



PARENTING WITH PURPOSE

by Roger Sonnenberg

INTRODUCTION

If there's one thing we know for sure it's that parenting isn't easy. There is no "easy-as-1-2-3" recipe and certainly no "one-size-fits-all" solution. Yet raising your children is undoubtedly the most important thing you will ever do and wise parenting does not happen by accident, you need to work at it.

Like building a house that will last for years, parenting can be tackled with an overall plan in mind, with things you want to make sure are part of the very foundation ... the purpose behind what you do, when you do it, and why you do it ... the threads that weave everything together. These threads are the general principles you value, mold, shape, and hold onto—the very things that make your family strong.

This booklet focuses on six of these threads to weave into the fabric of your family:

1. Commitment
2. Time Spent Together
3. Communication
4. Appreciation
5. Crisis Management
6. A Faith Foundation

As you read through the very practical strategies outlined in these principles, keep one thing in mind: No one is perfect, except God. He has given you the gift of your children and He will be there to help you through the terrible and the wonderful, the ugly and the beautiful, the terrifying and the exhilarating. Step by step ... little by little ... one day at a time.

Ready to learn more? Read on.

FOCUS ONE: COMMITMENT

Definitions of the Word "Commitment"

Commitment is ...

- reading your son a bedtime story even though you'd rather watch the last quarter of the Monday night football game.
- hugging someone even when you don't feel like it!
- ... in sickness or in health ..."

- “nobody gets fired when you’re family!”
- keeping a promise even when you have a legitimate excuse to break it.

Consider this: “Commitment is one of life’s high risk adventures. For when we commit ourselves to others, we look into a future that is not going to be quite like the present, and we promise that we will be there—truly present ... consistently caring—with people who may not be able to give us all we had expected from them. And the way we will make our commitment work is not by contract, not by force, but by the risky personal gift of trust.”

Ask yourself: What is the level of commitment I am investing in my family? Do I value commitment or am I suffering from “commitment-phobia”?

The Disease of Commitment-Phobia

“Commitment-phobia” can well be defined as the unwillingness to make commitments or to sacrifice oneself for the sake of values or ideals. Almost as contagious as the common cold, commitment-phobia seems to be everywhere. Do you know someone at work who tries to get by with as little as possible? When was the last time you heard someone say, “Don’t do more than you’re asked or you’ll be asked to do more”? You’ve probably noticed how hard it is to get the players on your child’s basketball or hockey team to come to all the practices, yet they still want to play the game.

Which leads right into the definition of commitment-phobia as an unwillingness to bind or obligate oneself to something or someone. What could be the cause of this? It could be all sorts of things; perhaps it’s the fear of rejection, the fear of getting hurt, the fear of giving up one’s “freedom,” or even the fear of cost.

But parenting with purpose *requires* commitment! Consider the following:

- The United States is at the top of the divorce rate charts. Almost one out of 2.8 marriages end up in divorce.
- Up to 72 percent of all married men are not monogamous after two or more years of marriage.
- Up to 65 percent of all married women cheat at some time during marriage. ¹
- Child abuse has risen 500 percent in the last ten years. One in four girls under 12 today will be sexually abused in her lifetime.
- Of the 3.6 million children who began schooling in 1986, 14 percent were children of unmarried parents, 40 percent will live in a broken home before they reach 18, and approximately 25 percent are latchkey children with no one to greet them when they come home from school.
- For each of the 3.6 million babies born annually in the United States, two other children die through abortion.
- Every 30 minutes, approximately 20 teens attempt suicide. ²

So, what are the symptoms and signs of commitment-phobia? What should you watch out for?

- Let’s play house and see if it works out before we tie the knot!”
- “This is forever (as long as we feel the same way about one another)!”
- “How can I love a woman who is double the size she was when I married her?”
- “I couldn’t care less that I’m three months behind in paying child support!”

And if you are diagnosed with commitment-phobia, what hope is there?

- Let’s start with the fact that you aren’t perfect. No matter what commitments we try to fulfill, in some way, shape, or form, we all make mistakes. But don’t lose heart. Even when you make the wrong decision or you blow it along the way, there is hope; U-turns are allowed.

- Have you ever thought about what forgiveness means? It means picking up the broken pieces and putting them back together. It means that you don't need to live under the guilt of breaking promises to others. And it means letting go of the hurt someone else has caused. And the good news is that even though you aren't perfect—you are forgiven!
- In the Christian Bible we find many references to forgiveness and it is in the Bible that we find the perfect example of forgiveness. Jesus Christ took every one of our broken promises and the hurts we have suffered to the cross where He died for your sake and mine. He took the guilt of every offense upon Himself so that we could be offered the gift of forgiveness. He forgives us and helps us forgive others. Forgiveness is crucial for making commitments and honoring them.
- Take some risk, trusting that God will empower you to keep your commitments. In the Bible we find the following verse: *"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength"* (Philippians 4:13).
- And don't forget to seek support from others for help in keeping your promises. Trust that they'll be there for you.

Commitment-Phobia—Preventative Care for Your Children

- Give your children a spiritual foundation. Help them learn that God loves them and forgives them. Admit when you have made a mistake and ask them to forgive you. It is from such a foundation that true and honest commitment to each other grows.
- Keep the promises you make to your children. Good intentions aren't enough!
- Keep the promises you make to others. Remember, your children "want to be like you someday."
- Communicate and show in what you say and do that there are some principles and values worth sacrifice.
- Love them enough to establish boundaries and to reward and discipline them accordingly.
- Give them your time and love; let them know they can depend on you.
- Provide a secure and safe environment in which open and honest communication can take place.

Commitment = Discipline

Every parent faces the problem of discipline. How much? What kind? When? Questions about discipline are part of parenting because disobedience is part of life. When a child does not respond to set rules, there must be some discipline. Sometimes parents choose the easiest, most immediate way of correcting—punishment (e.g., verbal abuse, spankings). Though these actions may correct the child for a moment, unhealthy consequences can come out of such forms of discipline. Verbal abuse and spankings may, for example, subtly program recipients to believe that exerting power is an appropriate way of getting certain results. In turn, your child begins to bully others younger or more fragile. In addition, using these types of discipline often means the consequence for misbehavior is not logically related to the situation.

If responsibility is a process of making choices and accepting the consequences of those choices, then disciplining through logical consequences makes more sense. By letting children experience the consequences of what they did wrong, parents teach children the realities of adult life. (If you're late to work enough times, the consequence is that you won't have a job for very long.) A consequence is called logical when it's logical to the person experiencing it. For example, if your teenager refuses to keep her room clean, a logical consequence might be to hire a cleaning service and take the fee out of your daughter's allowance. A logical consequence is just what it says—logical, a result directly related to the action.

Guidelines in Facilitating Logical Consequences

- Give your child choices such as "either, or" or "when, then."
- Make the consequence fit the misbehavior.
- Once the consequence is chosen and agreed upon, put it into play when the misbehavior occurs, not a few days later.

- Speak to your child about the consequence, not in anger, but in love.
- Once completed, try to “catch your child” doing something right and give him affirmation.

Consider this quote from a parent: “We never said ‘no’ to our children, so they never learned how to say ‘no’ to themselves. Now they care about nothing but themselves in a time that celebrates not caring.”³

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1. *Undressing Infidelity: Why More Wives are Unfaithful*, Diane Shader Smith, Adams Media Corporation, 2005.
 2. Statistics from various sources compiled by the author.
 3. “The Estate Sale,” A White Lion Pictograph production of a James F. Robinson film.

FOCUS TWO: TIME SPENT TOGETHER

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

A survey was taken of more than 1,500 children. They were asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” The vast majority said, “Doing things together!”¹ Children enjoyed doing everything from raking leaves to assembling a new toy as long as they could do these things with their parents and others important to them.

Microwaveable Potatoes and Beautiful Well-Adjusted Children: The Fallacy of Quality Time

Look around. We live in a world of megabytes and microwaves, of automatic tellers and convenience stores, of instant potatoes and instant coverage of events 5,000 miles away. Because of technology we have become a people used to instant everything.

As a result, we seem to think we can have beautiful well-adjusted children with “microwaveable” quality time. But while cooked potatoes might be possible in only a few minutes, a quality relationship with your child takes time.

Though quality time is important, quality time rarely comes without quantity. When you spend a lot of time with your children you’ll discover things called “teachable moments,” spontaneous opportunities for talking about something that can’t be scheduled in advance. It takes time to laugh with your child, to trust enough to share a special secret, to know how the other person feels!

No matter how one looks at it, you cannot build a family on a catch-as-catch-can basis by using whatever time is left over. Many doors only open once. And the scary thing is that if we’re not there, others are willing to entice and seduce our children down the wrong path. Is that what you want?

The problem is not that you need to find more time; we all have the same amount of time. Instead, the problem is that we sometimes fail to use our time wisely, and later we regret it.

Most of us would like to spend more time with our children. But the question is, “How?” As in everything we do, planning is important. The saying is correct: “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

Here are some suggestions for things you can do to change the way you manage time with your child:

- Plan to spend a minimum of 10 minutes a day with each child individually, making sure the child knows the time is for him or her alone.
- Plan a time when you can take each child out for a meal and some conversation!
- Plan not to find more time, but to use the time you have more wisely (e.g., give up an hour of television watching for an hour with your child).

- Plan to pray for your child while waiting in line at the grocery store or in a traffic jam.
- Plan to learn something about your child’s hobby or favorite sport and share with him or her what you have learned (e.g., read a book about soccer).

Eternal Instants

Max Lucado, author of *God Came Near*, writes about things he calls “eternal instants.” He defines eternal instants as “a picture that froze in mid-frame, demanding to be savored ... a moment that reminds you of the treasures surrounding you. Your home. Your peace of mind. Your health. A moment that tenderly rebukes you for spending so much time on preoccupations such as savings accounts, houses, and punctuality. A moment that can bring mist to the manliest of eyes and perspective to the darkest life.”³

We’ve all had such times. Eternal instants. Moments we savor and hold on to. Moments providing tiny glimpses of what heaven must certainly be like. How about the first time you saw your newborn child? You were certain she was the most beautiful child you’d ever seen! Or the night your child needed to sleep in your bed and you stayed awake talking. These eternal instants are important, “because they remind us that everything is okay.”⁴

Think about some of your special eternal instants. Why not begin recording them in a special diary? On those days when you wonder whether or not everything is okay, open your diary and remember that God loves you and is there for you.

Have I Taken the Time to ...

- teach our family history and culture to my child (either through telling stories or even making a video, writing a letter, or sharing a diary)?
- pass along timeless truths to my child (e.g., “Once a family, always a family”)?
- help my child wrestle with the answer to life’s ultimate question, “What happens to me when I die?”

Taking Time to Read to Your Child

Experts tell us that the huge number of DVDs and video games that are played, as well as the massive amount of time we watch television, has caused harm in a number of ways. For example, children read less and are read to less, because parents now have an electronic substitute. They can plop their child down in front of screen instead of taking the time to cozy up to them and read a good book. A survey showed that 90 percent of school-age children think television is more fun than reading and 82 percent prefer video games to reading.”⁵

At the same time, experts tell us that reading is one of the most important ways to build a strong, close relationship between parent and child. Like anything else, a parent who reads to his child does so because he or she makes a conscious decision to set aside some time to do so. You can decide what books are appropriate by the age of your child and what the book is about. If your child is old enough, you can take turns reading to each other. But what’s most important is that you spend the time reading with your child.

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1. “Six Secrets of Strong Families,” *Reader’s Digest*, Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain, November 1987, p. 133.
 2. “Where Kids Spend their Time,” *USA TODAY*, Marcia Staimer, June 14, 1989, ID.
 3. *God Came Near*, Max Lucado, Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987, p. 41.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
 5. “Read Me a Story,” *Los Angeles Times*, Elizabeth Mehren, September 18, 1991, Sec. E, p. 1.

FOCUS THREE: COMMUNICATION

Communication Breakdowns

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” Though written in the 1800s, these words ring true even today. We live in “the best of times.” Never before have people had so many ways of communicating and staying in touch. An executive can be miles away but do his work via computer networks. Text messages can be sent via cell phones and overnight delivery is guaranteed. The ways we can communicate with each other seem endless.

But it is also “the worst of times.” In spite of our many and advanced means of communication, people seem more lonely, isolated, and disconnected than ever before. Some are literally dying from lack of communication. In our busy society, family members can go for days without ever seeing, much less talking to, one another. Neighbors may not know you’ve just lost your son in a car accident. An aged grandmother, retired in Leisure World with thousands of others living just next door, may feel so isolated, so lonely, that she sinks into a deep depression. Now more than ever comes the cry from within our own homes: “Please, somebody with some skin on, ‘reach out and touch me.’ Talk to me.” So what can we do? Consider the following:

To Promote Good Communication

- ***Unless absolutely necessary, avoid giving “busy signals.”*** Busy signals sound something like this: “Wait, son, I may have more time later!” “Don’t bother me, honey; Mommy’s tired now.” “Go ask your mother!” If someone gets busy signals often enough, he or she will stop calling. Overnight delivery might be soon enough for a letter, but it’s not enough to mend a broken spirit. Remember, there are no “busy signals” with God, our Heavenly Father.
- ***Communicate with touch.*** A computer or television doesn’t smile and hug you! It doesn’t put its arm around you and say, “I love you.” It doesn’t snuggle up and make you feel important. It doesn’t listen to you when you talk and it doesn’t pray with you.
- ***Choose your words carefully.*** Words can either build you up or tear you down. There is a verse in the Bible that tells us to “*speak the truth, but speak it in love*” (see Ephesians 4:15). Think about what that means. Advertisers pay millions of dollars to sell products and ideas. In order to make the best use of the 30 seconds they have, they evaluate every word. Like those producing commercials, you also have only a limited amount of time to communicate with your children. Consider your words prayerfully and carefully.
- ***Listen!*** Listen with your heart. Remember, listening is different than hearing. Hearing is simply gathering information to use along the way. But listening is getting inside the other person and understanding what they are thinking and feeling. It means learning to be sensitive to what the other person is feeling and trying to understand what he or she is really saying. Is your daughter angry? Such listening requires practice. If we do not know how to listen, we will not know what to say.
- ***Talk with your child, not at your child.*** Analyze whether or not your messages are “I-messages” or “you-messages.” An example of a you-message might be, “I told you to pick up your room.” Such a message makes the child defensive or even defiant. In contrast, an I-message describes the behavior in a less accusatory way. It conveys more respect for the child and his or her feelings. “I feel really frustrated when your room is so messy that I can’t find a pathway open enough to put away your clean clothes.” Your child knows what needs to be done. By not telling him what to do, you appeal to his intelligence, trusting that he’ll pick up his room.
- ***Give the child psychological permission to talk to you about his or her feelings.*** If your child tells you he or she feels a certain way, don’t proceed to tell her differently. You’ll be sending a dangerous message that feelings are not okay. An effective parent will correctly tag the feeling being expressed, give it a name, and talk openly about it with his or her child.

- ***Build a secure environment for your child, letting him know that despite what he says or feels, you won't turn your back.*** Let your child know that you value him or her unconditionally. Your child needs to know that someone loves him without strings attached—and one of the best things about God is that He lavishes the very same kind of love upon His children.

Have you ever known the frustration of going to a bank to inquire how much you have in your account, and being told, “Sorry the computers are down”? Or you’ve typed an entire document and your computer “locks up,” meaning all you can do is shut it off and lose everything? Children need to know you’re not going to “lock up,” “shut down,” or otherwise abandon them if they say something you don’t like to hear.

Good communication is never easy. It doesn’t just happen. It only occurs and develops as a family works together to make it happen.

Practical Suggestions for Improving Communication

- Make it a point to eat dinner together as often as possible—even in the middle of hectic schedules. One evening, make a recording of your conversation. After you have finished eating, listen to the tape and analyze your conversation. Be honest enough to ask some important questions: Were most of our words negative or positive? Did they build up or tear down? Was there sarcasm? Did our words show love?
- Have family meetings on a regular basis and require that everyone in the family attend. Give each person in the family the opportunity to participate and, when appropriate, help make decisions (within limits, of course). During these meetings, include things such as
 - thanking each other for jobs well done and offering words of encouragement;
 - discussing problems or complaints;
 - reporting on and discussing financial matters and passing out allowances;
 - praying together as a family.
- Consider having a family “Music Night.” Tell each person in the family to pick a favorite CD or tape and to play it for the others. Then talk about what everyone liked or didn’t like about each selection. Let it be a fun time, a time when you practice how to listen to the ideas of others—even if they disagree. One of the important parts of family communication is learning to disagree without being disagreeable.

A Closing Thought

What would happen if tonight, just before you went to bed, you received a telephone call and were told you had just won the sweepstakes? How would you feel when you woke up tomorrow? Now suppose just before going to bed each night, your child hears a word of love and encouragement ... might not he or she wake up each morning with a glad spirit?

FOCUS FOUR: APPRECIATION

We Are Special, but Why?

One way to define self-image is the picture we see of ourselves, either through what we see or what happens around us. Are we shorter or taller than others? Athletic or musical? Grades come easy or I have to work harder? On the other hand, self-esteem can be defined as how we feel about ourselves based on that picture. A healthy self-esteem ... a good feeling about yourself doesn’t start with you; instead, it grows out of who you are as created and loved by God. In the Bible we read, *“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!”* (1 John 3:1). God has chosen you and He has chosen your child—what more wonderful gift than to be created as a unique individual who is loved beyond comprehension! As a parent, you have the privilege of teaching that to your child.

Ten Commandments to Helping Your Children Know Who They Are

1. **Let your child know you love him or her unconditionally.** Children need to know you love them not because of what they do but simply because of who they are. A child loved in this way will say, “Mom and Dad don’t like what I did, but I know they still love me.” Such love takes time.
2. **Love your child with your words and actions.** Affirm him or her by saying, “I love you,” and assure your child with a loving touch on the shoulder.
3. **Remember the commitments you make to your child.** When you promise it, do it. “When I get home, we’ll go bicycling.” “After dinner, we’ll play CANDY LAND.” In the child’s eyes, good intentions are not enough.
4. **Love and respect your child’s mother or father.** Security is built in the child when he or she sees love and respect demonstrated among others he or she values.
5. **Let your child know how really important he or she is in God’s eyes.** Help your children build a sense of self that goes beyond family and friends. Help them see the bigger picture—that they are loved to the greatest extent possible when you consider that God sent His only Son to die so that we can live forgiven for our imperfections.
6. **Let your child know there are boundaries and rules.** One place to start is to teach your children the clear “rights and wrongs” that God has already established as boundaries. Help your child see in the Bible because He wanted to protect us from harm. Since children will respond positively to rules when they know and believe that the rule-giver loves them and that the rules are for their own good, they’ll also figure out that when you establish rules, you are also doing it out of love for them.
7. **Never steal away a child’s feeling of “specialness.”** Every child needs to know that he or she is special in one way or another. “You may not have made the basketball team, but you’re the best cheerleader the team has.”
8. **Do not hurt your child’s sense of self-esteem.** Be quick to encourage and slow to criticize. Watch and catch your child doing something right and affirm him or her for it.
9. **Do not place unrealistic expectations upon your child.** If your child is not a basketball player, don’t try to make him or her into one just because you played basketball in high school. Love your children for who they are as individuals and help them develop the unique talents God has given them.
10. **Apologize when you make a mistake.** Given the smallness of their world, children often believe they are the only ones who make mistakes. Children are, after all, the only ones in the family who have to sit in the chair for a 15-minute time-out or get sent to their room. The full meaning of forgiveness, God’s and yours, becomes more real when children come to realize that you are in need of it also.

“I can live for two months on one good compliment.” MARK TWAIN

Appreciation, or the Lack of It, Is Contagious

Once appreciation is given, there are many tentacles that reach beyond the person being affirmed. When a family member feels appreciated, he or she is going to feel like giving affirmation to other members of the family. Once smiled at, one is more likely to smile at someone else. Once thanked, a child is more likely to return thanks for something received. When one receives a kind word, one is more likely to share a kind word. Affirmation is something you pass on. The lack of it, unfortunately, is also something we pass on in various ways.

Powerful Words and Phrases to Build Courage in Your Children

- I'm so proud of you.
- I can't tell you how much joy you bring me.
- You so very special!
- Super! Awesome! Incredible!
- Let's put this on the refrigerator door for everyone to see.
- You know, I couldn't love you any more than I do.
- Fantastic.
- You're a winner in my book!
- A #1!
- Your smile makes me smile.
- I'm impressed beyond words.
- I love you!
- I'm glad God made you just the way you are!
- I don't know what I'd do without you!
- The world is so much better off because of you.
- You're a great brother (sister)!
- I miss you.
- What a great idea!
- I'm so glad God gave you to us.
- I need you.
- You're unique.
- Bravo! Way to go!
- I thank God every day for you.
- I believe in you.
- You're amazing!
- You did it.
- I like just being around you.
- I'll always be there for you.
- I know you can.
- I wish I had thought of that.

FOCUS FIVE: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

"Out of the Mouths of Babes"

We need only to listen closely to children to understand the meaning of the word "crisis."

"This is my grandmother. She has a mad face because she argues with my mom all the time. They always fight about who's going to do the dishes." – John, a second-grader

"My grandma and grandpa live in Wisconsin so I never see them. They are still mad at my parents because we moved out to California. They still write to us but they think that we are 'airhead Californians' with blond hair and no brains. They also think we are always on a diet ... " – A junior high student

"Dad, don't lay a guilt trip on me. You know everyone's doing it. In your day, maybe it was different, but that's not the way it is today. ... It's like I heard on television the other night, 'A man is a lot of things, but he's not a virgin!'" – Carl, an 18-year-old, in a letter to his father telling his father his 16-year-old girlfriend is pregnant with his baby

"... Every adult I've ever met is a hypocrite. They say you can't watch R-rated movies, but they watch them all the time. Adults say you can't drink, but they drink. They say you can't swear, but they cuss ..." – Karen, 15 years old, in an essay for school

"My mom doesn't like any of my friends. In fact, she hates them" – Molly, 13 years old, in a letter to her friend

Your Manner of Handling Conflict Is What's Important

All of us have gleaned and adopted certain patterns of behavior from our own parents, including the way we handle conflict. Now would be a good time to stop and ask yourself, "Did my parents handle conflict in a healthy way? Do I handle it in the same way? Do I need to change my way of handling conflict?"

The health of a family does not depend on whether or not they have conflict, because every family will have conflict. What we need to think about is how conflicts are handled. Consider the following suggestions for dealing with conflict in a healthy, positive, constructive manner:

- **Identify the conflict.** Too often, fights are so general it's hard to identify the real reason for the conflict. John Dewey said, "A problem well-defined is half-solved." Kara gets yelled at for this and that—for not helping around the house, for being impolite—when what mom is really worried about is the meaning of the condoms found in Kara's purse and the fear that she could be sexually involved with her boyfriend.
- **"There is a time for everything ..."** wrote the wise King Solomon. There is also a right time and place for handling conflict. We do not need to hang out dirty laundry for everyone to see. Neither should we embarrass our children or ourselves by handling conflict in the wrong places at the wrong times.
- **Demonstrate respect.** If we fail to show respect for our children, we shouldn't be surprised if they don't show respect toward us. Family members in the middle of a conflict can still show respect by listening patiently and courteously in an attempt to understand the other person's point of view, even if they disagree.
- **Avoid sabotaging.** Pouting and refusing to talk about the issue at hand is a technique often passed down from generation to generation. Some people can live in the same house and not talk to each other for weeks, because they're sulking about something. Nothing can be resolved if people in conflict refuse to communicate.
- **Identify options.** Any conflict resolution requires that we look at all of the options. Be creative in solving the problem. Too often people consider only two options for resolving conflict: "You win, I lose" or "I win, you lose." Work instead to make it a "win/win" situation for all.
- **Pray together.** Include prayers asking forgiveness for the mistakes you've made. Trust in the forgiveness Jesus has earned for you. Ask Him to help you work toward your conflict's resolution and for help in dealing with your emotions. It's hard to stay angry for very long if you are all praying together.

A Family Reminder

Sit down together as a family and make up your own "Ten Commandments of Fighting Fair." Write them on a large poster board and post them where everyone will see them at least once a day. Here are the commandments of one family:

Our Family's Commandments on Handling Conflict

1. We will pinpoint what we are angry about and ask God to help us deal appropriately with our anger.
2. We will never punish with the silent treatment.
3. We will admit when we're wrong and ask each other for forgiveness.
4. We will lower our voices several decibels when angry.
5. We will avoid exaggerations.
6. We will avoid attacking each other's character.
7. We will verbalize how we're feeling.
8. We will have a lay-away plan for problems if we are too angry to discuss them at the present time.

9. We will all take responsibility for a solution to the problem.

10. We will speak the truth in love.

Helping Children Cope with a Major Crisis—Divorce

- Tell them, over and over, they are loved.
- Assure them you are not divorcing them. (“Daddy left us. Will you leave us also?”)
- Assure them that the divorce is not their fault and that the conflict was between mom and dad!
- Don’t use the children to get back at each other!
- Arrange for them to have as few changes in their lives as possible, such as the school they attend or the home in which they live.
- Don’t take responsibility for trying to tell the children what kind of father or mother they have; children will gauge for themselves with time what they are like.
- Don’t load the children down with all the gruesome details of the divorce.
- Talk and talk some more about hurts and pains the children are feeling over the divorce.
- Let the crisis of divorce be an opportunity to teach valuable lessons on how we are to treat one another. God’s Word is filled with what God desires for His people. Learn from God’s Word how to treat everyone involved with respect and forgiveness.
- Consider turning to God’s Word as a family, reading it together or going to church where you can—on a regular basis—hear His promise to be with you and give you strength to face the crises of today and tomorrow.

FOCUS SIX: A FAITH FOUNDATION

“You must live with people to know their problems; and live with God in order to solve them.” ¹

“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” ST. AUGUSTINE

“As one of the Karamazov brothers says in Dostoevsky’s novel, ‘If there is no God, everything is permitted.’ But even worse, human beings without God are so terribly alone in a big, cold, purposeless, unhallowed world.” ²

Does Religion Harm or Help?

More and more forms of media are talking about religion and its effect on people. From magazines to TV to the Internet, you can find discussions on the power of prayer, whether the Ten Commandments should be posted, or if the Pledge of Allegiance should include the phrase “one nation under God.” Many would have us believe that religion, far from being helpful, actually damages people rather than helps them. Yet, research does not confirm that premise. In fact, research supports that the very opposite is true.

Consider Just a Few Striking Examples:

“Religiousness markedly reduces the incidence of heart attack, arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, and hypertension.” ³

People who attend church live longer! ⁴

Religious people are less likely to abuse alcohol and far less likely to use illicit drugs. Conversely, one study found that 89 percent of alcoholics had lost interest in religion during their teenage years. ⁵

“Marital satisfaction and overall well-being tend to increase with church attendance.” ⁶

Divorce is twice as unlikely for those who attend church regularly. ⁷

Sixty-five percent of the corporate chiefs of the nation’s largest 100 corporations said that they and their families attend church or synagogue regularly. Many of them state that religion is an important part of the reason for their stable marriages and families. The percentage far exceeds that of the overall U.S. population where the average attendance is approximately 40 percent. ⁸

“Though children learn more about right and wrong as they grow older, they become increasingly deceptive. ... Children who were enrolled in Sunday school showed significantly better conduct in the areas of honesty, cooperation, persistence, and inhibition of undesirable behavior.” ⁹

“As the research clearly shows, what is ‘good’ in the moral sense, in the city of God, is also good in the pragmatic sense, in the city of man.” ¹⁰

One common denominator seems to be that families who know Jesus Christ as their Savior, Friend, and the answer to life’s questions, are prepared for the challenges of everyday life. They face what comes with a sense of hope that goes beyond themselves, realizing that they can cling to Christ as a source of strength, comfort and peace ... no matter what happens ... and relying on the promise that an eternity of happiness in His presence waits for them beyond the trials of this life. A faith foundation offers forgiveness, love, hope and peace. Isn’t that what you want for your family?

And Thus Our Prayer Becomes ...

“Day by day.
Day by day.
Oh, dear Lord,
Three things I pray –
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly,
Day by day.”

RICHARD OF CHICHESTER, 1197-1253

Ways to Help Our Children See, Feel and Taste God’s Love

- Ask, “What values do I want my children to have when they become adults?” Then ask, “Do I myself have such values now?”
- Don’t limit your spirituality to just going to church on Sunday or dropping the kids off for Sunday school. Instead, make it part of the total home environment. Too many people reserve God-talk for church, but leave Him out of day-to-day living.
- Show your children that you, too, need God’s forgiveness and grace. Admit mistakes when you make them. Confess them to God and to your family. Together, bask in His forgiveness.
- Pray *for* your child and *with* your child. Talk to God as you would a loving parent. Tell God your cares and concerns. Pray with your child about his or her future. Pray that the child might make a difference in the world.
- Read Bible stories and stories with a Christian message to your child. Read them with excitement and believability. Enjoy family devotional time together.

“We’ll let him decide later for himself what church he wants to attend.”

One of the issues many parents wrestle with is whether or not their children should be “forced” to go to church. “My child can decide later for himself what he wants to do about religion.” Those who say that often also add, “After all, I was forced to go to church when I was a child, and I grew up hating church. I don’t want to do the same thing to my children.”

But let’s think about that for a minute. What if you applied that same reasoning to other areas of your child’s life. “I hated school when I was a child, so I’m going to let my child decide for himself whether or not he wants to go to school.” “My folks made me go to the dentist when I was a child, and so I’m not going to make my child go unless he wants to.”

Though, ultimately, a child will grow up and decide whether or not he or she continues to attend church or go to the dentist, there are some important things to keep in mind that have a huge influence on the decision he or she will make later as an adult.

A child will respond to what she sees being done much more readily than what she merely hears being said. “I want to be just like you, Daddy” is more than some endearing statement; it’s also true. Statistics show that when mom and dad are both actively involved in the church, there is a much greater chance that their children will also, as adults, be involved in the church.

With the philosophy of “we’ll let him decide later” not only does the child lose but the parents lose as well. All parents, consciously or unconsciously, instill in their children values and beliefs about right and wrong. Parents who instill in their children Judaic-Christian values will receive reinforcement from the Christian church. It will help to answer your children’s “whys.” And it offers reasons for why you establish certain boundaries and why the family believes what it does.

The church also helps bring the past, present and future into focus for children. In *Caring & Commitment*, Smedes writes: “A family is really a story, and a child’s memory is a limited edition of his family’s story. Every new generation writes a new chapter. But to write their own chapter, children have to know the chapters that went before theirs.”¹¹ The Scriptures teach us not only what worked in generations past, but also tell us what will work in the present. Directing our attention to the Savior who loves and cares for us and has promised never to leave us, God’s Word offers us strength for the present and hope for the future.

Life is like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle with pieces that vary in configuration. As we go through life, the pieces of that puzzle are slowly put together. But it’s much easier to put these pieces together when we can look at the cover of the puzzle box, revealing what the final picture will look like. We help our children see the final picture when we share with them the promises of God’s Holy Word. As we tell our children about Jesus and His love, we introduce them to the most important Person they will ever meet—the One who lived, died and rose again to earn their eternal salvation.

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1. *Dad, the Family Coach*, Dave Simmons quoting P.T. Forsyth, Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991, p. 73.
 2. *Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner, New York: Summit Books, 1989, pp. 207-208.
 3. “Healthy and the God Factor,” *Christianity Today*, Philip Yancey, October 7, 1991, p. 88.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 8. “Praying for Guidance,” *Forbes*, Barbara Kallen, December 1, 1986, pp. 220-221.
 9. A study done by Hartshorr and May, as given in *Family Foundations*, Paul Meier and Richard Meier, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1989, p. 88.
 10. “Healthy and the God Factor,” *Christianity Today*, Philip Yancey, October 7, 1991, p. 88.
 11. *Caring & Commitment: Learning to Live them Love We Promise*, Lewis B. Smedes, San Francisco: Harper and Row 1989, p. 92.

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