Nurturing Our Children

A Basic Introduction to Raising Children for God
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Course Introduction

Children. Every nation, city, and neighborhood has them. Some nations wish they had more children as they face negative population growth. In other nations it is illegal to have many children. In some nations children make up 30 percent of the population. Children cannot be ignored. Starting out innocent and helpless, they grow to become the influencers in their societies. How children are raised or grow up affects their family’s, their city’s, and their nation’s success.

Nurturing Our Children is a course written for men and women who have children in their lives. Whether you are a parent, an aunt or uncle, a teacher, a friend, or a babysitter, this course will help you more effectively use your moments with children to influence them regarding God and life. For simplicity, the course most often refers to parents and children. If you are not the parent but are still carrying responsibilities for a child, know that this course also is intended for you.

In a mere few hundred pages, all the advice gained over the centuries cannot be adequately represented. This course is designed to be a basic introduction to raising children for God. It is designed to be studied in a small group where discussion and interaction can help interpret the information in a balanced manner. If you are facing particularly difficult situations with a child or children in your life, these principles can help. But if it becomes apparent that professional help is needed, may this course help you discern what kind of help you need to seek. Your fellow students may also be resources for finding the help you need.

The course is supplemented with appendices designed to give more information on specific topics. These appendices are optional, but they are recommended for further study.

Many excellent books have been written to help raise children. Be sure to make yourself familiar with those sources at the end of each lesson.

Each person comes to this course with his or her own presumptions and filters through which to interpret what is written. What one person interprets as strict parenting may seem lenient to another. What one parent interprets as loving may seem too permissive to another person. What may be traditional or accepted behavior in one culture may be unacceptable in another. Again, this is why the course is
designed to be studied in a group setting. Your fellow students can help balance your interpretation of the written material.

**Contributions to Developing Character**

This course is not designed to make you a perfect parent who produces perfect children. Living on this side of heaven makes that goal unreachable. It is designed to help you understand age-level characteristics of a child and how to identify and handle emotions, administer appropriate discipline, and prepare a child to leave the home. Learning and applying these key personal, emotional, relational, and spiritual concepts will lay the foundation for the development of Christian character. As you also learn and apply them, you will model Christian character to your children.

At the same time you will learn how to avoid common pitfalls and correct misconceptions or false beliefs regarding children. An open heart and willingness to examine yourself and your beliefs are critical. If a concept disturbs you, step back and examine what might cause this reaction: Is the issue something you wish you had as a child? Does dealing with this issue open a painful place for you? Does the issue trouble you because you now see you could have been wrong?

This course is for learners, not those who know all the answers. It is meant to encourage you by providing help and insights into child rearing and how to walk in the good paths God has prepared for you. With humility and faith, bring your regrets and painful memories to Jesus and let Him help you work through them.

**Contributions to Acquiring Ministry Skills**

The ministry skills of discipling, lay counseling, leading, and teaching find an important place in the area of child rearing. The very process of child rearing is a form of discipling. As you apply the principles in this course and thereby develop your skills as a parent, you will also develop your skills of discipling anyone, not just your children.

Likewise, child rearing is a form of counseling. Every interaction with your child will call upon your ability to counsel and will contribute to improving your skill in this area, both in the predictable daily times and in the sudden moments when life lessons are caught as well as taught. Learning and applying the principles in this course will prepare you to counsel your children and others knowledgeably in virtual all situations, both planned and unplanned.

The essence of leading is the ability to motivate and guide people to reach specific shared goals. The essence of being a parent is to lead. Developing that potential is a goal of this course as well. You will learn how to guide and motivate your child in the areas of physical, personal, emotional, and spiritual health.
Teaching involves both teaching your child about God, life, and personal growth, as well as teaching these concepts to others. Every moment of teaching at home helps you develop the skill of teaching others.

Being God’s instrument to guide a child to maturity is a wonderful opportunity to develop these skills of discipling, counseling, leading, and teaching that can be used in any ministry situation.

**Contributions to Developing Relationships**

This course encourages you to think about the importance of relationships that you have with the Lord, your spouse, your children, and others. Personal Reflections are designed to encourage you to consider all these relationships in your life and to develop in the areas of caring for, loving, and serving your family and others. Assignments will provide you with opportunities for practical teaching in areas related to developing relationships, such as communication skills, forgiveness, and conflict resolution.

Helping children grow to maturity is rewarding work. They can be terrific, terrible, enriching, draining, encouraging, frustrating, and challenging all in the same day. May your journey through this course be blessed as you seek to understand these little ones whom Jesus cherishes.

**Contributions to the Total Curriculum**

Children are special gifts from God, addressed often in Scripture individually and as part of a family. Parents are entrusted with the joy and responsibility of nurturing their children to personal, emotional, and spiritual maturity. Nurturing children is a skill which needs to be developed. The Entrust curriculum is designed to develop skilled servant-leaders. This course, *Nurturing Our Children*, contributes to that goal by providing you with valuable scriptural principles and practical applications to make you skillful in guiding your children to godly maturity. In the process you will not only develop your own skills in discipling, counseling, leading, and teaching others, but you will prepare your children to be servant-leaders of the next generation.

**Course Outline**

Lesson 1: Biblical Foundations  
Lesson 2: Personality Types and Parenting Styles  
Lesson 3: Loving Relationships  
Lesson 4: Dealing with Emotions  
Lesson 5: An Overview of Human Development Plus Characteristics of Children from Birth to Age Six  
Lesson 6: Characteristics of Children Ages Seven to Twelve  
Lesson 7: Characteristics of Adolescents
Lesson 8: Foundations of Discipline
Lesson 9: Discipline Methods
Lesson 10: Leading Your Child to God
Lesson 11: Challenges of Adolescence
Lesson 12: Releasing Your Child

Appendices
  A. Suggestions for Family Devotions
  B. Suggestions for Sex Education
  C. Child Abuse and Neglect
  D. Divorce and Separation
  E. The Uniqueness of Boys and Girls
  F. Practical Challenges

Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to:

1. State a theology (with biblical references) of children as God sees them.
2. Define the values and principles you will teach to the children in your life.
3. Evaluate your own personality and parenting style and describe your strengths and weaknesses to a fellow student.
4. Recognize in times of interaction with children ways you can put maximum positive energy toward good behavior and effectively correct improper behavior.
5. List specific ways you can express love toward children in ways they can understand.
6. Describe the characteristics of the various age groups and how these characteristics influence your expectations of children and your interaction with them.
7. Explain the difference between goals and desires and formulate appropriate ones relating to raising children.
8. Define proper discipline and distinguish that from negativity or punishment.
9. Write and role-play a gospel presentation for a child.
10. Describe how to help adolescents who are struggling with personal autonomy.
11. Explain what steps you will take to help adolescents in your life become autonomous.
Assignments are meant to be answered fully before class time. Write out your answers as completely as you can. Personal Reflections are meant to lead you in personal evaluation. Write your responses as you might write in your personal journal. Adorations are invitations to a brief time of worship and thanksgiving to the Lord. Whether you put responses on paper depends on what is helpful for you to worship God and draw near to Him.

Children grow up fast. Now get going! There is no time to lose.

Lord, open our eyes, hearts, and minds to know Your heart and how we can represent You to the children in our lives. You created these children and You understand them. Give us insight to begin to know them and love them as You do. Amen.

Icons

Assignment: a question or study that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and are to be recorded in the student’s notebook.

Personal Reflection: an instruction to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits or both as they relate to one’s walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.

Adoration: an instruction to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.
“Do you know about any really good, godly parents who had children who did not turn out well?”

Most parents have asked this question at one time or another hoping to find someone who can identify with their struggles. If we go back through the centuries to the first parent (God) and His children (Adam and Eve), we see children who did not turn out perfectly in spite of their great advantages: perfect environment, perfect genetics, godly heritage, unlimited potential, and unlimited God-given opportunities. If God’s children let Him down, is there hope for anyone’s children?

We learn from God’s relationship with Adam and Eve that He had an unending love and commitment to them in spite of their failure. God is in relationship with His children for life. He does not give up, even when they disappoint Him.

In fact, God designs the whole growing-up process to teach children and their parents more about Himself and themselves. The sleepless nights, interruptions, lack of control, and need for constant wisdom keep most parents looking desperately for help. It is no coincidence that a baby often starts to smile back at his parents by two months of age. Parents desperately need that encouragement after weeks of sleepless nights and exhaustion! Parents who are confident and secure in their parenting may only be in the eye of the hurricane. The storms have yet to hit hard. When the storms do come, dependence on God and His wisdom becomes the necessary key to survival.

God could have created all humans as adults and skipped the child stage. But He did not choose to do that. He chose for each of us to enter the world totally dependent on others for food, shelter, and care. And He chose fallible humans to be the agents to meet those needs. Imperfect children and imperfect parents. It sounds like a formula for disaster, or else a formula that requires close dependence on God for any measure of success. The goal in parenting can never be to produce perfect children. None of us is perfect. But with God’s help we can try to train our children in ways that encourage them to be mature individuals who love God and are a blessing to the people in their lives.
Lesson Outline

Introduction
Old Testament Glimpses of Parents and Children
   The First Family Relationships
   God’s Attitudes toward Children
   Training: A Promise and a Prayer
   Parents’ Responsibility to Teach Their Children
New Testament Glimpses of Parents and Children
Goals for Childhood Training
   Honesty
   Obedience
   Respect
   Self-Control
   Responsibility
   A Developing Conscience
   Proper Attitudes
   A Healthy Attitude toward Self
   A Healthy View of Sexuality
   Ability to Handle Failure
Biblical Case Studies of Parents and Children
Conclusion

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Formulate a biblical theology of children that explains how God views children and how He wants adults to treat them.
2. Describe what God requires parents to do to train their children.
3. List and describe the most important things you are called to teach your children.
4. Evaluate your own childhood and point out positive and negative aspects.
5. Assess the effect your culture had on your childhood and the effect it has on your expectations for your children.

Introduction

God is so creative. He makes people with unending variety. There are cheerful, thoughtful, methodical, spontaneous people—often in the same family. Would it not have been easier for Him to make us all alike so we could have an instruction booklet for proper handling that would work for everyone? Unfortunately, it is not that easy.
No books and no guidelines exist to tell parents how to do things exactly right with their children. What encourages one child makes another child proud and self-centered. Discipline that motivates one child to do well in school makes another child feel discouraged and misunderstood. No formula will guarantee that children will turn out the way we want them to. But there are ways to view children that seem to express God’s heart toward them.

(Define your personal objectives)
What do you hope to learn from this course?

(Analyze your own upbringing)
Write one page describing your childhood and your parents. What was good? What was not good? How did your parents treat you? How did they love you? How did they discipline you? How did you respond to your parents? Were you raised by both your birth parents? How did this affect you? How many brothers and sisters did/do you have? How did/does this affect you?

(Analyze your own upbringing)
When you were growing up, did you ever think about how you were going to do things differently than your parents did? What did you want to change about how you grew up?

If you are a parent of older children, what things do your children want to do differently than you did? If you do not know the answer to this question, ask them.

(Analyze your culture)
Looking back at your childhood, what influence did your culture have on how you were raised? Does your culture encourage displays of affection or not? What were some cultural customs that influenced your family life?
Old Testament Glimpses of Parents and Children

Children are important in the Old Testament. The birth of a child is a fulfilling, joyous event. Moses’ parents risked their lives to protect his existence. Jacob’s grief overwhelmed him when he thought his son Joseph had been killed. Sarah and Hannah grieved until they were able to conceive a child. Children are special and a sign of being blessed.

The First Family Relationships

Our first view of God and His creation of humans is in Genesis 1-3. Adam and Eve were created as adults, not as infants, yet we are allowed to see the relationship God had with Adam and Eve and His instructions to them.

Read Genesis 1-3 and answer the following questions:

1. What did God provide for Adam and Eve?
2. What kind of relationship did God have with Adam and Eve?
3. What choices did Adam and Eve make?
4. What were the consequences of those choices to Adam and Eve, and to God and their relationship with Him?

Adam and Eve walked in close relationship with their Creator and God, yet they chose to listen to other voices that wanted to destroy that relationship. Since then, we each have a daily choice to make about who or what we will listen to and follow. Adam and Eve’s decision cost them, but it also cost God. Disappointment, grief, pain, and sacrifice have characterized God’s actions as Redeemer. The story of the Old Testament and New Testament is one of God who is reaching out to redeem those He created and to bring them back into a healthy relationship with Himself.

God’s Attitudes toward Children

Looking at Scripture is an accurate method to learn what God thinks. Fortunately, the Old Testament talks about children and their value. The verses in the next Assignment give insight into God’s perspective on children.

How does each passage describe God’s attitude toward children?

1. Psalm 127:3-5
2. Psalm 128
Other Old Testament passages confirm that God is intimately involved with children, even before they are born. Before birth He forms each one of us to be a unique person.

What does Psalm 139:13-18 say about God and children

In light of the wonderful truths in Psalm 139 of how God creates us and knows us intimately, spend a few minutes with God in worship and thanksgiving for those truths.

Training: A Promise and a Prayer

Another passage in the Old Testament regarding children is found in Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Does this mean that children who do not follow God were not trained properly?

Bible teachers remind us that the book of Proverbs is a collection of truths about life that are generally true. For example, Proverbs 10:3 says that the Lord does not let the righteous go hungry. Yet we know that many godly people who follow the Lord have suffered hunger, for example, the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. But as a general principle, God provides for the needs of His people. In the same way, as a general rule, those children who have been properly trained will have the tools they need to follow the Lord for a lifetime. Even though some may have periods of doubt or rebellion when they are trying to make their faith their own, many of them will return to the faith of their upbringing.

Though not all children continue in the faith in which they were raised, most of us know individuals who have become more solid and more in love with Jesus than before their wandering. The following true story is one of a child returning to the faith in which she was raised:

My sister made a decision for Christ as a child, as did I and my brother. In fact, she even said at some point that she wanted to be a missionary when she grew up! All of us went to church together on Sundays and prayed at meals. Our parents were the old-fashioned type
and rather strict. My sister, being four years older, got the brunt of it. When she went off to college, she naturally was free of those restraints and lived as the others (not that she ever really talked about that at home).

She had a boyfriend, Mark. She brought him home to meet the family. He was a very nice young man but did not seem "born again." They married, lived a good, moral life and had two wonderful children. They did not go to church or show interest in spiritual things.

Many years later, my sister experienced some health problems, not life-threatening, but serious enough to end up in the hospital for awhile. It scared her enough to get serious with God and to seek Him. The Lord used that to bring her back to Himself. I am sure the Lord was answering the diligent prayers of our parents, especially our mom (our father died earlier). My sister started going to church, and her life changed so much that her husband Mark started attending also. He was a lawyer then, and he started reading books to answer the many questions he had about Christianity.

He was quite open about his search, talking to some of his non-Christian friends about it. The final push came when there was a crisis in his career which propelled him to place his faith in Christ and follow Him. (It is interesting how the Lord uses the problems of life to draw people to Himself as they realize that they can’t make it on their own!) It was not too long after that, that Mark’s kidney cancer was discovered.

Some of us feared what effect that would have on his new faith, but it just strengthened it. He and my sister became involved in a small church-plant, and he later became the pastor. Because he came to Christ later in life, he could really identify with non-Christians, and he had a very effective ministry. My sister also had a wonderful ministry in the church, especially in the area of prayer. They influenced many people’s lives. Mark’s father became a believer and was baptized when he was pretty old. Mark’s eight-year battle with cancer brought him even closer to the Lord. There were times of remission, when it seemed like the Lord had healed him. His faith stayed strong, and his only regret in dying was that he had to leave his family. My sister continues strong in her faith and ministry to others.

In the above lives we see that the years of faithful training, and even more years of prayer, yielded fruit as not only the daughter but her husband came to a strong personal faith in God. The father did not live on earth to see the fruit of his example
and godly leadership, but the mother had the joy of seeing her daughter love the Lord with her whole heart.

Proverbs 22:6 clearly admonishes parents to prepare their children early in life to walk with the Lord throughout their lives. The word “way” or “path” is found in most translations and is usually understood to refer to the way of wisdom found in Proverbs. The New English Bible captures well the point of this verse: “Start a [child] on the right road, and even in old age he will not leave it.” The New Living Translation renders it as “Teach your children to choose the right path.”

Some scholars say that Proverbs 22:6 means that parents should train their children according to their individual God-given tendencies, characteristics, and weaknesses. Whether or not this is the better interpretation, it suggests practical advice to parents. Taking their unique personality and needs into account when training children will better equip them to serve God with their particular gifts for the rest of their life.

For example, if a child is very self-critical, the parent can ensure that the child understands the grace of God and forgiveness in Christ. That understanding will help the child desire to walk with God in the future. Ignoring that tendency toward self-criticism and instead emphasizing constant failure will discourage the child and make him or her feel God would never be accepting.

If children are gifted artistically in crafts and handwork, helping them to see how they can use that gift to glorify God will help them in their relationship with Him (Exod 35:30-36:1). Trying to make them into teachers or missionaries might ignore those God-given gifts and make demands that require teaching skills they do not have. This could leave them frustrated and make them feel they cannot serve God acceptably. Understanding individual weaknesses and strengths and training children in light of those will help them develop a healthy relationship with God.

Parents’ Responsibility to Teach Their Children

Knowing the truth about God is vital to having a healthy relationship with Him. He created us and knows how we will function best. He has our best interests in mind and wants us to know the good paths He has designed for us (Eph 2:8-10), paths that keep us in close relationship with Him. Listening to God’s instruction is the best thing
we can do for ourselves and our relationship with Him. That is why a key command in the Old Testament was given by God to Moses in Deuteronomy 6:1-9. God desires that each generation of parents accurately pass on to their children a deep, complete love for God:

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it, so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. O Israel, you should listen and be careful to do it, that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Considering Deuteronomy 6:1-9 answer the following questions:

1. What is the benefit of listening to and following these commands?

2. What should be happening between parents and children according to these verses?

3. What are some modern-day situations in which we can teach our children?

God obviously loved the people of Israel and was watching their daily lives. He observed the relationships between parents and children. Therefore, He could make practical recommendations as to how and when parents could teach their children how to have success in life and to have God’s blessing. How tender of God to make this so clear and practical. More important than the commands themselves, God wants His children to love Him in response to His loving them.
When the Old Testament speaks of children, it reveals an attitude that cherishes them, not one that resents them. The message in the Old Testament is clear: God loves His children and wants them to follow Him and love Him in response to His love for them. He wants a relationship that is a blessing to Him and to His children.

New Testament Glimpses of Parents and Children

Adam and Eve may have been created as adults, but Jesus came to earth as a dependent, vulnerable infant. He grew up with fallible parents. Luke 2 records the birth and early days in the life of Jesus. We also get a glimpse of His childhood in Luke 2:41-52.

1. What do you learn about Jesus from Luke 2:41-52?
2. What effect did Jesus have on His parents and other adults around Him?
3. How did Jesus grow, and why is that significant?

We can learn from Jesus’ early life on earth. We can also learn more about children by observing how Jesus treated them. Jesus was extremely busy while on earth. He had the demands of the sick and dying as well as the need to train the disciples and teach the multitudes. Yet Jesus was intentional in His interactions with children.

Please explain what each passage tells you about Jesus’ attitude toward children.

1. Matthew 18:1-14
2. Mark 10:13-16

As a very busy adult, Jesus took time during His demanding ministry to pay attention to children. The Father Himself listens to those angels who bring Him news about His children.

Not many specific commands for parents or children are found in the New Testament. We can assume that the guidelines set down in the Old Testament regarding children still apply in the New Testament. Here are a few verses from the New Testament specifically about children.
What do you learn about parents and children in each of the following passages:

1. Ephesians 6:1-4
2. Colossians 3:20-21

Children have a responsibility to obey their parents because usually that is best for themselves and their parents. But parents have the difficult task of listening to and understanding their children so that their expectations are reasonable. The later lessons of this course will deal with reasonable expectations for children, plus training and discipline methods that are based on a listening ear and a proper understanding of each individual child.

Goals for Childhood Training

As Christian parents, teachers, guardians or grandparents, your responsibility is to train children to be the people God wants them to be, to inculcate Christian values in them, and to help them pursue the path of wisdom. Children do not become wise or mature overnight. They set forth on the path of wisdom taking one step at a time. They have much to learn before they will reach maturity. Yet parents should keep that ultimate goal in mind: that the child grows up to become a mature man or woman in Christ.

Along the way are other specific goals on which to concentrate at each age level. God has given us the Ten Commandments and moral guidelines in the Gospels and apostles’ letters. From these sources this section will highlight the following training goals for children: (1) honesty, (2) obedience, (3) respect, (4) self-control, (5) responsibility, (6) a developing conscience, (7) proper attitudes, (8) a healthy attitude toward self, (9) a healthy view of sexuality, and (10) an ability to handle failure.

This list is not exhaustive. You may think of several other goals that you believe to be equally important. When you set goals for your child, do not expect every child to respond in the same way. Remember that each child is unique, with his or her own personality, gifts, and inner timetable for learning. What worked well with your first child may not work with your second, whose temperament is different.

Honesty

Honesty is the basis of society and individual existence. Honesty was a foundational issue in the Garden of Eden and God’s communication with Adam and Eve. Satan tried to convince Eve that God was not being honest with them (Gen 3:1-6). Eve believed this lie, and the consequences continue to this day.

The Ten Commandments include the need to speak the truth (Exod 20:16). Proverbs are full of the need for honesty. God requires honesty in worshipping Him,
not merely outward show (Jn 4:23-24). Truth came in Jesus Christ (Jn 1:14, 17), and it is the truth that sets us free in Christ (Jn 8:32). The Helper, the Holy Spirit, is called the Spirit of truth by Jesus (Jn 14:16-17).

In the early church, God took swift action to expose the dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). In Paul’s letters to the churches in the New Testament, believers are told to be truthful to each other. Above all, we are told to be honest with ourselves. David asks God, who knows everything, to show him truth about himself (Ps 139:1, 23-24).

What does each of the following verses teach about honesty?

1. Proverbs 11:1
2. Proverbs 12:19
3. Proverbs 12:22
4. Isaiah 29:13 (Mt 15:8-9)
5. Ephesians 4:14-15
6. Colossians 3:9

Honesty is a foundational issue in life and relationships. It is vital to model and teach honesty to children. We are to be honest in reporting our actions, perceptions, feelings, as well as honest about events we witness. Honesty should be encouraged and rewarded as you train your children. Willingness to be honest and uphold the truth is essential to the other values you want to teach your children.

**Obedience**

Interestingly, one of the first words little children learn is no. You may laugh at their obvious declaration of independence, but you must begin early to direct their natural tendency to defy parental authority. Children who are allowed, without correction, to raise their voices in defiance of their parents or to disobey their commands will find it difficult to respect, obey, or submit to authority.

Aim to teach children to obey parental authority with a willing spirit. Wholehearted obedience should be emphasized when they are still quite small, between ages two and four. Emphasize that God is pleased when children obey their parents and that the rules which you set in your home are for the child’s well-being and safety. As the child grows, this teaching can be reinforced as, together with your child, you observe real life examples of the benefits of obedience.

Obedience brings blessing to the one who obeys. You can emphasize this when you teach a child to obey. Obeying the command to be honest saves a person from the
unpleasant consequences of lying. Of course, the rewards are not always immediate; sometimes God will not reward us until we see Him in heaven. But He sees the little acts we do and hears the things we say to please Him, and His heart delights in our obedience.

You can also explain to a child that mother and father must obey God because He is our heavenly Father, and He instructs us how we must live to please and honor Him. Children need to hear often that their parents are accountable to God, that they desire to obey Him. When parents emphasize this to their children, they are beginning to prepare them for ultimate accountability to God. Children’s obedience may be to please you, but stress that when they obey, they are also pleasing their heavenly Father.

Respect

A major step in children’s moral development is learning to respect themselves and others. Parental authority is the very first “God-ordained” authority in their young lives. Children first learn to respect parents. Later, they will learn to respect teachers, bosses, and then ultimately their heavenly Father.

Children should be taught to honor their parents and to speak to them and others respectfully, without whining or screaming to get attention. They should be taught from an early age to have reverence and respect for the Lord and for the Bible. One of the ways a child learns to reverence and honor God is by honoring his or her mother and father (Exod 20:12; Eph 6:2).

It is important to teach respect without instilling fear. The word “fear” has at least two meanings in Scripture. In some contexts fear refers to a form of anxiety. At other times it is used in a positive way to mean respect or reverential trust. Christians are to have a reverential trust in God, but they should never be afraid of the Lord. Likewise, children should trust and respect their parents, but they should not be afraid of them.

They need to respect their parents, but respect must be earned; it cannot be won through sheer force. Showing respect does not mean that a child should not be allowed to express a contrary opinion or to share his or her own ideas. Parents should give children opportunities to express their feelings, but they should help them to do it in an acceptable form. Encourage them to talk calmly about what is bothering them and to use a respectful tone of voice, rather than yelling or venting their anger inappropriately.3

Children’s concept of God is often based on their concept of their parents. Therefore, Christian parents need to reflect both authority and unconditional love, so that they might best represent the divine nature of God. Children will learn of God’s tender mercies and forgiveness and grace through their parents. But our heavenly Father is also a God of divine authority. To represent God as love, without authority,
is to misrepresent God. To represent God as an authoritarian being without love, compassion, and forgiveness is also a distortion.

Reflect on your own childhood training in the area of respect. Did your parents balance love and authority? What effect did the culture you grew up in have on the expectations for respect? How are you teaching your own children to have respect? What, if anything, would you like to change in your training?

An attitude of respect also extends to other areas of life, as a child learns to respect the rights and possessions of others. In simple ways small children can begin to learn about the rights of others. For example, they learn that others are important too, when their parents encourage them to wait their turn to speak, rather than interrupting others whenever they feel like talking.

Parental example is probably the greatest teacher of respect. You need to ask yourselves as parents, do I interrupt, or do I wait my turn? Unfortunately, many adults are still trying to learn this lesson. Similarly, children learn that they are not allowed to deliberately break or abuse the possessions of others, and that they are expected to show respect for others by respecting their belongings.

Self-Control

Early childhood is characterized by self-centeredness. Infants know only their own needs, and they can be very demanding if these are not met. Only gradually do they begin to gain a measure of self-control; for example, they can wait a few minutes for their food when it is being prepared. They learn gradually to control their outbursts of anger. Some studies indicate that the ability to delay gratification is a bigger indicator of success in life than IQ or test scores.

Self-control is an important goal of training at every stage of growth. While emotions are God-given and an important part of the human personality, they can cause many problems in life if they are not controlled. There is a balance between stifling or repressing emotions and letting them totally control us. Positive expressions of emotion, such as laughter, hugs, kisses, and crying when one is hurt, are normal. Emotions that can lead to destructive or aggressive behavior must be recognized, but they need to be properly expressed and controlled.

Children should gradually learn to control their tempers and to ask for things politely, rather than grabbing what they want. They should learn that throwing tantrums will not accomplish their purposes. How should a tantrum be handled? The best method is to ignore a tantrum, if possible, or to remove the child to a room where he or she can be alone to scream until the tantrum is over.
If Mary sees that having a tantrum eventually gets her what she wants, she will learn to scream louder and longer next time. For some children, even a parent’s negative response to a tantrum, such as spanking or scolding, rewards them with something they desperately want—attention. The best way to squelch a child’s tantrums is to pay no attention to them. This can be hard for parents, particularly when a child has a tantrum in public. Children will soon stop these emotional displays when they see that they gain nothing from them.

Responsibility

Children at age three or four should begin to have a few tasks to do at home to teach them responsibility: hanging up their coats when they come in, putting their shoes away, and helping to put their toys away before bedtime. Having tasks to do makes them feel that they are contributing to the family. They gain the satisfaction of doing their tasks regularly. At the same time they learn what it means to be faithful. This is another area where children often learn by example. They may learn from a parent’s faithfulness to a dull or tedious activity that God desires us to be faithful in the smallest tasks. As the child grows, responsibilities can be increased, preparing the child for the responsibilities of adulthood.

1. Review with your spouse the list of your child’s responsibilities at home.
2. If you do not have such a plan, set one up.
3. Discuss whether the responsibility is appropriate for the age and abilities of the child.
4. Draw up a simple checklist of the child’s jobs at home. You may want to reward the child with stars or stickers for faithful performance.

A Developing Conscience

A child generally develops a sense of right and wrong during the first five years of life. The values that you have in your home will be the tools that God uses to develop the conscience of your children. As parents you are the primary influences on their developing conscience. What standard are you writing on your child’s heart? Are you teaching him or her early to have reverence and respect for God and His Word and to desire to do what pleases God? These are some of the most important things you can teach your child.
When parents are good models and place a positive emphasis on encouraging their children to do right, children usually develop a healthy sense of right and wrong. They learn to feel a sense of guilt when they break the standard that has been set for them and to feel pleasure and a sense of contentment when they make a right choice. In order for their consciences to develop, they should be attracted to obedience, instead of concluding that obeying is simply a way to avoid punishment.

A child can be taught that an objective standard of right and wrong is in the Bible, a standard that was given by God. Small children can be taught that God is with them wherever they are, that He protects them whatever they are doing, and that they can talk to Him at any time. They can learn to desire to please God by their behavior, as you emphasize that God is pleased when they choose to do what is right.

As they grow older, you can encourage them to do what their mothers and fathers want them to do, even when mother and father are not there. Eventually, they must learn to be accountable to their own inner sense of right and wrong and to desire to please God because they love Him.

Proper Attitudes

Controlling a child’s behavior is only one aspect of rearing children. On a deeper level, children also need to develop proper attitudes: attitudes toward God, toward others, and toward themselves. It is possible for them to obey or to conform outwardly to your parental standard, but to do it sullenly or resentfully, and to fail to internalize the values you want to teach them. Such children often obey merely to avoid punishment. Later, when they are out of their parents’ reach, they may not obey at all. Even worse, they may reject their parents’ values when they are old enough to choose their own way.

Thus, it is important for parents to encourage small children to develop proper attitudes. Positive methods, such as praise, appreciation, and sometimes even a small reward, can convey to the child that the path of obedience is the best path to choose, a path that leads to joy.

Parents have to be discerning to know what attitude a child has, especially with a child who does not express feelings openly. Do you sense that your children are obeying grudgingly at times? Encourage them to talk about how they feel, and then discuss their feelings without belittling them. Do not lecture but try to be sure that they are not harboring resentment or negative feelings when they have been forced to obey.

In teaching, emphasize verses that show that God is pleased when they give cheerfully, obey willingly, and do things that are right without grumbling and complaining. Encourage them to think about how their actions affect others. It may help to use hypothetical situations to help them understand how another child might
feel in a similar situation. For example, you might ask, “How do you think Sarah will feel if you say you never want to play with her again?” Make use of “what if” questions to help them feel what the other child may be feeling and to gain empathy for others. For example, “How would you feel if you went to John’s house and he would not share his toys with you?”

A Healthy Attitude toward Self

One of the areas often overlooked in training is helping a child to develop a proper self-concept. We all have learned to think of ourselves in certain ways. Sometimes the image is good; sometimes it is bad. Our self-concept is shaped early in life and is often hard to change later. Much of our behavior, even as adults, is guided by our self-esteem. The same is true for children. When children have a poor self-image or think of themselves as “bad,” they will often act that way. Conversely, when they think of themselves as “good,” they often try to live up to that image or reputation.

One of the ways children can develop a poor self-concept is when they learn early in life that they can never please their parents or that their parents’ love for them is dependent on their obedience. Children soon discover that other people are constantly evaluating their performance, watching to see how they perform in sports, school, music, or art. When a child’s parents and others are genuinely pleased with him or her and communicate this, the child generally develops a healthy self-esteem. It is important to help your child build a good and proper sense of self-worth. God places an extremely high value on your children and loves them unconditionally in spite of their failures. You want them to have God’s unconditional love as well.

Think about your relationship with your children. Are you more prone to praise or criticize them? Do you add a “but” each time you praise? For example: “You colored very nicely, but you went out of the lines over here.” Write down what is worthy of praise in each of your children. Determine to say something encouraging and uplifting to each of your children each day for a week.

A Healthy View of Sexuality

In a warm and loving family, parents are laying the foundation for children to have a healthy view of human sexuality, to be comfortable with their own sexual nature. With the prevalence of sexual information and messages in the media and culture, it is important that parents be the ones to communicate godly perspectives
Lesson 1

concerning sexuality. Certain attitudes and simple explanations can be given to even small children to lay a firm and godly basis for sexual understanding later.

When children ask questions about sex, parents should treat these questions as casually as they do questions on any other subject. Children are curious about everything, and they think in literal, concrete terms. Give them a clear, matter-of-fact answer, but do not tell them more than they really want to know. One mother launched into a detailed explanation of reproduction when her daughter asked, “Where do I come from, Mommy?” only to find out that the child simply wanted to know where she was born!

To explain sexual reproduction plainly to small children, you can introduce them to the world of plants, animals, and insects. Explain the story of creation—how God created everything as male and female, plants and animals and insects, and how everything He made was good. God fashioned every living creature with seeds inside it to reproduce itself: apples from apple seeds, chickens from eggs, kittens from the mother cat.

Small children will inevitably ask, “Where do babies come from?” It is best to answer simply and truthfully, saying something like, “A baby grows in a special place inside the mother.” You can explain that a baby grows from a tiny seed that is inside the mother. At age three or four you need not try to present a detailed explanation of sexual intercourse to a child.5 Explain that babies grow inside mothers, where they are nurtured and protected until it is time for them to be born. If you have the opportunity, let your children be present when a family pet or farm animal gives birth. Explain the miracle of birth as being “God-designed.” Always bring God’s plan into your teaching.

Young children often display an awareness of and interest in the physical differences between boys and girls. They may sometimes play “doctor” or “nurse” in order to express their natural curiosity about the opposite sex. Do not make a bigger issue of this interest in physical differences than is necessary. That could convey to the child that the human body is in some way nasty or dirty, laying the foundation for sexual inhibitions. You should, however, explain clearly to your children that only doctors or parents are allowed to see them in the nude and that no one should touch them in their private parts, the parts of their bodies covered by their bathing suits.

To summarize: your most important asset in teaching children about sex, love, and marriage is having a healthy attitude toward these subjects yourself. This begins by viewing your sexual nature as a God-given gift which, when expressed within the bonds of marriage, is good. It is meant to foster intimacy and bring great pleasure to both husband and wife.

Some Christians are uncomfortable when it comes to sexual training. The facts are, however, that your children will hear about sex from someone. Is it not better to
hear it from you under controlled conditions, with the important emphasis on moral principles included, than to hear it from some other source? Human sexuality is a part of life, an aspect of moral training which should be undertaken by parents. Appendix B is included to help parents discuss this subject with their children.

Reflect on your home life as a child. How do you think your attitudes toward sexuality were influenced by your home training? How does your culture influence the way you think about sexual matters? What attitudes are you communicating to your children? How have you handled the subject of sexuality?

**Ability to Handle Failure**

Children will see you fail, and you cannot expect them not to fail. Fortunately, God has made provision for human failure, and He loves us in spite of our failures. In Hebrews 5:1-2 we are reminded that the high priests that God chose to represent Him to His people were not perfect. They were able to deal gently with the ignorant and misguided because they also had weaknesses. Children will fail. But they need to know that there is forgiveness in Christ. In fact, if we pretend that we have never failed, we are only fooling ourselves. We are promised (1 Jn 1:9) that if we admit our sin and failure and bring it to God, He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us. Then we can move beyond the failure and continue our journey in the good paths God has prepared for us.

A child who can try again after a failure is a child who will not be immobilized by fear of failure. In fact, Peter tells us that we should be pursuing good qualities of the divine nature like diligence, faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. If we do not have evidence of these characteristics, we are told it is because we have forgotten our purification from our sins (2 Pet 1:3-11). God has provided a remedy for our failure. To be all He wants us to be, we need to take His provision and then walk in His strength. As children learn this, they can live life to the fullest without being burdened with past shortcomings. While Satan would try to hinder us with reminders of past failure, God means for us to live in His strength and forgiveness.

These values are just a few of the things you should teach your children. Many passages of Scripture discuss these and other important values and character qualities. In fact, a simple Bible study for family devotions is to take a short passage of Scripture and to ask: What does this teach me about God? What does this teach me about how I should live? There is real freedom in knowing and walking in the righteous path that God has laid out for us.
Biblical Case Studies of Parents and Children

Assignment 5 looked at Jesus’ early years. Here are other biblical glimpses of parents or adults interacting with, or on behalf of, their children. Choose two out of the four passages in Assignment 10 to study and answer the questions.

A. Hannah and Samuel: 1 Samuel 1-3
   1. What kind of a relationship with God did Hannah have?
   2. What was her deepest desire?
   3. What did Hannah do after Samuel was born?
   4. How did Hannah influence Samuel when he was in the household of Eli, an environment that had negative influences? How did God provide?
   5. Describe Samuel’s relationship with God.

B. Moses and his mother: Exodus 1-2
   1. What difficult situation did Moses’ parents face?
   2. How did they deal with it? What risks were involved?
   3. What happened to Moses? How did God provide?
   4. What happened to Moses’ mother?

C. Timothy and his mother: Acts 16:1; 2 Timothy 1:1-7; 3:14-15
   1. What heritage did Timothy’s mother give him?
   2. How did Timothy’s mother influence his faith?

D. A son and wisdom: Proverbs 6:20-29; 10:1
   1. What are the warnings here?
   2. Why should the son listen?
   3. What will happen if the son does not listen?
   4. What blessing is there if the son does listen?

Conclusion

This first lesson has briefly looked at Scripture relating to children and the values parents and teachers should pass on. The following lessons will give more specifics on how to carry this out. God is the model of a loving parent reaching out to have a close relationship with us.
God is worthy of our worship and deserves our praise for allowing us to have a relationship with Him. Let us learn from Him to be effective influences in children’s lives so that we can join with the psalmist:

Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised,
And His greatness is unsearchable.

**One generation shall praise Your works to another,**
And shall declare Your mighty acts (Ps 145:3-4, emphasis added).

Spend time now praising God for His unsearchable greatness and good works toward you.
ENDNOTES

1 “Start” is a good understanding of the Hebrew word because it is usually used in the Old Testament of dedication/initiation (see, e.g., Deut 20:5; 1 Kgs 8:63; 2 Chr 7:5).

2 See Appendix A for helpful information on leading children in the way of the Lord.

3 The three preceding paragraphs are based on Bruce Narramore, Help! I’m a Parent (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 46-48.


5 Narramore, 415.