditional love? Why is it essential for our children to know they are loved unconditionally? How can we communicate unconditional love to our children?

[Q] Why is consistency important in discipline? Why do parents fall into inconsistent discipline?



Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Diligent training and consistent modeling of God's ways are foundational to discipline.

Read Deuteronomy 6. Parents need to know God's Word, hiding it in their own hearts in order to teach it to their children. We want to teach our children to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Deuteronomy says we need to impress this on our children. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* says impress means to "produce a vivid perception or image of or to affect or influence deeply or forcibly."

To impress this on our children means it will leave a mark, or in this case, permanent, life-changing teaching. We are to teach this as we live life. According to Deuteronomy, this includes when we sit at home, walk on the road, lie down, and get up. This means we tell our children about God's character and all he has done, using Scripture and experiences from our own life. To train our children how to live, act, and obey God, we need to model the behavior we desire for them.

If our children have a heart to love and obey God, the desired behavior will follow. An example of this would be that manners are used, not as a social norm, but because they are a portion of the kindness and respect that God wants us to show to others. Sharing becomes an issue of putting others' needs before our own. God's principles affect every area of life.

Obedience to God is the call on their life, not people pleasing or following culturally acceptable behavior. Training, teaching, and modeling must be consistent, and we must communicate what the consequences of behavior will be and why these consequences apply. Biblical training is a training of the heart, not merely modifying the outward behavior expected by society.

[Q] Why should training be focused on the heart of the child, not merely on the behavior itself? How does God's Word assist us in focusing on heart changes in our children?

[Q] Why must parents first know God's Word before they teach it? How is the phrase, "Do as I say and not as I do" in direct violation of God's teaching on child rearing?

[Q] How should God's ways be part of our everyday life and conversations? How does Deuteronomy suggest we do this?

[Q] What does Deuteronomy infer about consistency in training our children? Why is consistency important in discipline? What does consistent discipline look like?



Teaching Point Two: Wisdom comes from correction.

Read Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; and 29:15–17. Chapman and Lee believe correction and, if necessary, punishment, are the steps after training in discipline. Correction for a toddler can be as simple as changing the environment or removing a child from whatever is tempting him or her. Redirection can be a valuable tool in correction. We can help the child replace a poor choice or behavior with a positive choice or activity. A word of correction heads the child in the right direction.

The heart issue is to help teach the child to turn away from temptation and disobedience and head in the right direction. During correction, we also need to communicate with our children *why* their behavior or choices are not acceptable, and what the consequences will be if they continue down this path.

If the child continues in defiance and disobedience, punishment becomes necessary. Scripture says if we do not discipline our children, we do not love them. Proverbs 22:15 refers to the heart issues that lead to sin and rebellion. Timely punishment, partnered with biblical counsel and unconditional love, removes the foolishness from a child's heart and teaches him wisdom.

[Q] Why does a child who gets his own way usually bring disgrace to his or her parents? Why do parents give in to their children? Why does that show a lack of care and concern for the child?

[Q] What does Proverbs 13:24 infer about consistency in discipline?

[Q] What foolishness is typically in the heart of a child? How do correction and punishment bring about wisdom in a child?

[Q] What are some practical ways you can redirect a child? What role does communication and biblical counsel play in redirection? Why is it important to replace the negative choice with a positive one?

[Q] When does punishment become a necessary step in discipline? Why are biblical counsel and unconditional love essential partners to punishment?

Teaching Point Three: We demonstrate unconditional love when we discipline our children for their good, just as God disciplines us for our good.

Read Hebrews 12:5–11. Hebrews 12 says God disciplines those he loves, because he deals with us as sons. Discipline is proof that God loves us, that we are his children, and that we belong to him. God's discipline is always for our good.



Our love for our child must be unconditional and unwavering, just as God's love is for us. This means we do not withdraw love during discipline. Our love is not based on our children's behavior, but because they are precious gifts from God entrusted to us. With God as our role model, we must discipline with unconditional love for the good of our children. We must seek God for wisdom in each situation, and ask him to help us display the characteristics of love when we discipline. This means we do not discipline with self-centered motives.

Self-centered motives may take any of these forms: lashing out with words or physical attacks because we are angry or frustrated, paying our children back for pain or hurt they have caused us, emotional manipulation, or a desire to dominate. Our purpose in discipline must always be for the good of our child. This means we discipline with patience and kindness, and that we are not rude or easily angered.

Loving discipline seeks to protect our children from the consequences of sin. It perseveres in love as evidenced by consistency. Although discipline is painful for children and parents alike, it trains our children to respect authority and leads to holiness. We discipline in love with the hope and expectation that our children will learn to understand the unconditional love of God, and that they will love and obey him in response.

[Q] Why does God discipline us? What does this teach us about disciplining our children? What should be the desired result of discipline?

[Q] What does Hebrews 12 say are the benefits of discipline? How does discipline produce holiness?

[Q] Why is it important to consider our motives in disciplining?

[Q] How should we deal with the anger we feel when disciplining? What do we do if we have lost control and have disciplined in an unloving way?

[Q] How does a child generally respond to discipline done in anger? How might this response differ if the parent is calm, loving, and consistent when they discipline? Consider short-term and long-term implications.

Teaching Point Four: We must forgive our children just as Christ forgave us.

Read Psalm 103:8–13 and Colossians 3:12–17. The moment we confess our sin, God's forgiveness floods over us, and he remembers our sins no more. His forgiveness is as high as the heavens are above the earth, and as infinite as the East is from the West. God calls us to this same kind of forgiveness.



Forgiveness for our children must come from a heart of compassion, kindness, gentleness, and patience. In humility, we forgive our children just as Christ forgave us. Our forgiveness must be complete, just as Christ's forgiveness is complete, leaving no room for grudges, retribution, or constant reminding of the past. Chapman and Lee say once our child acknowledges that she was wrong and is willing to change her behavior, we must make it clear that we forgive her. After forgiveness, we should be restored to the perfect bond of unity, with hearts that are ruled by the peace of Christ.

This process of forgiveness models for our children how to forgive others. It also helps them believe God will forgive them when they seek it. Forgiveness is a step of discipline that helps our children understand God's compassion, lovingkindness, and mercy.

[Q] Why is forgiveness essential to restoring a relationship with our children? What characteristics of God's forgiveness should also be present when we forgive (Psalm 103)?

[Q] How might a parent's forgiveness, or lack of it, affect how our children learn to forgive others? How might our unforgiveness keep our children from fully believing or accepting God's forgiveness?

[Q] What does it mean to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience? How do we do this practically? What do these characteristics have to do with forgiveness?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Discipline consists of training, teaching, modeling, correcting, rebuking, and sometimes punishing. If reproof is needed, consequences and forgiveness should be carefully explained. The focus of discipline needs to be the heart, not merely outward behavior. Parents need to be consistent and diligent in their efforts to raise children who glorify God by their behavior and love him with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

[Q] Why is it essential for us to deal with the heart issues underlying behavior when we discipline? How can we incorporate God's Word into discipline?

[Q] With what areas of discipline do you struggle? What changes will you make to improve your discipline?

[Q] In light of Deuteronomy 6, reevaluate how you spend your time. Do you have the time it takes in your schedule to focus on heart issues with your child and to train them consistently and diligently?



Suggested Activities:

- *Start a parents' support group or small group Bible study to share parenting ideas and biblical methods of discipline. Focus on heart issues.*
- *Share with a friend the areas in which you struggle with discipline, and ask him/her to hold you accountable.*

— Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker and freelance writer

Recommended Resources

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

• **You and Your Prodigal Child**

• **Who's Teaching the Children?**

📖 **Changing Your Child's Heart**, Steve Sharbondy (Tyndale House, 1998; ISBN 0842304290)

📖 **Discipline with Love**, James Dobson (Tyndale House, 1983; ISBN 084230665X)

📖 **The Five Love Languages of Children**, Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers, 1997; ISBN 1881273652)

📖 **Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours**, repackaged edition, Dr. Kevin Leman (Baker, 2005; ISBN 0800731050)

📖 **The New Dare to Discipline**, Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House, 1996; ISBN 0842305068)

📖 **Shepherding A Child's Heart**, Tedd Tripp (Shepherd Press, 1998; ISBN 096637801)





Loving Discipline that Works

Feel like all you do is yell at your kids? Here's a better way.

By Gary Chapman, with Ron R. Lee,
for the study "Loving Discipline."

Parents face dilemmas like this almost daily: Mikey talks back when you tell him to pick up his toys. He's been talking back a lot, in fact, and you've had it. After getting your anger under control, you send him to his room. You tell yourself: "He'll think twice before he sasses me again."

The next day in the car, you tell Mikey to stop kicking the back of your seat. But he keeps kicking all the way to the store, then throws a fit when you won't buy him a box of Happy Hyper Flakes cereal.

When you get him home, you put his favorite toy on a closet shelf, sit him down for a time-out, and tell him he won't be allowed to watch his favorite Veggie Tales video all day. But after his time-out there's another confrontation, and you're about to lose your mind. That's when you ask yourself: "What am I doing wrong? Why can't he just behave?" You know you can't go on like this, but you feel like you've exhausted all the options.

Positive Discipline

We make discipline a bigger challenge than it needs to be, in part because we tend to equate discipline with punishment. But punishment is only a small part of the process. It's more helpful to think of the positive side of discipline, a word that means "training." In training our children to become responsible adults, we teach them the values and skills they need to succeed in life. It's a positive enterprise.

For example, when a child is rude to an adult, a parent's initial reaction might be to punish the child. But before taking that step, consider whether proper manners have been explained to the child. Rudeness can be replaced with respectful behavior. And in practicing good manners, the child also learns important social skills that she'll use the rest of her life. Where punishment might have solved a temporary problem, training sets behavior on a positive course for life.

A second aspect of discipline is correction. While punishment involves a penalty, correction involves turning a child away from disobedience so he'll head in the right direction. In many instances, a word of correction is all that's needed: "Don't ride your Big Wheel into the street because you might get hit by a car."

If words don't work, the next step is corrective action. Let's say the child insists on riding his Big Wheel into the street. Before punishing him, take an intermediate step. Calmly lead him to the back yard swing set. Now removed from the temptation of a busy street, he can have fun in a safer part of the yard.

Training our children and correcting them with words and actions are ways we teach and guide without resorting to penalties. But if your child continues to defy you, it's time for punishment. That's when discipline becomes negative because punishment causes discomfort.

The Love Connection

Whether it's the loss of privileges, a time-out, or a swat on the back of the diaper, punishment gets a child's attention. It shows that the parent is serious about enforcing a rule that the child insists on breaking. But too often, we forget to punish our kids in the context of unconditional love. Some parents fear that heaping love on a child who seems devoted to messing up is giving the child a license to disobey. But that's a misunderstanding of discipline. We need to discipline our children



because we love them, not instead of loving them. The worst thing we can do is withhold our love as a form of punishment.

When a child is being belligerent, it's natural for a parent to feel angry. But no matter how many times your child breaks the same rule, don't allow your frustration to cause you to love her conditionally. If a child feels neglected, it won't be long before she starts acting up. If her need for love and attention still isn't met, she will likely continue the same misbehavior, or do something worse, until she feels loved.

My wife and I raised two children to adulthood. One of our kids was almost always cooperative, while the other seemed to be constantly in trouble. I know how easy it is to shower love on the pleasant child and present an impenetrable facade to the child who regularly pushes the limits. Like most parents, I've thought to myself, *I'll start giving him lots of hugs when he starts controlling that smart mouth of his.* But I realized that following that impulse is putting conditions on love. And conditional love doesn't reflect God's approach to us, which is an unwavering love that is unaffected by our failures.

God disciplines us because he loves us (Hebrews 12:5–7). It's crucial that we express unconditional love to our children even as we punish them. A child needs to hear: "I love you no matter what, even when you disobey. But you kept hitting your brother after I told you to stop, so I'm not going to allow you to play with your friends today. You have to stay indoors."

Just as we know we can turn to God with our deepest sins, disciplining our children in love will keep them turning to us even as they get older and the stakes become higher. For some teenagers, home is the last place they want to go when they're in trouble. But if a teenager has felt unconditional love, he's more likely to come home and tell the truth when he's in trouble. If his parents' love is dependent on his good behavior, however, he'll look for help somewhere else.

We want our children always to turn toward home, so it's essential that we put no conditions on our love. Whether we are teaching and training, correcting our children with words and actions, or punishing them for repeated misdeeds, we need to do it in love. God loves us no matter what we do. We need to link our discipline with that same kind of love for our kids.

—*Gary Chapman is a pastor and counselor who leads seminars on marriage and family life. He is the author of several books, including The Five Love Languages of Children (Northfield), co-authored with Dr. Ross Campbell, and The Other Side of Love (Moody). For information on his seminars, call (800) 254-2022 or (800) 356-6639.*

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. July/August 1999, Vol.11, No. 6, Page 38



5 STEPS TO BETTER BEHAVIOR

Kids are experts at explaining why it wasn't really their fault and using their charm to soften us up. They're also skilled at pushing all the right buttons to make us so mad we can't see straight. No wonder it's so hard to enforce family rules.

Hard yes, but not impossible. Keep these guidelines in mind the next time your child gets under your skin.

1. Be consistent.

Fatigue and stress often cause one of two things to happen. We let our kids misbehave because we're too weary to enforce the rules, or in our frustration we come down too hard on them for minor infractions. The child doesn't understand why he got a spanking yesterday when he poured milk into the aquarium, but when he tried the same thing this morning, using grape juice, he got off scot-free.

Rather than confusing our children, we can help them by enforcing the same rules in the same way every day. Consistency in discipline is just as important as consistency in love.

2. Stay cool.

When our kids act up, it's natural to feel angry or even rejected. But those emotions work against successful discipline.

When a child is a repeat offender, it takes self-control to step back from the situation before issuing a verdict. "You're grounded for a) the rest of your life! b) the rest of the summer! or c) the rest of the week." Think before you lay down the law. Punishment that's out of proportion to the misdeed creates resentment in a child.

3. Clarify the consequences.

Children need to know ahead of time what the rules are and what the penalty will be if they break one of those rules. Tell your child: "Your sister's dolls are off limits because you're not careful when you handle them." Once the rule is clear, spell out the consequences: "If you fool with her dolls, you'll have to take a 10-minute time-out." Then stick to it.

4. Be forgiving.

When kids ignore our warnings and repeat the same troublesome behavior, we sometimes take it personally. But harboring hard feelings doesn't contribute to fair discipline. If your child acknowledges that what she did was wrong and says she's willing to change, make it clear that you forgive her. Then enforce the agreed-upon consequences of her actions.

5. Overlook past offenses.

No matter how hard our children try to obey, they'll slip up before long. And when that happens, it's tempting to review recent history: "You forgot to walk the dog again, just like last week and the week before!" What a child hears is: "You're a failure. Why do you keep messing up?"

If God did that to us, we'd feel like rejects, not beloved children. In his grace, God forgets our sins after we confess them (Psalm 103:8-13; Isaiah 43:25). Practice the same type of grace with your child by leaving past disobedience in the past.

—Gary Chapman, with Ron R. Lee



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers

Does "Christian youth" need to be an oxymoron?

The apostle Paul admonished his disciple Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity." But some scholars believe there must be a lost verse after 1 Timothy 4:12 that, loosely translated from the Greek, means: "Yeah, right."



We've all read the statistics showing how the moral behavior of Christian youth is hardly distinguishable from their unbelieving peers. Thus, it's easy to see why, as Jenny Nordman writes in a CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY article, "There's one phrase that can frighten even the most stalwart parents: The Teen Years."

Are the teen years simply to be endured with prayers that our sons and daughters just make it out alive? Or are these years a unique and exciting time of adventure and disciple making for parents? This study will explore these issues further.

Scripture: Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–37; John 17:20–23; Ephesians 4:4–16

Based On: "Keeping the Faith," by Jenny Nordman, CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, Summer 2003, Page 56



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Keeping the Faith" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

Christian Smith, sociologist and author of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford Press, 2005), said in a recent interview, "One of the most powerful realizations I took from our research is how formative parents are in their teenagers' lives. They often don't realize it, but parents are the most significant influences on their teenage children's faith lives. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that normally the most important pastor a young person is going to have is his or her father and mother—for better or worse..." (interview with Tony Jones in *Youthworker Journal*, May/June 2005).

A thread that runs through Jenny Nordman's article is that of parents who intentionally persevere with their kids. Abdicating responsibility for our junior and senior high kids to youth culture, the Christian-youth subculture, the schools, a youth ministry, etc., seems like the path of least resistance. However, God is clear on our role with our children, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 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 6:5–8).

Parents, then, utilizing both word and deed, hold the primary positions of pastor, shepherd, model, mentor, disciple maker, Jedi master, and so on—even, and especially, during the strange and wonderful teen years. Thus, as in all discipleship, modeling is the key. The best way to grow kingdom-minded kids is by way of kingdom-minded parents who model the commands of loving God and neighbor (Mark 12:28–34) in the context of Christ-centered community.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What frustrates you about kids today?
- [Q] What are your hopes and prayers for your children?
- [Q] What was your faith like in junior and senior high school? Who was key in your faith development during those years? Why?
- [Q] How did your parents model faith for you—for better or worse?
- [Q] In what areas do you do a good job of modeling faith for your kids? In what areas do you need to grow?



Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Model loving God to your children.

“...With God’s help, [teens] can indeed survive adolescence with the light of God shining brightly in their lives,” Nordman writes. So, we begin this study with The End in mind: God. In fact, Jesus says, not only is God the goal of the journey, but he is the beginning and the middle too. The greatest command? Love God. It’s the most important thing parents can model for their children. Read Mark 12:28–34.

[Q] What does it tell you about the heart of God that these are his greatest commandments?

Leader’s Note: *All of God’s commands can be distilled into “love God” and “love neighbors.” Not a list of rules, but an invitation to relationships. Sometimes we can see the parent/child relationship as a math problem to be solved rather than an intimate adventure to be entered into.*

[Q] What are the four ways in which we are to work out our love relationship with God (v. 30)? What does that look like in everyday life?

Leader’s Note: *Loving God with our hearts means an undivided, pure devotion where God is most important; loving God with our souls means we love with passion and emotion; loving God with our minds means we love with our intellect and have considered him and his words deeply; and loving God with our strength means that “...whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).*

[Q] What are some places, events, or experiences in which you could regularly exercise these four ways of loving God with your children?

[Q] What are you fearful of when it comes to being a model, or discipler, for your child?

Teaching Point Two: Model loving your neighbor to your children.

A prominent youth leader once suggested that something like 80 percent of youth ministry programming should be focused on missions and service just to overcome students’ tendencies towards self-centeredness. No one knows the self-focus of youth better than their parents. Read the familiar story of Luke 10:25–37.

[Q] What justifications do people use for not helping their neighbors—across the street or across the world?



[Q] What's Jesus' definition of *neighbor* from this passage? Are you loving your neighbor?

Leader's Note: *A loving neighbor might be described like this: One who practically, relationally, sacrificially works with others to see people in need through to health and wholeness.*

[Q] What does this parable tell you about God's heart for people in need? Why do you think love for God and love for neighbor are so connected in God's perspective?

[Q] What did the Samaritan give up to help the victim on the road?

Leader's Note: *A few things he gave up were: time, as he stopped; safety, as he stopped in a risky neighborhood to help the victim; cloth for bandages; oil and wine that were probably meant for a celebration; his seat on the donkey; more time by staying overnight at the inn to care for the man; money; even more time by returning to the inn; and more money to settle up the bill.*

[Q] Peter Benson, in his book *All Kids Are Our Kids* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), writes, "First, caring, like all values, is passed on by modeling. It is rooted in the experience of being with people who choose to respond to human need with acts of caring and compassion... The second source is practice, the doing of caring... For caring to become a lasting disposition, the practice of it ought to be in the range of once a week throughout childhood and adolescence..." Who is in need in your family's world? How can you model caring? And in what regular, relational, practical, sacrificial ways could you work as a family to meet some of those needs?

[Q] Nordman writes, "Teenagers are notorious for being overly self-involved, and this can be a destructive path if not counteracted." How would the kind of service mentioned above affect your junior or senior high school child? Your family?

Teaching Point Three: Model community living to your children.

"Personal growth." "Self-help." "Personal relationship with Jesus." These phrases reveal our modern, cultural bent towards the individual ingesting of information as the means to education and growth. But the biblical model for growth and discipleship happens in the context of community—growth that comes from life together with the church.

Read John 17:20–23.

[Q] Jesus, right before his death, prays for "those who will believe in me through their (the disciples') message." That's us! What is Jesus' prayer for us?

[Q] What is the basis for this unity or oneness? What is the purpose of this unity?

Leader's Note: *The unity of the Father and the Son. So the world may know that the loving Father sent the Son.*

[Q] Do you think Jesus' prayer has been answered in your church? In your family? What steps do you need to take to further reflect the heart of Jesus' prayer?

[Q] How might unity within the church affect youth who live in an individualistic, self-centered, disconnected world?

Read Ephesians 4:4–16.

[Q] How do the “ones” in verses 4 and 5 help us live in unity with other Christians? After reading this, what problems could come from being disconnected from the church? According to this passage, in what ways do you need the church?

[Q] Obviously this passage is talking about more than Sunday morning church attendance. What kind of involvement is it talking about?

Leader's Note: *Small groups or youth groups could be encouraging, intimate places to grow and serve.*

[Q] In verse 16 it says the body “grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” What gifts do you and your child have that could benefit the church? Where could you use them?

[Q] How have the diverse gifts of the church working in unison aided you in parenting your kids? How do you and your family need to step deeper into the life of the church?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Parenting can be the highest form of discipleship. Maybe that sounds like a lot of pressure, but really, it is cause for a sigh of relief. Why? Because, as the apostle Paul wrote, “...neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Corinthians 3:7). Whew.

Nordman writes, “Pray for the Holy Spirit to work in your teen's heart. Praying requires patience and perseverance. It may seem easier to just continually tell your teen what you want him to do, but that will not be nearly as effective.” Pray for your kids right now.

[Q] When Jesus looks at your child(ren), what is his desire for them in five years? Ten years? Fifteen years? What specific word or deed do you need to offer your child(ren) today to take a step towards Jesus' vision?



[Q] Think of a parent who has modeled Christian values for his or her adolescent. Or, think of a Christ-minded high school student. What are five interview questions you'd like to ask him or her? Call that person this week to chat about those questions.

[Q] What is one way you could model each of these areas for your child this week: Loving God? Loving neighbor? Community living?

[Q] What is one way you could partner with your child in each of these areas this month: Loving God? Loving neighbor? Community living?

—Kyle White is a former youth pastor and currently the director of Neighbors' House, a ministry to at-risk students in DeKalb, Illinois.

Recommended Resources

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- [You and Your Prodigal Child](#)
- [Who's Teaching the Children?](#)

📖 **Different Children, Different Needs: Understanding the Unique Personality of Your Child**, Charles F. Boyd, David Boehi, Robert A. Rohm (Multnomah, 2004; ISBN 1590523121)

📖 **Growing Compassionate Kids**, Jan Johnson (Upper Room Books, 2001; ISBN 0835809323)

📖 **Lifecoach Your Teens: Five Principles to Help Your Kids Thrive**, Roger Cross (InterVarsity Press, 2004; ISBN 0830832521)

📖 **Parenting Adolescents**, Kevin Huggins (NavPress, 1989; ISBN 0891096973)

📖 **Romancing Your Child's Heart**, Monte Swan & David Biebel (Multnomah, 2003; ISBN 192912516X)

📖 **Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers**, Christian Smith (Oxford Press, 2005; ISBN 019518095X)





Keeping the Faith

10 secrets for helping your teenager live what she believes.

By Jenny Nordman, for the study,
“Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers.”

If there's one phrase that can frighten even the most stalwart parents, it's this one: The Teen Years. We all know stories of teenagers who turned away from their faith or made terrible choices about sex, drug use, alcohol, theft, or violence despite being raised in wonderful Christian homes. These teenagers stand like dark specters in the minds of parents who want nothing more than to find the key to helping their children hold on to their faith despite the challenges of adolescence.

As a teacher and a volunteer, I have observed and talked to teens who continue to walk in the light of faith even when their peers make the opposite, destructive choice. And I've noticed some common threads that seem to tether these teenagers to their faith even in the face of the world's opposition. While there are no guarantees in parenting, I've seen that the most spiritually grounded teenagers have parents who:

1. Speak by example.

Pre-teens and teenagers tend to put the actions and words of adults under a microscope. This is part of the healthy psychological development of a teenager who is learning how to live in the world. But it also means that parents need to be active role models during this extremely influential stage. Teenagers examine their parents' actions, and are repelled by any form of hypocrisy. But they are also highly impressed when their parents' lives reflect morality, and will often emulate what they see.

Brad, a teen who volunteers in the worship ministry at his church and is an active member of FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes), attributes his commitment to faith to the role modeling of his step dad. When Brad's biological father left the family, Brad became a surly, temperamental child. He says, “I was eight when my mom remarried, and I really kept my eye on my step dad. I watched how he treated my mom and my sister and how he always tried to do the right thing. I guess I decided I wanted to be like him.” The miraculous way Brad turned his life around is a living testimony of the power of a positive parental role model. Let your actions match your faith; believe me, your child will notice. “Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

2. Discuss the hard topics.

Teens are bombarded with a barrage of anti-Christian messages such as evolution, new age “spiritualism,” and promiscuity, so it is natural that they will have questions regarding these issues. Your best defense against these arrows is to talk about them with your teenager. No matter how old your child is right now, start a pattern of open, honest communication so that when your child reaches the teen years, she'll know she can trust you with her tough questions.

Lori was a freshman at a state college when she attended an anthropology class that taught evolution. “At first, I didn't know what to think because everything seemed so scientific. Then I remembered what my parents had always taught me about creation and how we are made in the image of God. I decided to drop the class.” (Whether you encourage your teenager to avoid situations that might harm her faith or to stand up for her beliefs in the face of opposition should depend on your child's personality and the strength of her faith.) Don't worry about having all the answers; when you're stumped, show your child how to seek wisdom from the Bible and from fellow Christians. “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8).



3. Provide perspective.

Teenagers are notorious for being overly self-involved, and this can be a destructive path if it is not counteracted. Teens need to be given some perspective in order to recognize the incomprehensible blessings that have been given to them by their Savior. Take your child with you to volunteer at a soup kitchen for an afternoon, help with a local food drive for the needy, or go with your child on a mini-missions trip. These experiences will open her eyes—and her heart—to the needs of others.

Jeremy was a self-described “spoiled” 15-year-old when he went with his dad on a missions trip to Mexico. “We helped build a house for a family down there and we gave them a Bible of their own. I couldn’t believe how grateful they were to have a house to live in. They were so poor. It made me thankful for how much I have.” All of a sudden, the “little things” your teen was so concerned about will seem less huge, and what really matters will come into focus. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

4. Give Christian gifts for no other reason than to express love.

It is amazing the impact an unexpected gesture of kindness can have. Pick up a Christian book, devotional, or CD and give it to your teen on an ordinary day. He or she will feel cherished, and will be much less likely to see an “ulterior motive” than if the same gift appeared under the Christmas tree. You can attach a note saying, “Just because I love you,” or, “I thought this looked like something you would enjoy.”

Judy, the parent of two teens, leaves little gifts in places that surprise her children. “I will put a CD in the glove box of my son’s car, or a book on my daughter’s pillow for when she comes home from school. They love finding these little treasures, and I love giving them.” These gifts tell your child that he’s always on your mind and in your heart. “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42).

5. Encourage the fellowship of Christian peers.

A teenager’s peers are a powerful influence in her life, second only to parents, so it is important to encourage your child to attend church youth meetings and activities.

Remember, “encourage” does not mean force. Forcing a teen to take part in something she doesn’t want to do can cause rebellion; teenagers resent parents who try to pick their friends for them. You can offer gentle encouragement by allowing your teen to use the family car for youth group events, or by giving her an extra \$10 to buy snacks when the youth group goes to the movies. These actions are subtle, but they demonstrate approval without getting “preachy.”

Judy encouraged her son to join their church’s summer softball league. “Michael is shy, but he loves sports, so I thought it was a good way for him to get involved. He made so many friends, and then started to join other youth activities.” The bottom line is that teens need to spend time with other kids their age, and church youth activities are a way for them to have good, clean fun. “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13).

6. Share faith intentionally.

Even though this seems obvious, it is surprising how many parents have never taken the time to share with their children their own personal stories of salvation, and the difference it has made in their lives. It is our responsibility to share our faith with our children, and yours may be the most powerful testimony your child hears. And don’t stop there. When you sense God at work in your life, talk about it with your teenager. Show him what it means to have a living, active faith.

Miranda, a fun-loving Christian teen, was touched by her mother's testimony describing how she accepted Christ. "I thought my mom's story was so cool. It was weird to think about what my mom was like before she was a Christian, but I'm glad she told me because now I feel like I know her better." Remember, your children most likely did not know you before you were saved, and they need to hear about all that God has done in your life. Your passion for Christ and his saving grace will impact your teen and his decisions. "The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (John 19:35).

7. Forgive mistakes.

We all sin and do things that we regret, and the same is true for your child. The important thing is to allow her to ask for forgiveness, and then to forgive. This does not mean that there won't be consequences, because even forgiven sin has consequences. But it means that, like God, you will put her past mistakes aside and allow her to regain your trust.

If your teenager stays out past curfew but admits it and apologizes, dole out a fair consequence, then move on. If trust dissolves after just one mistake, your teenager has no motivation for doing what's right. She may rebel and become secretive and sneaky.

Brad tested his boundaries when he drank a beer at a party. "I told my mom and step dad about it. I could tell they were really upset and they told me they expected better from me. I expected better from myself, too. I told them I'd make better choices from now on, and they believed me." Resist the urge to punish your teen by withholding privileges indefinitely. It's far better to believe that your teen will make the right choice the next time because you raised her to do so. "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

8. Commit to family devotions.

The whole is only as strong as its parts, and every member of the family has something to contribute to God's kingdom. It is important to instruct and encourage one another by meeting together and studying God's Word. This does not need to take up an entire evening, or happen every week, but it should be a consistent and positive time that the family prioritizes and looks forward to.

Miranda remembers some of the most special times during her childhood were family devotionals. "We would pray for one another and read out of the Bible. Then, my dad would lead a discussion. I especially liked it on Christmas and Easter because it made the holidays so much more meaningful. I will do devotionals with my children someday." Some of the most influential Christian instruction your child receives will come from you. When this teaching is a regular part of his family life, it will stay with him and impact the decisions he makes. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6).

9. Respect spiritual insights.

Although parents are to provide spiritual leadership for the family, it is important to encourage and allow your children to share their opinions as they become older. Ask your teen what she thought of the pastor's sermon or ask for her insight on a passage of Scripture you're studying in your personal devotions. Have your teenager help you and your spouse plan family devotions. In each case, take her ideas seriously and give her the respect you'd give any other Christian. It is incredibly empowering for a teenager to feel that her thoughts and opinions are valued.

Deb enjoys asking her 16-year-old son his opinion on spiritual matters. "I am amazed at how he is able to apply Scripture to his own life. Sometimes he will actually deepen my insights on a passage. I feel like I really benefit from what he has to say, and I also think he enjoys giving his opinion." "Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise" (Psalm 79:13).

10. Pray...a lot.

This is the single most powerful thing you can do as a parent to keep your teenager walking in the light of faith. Ask God to bless your teen, to direct him, to bring positive influences into his life, to protect him from evil, to light his path. Pray for the Holy Spirit to work in your teen's heart.

Praying requires patience and perseverance. It may seem easier to just continually tell your teen what you want him to do, but that will not be nearly as effective. Teenagers need to start making some decisions on their own, but they also need the protective presence of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6).

Teenagers long to do what's right. They long to be loved and cared for by their parents. They long to grow into healthy, fully functioning adults. Unfortunately, they sometimes make choices that derail their best intentions. But with God's help, they can indeed survive adolescence with the light of God shining brightly in their lives.

—*Jenny Nordman lives with her family in Colorado.*

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. Summer 2003, Vol. 16, No. 2, Page 56



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Fear Factors in Parenting

What to do with parenting fears.

You go through nine months of preparation, but nothing really prepares you for the moment an infant is wrapped in pink or blue and placed in your arms. And then it hits you—you're a parent. It's not like babysitting or being in charge of your younger siblings. This is different. No one is coming to relieve you. This child is yours for keeps. Is it any wonder we inwardly scream, What am I going to do now?



Sheila Wray Gregoire says, "Some degree of fear is natural in parents. We love our kids so much that the thought of anything bad happening to them sends us into a panic. Yet, if we're not careful, this caution can become oppressive. When we let fear dominate our parenting, we can actually shield our kids from the very things they need to be dealing with." This study is about dealing with our fears.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 17:37; Proverbs 22:6; Isaiah 41:10; Matthew 7:11; James 1:5; 1 Peter 5:7

Based On: "Parenting Without Fear," by Sheila Wray Gregoire, *CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY*, July/August 2000, Vol. 12, No. 6, Page 51



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: *Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Parenting Without Fear" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).*

How many of us who go by the name Dad or Mom remember that first time we laid eyes on our bundles of joy? Ever so gently someone placed our treasure in waiting arms so we could hold this precious one close to our beating heart. Checking out every little feature, we made sure that nothing was missing. We sat mesmerized by this little being, tenderly touching the softest skin ever felt.

As new parents we found it necessary to share anything and everything our little darling did, as if it were the first time a baby ever laughed, crawled, took a step, or even went potty. Each accomplishment was major, perhaps because each little feat reassured us that we must be doing okay at this parenting thing.

At the beginning the feeding, cuddling, and changing were easy, and then we left the hospital! Fear set in immediately. How in the world could we continue doing all those parenting things without the nurse looking over our shoulders?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Share about a babysitting experience that didn't turn out well. Share how babysitting did or didn't prepare you for parenting.

[Q] Describe good parent role models in your life. Have you emulated them in your parenting?

[Q] Share a time when you wanted parents other than your own. What was going on in your life at the time?

[Q] Can you think of a good example of parents from a television show or a movie?

[Q] What are the necessary components of a nurturing home? What should be missing?



Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We don't parent alone.

Wray reminds us, "The world is a scary place. A mere glance through the newspaper reminds us just how many dangers our children face." And yet, we soon learn that we are not parenting alone. Even though this world seems more fraught with danger than the one we grew up in, we can still commit our children to our heavenly Father, who always watches us. How often do we send up quick prayers throughout the day because of an elevated fever, unexplained crying, or not knowing what could be wrong? Yet God is always available.

Years ago, extended families provided more of a sense of community. People were less mobile and spent more time with each other. The number of single-parent homes and latchkey kids has grown over the years, but it's also true that we don't parent alone. Thankfully, God is available 24/7. He doesn't have an answering machine. He doesn't ask us to hang on as he takes another call. He doesn't screen his calls or decide not to pick up. In fact, Scripture tells us he longs to hear from us. Read James 1:5.

All we have to do when we are unsure about a decision is to call on the Father. He will readily disperse the wisdom we so desperately need. It's there for the asking.

[Q] What is your biggest fear in raising your children? Why is this frightening to you?

[Q] How does knowing that God wants to give you wisdom comfort you in your parenting fears?

[Q] Name a fear you have conquered concerning your parenting. How did you gain victory over this fear?

[Q] How does the geographical separation of family members affect raising our children? What options can help to close those gaps?

Teaching Point Two: God enables us to do what he requires.

At some points in our lives we can feel overwhelmed, like there is no way out and we are going under. And yet, if we look back we can remember times when we overcame similar obstacles. Read 1 Samuel 17:37. When David was about to fight Goliath, he remembered how God had given him the strength he needed before, and trusted him in his current time of need. All of us face our own Goliaths; they just look different. One practical thing we can do is make a list of times in our past when God stepped in and came to our rescue—things we were afraid of that God helped us face. Making such a list is a wonderful reminder to us of God's faithfulness. Then

when we are tempted to worry or become fearful, we can find hope by reading our personal record of what God has done.

[Q] How could memorizing 1 Samuel 17:37 help you overcome your parenting fears?

[Q] What is the most difficult thing about parenting for you?

[Q] Share about a time when God rescued you and helped you do something you couldn't accomplish on your own.

[Q] What would it look like to have succeeded in parenting?

Teaching Point Three: Pray without ceasing.

The most frightening things can happen to our children; no matter what we do to protect them, it is sometimes not enough. Only God is the ultimate protector. Read Isaiah 41:10.

We will have countless opportunities to pray as we raise the children God gives us. We will pray for safety, but even with prayer there are accidents. Everyone knows of a tragedy where a child was lost. Do we understand why? No, not on this side of glory, but we can get to the place where we trust the One who does know.

Eventually our teenagers get the driver's license they have been waiting for. But wasn't it just yesterday they were trying to ride their bicycles without training wheels and running to us for comfort when they fell? Now we feebly wave as they pull out of the driveway, and understand as never before 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray continually." We pray without ceasing to the God who never ceases to hear us.

[Q] If you are a parent, you've probably experienced a bit of praying continually. How does prayer help us trust God with our children? What must we believe about God to trust him with our precious ones?

[Q] What is the most important thing we can pray for concerning our children? As a group, make a top-ten list.

[Q] Why do you think it's easier to take our serious concerns to God, rather than our smaller petitions? Share the smallest thing you have prayed about. What was God's answer?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Wray goes on to say, “It’s easy to think that we have control over our children’s futures. The fact is, most of the time, our kids’ lives turn out completely different than we plan.” And yet, God is not surprised. When the God of the universe looked down into our families, he decided to give us these children. They were handpicked especially for us. Lovingly, he fashioned these works of art and carefully placed them in our arms. But he waits nearby, ever ready to help us with any need. Who could better help us? He wrote the manual.

Read 1 Peter 5:7. God cares about what we care about: these children he has entrusted to us. Listening to our every call, God grants us wisdom to be the responsible parents he made us to be, and he tells us to call on him anytime we need him. Lovingly he meets our needs. Read Matthew 7:11. God is waiting to give to us and to bless us.

Read Proverbs 22:6. God instructs us to train our children. He assures us that if we do, that training will somehow stay with our children. What a comfort it is to know that if we obey God, even if our children stray from the right path we have shown them, they can come back to it. We see this illustrated with the prodigal son. What a perfect picture of how God is with us. Even when we blow it, we are welcomed back into his arms. How wonderful that God our Father can show us how to parent. Even the things that were never modeled for us, God can teach us.

[Q] Share a specific way that God helped you raise one of your children. What was unique about it?

[Q] Share a hope you have for your children when they grow up.

[Q] What is one character trait you possess that you pray does not get passed down to your children?

[Q] Other than prayer, share something you do to encourage your children’s spiritual growth. How has it been helpful?

—*Study by Anne Peterson, a published poet, speaker, and a regular contributor to Christian Bible Studies.*

Recommended Resources

☞ Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **You and Your Prodigal Child**
- **Who's Teaching the Children?**
- **Loving Discipline**
- **Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers**

☞ **Aren't They Lovely When They're Asleep? Lessons in Unsentimental Parenting**, Ann Benton (Christian Focus Public, 2003; ISBN 1857928768)

☞ **Fearless Parenting**, Iverna Tompkins (Bridge-Logos Publishing, 1996; ISBN 0882706918)

☞ **Grace Based Parenting**, Tim Kimmel (Thomas Nelson, 2005; ISBN 0849905486)

☞ **Parent's Answer Book**, Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House, 2003; ISBN 0842387161)

☞ **The New Strong Willed Child**, Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House, 2007; ISBN 1414313632)

☞ **Worried All the Time: Overparenting in an Age of Anxiety and How to Stop It**, David Anderegg (Simon & Schuster Trade Sales, 2003; ISBN 0743225686)





Parenting Without Fear

Get rid of your anxieties and learn to trust God.

By Sheila Wray Gregoire, for the study,
“Fear Factors in Parenting.”

“Jonathan, don’t run so fast!” Andrea called as we sat on the park bench watching our 3-year-olds play. It was tough to get a word in edgewise between all of her warnings to her son. When she realized that I had uttered far fewer “watch outs!” to my daughter, Andrea turned to me and said, “I guess you think I’m pretty paranoid. It’s just so easy for them to get hurt, and Jonathan never looks where he’s going.”

Andrea’s not alone in her “paranoia.” Some degree of fear is natural in parents. We love our kids so much that the thought of anything bad happening to them sends us into a panic. Yet if we’re not careful, this caution can become oppressive. When we let fear dominate our parenting, we can actually shield our kids from the very things they need to be dealing with.

It’s important to let go of parenting fears if we want our kids to be confident and responsible. By acting as watchdog we run the risk of raising kids who are unable to look after themselves. Fear has a way of silencing the God-given instincts we all have for discerning what’s right and wrong, safe and unsafe.

While being conscious of safety issues is important, we have to know when to draw the line and let our kids experience life, even the painful parts. That might mean letting your toddler climb on the jungle gym in the park, even when you’re afraid she might stumble. Or you might need to let your 10-year-old ride his bike to a friend’s house a few blocks away rather than drive him there. Ultimately, only God can completely care for our children. He trusts us to protect them and love them, but as Jeremiah 29:11 says, “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.’” This is our hope as Christian parents: God is in control and we can trust him. He really does have only the best planned for our children.

The world is a scary place. A mere glance through the newspaper reminds us just how many dangers our children face. When you find yourself struggling to let go of your fears, take these steps to help you place your children in God’s hands with faith and confidence.

Surrender Your Children to God

It’s easy to think that we have control over our children’s futures. The fact is, most of the time, our kids’ lives turn out completely different than we plan.

Evelyn Christenson, author of *What Happens When We Pray for Our Families* (Victor), encourages parents to pray “releasing prayers” for their kids. By releasing your children to God in your prayers, you’re acknowledging his sufficiency—a scary prospect. What if we surrender our kids only to have God respond by doing something awful? I had to pray a releasing prayer when I held my one-month-old son Christopher the morning of his open-heart surgery. I gave my son to God, and Christopher died five days later. But I know now that my prayer didn’t cause Christopher’s death. Instead, it prepared me for the loss because I’d already acknowledged that he belonged to God. Instead of anger, there was peace.

Thankfully, most of us won’t have children who die young. However, God may ask you to release your kids in other ways. I have known parents who pray desperately for God to use their children—just not as missionaries. We must be prepared to trust God, whether he chooses to send our kids to the jungles of Africa, the inner city of Chicago, or a quiet house around the corner.



Live with Hope

The next step is to mold our concept of hope to match God's. True hope isn't wishing for something, crossing our fingers and holding our breath until it comes true. To have true hope means believing that God will use your children and guide them through their lives, even if he never reveals how or why.

With this perspective, it's easier to view our children's difficulties as character-builders rather than obstacles. I'm sure Joni Eareckson Tada's parents never dreamed their daughter would be paralyzed in a diving accident. They probably also never dreamed she would impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Tada's life proves that God can use even the most devastating situation for good. She demonstrates daily the paradox that God's power "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). To parent with hope is to understand that the circumstances our kids face are not the final goal, but rather the tools used to shape their character.

Foster Responsibility

In order to parent with hope, we have to change our attitude from overprotection to one that teaches responsibility. Once we allow our children to suffer the age-appropriate consequences of their actions, even if it means watching them get hurt a bit, we give them the chance to learn a little more about how life works. A tumble off the swing set teaches them not to be so reckless. Failure to study results in a poor grade. It's through experience that our children learn which choices work and which ones don't.

Rebecca, our 4-year-old, runs to us constantly whenever a child won't share with her. Since we want her to learn to solve problems on her own, we rarely jump in and insist that the other child share. Instead, we encourage her to work out her own problems with her friends and ask her to think of ways to get along, whether or not she gets her way.

A child who learns to be responsible and independent is ultimately a child who knows how to succeed in life. But as a parent, it's tough to know when your kids are ready for more freedom. It's important to allow your child as much independence as possible without jeopardizing his safety. As you watch your child grow in confidence and ability, you'll be better able to trust his judgment. And the more you allow your children to build life skills, the more you'll find your fears subsiding.

Pray, Pray, Pray

The final step in overcoming fear is actually the most important: pray often and pray with purpose. Rather than simply asking God to keep our kids from harm, we need to focus our prayers on the character God's molding in our children.

When Paul prayed for his spiritual children, the Philippians, he didn't ask that they be spared from persecution. Instead, he told them, "My prayer [is] that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9,10). By praying this way, you're reinforcing a fundamental truth: being a Christian is no guarantee that life will be easy or free from pain. As you show your children that you trust God to walk beside your family, no matter what life brings, you'll be showing them that they can trust God with their futures as well.

—Sheila Wray Gregoire is a freelance writer. She and her family live in Belleville, Ontario.

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. July/August 2000, Vol. 12, No. 6, Page 51



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Friendships That Benefit Parenting

How do friendships help us to be better parents?

New parents can feel overwhelmed, insecure, incompetent, and inadequately prepared, according to Mimi Greenwood Knight in her article for CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. Knight said she was also lonely and starved for adult interaction as a stay-at-home mom. Building a community of friends helps alleviate these doubts and gives moms shared wisdom and skill, comfort, reassurance, and encouragement.



This study looks at why it is important for moms to make time for friendships, and how covenant friendships strengthen us emotionally and spiritually. We also examine how intergenerational friendships and mentors add valuable wisdom to our parenting skills.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 18:1–3; 20:1–42; 2 Samuel 1:25–26; 9:1–13; Philippians 2:19–27; Titus 2:3–5

Based On: "That's What Friends Are For," by Mimi Greenwood Knight, CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, Summer 2005, Vol. 17, No. 4, Page 24



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: *Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "That's What Friends Are For" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).*

God has created us with a deep need for friendship and a desire to have kindred spirits with whom we share struggles and joys. This need for depth of relationship is critical for new moms, who are often overwhelmed with parenting responsibilities and insecure about how to best raise the precious gift of life God has given them. New moms can share fears, struggles, and joys with others who can empathize and relate to them.

God encourages this depth of fellowship for all believers. In fact, the ideas of covenant friendship and kindred spirits are introduced in Scripture. Relationships that are rooted in Christ have a depth that allows us to impart wisdom, discernment, encouragement, and understanding to each other. This is a vital part of child rearing that can go unnoticed in a society that is hurried, stressed, and overworked. By making time in our lives for the depth of friendship God intended, we can add wisdom to our parenting, find emotional support and understanding, and foster relationships that keep us accountable and spiritually challenged.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What fears or emotional struggles may new parents face?
- [Q] Why do stay-at-home moms often feel isolated and lonely? How might friendships help them cope with these emotions?
- [Q] How can support groups, friends, and mentors help us to be better parents? Where might you find support as a parent?
- [Q] How can we find time in our busy lives to invest in friendships that have depth? What do you think is meant by a covenant friendship? What meaning does the term kindred spirit imply?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Covenant friendships keep us transparent and vulnerable, so we can share our parenting struggles, ideas, and joys.

Read 1 Samuel 18:1–3; 20:1–42; and 2 Samuel 1:25–26. The friendship between David and Jonathan was a covenant friendship. It included a promise before God of faithfulness, protection,



help, and love for each other and each other's descendents. David and Jonathan each loved the other as he loved himself, and they trusted each other with their lives.

This was a friendship of accountability, openness, sharing, and trust. They were willing to not only protect and serve each other, but to risk all they had for each other. David and Jonathan are an example of what friendship can look like when we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

In a covenant friendship souls are knit together and become one in spirit. For believers this covenant friendship is eternal. When friendship has this depth, we are able to share our deepest fears, darkest thoughts, strongest emotions, and greatest joys. When we are able to be vulnerable and transparent in our friendships, we open ourselves up to accountability, advice, and assistance.

For parents this means we can share our failures, frustrations, insecurities, and feelings of inadequacy. We can exchange advice, helpful tips, and shared experiences. Together we can hope and dream for our children and their future. In a covenant friendship we help to raise each other's children. This increases the bonds of community in the family of believers and strengthens the faith of parents and children alike.

[Q] Why did Jonathan and David make this covenant friendship? Based on 1 Samuel, what does a covenant friendship include? How could a covenant friendship be beneficial to parenting?

[Q] How did David allow Jonathan to hold him accountable (1 Samuel 20:8)? How did David and Jonathan's covenant friendship make them accountable to God (1 Samuel 20:13–17, 23)? How does accountability to God and others help us to be better parents?

[Q] What would a covenant friendship look like today? What responsibility, before God, would you have toward a friend in helping him or her to be a better parent?

[Q] What do 1 Samuel 20:41 and 2 Samuel 1:26 show about the depth of emotion between David and Jonathan? How could a covenant friendship help us deal with the many emotions of parenting?

Teaching Point Two: Covenant friendships extend to our children and grandchildren.

Reread 1 Samuel 20:13–17 and read 2 Samuel 9:1–13. David's covenant friendship with Jonathan extended to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, and his grandson, Mica. David had promised to show kindness to Jonathan's family, even though they were also descendents of Saul, who was David's enemy. David made this promise with God as his witness. Out of love and loyalty to Jonathan, and obedience to God by keeping his promise, David searched for Jonathan's family

with the purpose of showing them kindness. David restored Mephibosheth's inheritance to him and treated him as his own son.

[Q] Why did David and Jonathan include their families in their vow of love and loyalty to each other? How would a promise to care for each other's families deepen a friendship bond? How would a promise to care for each other's families prevent a friendship from becoming inwardly focused, exclusive, or in competition with family time and commitment?

[Q] What are some practical ways you can help care for a friend's family? How does this type of friendship fulfill the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself?

[Q] How could this type of friendship benefit your family? Support you as a parent? Act as a security net for your family?

[Q] Why is it difficult, in our society, to have this level of family friendship? How can we carve time out of our schedules to invest in this type of friendship?

[Q] What do we miss when we are too busy for this depth of friendship in our lives? What do our children miss?

Teaching Point Three: Intergenerational friendships between women are biblical, rewarding, and lend themselves naturally to mentoring.

Read Titus 2:3–5. Younger women should initiate mentoring relationships, and older women should demonstrate they are open to mentoring, according to Dee Brestin, author of *The Friendships of Women* (Scripture Press, 1997). Brestin also recommends having different mentors for different areas of your life. Find women who are strong in areas where you struggle or feel insecure. Choose a mentor whose faith and actions challenge you to be more like Christ. A good mentor is someone who inspires and challenges you by her life.

God gives older women the honor, joy, and privilege of helping younger women both practically and spiritually. Older women can help younger women deal with their feelings of insecurity or inadequacy by sharing wisdom, parenting tips, and biblical advice. These friendships also ward off the loneliness and isolation stay-at-home moms often face. Older women can assist practically by training in action—coming alongside by serving, caring, and encouraging. The ultimate outcome of these friendships should be glory to God through lives lived for Christ.

[Q] Based on Titus, what qualifications should you look for in a mentor? What additional qualifications might be important or helpful to you personally? Do you think a mentoring relationship would be more helpful if it were informal (simply living life together as friends, gleaned the assistance and advice that flows naturally from the relationship) or formal (a scheduled and consistent discipleship program)? Explain your answer.

[Q] In what specific areas does Paul suggest women might need training or assistance? Why do you think he mentioned these specific areas?

[Q] What benefits do intergenerational friendships have that you might miss in friendships of the same age? How might intergenerational friendships benefit younger women? How might they benefit older women?

[Q] How might mentoring help young moms with feelings of inadequacy or loneliness? How can women in mentoring relationships guard against codependency or situations where mentors might assume too much control in a relationship?

[Q] Why does Paul say in Titus that mentoring is important? Why does he say mentoring relationships help us to not malign the Word of God?

Teaching Point Four: Friendships are strengthened when we serve together in the work of the gospel.

Read Philippians 2:19–27. Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus were partners in the work of the gospel. Out of their ministry, strong friendships developed. The New American Standard Translation of the Bible says Paul and Timothy were kindred spirits. Paul said Timothy was like a son to him, and Epaphroditus was his brother. Paul's love for Epaphroditus was evident when he discussed how great his sorrow would have been if Epaphroditus had died.

It is important for believers, including moms, to be involved in ministry. Ministry is important not only for God's glory and kingdom, but because it adds to our spiritual growth, is important modeling for our children, and gives us a chance to have adult interaction. When friendship is rooted in ministry, we learn together, grow together, and teach each other. We are also able to share ideas, frustrations, disappointments, failures, joys, and encouragements.

By God's grace and power, we can develop a genuine interest in each other's lives and the lives of those to whom we minister. The relationships that develop between people when they minister together have a depth that surpasses a typical friendship. They have a common purpose—to glorify God—and a focus set on eternity that reminds them that their bond is everlasting.

[Q] Do you agree that it is important for moms to be involved in some type of ministry? Why or why not? How might ministering together bond people in friendship?

[Q] What does the term *kindred spirit* imply? How can you find a kindred spirit? How might a kindred spirit help you to be a better parent? Why can kindred spirits, like Paul and Timothy, minister together effectively?

[Q] Sometimes families can minister together. This allows time to spend with our friends and family together in God's service. What ministries might lend themselves to family participation?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Kindred spirits are people whose souls are knit together for eternity. In Christ, these friendships have a covenant before God of loyalty, accountability, and love that extends to our children and even grandchildren. With the Holy Spirit's guidance, these relationships supply deep springs of refreshment and godly wisdom for each other, and they become treasures that are irreplaceable and eternal.

[Q] How could a covenant friendship benefit you? Does anything keep you from having a friendship with this depth?

[Q] How are covenant friendships different from regular friendships? What character qualities would you look for in a covenant friendship? How might you be able to transform your existing friendships into covenant friendships?

[Q] How could a mentor benefit you? How might you be able to mentor someone else?

Action Plans:

- **Women in the past seemed to have a better understanding of their need for each other. They made time for friendship by working together in quilting bees, canning sessions, and sewing circles. Using this concept, come up with five ideas for having fellowship while accomplishing a task.**
- **Make a list of three people who might mentor you in specific areas. Ask at least one of them to be your mentor.**

—Study by John Ortberg, with JoHannah Reardon



Recommended Resources

☞ Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **You and Your Prodigal Child**
- **Who's Teaching the Children?**
- **Loving Discipline**
- **Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers**

☞ **Becoming a Woman of Power: Releasing Mighty Women of God Through Mentoring**, Shirley Sustar (Baker, 2005; ISBN 0800793919)

☞ **Divine Secrets of Mentoring: Spiritual Growth Through Friendship**, Carol Brazo (InterVarsity Press, 2004; ISBN 0830832378)

☞ **The Friendships of Women, 10th Anniversary Edition**, Dee Brestin (Cook Communications, 1997; ISBN 1564766322)

☞ **The New Mother's Survival Guide: A Primer for the First Year of Motherhood**, Elizabeth Wright (Cumberland House Publishing, 1997; ISBN 1888952547)

☞ **Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith**, Anita Diamant (Simon & Schuster Trade Sales, 2003; ISBN 0743246160)

☞ **Rediscovering Friendship: Awakening to the Power and Promise of Women's Friendships**, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (Augsburg/Fortress, 2001; ISBN 0800634454)

☞ **Treasured Friends**, Ann Hibbard (Baker, 2004; ISBN 0800787137)





That's What Friends Are For

Spend time with other moms and get the encouragement and support you need.

By Mimi Greenwood Knight, for the study,
"Friendships that Benefit Parenting."

I once heard someone say, "There's no one lonelier than a new mom." Then I lived it. After my husband, David, and I pinched pennies for four years so I could stay home, our first daughter was born. It should have been my "happily ever after," but four months later, I found myself lonely, isolated, uncertain of my parenting ability, and starved for adult companionship. Don't get me wrong. I loved Haley, loved David, and felt blessed to be able to stay home and take care of them. But nothing, not David's encouragement, not my mountain of parenting books, not the advice from my older sisters, not lunch and phone calls with the gang back at the office, could alleviate my overwhelming feelings of isolation and insecurity. I began praying for a way to stay home with Haley without feeling so alone. My prayers were answered the day a friend told me about The Parenting Center, a local nonprofit group providing moms with education, support, and—most importantly for me—a place to hang out and meet other moms.

The next day when the doors opened, I was there. Walking into the center, I felt shy for the first time in years. In my sales job I was confident and assertive. As a mom I felt incompetent and inadequate. Then we started talking. We talked about our deliveries, our recoveries, our sleepless nights, breastfeeding problems, even our mothers-in-law. We laughed about finally getting the baby to sleep only to jump up a dozen times to check her breathing, about putting a drop of baby shampoo in our own eye to make sure it was really tear-free, about dozing off in traffic jams because we were so sleep deprived. When I showed them how I'd only manicured one hand before Haley started crying and I never got back to the other one, another mom rolled up her pants to show us how she'd only shaved one leg. I wasn't alone any more. As much as Haley depended on me, I began to depend on my new mom friends for reassurance, encouragement, and support.

Unstringing Your Bow

In ancient times when warriors fought with bow and arrow, they found the best way to strengthen their bow was to "unstring" it each night and let it relax so it would be stronger the next morning. It's the same with moms. "Nothing in life is more consuming than being a mom," explains Leslie Parrott, author of *If Ever You Needed a Friend, It's Now* (Zondervan).

"[Mothering] depletes, expends, and burns up more time and energy than any other human activity, often leaving a mom's life out of balance. But friends, perhaps more than anything else, have a way of balancing the scales. Nobody can empathize with being a mom like another mother," Parrott continues. "The sheer understanding that comes from being around women who know what your life is like provides unspeakable comfort and support."

Consider the time you spend with your girlfriends your way of unstringing your mommy bow so you can bounce back stronger and with more to offer your family.

"I compare it to the safety address flight attendants deliver before commercial airline flights," explains author and lecturer Stacie Maslyn. "There's a reason they instruct passengers traveling with small children 'in case of a sudden decrease in cabin pressure, first secure your own oxygen mask. Then secure the mask of the child sitting next to you.' If the adult helps the child first and passes out before getting her own mask on, she isn't of use to herself or the child."

What a great illustration of motherhood. As mothers our instinct is to give, give, give until we have nothing left. But if you give all you have without putting anything back, everybody loses. Being with



another person who understands where you're coming from is one of the best ways I know to recharge that mommy battery so we're refreshed and ready for anything our kids dish out.

What Did Jesus Do?

The Bible is full of examples of godly friendships. Jesus loved his disciples and called them his friends. He loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and took solace in the time he was able to spend with them. If the Lord needed the support and encouragement of his friends while he was on earth, then why wouldn't we need it today?

In Luke when Jesus sent the disciples to spread the gospel message, he didn't send them alone. He sent them in twos to support each other. Clearly God never meant for Christian moms to go it alone either.

Meeting and Greeting

Three kids later, the women I met as a new mom at The Parenting Center are still some of my best friends. We've formed bonds in the trenches of motherhood that will last a lifetime. In the past 14 years, we've seen each other through deaths, illness, divorce, unemployment, remarriage, relocation, adoption, and the birth of literally dozens of babies. Our support and shared faith was often the glue that held our families together. I've made some other golden friendships along the way, mostly with the parents of my kids' friends from church, school, and the ball field.

One of the biggest helps has been hooking up with a mom who's a step or two ahead of me (with kids just older than mine) who can help me anticipate the challenges and keep my kids' stages in perspective. One of the greatest joys has been being that mom for someone else. At times just saying or hearing the words, "You're a good mom," can make all the difference in someone's day.

What do you do if you've been the lone ranger for so long that you truly don't have any mom friends with whom to unwind? "You'll have to be intentional about finding them," says Elisa Morgan, President and CEO of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International. "You might have to shop for friends, but they're out there. Look around at the soccer field, the gym, day care, or the office. Approach moms you see pushing strollers in your neighborhood or who have photos of their kids on their desk at work. Strike up conversations until you find someone you click with. Kids are a natural ice-breaker. Let them lead you to moms you can relate to."

Stay-at-home mom Elizabeth Burdick of Derry, New Hampshire, met moms at the playground, a baby gym class, and through her local MOMS Club. "The trick is finding someone you like and whose kids are compatible with yours," Elizabeth explains. "The women I met at MOMS are so supportive. When I had my third baby they brought me meals for two weeks and understood what it's like being home with a new little one the way my friends without kids simply couldn't."

Another way you might meet moms is to call the hospital where you delivered and ask for a list of the parents from your childbirth class. Contact one or two and plan a play date. Call the library and ask about daily story times for moms and babies. Contact your YWCA for a list of classes other moms with young kids might take. There are numerous websites like christian-mommies.com where parents can meet and chat. Many offer regional message boards where you can connect with moms in your own area.

Lisa Jernigan and Patty Wyatt started a program four years ago called Girlfriends Unlimited with the sole purpose of bringing women together in friendship. "We wanted to make it fun, no pressure, no agenda except to connect and spend time with each other. As moms we are like pitchers. We pour ourselves into our marriage, our children, our jobs, our church work. If we keep pouring and pouring



without being replenished, it won't take long before the pitcher runs dry. Being with girlfriends is a great way to fill your pitcher."

Getting Together

Once you find some moms you connect with, how do you squeeze them into your already overworked schedule? It may not be easy, but there are ways to make it happen. Lynnell Mickelsen kills two birds with one stone by taking early morning or late evening walks with other moms in her neighborhood. "We walk before the kids get up or after they're in bed. Sometimes we have a lot to talk about. Other days it's just good to get out, exercise, and be with someone who understands where I'm coming from."

Dessa Patton of Southaven, Mississippi, says there are days when the best she can manage is a phone call with a mom friend, but just hearing the voice of someone who'll sympathize, not try to offer advice, is priceless. "I also have a friend who seems to know when I'm going to have a lousy day. I'll go to the mailbox and there will be a card from her when I need it most."

Other moms hold a craft night where each one brings an independent craft to work on while enjoying time together. You might plan a getaway weekend without kids and with rules like no makeup, no hair spray, no cooking, and no cleaning. Or organize a Moms in Touch group at your church where you meet with other moms and pray for the teachers, students, and workers at your child's school.

Recharge Your Battery

Extensive studies have shown that people who spend time with friends live longer and have more energy and vitality. Please don't feel like taking time away from your family to connect with other moms is a selfish indulgence. It's actually a win/win situation for you and your family.

"No child wants a mom who's living for him alone," says Elisa Morgan. "No husband wants a wife whose entire existence is the kids. When a mom spends time investing in herself and building herself up the way friendships can, her husband is often reminded why he fell in love with her in the first place. Your children see you modeling friendship and see that you are an entire person above and beyond just being their mom."

We need friends who will hold us accountable, friends who aren't afraid to tell us what we need to hear, even when it's not what we want to hear. If you don't already have friends like that, ask God to send you some. Ask him to open your eyes to see the women at work, at church, at the playground, and in your neighborhood he's just waiting to bless you with.

—Mimi Greenwood Knight, a freelance writer and artist-in-residence,
lives with her family in Louisiana.

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. Summer 2005, Vol. 17, No. 4, Page 24

ORGANIZATIONS THAT HELP

Here are some groups that can help you get started connecting with other moms in your area.

M.O.P.S. (Mothers of Preschoolers) www.mops.org or 1-303-733-5333

MOMS Club International www.momsclub.com or MOMSCLUB@aol.com

Girlfriend Unlimited www.girlfriendsunlimited.com or 1-602-817-4410

Moms in Touch www.momsintouch.org or 1-800-949-MOMS



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Parenting Together

Refuse to let your differences divide you.

Children are intelligent little beings. It isn't long before they realize both of their parents were not cut from the same fabric. Some things are okay with one parent and definitely a "no-no" with the other. As parents, it's important to realize this and join forces. Our children are not our enemies, but if parents are not united, even with their differences, their little ones will quickly learn how to play one against the other. "But, Mom/Dad said I could!" is one of the first phrases a clever child learns.



How can parents lovingly disagree? What part does forgiveness play? Why is it essential to find common ground? These are some of the questions we'll be discussing in this study.

Scripture: Genesis 22:7–12; Proverbs 22:6; Isaiah 66:13; Ephesians 4:32; Philippians 2:1–7; 4:19; Colossians 3:13

Based On: "Mom vs. Dad," by Faith Tibbetts McDonald, CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, July/August 2001, Vol. 13, No. 6, Page 26



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: *Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Mom vs. Dad" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).*

God created each of us to be unique. All you have to do is look around to notice how different we are. When we marry someone, those differences seem to take on lives of their own and often become irritating. Add to those individual differences the fact that we came from completely different homes, and you have the ingredients for an interesting life. Parenting accentuates those differences. Faith Tibbetts McDonald states, "If you and your spouse have polar personalities, take heart, you can make peace with your differences and raise happy, well-adjusted children."

It isn't so much our disagreements as how we disagree. First Peter 3:8 says, "...live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble." What sometimes happens is that our need to be right becomes bigger than the person in front of us; it's called pride, and it doesn't please God.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] When you were growing up, what kind of parents did you have? Who was the fun parent? Who was the serious parent?

[Q] Share how many children were in your family growing up. Were all of you treated the same? Explain.

[Q] In what areas of parenting do you and your spouse disagree? Has it been resolved? How?

[Q] Name some differences between you and your spouse. How successful have you been at accepting those differences?

[Q] Share how your children are different. Have you had to make adjustments in your parenting to accommodate these differences?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We may have different perspectives, but we have the same goal—to raise godly, well-adjusted children.



Read Proverbs 22:6. It is a God-given responsibility to train our children in the ways of the Lord. Tony Evans said, “*Train* means you give them the rules with rewards and punishment. The expectations are clear, and you create an environment where the kids are helped to succeed, not set up to fail. Instruct is the inculcation of God’s Word. Of course, this means we have to be in the Word and living in the Word ourselves” (*Get Serious*, 1995).

Though you and your spouse may approach things from different perspectives and use different methods, you still want the same thing—what’s best for your children. There is more than one way to get to a destination. The problem comes when we believe that our way is the only way. Jerry Jenkins said, “Some people have the right to do things the way they think they should be done, rather than the way you or I think they should be done. Each of us has built-in confidence that our way is best” (*Twelve Things I Want My Kids to Remember Forever*, 1991).

Abraham’s son Isaac was trained in God’s ways. Read Genesis 22:7–12. Abraham demonstrated his trust in God by his actions. He knew Isaac belonged to God. Sometimes we forget our children belong to the Lord. We act as if they are ours for the keeping. If we could remember they are God’s, we would seek his counsel more often. We are just the trainers.

[Q] What are some of the practical things you and your spouse do to train your child(ren) in the ways of the Lord?

[Q] Name some effective rewards you have used in your parenting that have been good motivators.

[Q] Share something you tried which proved unsuccessful. What happened?

[Q] Have you ever strayed from the way you were brought up? What brought you back?

[Q] What goes through your mind when you think of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son? What does Isaac’s willingness to be laid on the altar say about his training?

Teaching Point Two: There will be times of disagreement.

The reality is, there will be times of disagreement. So the question remains, how will you display your disagreement? Our temptation is to act unloving when we don’t get our way. Our anger is demonstrated when we loudly disagree, or when we simmer, waiting to erupt. We can be silent, expecting our spouse to know what is wrong, or we can use bitter sarcasm to get our points across. Your differences may be significant, but they don’t have to divide you. You can agree to disagree. Disagreeing with someone doesn’t give you the right to attack that person. You can choose to defer to your spouse even when you think your way is better. Both of you are on stage in front of little eyes. What a wonderful opportunity to illustrate an important life lesson.

Some issues need to be discussed away from your children's ears. Sometimes conflicts arise when your child wants something and needs an answer. One way to deal with this is to tell your children you will talk it over and let them know what you both have decided.

One pastor shared what he and his wife do about decisions that need a quick reply. They let their children know that if any of them needed an answer within 20 minutes, the answer would be no. This helped eliminate those times of giving in because of feeling pressured. In addition, it also encouraged planning ahead, a valuable life lesson. Granted, some things may require immediate responses, but for the most part this establishes a boundary alleviating the pressure of two-minute decisions.

Dr. James Dobson once said, "The best way to love your children is to love your spouse." It is important to remember that in addition to the multitude of things we are teaching our children, what we model for them speaks louder than anything. Even when we are not disagreeing out loud, tension can be felt. Learning how to disagree in a respectful, honoring way demonstrates what love looks like. It's much easier to love someone who agrees with us, but God can help us love and honor our spouses when we have opposing views.

Read Philippians 2:1–7. If we continually consider our spouse more significant than ourselves, we will learn how to disagree with humility.

[Q] Name a time when it seemed impossible for you to give in to someone. What was the outcome?

[Q] Why do you think it's so important for us to get our own way? How does our passage in Philippians contradict this tendency?

[Q] Why does loving your spouse equal loving your children? Share what your household is like when you and your spouse are at odds.

[Q] In what ways are you failing to honor your spouse?

Teaching Point Three: We must concentrate on what we can do to parent well and not on what our spouse is doing wrong.

Some people parent alone because of divorce, separation, or the death of a spouse. Some do because their spouse is unable or unwilling to share the load. Any of these scenarios is difficult, but the good news is, we don't parent alone. Read Philippians 4:19.

God said he would supply all our needs. He meant *all*. If you are in a situation where you feel like you are carrying too much, take it to God and ask him what he wants you to do. Then do your part. Ask him for help with anything else. Read Isaiah 66:13. God knows how to comfort

us as a mother does. And he is the ultimate father. He will provide what you need. You can count on him.

If your spouse is not helping you carry your load of parenting, you need to entrust your other half to the Lord. We can't change anyone, only God can. And as you continue loving your spouse, your children will witness God working in your heart. You can demonstrate forgiveness, love, and commitment. What an awesome responsibility we have.

[Q] Are there times when you felt you were carrying the responsibility of parenting on your shoulders alone? Share what that felt like.

[Q] What is your biggest temptation when you feel you are doing more than your part? Do you have pity parties? Do you put your spouse down? How can we fight the temptation to become bitter when we feel we are doing more than our part?

[Q] Share any successful ways you have found to encourage your spouse to do more to help you.

Teaching Point Four: Some day the nest will be empty, so we need to treasure our marriage.

You still can remember when your little one fit neatly in your arms. Lovingly you laid your child in the crib as your eyes were glued to this little bundle of joy. But someday you will see them pack up their belongings and with a spring in their steps load up the car. You will hear them drive away to start their new life and somehow change yours. It's what's supposed to happen; you train them to grow up and move out. And there you are sitting across the table from the same person you started the journey with. How does that feel? Maybe if we could remember that someday the nest will be empty, we would have the right perspective as we raise these children together.

There are some who wait till the children leave home and then live separate lives. Either they physically leave, or they leave emotionally. What is the reason for this? Their children were their whole lives, and when they moved out, these parents felt empty and lost. They knew how to be a parent, but had forgotten how to be a husband or wife.

Another reason it's important to not let your parenting differences divide you is that if you have worked on your relationship with your spouse, when your nest is empty, the same won't be said of your heart. We might have disagreements along the way. We may even win some of those battles, but we don't want to lose the war.

One way we can maintain our relationships is to get rid of scorecards. Many of us have them; they are the cards we take out and add to when our spouse has hurt us one more time. We

almost have them memorized but, just in case we forget an offense, we write it down on these cards.

Read Ephesians 4:32. Forgiveness is a necessary ingredient for a healthy family. We forgive because we are forgiven. We are not to wait until we feel like forgiving; we are to forgive because Christ forgave us. It has nothing to do with how we feel. And for the record, we need to burn our scorecards. God doesn't have any.

[Q] If you are struggling with forgiving your spouse, how do you think that affects your household?

[Q] If we have forgiven someone, how do we go about forgetting the offense? Is this necessary for true forgiveness?

[Q] What would it mean to you to be able to burn your scorecard?

[Q] What are some of the ways you cultivate a relationship with your spouse? Do you have date nights?

[Q] If you've emotionally distanced yourself from your spouse at one time and now have reconnected, share how you gained that victory.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Parenting is an unbelievable responsibility. We are given an opportunity to model love, acceptance, honor, and respect before impressionable eyes. Sadly, we live in an age where good marriages are hard to find. People to the right and left of us are calling it quits because they are not happy. Unhappiness has become a justification to part ways. God calls marriage a picture of Christ and his church. We have the privilege of not only showing our children what a good marriage looks like, but also showing the world. How do we do this? Simply by acknowledging that God has brought two imperfect people together and is making them one.

It's pretty obvious we can't parent in our own strength. And the reality is, even doing the best we can, our children will grow up and some will make bad choices. They can choose to walk away from their values, from their faith, even from their God. Does that mean we have failed as parents? No, because we can still do something we've done from the very beginning. We can pray. We can storm heaven for the lives God has entrusted to us. And some day we may hear, "Well done."

[Q] Share some components of a good marriage you have had the opportunity to observe. How does the couple deal with conflict?

[Q] When should a counselor's help be enlisted? Why would it help to have a third party involved?

[Q] Many times one spouse will be lenient with the child in order to be the child's friend. Can we be parents and friends to our children? Why or why not?

[Q] Do you know of any families that run smoothly without incorporating God's Word? Explain how that is possible.

[Q] Share a wise piece of counsel you received from your parents and incorporated into your family successfully.

—Study prepared by Anne Peterson, poet, speaker, and regular contributor to Christian Bible Studies.

Recommended Resources

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **You and Your Prodigal Child**
- **Loving Discipline**
- **Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers**
- **Fear Factors in Parenting**
- **Friendships that Benefit Parenting**

📖 **As You Leave Home**, Jerry B. Jenkins (Tyndale House, 1993; ISBN 0842337725)

📖 **The New Dare to Discipline**, Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House, 1996; ISBN 0842305068)

📖 **The New Hide or Seek: Building Self-Esteem in Your Child**, Dr. James Dobson (Baker, 2001; ISBN 0800756800)

📖 **Positive Parenting**, Jack Barnell (Beacon Hill Press, 1973; ISBN 083411366X)

📖 **10 Secrets for Raising Sensible, Successful Kids**, Dr. Kevin Leman (Tyndale House, 2003; ISBN 0842371281)

📖 **What the Bible Says About Parenting**, John MacArthur Jr. (Thomas Nelson, 2000; ISBN 0849937752)





Mom vs. Dad

Why your different parenting styles are actually good for your kids.

By Faith Tibbetts McDonald, for the study “Parenting Together.”

After a girls’ get-away weekend, my friend and I returned to her usually orderly home—now a housekeeping disaster. Dirty dishes were crammed in the sink, pizza boxes and empty soda cans littered the countertops. Clothes, toys, books, and shoes were everywhere.

Her children greeted her half-heartedly: “Back so soon?” Their forlorn looks were telling. They knew: Party’s over!

With gritted teeth, my friend hissed, “Why does he get to be all fun and games and I’ve got to be the drill sergeant who gets everyone back on track?”

My friend and her husband are not the only parenting duo who’ve discovered significant differences in their parenting styles. Maybe you know Drill Sergeant Dan who’s married to Permissive Pam. Bedtime at their house is bedlam. Dan roars at the top of his lungs, “You kids get to bed and you get to sleep now! I don’t care if you’re thirsty, hungry, or scared. I don’t want to hear another sound.” Pam, on the other hand, isn’t too concerned about bedtimes: “Kids, just make sure you clean up the taco dip on the rug and turn out the lights before you go to bed.”

Or do you know Spontaneous Sam who’s married to Regimented Ruth? They struggle over the when, where, and cost of family fun-time. Sam can’t contain his exuberance as he makes last-minute weekend plans. “Let’s go to Disney World!” he shouts. Ruth wails, “The budget, Sam! There’s only money for a movie and popcorn. Besides, Saturday is chore day!”

Then there’s Empathetic Ellen married to Stoic Stuart. Ellen clucks, coos, and cuddles her darlings over every bump, scrape, and heartache. Stuart scowls and grouches, all the while insisting the kids need to “tough it out.”

If you and your spouse have polar personalities, take heart. You can make peace with your differences and raise happy, well-adjusted children.

Underscore Your Similarities

Despite their differences, all couples agree they want the best for their children—it’s how they get there that brings on conflict. For instance, my husband, Steve, and I agree that our three kids need to acquire a sound work ethic, but our training approaches differ significantly. Steve likes to assign a task—often a difficult one—that involves lots of sweat, like hoeing the garden or stacking firewood. He later inspects and evaluates the (hopefully) finished task. His motto is to do the job and do it right.

I, on the other hand, like to work side by side with our children, enjoying their company, demonstrating the hows as we go, and often, when they lose interest, finishing up on my own. My motto is that work can be fun if you approach it right.

When I think Steve’s expecting too much, or when he thinks I’m too soft on the kids, we try to remember that ultimately we both want the same thing. We want our children to know that diligence is profitable, so we allow for each other’s differences in achieving that goal.



Appreciate Your Spouse's Strengths

Often, my first reaction when my husband is interacting with our children is, "That's not the way I would do it." But it's important to take a step back from thinking, *my way is the right way*, and recognize that both parents contribute immensely. David R. Miller, author of the book *Help! I'm Not a Perfect Parent!* (Accent), says that parenting differences are actually good for kids. If there is an extreme tendency in one parent, the other will likely soften that tendency. Kids will adapt and learn to successfully respond to each parent's style, which is a crucial, lifelong relationship skill. My sister and I remember when Mom (who expresses herself dramatically) yelled, it was no big deal, but if Dad raised his voice, we'd better get out of the way! Those differences have helped me understand that a loud voice doesn't always equal anger.

Let's say your spouse has a glaring issue that surfaces in parenting. Maybe she suffers from depression or he doesn't give priority to his relationship with God. While it's possible for this negative trait to affect your children, remember that God helps us in every aspect of parenting. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God tells Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." By prayerfully applying this promise to our parenting, we find hope and comfort, knowing God is actively filling in the gaps our flawed selves leave. Remember that you have weaknesses, too. Pray for yourself and your spouse in this area and extend grace.

Don't Ignore the Irritation

The conflict ignited by differences with your spouse is inevitable. But it compounds when you focus on the problem rather than the solution. To effectively address a disagreement, start by reaffirming your commitment to the relationship and to resolving the problem. Communicate with a workable solution as the goal. Develop listening skills and creative ways to compromise.

In her book *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (InterVarsity), Diana Garland gives sound advice on communicating powerful feelings when she says, "[Anger] needs to be named truthfully and reported in ways that do not lead to sin against one another." Truthfully naming the problem means reporting one's experience and feelings. For example, my friend who was angry at her husband for not cleaning up the house could say, "I feel angry and upset when I come home from a weekend away and the house is a disaster." To accuse and blame is tearing down and disrespecting your spouse. Garland urges using "I" statements to relay feelings. She says, "Learning to sort through feelings and use them on behalf of those one loves is a spiritual discipline that requires vigilance, prayer, and self-control." And it is vital to family life. Getting beyond your differences will involve a lifetime of discussion as you face the new challenges that come with each stage of your children's lives. As Miller states in his book, "When it comes to children, parents are supposed to disagree, but within certain parameters of love, good sense, and putting the welfare of the other above one's own."

A longtime leader in family ministry, Garland encourages couples to identify and pursue God's purposes for their families and operate accordingly. For example, at times Drill Sergeant Dan's orders will get the job done effectively. Maybe he can get everyone moving and to church on time on Sunday morning. Perhaps Regimented Ruth can keep family members within a budget so they can save and eventually take that trip to Disney World. The next time you and your spouse lock horns over a parenting matter, remember to relax, be compassionate, and know that your kids need you both.

—Faith Tibbetts McDonald is a writer and mother of three. She and her family live in Pennsylvania.

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. July/August 2001, Vol. 13, No. 6, Page 26



Christian Parenting

Leader's Guide

Model Self-Confidence for Your Kids

Move your children from being self-focused to being God-focused.

We've all seen those motivational posters—such as the one with a drop of water causing a ripple effect that reads: "Attitude: a little thing that makes a big difference." You can now buy "de-motivational posters," such as the one of a sinking ship that reads: "Mistakes: It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others." While funny, it's a reminder—as if we needed one—that our culture has perfected the put-down. It's no wonder that we misplace the basis for our confidence, and even easier to see how children and adolescents in our culture would struggle with the same. This study, based on Jennifer Mangan's article in CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, will explore how to foster a God-centered self-concept in our children.



Scripture: Luke 11:1–13; Acts 2:41–47; Philippians 2:3–11; Colossians 1:15–23

Based On: "Raising Confident Kids," by Jennifer Mangan, CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, September/October 2000, Page 38



Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to Leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Raising Confident Kids" from CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).

Dr. Chap Clark, Associate Professor of Youth, Family, and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, describes adolescents as "...huddling together to wait out this increasingly difficult time of trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in a performance-oriented and often hostile adult world" (*Youthworker Journal* interview, 8/2005). Or as author and theologian Frederick Buechner puts it, "Adolescents are Adam and Eve in the process of...discovering that in addition to good there is also evil, that in addition to the joy of being alive, there is also the sadness and hurt of being alive and being themselves" (*Youthworker Update*, 11/92, pg 8). It's no wonder then, in this process and atmosphere, that even Christian youth are found groping for a sense of identity and a source of confidence.

But is the key to greater self-esteem simply increased self-focus, as our culture would suggest? Jennifer Mangan writes in her article, "What does healthy self-esteem look like? ...The answer is Jesus and his example of living as a child of God." Ironically, greater self-confidence happens when a person moves away from focus on self and towards focus on God. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25). As parents, then, we would do well to model Christ-like ways of "losing self" for the sake of our kids. Scripture provides—commands, even—a number of disciplines and practices for moving focus from self to God, such as worship, prayer, service, and community.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] "There is an overemphasis in our society on building kids' self-esteem." True or False? When you hear the phrase *self-esteem*, what comes to mind?

[Q] What do media and culture offer as the basis for adolescent self-esteem? Adult self-esteem?

[Q] What was your self-image like in junior and senior high school? What was the basis for your self-esteem at that time?

[Q] What, today, causes you to slip into the "mire of self-hate and doubt"? How about your children?

[Q] Can self-denial and self-esteem co-exist? Why or why not?

[Q] In what ways has God helped you towards a proper self-image? Think of Bible passages, events, and relationships.



Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Model awe of God and his grace.

“[As Christians] we find ourselves walking this tightrope between the idea of a God who judges humans and finds none righteous, and a God who finds us so valuable that he would send his only son to die in our place,” Mangan writes. Perhaps this is not such a precarious place to be. If life is better when we move focus from self to God, then perhaps the place where God’s holiness and our great need come together is the starting line for a proper self-image. So, let’s start by reading Colossians 1:15–23.

[Q] Look at verses 15–20. List all of the qualities and attributes of Jesus that are noted here. What kinds of thoughts and feelings does this description evoke in you? What kind of worship does the one described here deserve?

[Q] What does it mean to you in your day-to-day life that “all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (vv. 16–17)?

[Q] In light of this description of Jesus, what can you do to model proper worship of God to your child(ren)? How might your worship center upon the attributes of God as he describes himself in his Word?

[Q] How does worship of the God described here help you form a proper self-image?

[Q] Describe the “before and after” of verses 21–22. What were the costs to God and the benefits to us?

[Q] How do the lengths that God has gone to in order to “present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (v. 22) affect you and your self-image? What might life look like if we lived out this new identity in Christ? How would modeling this new identity affect your child(ren)?

Teaching Point Two: Model faith in God and his grace.

When Jesus explains the parable of the sower and the four soils in Matthew 13, he says the message of the kingdom can be choked out by the thorny “deceitfulness of wealth” (v. 22). In our society we can attest to the way affluence can choke out our faith and the basis for our self-image. Prayer, motivated by faith in a good and powerful God, may be the biggest antidote to soul-crowding self-focus—and the best way to form a proper self-image.

Craig Rogers, founder of Abundant Life Academy, says, “Today’s troubled teen is a kid who comes from a good family, has tremendous gifting and talent, yet appreciates nothing, is unmo-



tivated, believes the world owes him everything, and refuses to hold him/herself accountable, pushing off responsibility of his/her immature behavior onto everyone else, especially his/her parents. We call it Entitlementitis. Troubled teens who have Entitlementitis are basically good kids from Christian families who have been spoiled by the prosperity of their parents and the nation.”

Read Luke 11:1–13.

[Q] What does Jesus teach us about how we should approach God (vv.1–4)?

[Q] What does this short prayer tell you about God and his goodness?

[Q] Poet and dramatist Oscar Wilde wrote, “A man’s very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life.” This is kind of ironic. How might the humility of confession and forgiveness (v. 4) be our “highest moment”?

[Q] How could daily dependence on God, through prayer, properly align one’s self image?

Leader’s Note: *In the Lord’s Prayer there is the underlying theme of our dependence on God for everything, and the overarching theme of God’s good providence. We need everything from bread to forgiveness from him. Prayer, then, takes the suffocating pressure of self-reliance off of us, and makes way for God’s daily, satisfying goodness. It would do wonders for anyone’s self-image to be able to say, “God provides for me!”*

[Q] Verses 5–10 remind us of the need for persistence in prayer. How could persistent prayer change us for the better?

[Q] How could you model asking, seeking, and knocking to your child(ren) (vv. 9–10)?

[Q] Why is the Holy Spirit the best gift our Father can give us (v. 13)? How does this extravagant, perfect gift affect your self-image?

Teaching Point Three: Model self-sacrifice to honor God and his grace.

In her article Mangan writes, “Our consumer society certainly promotes the idea that having enough of the right stuff will make us feel good. And with teens being the primary target of advertisers these days, they’re getting the message loud and clear. But this emphasis on finding happiness through material possessions actually creates young teens who remain chronically unhappy.”

Instead Mangan posits that healthy self-esteem involves an understanding of “how deeply and unconditionally we are loved and valued by God.” Therefore as we understand God’s love, we will see that our material possessions and resources are not an end in themselves, but a means to

glorify God and bless others. 1 John 3:17 points out that, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” Could using our resources to serve others, rather than ourselves, help us to more clearly understand God’s love for us? Read Philippians 2:3–11.

[Q] Verse 3 says, “in humility consider others better than yourselves.” How can this attitude co-exist with a healthy self-image?

[Q] What are some of the “interests of others” (v. 4) around you? What are some of “your own interests” that tend to steer you towards selfishness?

[Q] How would you summarize Christ’s attitude in verses 5–8? Ponder for a moment the great depths to which Jesus descended.

[Q] What gospel stories about Jesus can you recall that illustrate this description of him in verses 5–8?

[Q] How did Jesus retain his identity and maintain this attitude at the same time?

Leader’s Note: *Christ’s humility is really evidence of his great power. Although he did not give up any of his divine attributes, he did choose to take on the lower role of “human” and “servant”(all the more reason to worship him). Humility, then, is power and position restrained. With Christ as our example, we can choose to “consider others as better than ourselves,” while retaining our identities as beloved of God.*

[Q] Mangan writes that a child’s “confidence and belief that God can and does act through (him or her) is the mark of healthy self-esteem.” How would living life as a mission of service towards others affect your children and their self-confidence?

[Q] It’s clear in verses 9–11 that, in God’s economy, sacrificial servanthood is most important. We won’t discover a proper self-image until we align ourselves with God’s values. How could you and your child(ren) take on the “nature of a servant,” like Jesus?

Teaching Point Four: Model community to demonstrate God’s grace.

Browse through a Christian bookstore, and you could walk away believing that the Christian life is only a personal exercise between the individual Christian and God—a “personal relationship with Jesus” lived in a vacuum. But flip open your Bible to any spot, and you’ll see that faith is a community exercise. We are to live out our faith within the context of the church body. A clear picture of this is seen in the Book of Acts. God provides this strange and wonderful atmosphere where our self-esteem will not become over- or under-inflated, and where we grow together toward him. Read Acts 2:41–47.

[Q] What was the effect of the gospel message upon this community of people? What specific activities were the believers dedicated to in the church?

Leader's Note: *One commentator points out that the church was involved in four basic activities: learning, caring, fellowship, and worship.*

[Q] How do your fellowship experiences match up with this description of the early church? Why might they be different?

[Q] How might this kind of shared life sharpen a believer's focus? How would it affect one's self-image?

[Q] How would it affect your child(ren) to know that faith is a team sport rather than an individual event?

[Q] What could you and your child(ren) do to cultivate this atmosphere more in your church?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Despite a hostile environment, we can develop a proper self-image as we move from focus on self toward focus upon the Holy God who is good, powerful, and loving. And as parents we have the great privilege of modeling to our kids these God-ordained practices that will carry them to proper self-esteem. Mangan writes, "With our help [our kids] can be rescued from the mire of self-hate and doubt and brought to a place where they see themselves as unique, beloved creations of their heavenly father." Amen! Take a moment to pray for your child(ren) right now.

[Q] How much does the media affect our self-concept? Try these: 1) Help your child become a media critic. When you watch a movie, read a magazine, view television, or see a commercial, play "Truth or Lie?" with your child. Help him or her measure the message against God's Word; or 2) Go on a media fast for two weeks. Use the time you'd normally spend watching a movie or television show to serve someone in your church or community. Who can use your help and how?

[Q] Give good gifts, like our Father in heaven (Luke 11:13), to show his love and to provide opportunities for growth towards a God-honoring self-image. What gifts (experiences) could you provide for your children that would help them practice: Awe before God and his grace? Faith and prayer? Self-sacrifice? Community life?

[Q] Make a list of passages in Scripture that explain our identity as God's children and speak of his love for us. Share these with your children during bedtime.

—Kyle White is a former youth pastor and currently the director of Neighbors' House, a ministry to at-risk students.



Recommended Resources

☰ Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **You and Your Prodigal Child**
- **Loving Discipline**
- **Raising Counter-Cultural Teenagers**
- **Fear Factors in Parenting**
- **Friendships that Benefit Parenting**

☰ **Growing Compassionate Kids**, Jan Johnson (Upper Room Books, 2001; ISBN 0835809323)

☰ **Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers**, Chap Clark (Baker, 2004; ISBN 0801027322)

☰ **The Ragamuffin Gospel**, Brennan Manning (Multnomah, 2000; ISBN 1576737160)

☰ **Romancing Your Child's Heart**, Monte Swan & David Biebel (Multnomah, 2003; ISBN 192912516X)

☰ **Wanting to Be Her: Body Image Secrets Victoria Won't Tell You**, Michelle Graham (InterVarsity Press, 2005; ISBN 0830832661)

☰ **Who I Am in Christ**, Neil T. Andersen (Regal Books, 2001; ISBN: 0830728902)





Raising Confident Kids

Teach your children to find real self-esteem in the unconditional love of God.

By Jennifer Mangan, for the study
“Model Self-Confidence for Your Kids.”

Melissa is an attractive, intelligent, and musically gifted 14-year-old whose self-esteem has plummeted in the last year. Outwardly, Melissa appears to be a well-adjusted, happy teenager whom everyone likes. But inside, she’s suffering.

The warning signs of her diminished self-esteem blinked loud and clear when Melissa’s grades took a dive, angry outbursts at home became a daily event, and get-togethers with friends were replaced by nights in front of the tube. Although Melissa is a leader in her youth group at church, her spirituality quickly evaporated in the face of social pressures at school and the stresses of eighth-grade academics. She has alluded to suicide and is now in counseling where she’s confessed she is unable to shake an inner voice that tells her she doesn’t measure up.

Sadly, Melissa’s shift from a happy, confident girl to an insecure, anxious young teen isn’t all that unusual. In her book *Reviving Ophelia* (Putnam), sociologist Mary Pipher says, “Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves... In early adolescence, studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic and ‘tomboyish’ personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed.”

The Tightrope

For Christians, the challenge to build a healthy sense of self-esteem in our children takes on an added dimension. We recognize that real self-esteem involves a sense of how deeply and unconditionally we are loved and valued by God. But we also know that in order for our children to grow spiritually, they must understand the reality of sin.

For many Christians, the concept of self-esteem seems in direct contrast to understanding our need for a Savior. So we find ourselves walking this tight rope between the idea of a God who judges humans and finds none righteous and a God who finds us so valuable that he would send his only son to die in our place—a tough concept for even adults to grasp. So perhaps it’s no surprise that Christian adolescents are as prone to falling into that “Bermuda Triangle” as their non-Christian peers.

Lisa McMinn is assistant professor of sociology at Wheaton College in Illinois and author of the book *Growing Strong Daughters* (Baker). She sees the loss of self-esteem in adolescent girls as a direct result of sin. “Our daughters have been created in the image of God,” she states. “Yet because of sin, our ability to [be aligned with] God’s will has been perverted.”

So what does healthy self-esteem look like? For McMinn, the answer is Jesus and his example of living as a child of God. She writes, “[Strong daughters] know they have been made in the image of God and are empowered by God to reflect that image in a broken world.” That confidence and belief that God can and does act through them is the mark of healthy self-esteem. And this underlying confidence is what separates a child with poor self-esteem from a child who is simply experiencing normal teenage insecurities. With this understanding of self-esteem, it’s easy to see that helping our children develop a strong, healthy sense of their own value goes hand-in-hand with helping them develop a strong, healthy faith.



False Impressions

As the mother of three girls, McMinn knows she must help her daughters gain confidence in themselves in order to guide them toward healthy social and spiritual development. “This is particularly challenging given the obstacles in our present culture,” she says.

One of the best ways to build confidence in your daughter is to look at ways you talk about your own appearance and self-image. McMinn asks, “Are mothers obsessed with weight control? Beauty? Is aging an enemy? Do fathers perpetuate this obsession by their own response to beautiful women portrayed in the media? If parents can resist the tendency to judge and critique others or themselves on the basis of beauty, they will begin to break a cycle that negatively impacts how their daughters think about their bodies.”

Another major factor is the media. For McMinn, the best way to battle the pervasive messages of the media is to teach our daughters to be critics of the culture. “Point out unrealistic portrayals of beauty,” she says. “Are the models they see starving themselves? My daughters are finally beginning to recognize that an anorexic model is not healthy and beautiful. They recognize that large breasts on a skinny body are probably not natural.”

The Power of Peers

Melissa and her family live in a prosperous suburb outside of Chicago. Most of her friends have parents who make a generous living. They can afford a school wardrobe for their children that includes trendy and expensive labels. Melissa comes from a large family that sticks to a clothing budget so she sometimes has to wear the same jeans two or three times a week. Although she's never been mocked for her alleged fashion faux pas, Melissa feels self-conscious and judged.

Our consumer society certainly promotes the idea that having enough of the right stuff will make us feel good. And with teens being the primary target of advertisers these days, they're getting that message loud and clear.

But this emphasis on finding happiness through material possessions actually creates young teens who remain chronically unhappy. Sean Thomas, a social studies teacher and leader for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at Melissa's middle school, sees the impact of this hollow materialism every day. “It's hard to build self-esteem on God alone when you have so much. So kids build their self-esteem around the cliques they're in or the clothes they wear or the grades they get. Before long you have to do a better project, have a cuter girlfriend, and accumulate more Abercrombie shirts.”

The solution is to start giving our children a sense of who they are in God even before they hit their teenage years. This confidence to follow God, make their own decisions and stand apart from the crowd will go a long way toward helping them fend off the pressure to dress and act like their peers when they hit middle school.

McMinn recommends parents encourage early adolescents to practice problem solving. Whether it's how to spend their allowance wisely or how to get out of a friendship that's gone bad, parents need to resist the urge to tell our children how to solve the problem. Instead, McMinn suggests, “We need to dialogue with them, help them ask the right questions, and lead them toward a solution that emerges from within them, rather than from us.” This approach teaches children to trust their God-given instincts and learn to think and act according to their values, not the whims of their peers.

A Surprising Culprit

While we as Christians believe that true value, true esteem can only come from God, it's sometimes tough to convince our children of that eternal truth. Ironically, our Christian culture might even contribute to the drop in self-esteem we see in our children.

According to Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, Christians are taught to live as if they have high self-esteem. "We think we have to look good, sound good, and perform well," says Burge. "A surprising number of my students come from backgrounds in which their performance is the basis of their value. That erodes their self-esteem because they discover they don't have intrinsic value. Instead they have earned value. None of us can perform our best forever, so if I fail or fear failure, I am constantly feeling insecure."

Sadly, that expectation of performance can often extend to our children's perceptions of what it means to be a Christian. "In many parts of the evangelical world, people are seemingly beautiful and financially successful," says Burge. "If I'm someone who already feels critical about myself, I feel like I have to perform and wear a mask. Kids often get tired of performing and decide to bail out of the whole system. It's almost like their first act of self-esteem but it manifests itself by turning to alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity. They see the church as a perpetuator of this mentality that's bringing them death."

A Grace-Filled Solution

With all of these forces pressing on our children, it's no surprise that we often fail to build genuine, lasting self-esteem in our kids. So where do we begin?

Gary Burge has found that the turning point for many of his performance-oriented students comes when he teaches a section on grace and the character of God. "Frequently, students are moved when I talk about the unqualified affection of God that cannot be earned or lost," he says. "It's as if they are understanding God's grace for the first time. The only time a child will ever glimpse a genuine, unqualified affection, unfettered by sin, is when they experience the love of God."

That's the real challenge for parents: to show our children that genuine, unqualified love at every turn. Chap Clark, associate professor of Youth and Family Ministries at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, encourages parents to show that love through action, not just talk. He says, "Research shows that when parents model and talk about faith regularly, adolescents will come to understand that God loves them. It's not about imposing your faith, but living it everyday." To figure out what messages you're sending your children, Clark recommends parents ask themselves a few questions:

How do we talk about people at home? Kids pick up on those parental impressions and use them to figure out what makes a person worthy of their parents' approval. For instance, if Dad talks disparagingly about the heavy woman he works with, his kids may get the message that appearance is more important than character.

How do we talk about faith and Christ in the context of the family? This has an enormous impact as well. Is religion seen as a tool for restricting behavior or is it something that brings grace and peace to the family? If a teenager gets into trouble and her parents react by scolding her with Bible verses about God's anger and wrath, she's likely to see God as a someone to fear, not someone to trust and turn to for forgiveness.

Do we treat our children in a way that reflects the way we talk about faith? Parents who conduct devotionals, talk about faith and go to church, but who are unreasonable or aren't willing to negotiate or listen to their children completely undercut anything they've said to their kids. To impact

adolescents, parents need to treat them with kindness and respect and live their faith for the kids to see.

To some degree, the sense of being weird and different and misunderstood is part and parcel of early teenage life. Clearly, raging hormones, body changes, emerging independence and the social pressures of junior high play an enormous role in the confusing feelings adolescents have about themselves. Yet we as parents can also take an active role in shoring up our children's sense of value and worth by giving them the tools to see their culture more clearly and understand God's intense love for them more fully. With our help, kids like Melissa can be rescued from the mire of self-hate and doubt and brought to a place where they see themselves as unique, beloved creations of their heavenly Father.

—Jennifer Mangan is a writer and the mother of four. She and her family live in Illinois.

CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. September/October 2000, Vol. 13, No. 1, Page 38

