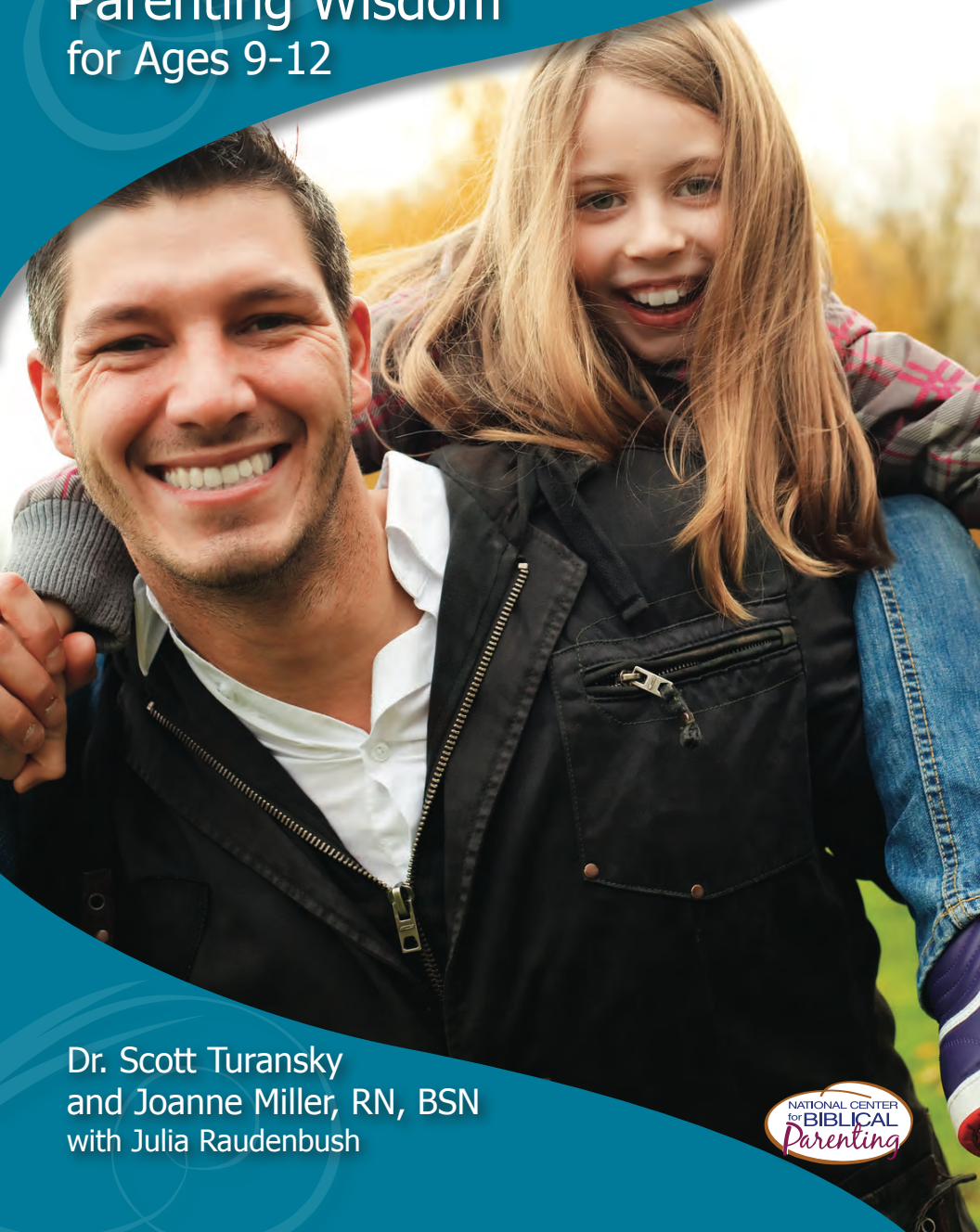


# Cultivating *Responsibility*

Parenting Wisdom  
for Ages 9-12



Dr. Scott Turansky  
and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN  
with Julia Raudenbush



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Published by the National Center for Biblical Parenting

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To obtain a complete resource list or have Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller present their material live, you may contact the National Center for Biblical Parenting, 76 Hopatcong Drive, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648-4136 (609) 771-8002 or visit the website at: [biblicalparenting.info](http://biblicalparenting.info)

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## Introduction

Racquel could see the raindrops starting to fall as she watched out her living room window. Michael, her ten-year-old son, was just stepping onto the bus. Normally she would be out there giving him a final hug as he left for the day, but this morning as he walked out of the house he said, “Mom, I love you but it feels weird when you hug me at the bus stop. I can go by myself.”

Racquel was torn. On the one hand, she so enjoyed those last moments as her son headed off for the day. On the other hand, she knew that this was a sign that her son was growing up and wanting more independence. He’d really matured over the last couple of years, doing better with his schoolwork and finally taking a shower without continual prodding.

But Racquel knew she still had some important work to do in Michael’s life. He had a problem with blaming his weaknesses and mistakes on others. It was hard for him to take responsibility for himself. She needed some new ideas to help her son in this very important area of his growth.

As Michael stepped onto the bus, he turned around and waved. Racquel waved back and, with tears in her eyes, thanked the Lord for the growth she saw in her son.

Just like Racquel, parents of children in the preteen years see a mixture of maturity and weakness. Kids during



these years are developing responsibility in several areas of their lives. Some of those come more easily than others. Parents do a lot to help preadolescent children develop the necessary life skills to be successful in the teen years and beyond. A major part of that maturity process is the development of responsibility.

Responsibility provides that uncomfortable feeling that something needs to be done. A problem needs solving. A task needs finishing. A relationship needs care. In short, responsibility is that inner sense of obligation to take action. Some kids move more quickly in their development than others, but there's a way to parent them that maximizes this growth. The reality is that some children get stuck in one or more areas and need more care and guidance in order to move forward. The next chapters will give you practical ideas of how to parent the older elementary child in a way that builds internal motivation and fosters a sense of responsibility.

When Jesus was twelve years old, he was already taking responsibility for himself. We only have that one short story in Luke 2:41-49, but when his parents found him, he made a statement that demonstrated his personal responsibility. He said, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Then in the next verses, the Bible says, "But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

The later elementary years of a child's life are a time of strategic growth. Just like Jesus, they can grow in four areas: wisdom (the ability to handle life with skill), stature (healthy physical growth), favor with God (spiritually) and men (relationships with others).

Responsibility reveals itself in many areas. It's not just about turning homework in or cleaning up the counter after eating a snack, although those are two important areas of responsibility. A more complete picture of maturity reveals an ability to handle emotions, conflict, time, friends, and speech. Maturity is revealed in personal cleanliness, following instructions with a good attitude, and looking for ways to add to family life. Children often need help with organization, managing time, and admitting when they are wrong.

As you read this book, you'll discover what's appropriate for children during the ages of nine to twelve and you'll learn what you should be able to expect. Each child is unique, and the path toward maturity is always a bit different. You'll find ways to measure your child's present character levels and help chart a course to move forward.

We've identified twelve tasks of responsibility for older elementary age children. You might want to use chapter 7 as a report card. It's fun to show the list to kids and ask them to identify two areas in which they are doing well and two that need improvement. It's interesting to hear what young people say. It's often a lead in to an important conversation of ways that you can coach them forward in their maturity.

You may find yourself frustrated at times when it seems that your child doesn't want to grow up in a particular area. The reality is that sometimes kids need firmness and direction to move from where they are to where they need to be. In the following chapters you'll discover new ideas and suggestions that will help you as you contribute to your child's development.

The growth process is a partnership between you and

your child. It may seem sometimes as if you're both on opposite sides of a rope pulling in different directions, but you'll want to look for ways to be on the same side, teammates in raising a child toward maturity. It's important to realize that many times children won't change the way they live until parents change the way they parent. Just like Racquel, you'll see encouraging signs of growth while at the same time recognize need for improvement in your child's life. It's our goal to provide you with tools and strategies to propel you forward in your work with your child.



## What to Expect from Your 9-12 Year Old

**K**nowing what to expect from your young person will help you plan and develop strategies as you move forward. Every child is unique. Some are further along in their developmental journey than others. Furthermore, most kids are advanced in some areas but delayed in others. Knowing what's normal may be helpful, but don't use normal as an excuse for not developing maturity. Some parents rationalize foolishness in children by saying something such as, "That's just the way these kids are nowadays." That kind of thinking justifies immaturity and prevents initiative by parents to challenge their children to do what's right.

The goal is not simply to give your child a happy childhood. Parents who fall into that trap often end up with selfish children who develop a demanding attitude about life. Rather, the goal is to build maturity and responsibility in all areas of development. The following paragraphs will give you some suggestions of developmental characteristics of this age group, but pick and choose from this list to maximize your own parenting.

## **Physical Growth**

Children become stronger and develop greater coordination during the preadolescent years, increasing their potential on sports teams, doing chores, and developing confidence in their own physical ability. Their small muscle coordination also improves, providing them with a greater ability to take on a hobby involving fine detail and skill. High energy levels tend to fuel a desire to do more and be heavily involved in activities.

Rapid physical growth, especially at the end of this developmental stage, can create a lack of confidence and kids can become more self-conscious. One of the tasks of this stage is to help children accept their own bodies. It's also helpful to encourage children to become adventuresome and try new things. New experiences and hands-on learning are particularly helpful during these years.

## **Social Development**

Girls tend to mature in general about one to two years faster than boys do, and some begin menstruation during these years. Most boys and girls do better in same-gender groups. Kids need same and opposite sex gender role models as they are learning what it means in practical terms to be a man or a woman, a husband or wife, a dad or a mom. Having strong gender role models outside the home is also helpful for any child, but particularly necessary in single parent homes.

Peer interaction is important and many young people rely on their peers for affirmation and acceptance. Their reasoning skills provide them with heightened abilities to negotiate, compromise, and communicate with others.

Kids love to be part of a team, club, or group. They enjoy a sense of belonging and may begin pulling away from parents and questioning authority in general in favor of their peers. Many parents report that they have close relationships with their young people during this developmental stage, but that relationship takes work, especially when the busyness that comes with this age range often requires that tasks get completed and children shuttled to various activities to maintain their busy calendars.

Sometimes children need a bit of firmness to help them think of others instead of themselves, but this age has all the ingredients necessary for children to learn to give, cooperate, and find meaning in their contribution to life situations. Providing children with opportunities to lead increases a sense of meaning and confidence. That leadership involves defining a problem, identifying a solution, working with others to make it happen, and negotiating with, or submitting to, other leaders. Much of a preteen's life can involve leadership development when parents transfer responsibility to the child for addressing life's challenges instead of simply solving problems for them.

## **Mental Growth**

The ability to think logically and abstractly provides children with new skills of reasoning, negotiating, and imagination. Discipline strategies with these kids then can involve more dialogue. However, some children become quite adept at arguing or badgering and need specific limits when their dialogue crosses socially appropriate lines. Communication skills increase, as does vocabulary, and children require teaching to avoid inappropriate

words and to learn ways that non-verbal communication contains hidden but potent messages. Teaching children about honoring communication instead of reacting out of emotion is important.

Kids today tend to feel the pressure of academic achievement, but excelling at school requires more than just mastery of content. Young people must learn how to study, organize their work, and respond well to different leadership styles of their teachers. Children need parental guidance and direction to develop the skills necessary for academic success. Involving children in the process by requiring that they help develop solutions to problems is often empowering for them.

Technology plays a large part in your child's life. Kids learn quickly how to maneuver themselves in the technological world and can often master the new remote control or Internet more efficiently than their parents. Although technology allows kids to connect to others quickly, their face-to-face interpersonal skills often lag and need some training.

## **Emotional Growth**

It's important to help children at this age develop strategies for addressing intense emotions of sadness, anger, and anxiety. Transferring responsibility to the child as part of the solution can empower them to move forward. Many children need a combination of firmness, teaching, and practice to work their plan into their daily lives. Kids must learn that the emotion itself isn't wrong, but acting out of that emotion can be hurtful.

Some children have a higher level of confidence than

others at this stage. All kids need affirmation and feedback that helps them know not only what to do, but also what to think. Many kids feed their emotions with negative thinking. Psalm 19:14 reminds us that the things said in the heart are just as important as those that are spoken. "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." Many times the words of parents become the script that children say in their own hearts, so it's important to manage parental speech, even when you are frustrated or angry.

## **Spiritual Growth**

As young people move through the preteen years, they're more able to gain a vision for a personal relationship with God instead of relying solely on their parents' faith. These children can learn to read their Bibles and apply God's Word to their lives. They can pray and open up regular dialogue with God. They can understand sin, forgiveness, and grace applied to their daily lives. Of course, they need help to exercise their faith and they're watching their parents and other leaders to see their example. Spiritual training of children at this age can produce huge life skills and much of the spiritual development impacts other areas of life such as decision-making, leadership, and emotional control.

As children learn spiritual truth, they can offer lessons that encourage parents in their own walks with God. Expecting God to speak to and through your child can increase confidence in children's spiritual awareness, recognizing that they too can be conduits of God's grace in the lives of



others. Kids learn that life is not just about enjoyment, but also about meaning and contributing to others' lives.

Children grow in their maturity and responsibility as parents carefully raise the bar of expectation and transfer responsibility more and more to the child. Too much too quickly can cause frustration, but lowering the bar for the sake of peace or a child's pleasure can delay their development. A careful balance is in order requiring prayer, thoughtfulness, and strategy.

One of the primary tasks of the older elementary age child is to develop responsibility. In order to accomplish that goal, several prerequisites are necessary: self-control, initiative, problem solving skills, and confidence. The next several chapters focus on these abilities before moving on.



## Developing Godly Character in Your Child

**T**he Bible extols the virtuous woman, and likewise the man of God. But how do men and women of noble character get that way? Are they just born “good people,” or is there more to it than that? Is it possible to raise a child of noble character in a culture that only seeks to serve self?

In order to help children develop God-glorifying character, it's important to recognize the difference between character and personality. Character is something that's developed over time, while personality is something often defined from birth. You can't change your child's hard-wiring, but you can help shape the choices that he makes. For example, lying is a character flaw, not a personality flaw. Personalities have weaknesses and that's where character becomes so important. The child who has a bubbly, outgoing personality, may have trouble being sensitive to how she dominates a situation. That annoyance is overcome by developing character qualities such as sensitivity and self-control.

Sometimes parents dismiss character flaws with the excuse, “Well, that's just the way he is.” This excuse is un-

acceptable for Christians. It may be the way that he is, but it's not the way God wants him to be. It's interesting to see how personality is molded over time. For example, the mom who tends to worry about everything may pass that negative tendency on to her son. It's often that parents stop and consider their ways as they see their children mimic their own behavior. The reality is that the Lord uses children to hone the character of their parents. In fact, the home is best viewed as a laboratory of growth for all who live under its roof. Being a good parent implies humility, and communicating to children the value of God's grace in your life can set a tone for growth for all.

Strong character is built in children through practice. Experience and training are often required, and parental firmness usually plays an important part. That doesn't imply that you have to be mean to your kids, but it does suggest that you'll need to stay at it, help your child build new habits and patterns, and determine to help your child live a different way.

Romans 5:3-4 says, "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Paul, in this passage, is helping the Romans see that the pain and trials they experience have benefit for their lives. Their job is to persevere in the midst of the pressure, and, as a result, character and hope develop. In a similar way, parents put strategic pressure on their kids in certain areas to require character development.

If your son, for example, has a problem with meanness, you may have a meeting with him to talk about the need for developing kindness in his life. That's a positive meeting that answers the question "Why is kindness important anyway?" That kind of teaching may be all that's needed.

However, some children do better learning through experience. You may have to draw attention to mean comments in order to raise the awareness level, and you may have to provide a consequence to increase your son's motivation to change. All those are helpful, but be careful to also add the positive. What do you want your child to do instead? Your son may need some practice at being kind, so you might say, "Son, I'd like you to think of three kind things you can do for your brother before you can go play again."

Talking about character with kids is a great way to get them thinking about it in practical terms. You might even identify Bible verses that relate to certain qualities to help reinforce the biblical thinking in these areas. You might consider qualities that are strengths, not just weaknesses, seen in your home such as honesty, humility, diligence, contentment, flexibility, and generosity. As you go about your day, you can then illustrate the qualities in positive ways, not just negative ones, in the lives of your children and in others.

Children need to understand that they are on a mission toward growth and maturity. It's not all about performance and behavior. It's also about the heart. Character is not something that just happens. It's developed over time through teaching, modeling, and training. This is true of both good and bad character traits. When we think of good character, we often think of great people of the past, or people we know that have some extraordinary qualities. You might even use these people as examples of desirable character.

Be sure to point out progress as you see it develop. Remember that the developing of character produces hope according to Romans 5:4. Sometimes children need to

see their progress, and by pointing out the small steps of growth, your child's hope provides an encouragement to move forward even more.

In your discussions on character, differentiate between good and godly character. There are a lot of nice, good people in the world who do a lot of nice, good things. Your child may wonder what the big deal is about being a Christian when he sees people, particularly his favorite celebrities, doing good at seemingly great cost to themselves with no visible payoff. Godliness is often demonstrated in the motivation. The world may be motivated by obligation, self-fulfillment, or attention. Christians are motivated by a desire to please God. True spirituality is often shaped through character training when it's tied to a motivation that comes from a sense of godliness put into action.

Building a child's character is a process that takes wisdom, patience, and a lot of prayer. When it seems that all your best efforts are to no avail, remember that God only calls you to be faithful. Train, model, and reinforce desirable character traits, but leave the results to the Lord. Strong character takes time to develop. Don't become discouraged because of a deeply ingrained shortcoming in your child's life. Stay on it and do the training necessary to produce the maximum benefit over time.



## The Value of Self-Control

When thinking about preteen boys and girls, the word “self-control” may not be the first word that comes to mind. These young people are better known for behavior that ranges anywhere from silly to downright strange. Parents tend to roll their eyes, shrug their shoulders, and say, “Boys will be boys,” or “They’re just silly girls.” But one of the foundational qualities that encourages responsibility is self-control and this is a great age to teach it.

The Apostle Paul gives some good advice to Titus when he says to him in Titus 2:6, “Encourage the young men to be self-controlled.” Of course that’s good advice for young women, too. Boys can be crazy, hyper, impulsive, rude, and obsessed with bodily functions. Girls can be dramatic, annoying, and possessive. Those negative traits aren’t gender specific. Boys who are left to their own devices grow up to be immature men who don’t know how to relate well to women or how to lead their families. Girls can grow up to be immature women, unwilling to take on the responsibilities necessary for maturity and success. At least part of the solution is to develop self-control in practical ways.

Kids don't typically wake up one day suddenly mature and godly. God uses a process of training to bring about appropriate character, and the family is a great place to start. One way to teach self-control in your home is to equip your child with the ability to wait. If your child tends to respond with badgering, complaining, or whining, then that's confirmation that teaching your child to wait will prove productive. Waiting in our society isn't easy and most kids don't get much practice. With microwave ovens, remote controls, and cell phones, children usually can get what they want quite quickly. Learning how to wait is not just a waste of time. It's a demonstration of inner character.

Self-control, like any character quality, is a combination of several actions and thinking patterns all at the same time. The ability to manage emotions and desires in the face of a particular challenge requires self-management, patience, and internal restraint. Self-control is often the ability to do what you should do instead of what you want to do. Kids who lack self-control often need more parental control in order to achieve success in given situations.

Children learn self-control best when parents use a multi-faceted approach. Firmness is essential because it requires a child to rise to the next level, realizing that impulsiveness and instant gratification are signs of immaturity. Providing a vision for heightened self-control challenges a child internally to be self-motivated in order to stretch their limitations. Most children need teaching and practice to know how to demonstrate self-control in their speech, use of their hands, or managing things such as emotions, money, time, and resources.

Parents can do a lot to facilitate development in children by teaching, modeling, and coaching children to

greater levels of maturity. As children extend themselves a bit in their self-restraint, it's important for parents to affirm progress. In fact, affirmation of small steps often encourages a child to take larger ones. Teaching self-control to children takes time. Often the easy solution is to give in and satisfy the child's wants in order to get rid of the whining, complaining, arguing, or bad attitude. Children often train their parents to jump at their every request by making life uncomfortable. Parents sometimes become more interested in peace than character development and are quick to comply.

Self-control isn't easy to develop, but it's one of the primary qualities necessary for responsibility to grow in a child's heart. Competing desires in a child's life often encourage procrastination or laziness. Responsibility allows a child to rise to the occasion and make the hard choice, follow through on an activity, and complete a job thoroughly. All of those require self-control.

Sometimes children view self-control as stopping something or simply demonstrating restraint. It's usually helpful for children to recognize that self-control is usually about doing something different, not just focusing on reducing the negative action, but developing a new positive one to take its place. For example, whining is the negative action, but kids who practice self-control learn to ask in a positive way or accept no as an answer. Focusing on the positive response can often help children embrace the idea of self-control more readily.

Children experience many temptations in life. Self-control has spiritual ramifications because it helps a person stay within the boundaries instead of leaving them to find pleasure and satisfaction. Self-restraint is essential for



being healthy, managing money, and having good relationships. The temptation to be angry, indulge in some form of pleasure, or even be dishonest, all have spiritual ramifications. It's been said that one of the greatest heart qualities parents give to their kids is to teach them self-control. It's no wonder, when you think of how important it is for developing responsibility in one's heart.

The family is a laboratory for growth and as you take the extra time to build self-control in your child, you'll contribute to maturity. It's an investment. As you continue to partner with your child in this area, remember that self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit, so pray with and for your child to allow God to do a deeper work in your child's heart.



## Teaching Kids to Take Initiative

**D**o you wish your kids would see what needs to be done and do it without being reminded each step of the way? If so, you're not alone. Parents often feel as if they must continually prod their kids along to get them through the same routine that they do every day. If your children are repeating the same tasks on a daily basis, then why do they need continual reminders? That's a good question, and one worth evaluating, because maybe there are some approaches you could take that would develop that internal motivation in your child, and this stage of their lives is a great time for them to learn it.

Internal motivation is a function of two things. First, the ability to pay attention to internal promptings, and the second is the character to follow through with them. Internal promptings come from the heart, stemming from the conscience and the Holy Spirit. When your son cleans up the kitchen without being asked, you might say, "Wow, I'm impressed. You not only did a good job, but you were internally motivated. What prompted you? Was it the Holy Spirit or the conscience?" Of course, your child will give

you that puzzled look, providing a moment to do some teaching tied into your gratefulness.

You might say, “If I tell you to clean the kitchen, then that’s an external prompter. If you do it on your own, without being asked, then that means that something good is happening inside your heart. Sometimes God prompts us to do things, so we always need to be listening to him. Sometimes those things are moral, like telling the truth, and sometimes they are just being responsible, kind, or caring. Also, God has placed a conscience inside your heart that prompts you in areas of maturity and responsibility as well. When you are internally motivated like this, it brings joy to my heart. I’m very grateful for the clean kitchen, but I’m also grateful for the way that you’re maturing and growing up. Thank you.”

You can encourage those internal prompters in your child by pulling back on the specific directives but still requiring action. For example, you might say, “Kaleigh, I’d like you to go into the bathroom and check it.” Now, your daughter must go into the bathroom and look for herself, check things out, and respond accordingly. If you tell her to pick up her pajamas, she’d likely comply. If you tell her to check, then you’re exercising her heart. She has to go and see for herself, look at the situation, evaluate it, and take some action. In fact, maybe she will do more than just pick up the pajamas but will also look for other ways to clean things up.

Your daughter must report back when she’s done, an important part of the process. When Kaleigh tells you that she completed the job and you go inspect her work, you might find that she did well, and use the opportunity to affirm her. On the other hand, if the counter is messy, you

might say, "I like the way you picked up your pajamas off the floor, maybe you could straighten up that counter a bit."

If you get the reply, "I didn't make that mess," then you have an opportunity to do some teaching. Obviously, she has the misbelief that she's only responsible for herself. Your goal is to help her recognize that everyone in a family is responsible to add to family life. We all look after each other. Then she needs to clean up the counter.

Internal motivation comes with training, and parents often have to change the way they give instructions to exercise that part of the heart. First, you'll want to raise the awareness level of the internal promptings, but often children need practice at responding to them. It takes wisdom and character to respond well to internal promptings. It's much simpler and easier to wait for someone to tell you what to do. In order to develop initiative in daily life, kids learn to see what needs to be done, recognize it as their responsibility, and respond. Instead of complaining that your son's bed is not made, the dog's dish is empty, and that the garbage is overflowing, you may need some form of reminder to get your son to check on things himself.

One part of internal motivation is remembering things that need to be done. Responsible people use lists, alarms, calendars, and reminder notes. If you want your child to develop internal motivation, you'll want to transfer responsibility for some of these things instead of being the reminder system for your child. Checklists and chore charts may seem cumbersome at first, but once created, they change the way you work with your child. Instead of saying, "Go make your bed," now you're saying, "Check the list and report back to me."

When implementing charts and checklists, it's important to use them as tools to guide your kids into ordered, godly living, rather than techniques in behavior modification. As children mature, they will rely less on the lists when we use them properly. When used improperly, we'll end up with children who won't do anything unless it's on a list that they will be rewarded for completing. Unfortunately, this method fosters a "what's in it for me?" attitude that does not develop the initiative we want to see in our children. Proverbs 6:6 gives a nice verse for being self-motivated and for the completion of mundane tasks, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise."

Developing internal motivation in kids requires a strategic parenting shift, teaching kids to do tasks without specific directives sometimes, and showing them how to see what needs to be done, and to do it without being asked. Now's the time to help your child develop organizational systems to stay on track and think of others. As you work on it, kids learn to contribute and find ways to be a blessing to others.



## Problem Solving Skills

Parents usually want their children to ask their advice, but as children get older their constant questions and need for direction can become exhausting.

Mom, should I...?

Mom, can I...?

Mom, what should I do?

Mom, I need help.

Mom, I'm bored.

Mom, where's my socks, my backpack, my shirt, my homework?

Mom? Mom? Mom? Has anyone seen Mom?

Problem-solving is an important skill to learn now, while the problems are still small. Your work can equip your child to become a confident problem solver in the future as life gets more complicated and the problems, and their consequences, are more serious. Most problems for older elementary age children come in three main categories: relationships, schoolwork, and tasks. Teaching your child how to solve problems is a worthy use of your time, although it will take a bit longer than if you were to just do

the task for your child. Here are some ideas.

Relationship problems may take place with parents, siblings, friends, or teachers. Helping your child learn to solve problems with others is critical for good long-term relationships, but it's easy for kids to get sucked into emotional tactics. You might establish some key words or nonverbal cues to remind your child of problem-solving strategies. For example, when kids start bickering, you might use key words such as, "patience," "tone," or "listen." Nonverbal cues might include a raised eyebrow or an open hand to say "stop," or "calm down." These simple verbal and nonverbal signals remind children that they need to improve the way they're relating to each other in the heat of the moment. This gives them the opportunity to then work out their problems in a helpful manner. You may need to act as mediator, especially as you first introduce this skill, but in time your children will become more proficient at handling their problems themselves.

Problems with friends sometimes stem from negative peer pressure and cliques. For example, you might teach your child to identify a good group of kids by seeing how accepting they are of outsiders and new people. Encourage your child to evaluate friendships, and possibly find new friends to hang out with that better fit this assessment. If she's been snubbed, this is an opportunity for her to use her own hurt to recognize the pain others feel in similar situations and reach out to someone else who is being excluded. She may wind up with a new best friend or group of friends that is much more genuine and accepting than the "mean girl" clique she was trying so hard to fit into anyway.

School problems may come with the actual academic material or may arise with the people teaching it. Problems with teachers often stem from misunderstandings on the child's part, or a misperception of expectations. One of the challenges of working with teachers is figuring out how they relate and what they expect. Each teacher is different and one of the tasks of a good student is to learn how to navigate in the environment created by that teacher. Some kids have a hard time with that, somehow believing that teachers will relate to them the way they like. Learning otherwise is part of their education.

If your son is having a problem with a teacher, you might ask him what he may be doing to contribute. For example, if he complains that a certain teacher is always picking on him or is too strict, it's possible that he has developed a reputation of being one that disturbs the class by talking to his friends, interrupting the teacher, or getting out of his seat. Of course, the teacher needs to correct this behavior and may think your son is the culprit when he is only a bystander. Instead of defending his innocence, it might be better to evaluate his reputation. Sometimes children develop a reputation of being silly, sloppy, or forgetful. Those perceptions are important, so helping a child understand the benefit of a good reputation is important. If he doesn't want to get into trouble, it might be better for him to practice doing what's right and looking for ways to contribute to the classroom.

Other problems arise at school when children do not understand the material. Again, ask your child first what he may be doing to contribute to this problem. If he is talking during class time, frequently leaving to use the bathroom or get a drink, doodling, passing notes, or just



zoning out, then he's naturally not going to understand the material since he wasn't paying attention to the explanation. It's the teacher's job to teach, but it's the student's job to learn. Encourage your child to take that job seriously, as a calling from the Lord. Colossians 3:23-24 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Problem solving is part of the job of childhood, and working hard at it is a sign of godliness and maturity.

Homework problems may be in reading, understanding and following directions, or in completing longer assignments independently and promptly. Sometimes when a child complains, "I don't get it," it often indicates a lack of effort rather than a lack of understanding. Before you dive into 45 minutes of math help when you're supposed to be making dinner, make sure your child has read the directions thoroughly, attempted to understand them, and at least tried to answer a few questions independently. You might ask for a recap of the problem so that your child can learn to identify the issue and then get help from you. This process may save both of you a lot of aggravation.

When completing tasks, whether at school or home, some children quickly give up when the task becomes difficult. Encourage your child to work on perseverance, which, in simple terms, means "hanging in there after you feel like quitting." You might want to encourage your child to go back and try again, with the goal of building determination and the ability to work hard in the face of obstacles. Allowing kids to struggle can be helpful, but you'll want to monitor the frustration level. The struggle is what teaches

the character! When well-meaning parents constantly jump in to help, children cannot become independent problem solvers. Skills are developed by watching and doing, not just watching.

As you can see, problem solving involves several related skills and demonstrations of character. Children learn to think outside the box, look at the problem from various perspectives, and sometimes just dig in and do the work necessary to solve it. Learning takes place when kids are exposed to a process. Teachers often teach by setting goals, introducing skills, demonstrating, modeling, and practicing those skills, and then helping the child master them. Children demonstrate mastery of skills when they feel confident in what they are doing. This confidence comes from a sense of competency that's best achieved through practice, and that usually requires work. So you, being the problem-solving coach for your child, can look for the roadblocks in your child's thinking and provide new ways to attack the problems.

When children become problem solvers, they become the managers of their own lives. They command the respect of their peers and the recognition of their teachers. Parents move from disciplinarians and behavior managers to guides and mentors. This shift is important in establishing yourself as the go-to person for your child, especially as the teenage years approach. You want to act as a counselor or coach whenever possible. God exercises the same kind of parenting approach with us. He leads and guides us as we struggle to understand his will, but he allows the struggle because he knows that's what makes us grow. May he grant us the wisdom and restraint to parent our children in the same way.



## Developing Boldness and Confidence

**G**od uses kids now, not just when they get to be adults. In fact, if kids in the later elementary years can view themselves as leaders or develop the confidence necessary to initiate, take on challenges, and solve problems, great things can happen. Some of those children will be leaders, others won't, but all kids can have the confidence and boldness to take a stand for what's right, suggest new courses of action, and take measured risks that spark innovation and creativity.

In the gospel of Mark, one way that Jesus taught was to use parables, but that wasn't his only teaching technique. He healed people while the disciples watched. He also responded to criticism of his leadership as the disciples learned. Sometimes he ignored opposition and sometimes he challenged it. But one of the greatest learning experiences took place when Jesus sent his disciples out to practice it on their own. Mark 6:7 says, "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits." Jesus sent them out to practice it.

There's nothing like experience to test your training.

You can do the same thing with your children. Give them risky jobs to do. For example, let your child pour the milk for dinner into the glasses or crack the eggs for breakfast. Likely, they'll make a mistake and a mess will need to be cleaned up. The most important thing is your response. Don't get angry or go into a lecture mode. Instead, be a coach or an encourager. A good way to build self-confidence is to overcome failure and achieve success. You want your child to have the confidence to try new things and the boldness to step out even when there is a risk of failure.

One dad allowed his eleven-year-old to drive the mower with the grass catcher on the back. As his son turned away from the fence too early, the back swung around and hit the fence, damaging it. Dad's response was great. "It's okay, son. That's how you learn. You needed to clear the fence before making the turn. It's a good thing we know how to fix it." Although his son felt bad about hitting the fence, he was encouraged by his dad's faith in him.

A mom told us that she allowed her son to make cookies. He put in a tablespoon of salt instead of a teaspoon, creating cookies that were a bit challenging to eat. Her response saved the day. "These are the best salty cookies I've ever had, but next time I think a little less would make them perfect." They laughed and her son learned an important lesson that day.

Choose times when you can let your kids try life out for themselves. Let them make mistakes. Remember that the success of a new venture is not the absence of mistakes. It's how well you recover from them. Don't hover. In fact, it might be best for you to walk away instead of nagging. You have to be willing to allow your child to learn from experi-

ence, and that usually means that you'll end up helping by cleaning up the mess. If you are opposed to messes, then you may end up with weak kids who are afraid to take a risk.

Solomon knew that we must be content with messes in order to benefit from life. He said in Proverbs 14:4, "Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest." His point was that you can have a clean stall (or house) but then you miss out on many of the benefits that come from the ox (or children). Messes come with the territory. Some messes are the result of laziness and lack of organization and kids need a plan for cleaning up. Other messes are the result of trying new things. Accidents happen and failure is often the teacher that reveals new solutions for life.

One of the greatest roles you'll have with your children is that of a coach. Unfortunately, some parents are more like a referee in a hockey game. They yell, "Infraction! Five minutes in the penalty box!" Instead, we want to coach our kids to success, giving them jobs that are challenging and helping them to learn from life experiences.

It's amazing what kids can do when they have confidence to try new things and test out new ideas. Of course, some kids have too much confidence and take risks without thinking. Those kids need to learn other heart qualities to balance out their boldness and initiative. They need things like graciousness and humility.

As you coach the over-zealous child, you'll want to point out how life is trying to teach patience or self-control. You might say something like, "It looks like you may have overstepped your bounds there and that person is now frustrated," or "When someone gets hurt like that you

might want to ask yourself what you could do to slow down a bit." Those kinds of coaching may be just what your child needs to learn to be a bit more patient or sensitive to others instead.

Be a coach and let your kids learn from life and you'll build a greater sense of confidence to face new challenges and opportunities. It's a gift that may cost you a mop and a broom in the short run, but pays off in huge ways later on.



## Responsibility Checklist

One of the greatest ways to help older elementary age children to grow is to focus on responsibility. You might define responsibility in practical terms as “taking initiative and managing areas of life with little or no reminders from parents or others.” Hebrews 12:1 gives a good picture that describes what it means to be moving forward in life. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” That passage is talking about running the race before God and can encompass every area of one’s life.

As you’re helping your child move toward responsibility, you might encourage dialogue by reading this chapter together. After all, parenting is a partnership with a child to encourage growth and maturity. If you’re a young person reading this chapter, you might ask yourself to identify two areas of strength and two areas of weakness from the following list and then discuss them together with your parents.

Responsibility is seen in the following areas:

**1. Cleanliness - Responsibility means regularly taking a bath or shower, brushing teeth, and other hygiene tasks without being reminded.**

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. —1 Corinthians 6:19-20*

**2. Following Instructions - Responsibility is accepting tasks with a good attitude, completing them promptly and thoroughly, and reporting back.**

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.  
—Ephesians 6:1*

**3. Admitting Fault - Responsibility is admitting mistakes and taking responsibility for offenses, weaknesses and sins.**

*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. —Proverbs 28:13*

**4. Managing Time - Responsibility is managing my own time and schedule including the morning routine, bedtime routine, and homework.**

*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. —Proverbs 21:5*

**5. Thinking of Others - Responsibility means taking initiative to help out and contribute to family life and to others.**

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in*



*humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. —Philippians 2:3-4*

**6. Being Organized - Responsibility is managing my own belongings and keeping things neat and organized.**

*But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.  
—1 Corinthians 14:40*

**7. Handling Conflict - Responsibility means that I handle conflict well with my parents, teachers, and peers.**

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. —Matthew 5:9*

**8. Choosing Friends - Responsibility means that I choose wise friendships.**

*Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."  
—1 Corinthians 15:33*

**9. Managing Emotions - Responsibility means that I exert self-control with my emotions, and use them to encourage others when possible.**

*A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. —Proverbs 29:11*

**10. Controlling Speech - Responsibility is guarding my words and using them to build others up.**

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. —Ephesians 4:29*

**11. Managing Money - Responsibility is recognizing the value of money and learning how to save, give, and spend it wisely.**

*Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life. —Proverbs 22:4*

**12. Spiritual Independence - Responsibility is nurturing my own relationship with God and his Word.**

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. —Proverbs 3:5-6*

Once you do some evaluation, you'll likely come upon both strengths and weaknesses. The first thing to do is to celebrate the strengths. One mom watched her son beam as she said, "Look at how much you've grown in your ability to handle your own hygiene needs. You used to give me a hard time whenever you needed to take a shower. Now you manage your showers all on your own. You're growing up and that's encouraging to me."

Kids need affirmation. They tend to see life in the present and don't have the life experience to see how things are changing. Parents help their children gain perspective by pointing out the growth they see.

When working on weaknesses, it's amazing how focusing on one area of responsibility often strengthens other areas as well. The child who learns to follow instructions well often learns to handle emotions better. The child who can take responsibility for faults and mistakes often does better in conflict situations. Choose somewhere to start and

work together with your child to develop a plan to “hand off” the management of that area to your child. Transferring responsibility to a child doesn’t mean that the parent walks away and expects the child to mature alone. Rather, the parent holds the child accountable to work a plan for change, taking the attitude of a coach and using firmness, teaching, and prayer to encourage progress.

Some children get stuck in negative patterns of immaturity regarding their emotions, responsiveness to authority, or selfishness. Getting unstuck can be challenging both for the parent and for the child. It’s wise to view the weakness as a need for remedial work and when both the parent and the child concentrate on a particular area, good things happen. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. Change is hard, but kids who embrace the challenge move toward responsibility more quickly. Parents who persevere help keep a child focused and then both see progress and find cause to celebrate success.

If you’re a child reading this part of this book, keep in mind that if there are some particular areas where you recognize the need to grow, you might not know exactly how. You may need to develop skills to be more effective. You might want to read some of the following chapters that go more into detail about each of these areas of responsibility. They aren’t written for young people. They are written for parents, but if you take time to read the chapter, you’ll likely find specific ways you can make changes on your own and move along more quickly in your pursuit of responsibility.



## Managing Personal Hygiene

“Time to take a shower.” Why can these five simple words meet with such resistance? What, really, is the big deal anyway? For adults, taking a shower is just part of the daily routine and a good way to wake up in the morning. For young children, bath time is playtime. But young people are growing out of their desire to play in the tub and many are too young to appreciate an invigorating start or relaxing end to the day. Showers and baths are an intrusion into time they’d rather be using some other way.

Your child will likely not appreciate the need for a regular shower without an understanding of the importance of personal hygiene. Little ones take baths because Mom and Dad say so. By the later elementary years, taking care of one’s own personal hygiene is part of responsibility training. You want your child to be more independent in such areas, but relying on a nine- or ten-year-old to monitor personal hygienic care will likely take some work. The solution will usually come in the form of simple old-fashioned firmness. That doesn’t have to mean harshness. But a firm approach will likely be necessary to establish a new routine.

Most schools have a health class where certain basic elements of puberty are taught during this age, including the need for more frequent showering and using deodorant to eliminate body odor and washing the face to prevent excessive oil build-up. Since body odor is not something that your child may recognize, you'll probably need to establish a regular schedule for showering and ensuring the use of deodorant. You'll probably want to establish certain days as shower days, and when the weather is warm or there's a lot of physical activity, you may want to make it an everyday event.

Body odor is an embarrassing subject, so the way you approach it is important. Don't make negative or mocking comments. Talk about it as a natural part of growing up. Use humor cautiously. Some children embrace change better than others. Even good-natured teasing can be damaging in personal issues. Let your child know that using deodorant is part of growing up. You can buy your son his own deodorant and quietly put it on his dresser or in a special location in the bathroom where he can find it. Be discreet about it, especially if you have other children. This is a sensitive issue that needs careful handling. Quietly remind him to use it in the mornings, or make it part of his "getting ready" checklist.

Determine the best time of day for your child to shower. For many kids, nighttime is still the best time. For young people that are completely self-sufficient and prefer to read, play games, or finish homework after supper, allowing morning showers may give a sense of independence. You can quickly eliminate any problems you may face in the morning, such as getting in the shower too late or taking too long, by switching shower time to the evening with

a statement that says, "You only get to choose the shower schedule if you're being responsible on your own." Children often respond well to freedom within limits.

If you need to get several kids bathed and showered consecutively, it's often helpful to set a schedule for "time in" and "time out" to keep things moving smoothly without your direct supervision. Offenders can shave the time they wasted in the bathroom off their bedtime. You might manage this by purchasing an inexpensive egg timer and leaving it on the bathroom counter. Older elementary children do well with a clock. Time is a resource and now's a great time to teach wise time management. When the timer dings, the water goes off.

If your child refuses to shower or bathe and seems unconcerned about his lack of hygiene, you may be dealing with a behavior problem that has more to do with control than it does with the specific issue of showering. Children sometimes feel like they have little control over their lives, and exert control in the few areas they can. Outright refusal to shower is a heart problem, not a hygiene problem, and is better dealt with as such.

If this is happening in your home, don't engage in a battle of wits. You might send your child to sit in the hall for a Break and allow him to come back when he's ready to obey. You can usually tell if he's ready by his countenance. You may have to add a further consequence to the picture. Delayed obedience may result in the loss of a privilege that would have otherwise been enjoyed during the wasted time. When he's ready to talk, explain that there are issues you may consider changing your mind on, and issues that you won't. Showering is a nonnegotiable issue. However, you might again offer the option of morning or evening,

giving a bit of control to your child.

If your child refuses to take a shower in the morning, you might let him know that you won't take him to school until he does, and then have to explain to the school why he was late. This is an example of using another authority in your child's life to complement your own. Children are raised in a community, and sometimes parents need the community's help. It's unwise to allow a child to shower "when he feels like it." The teasing he gets at school may only damage his self-concept. It will not necessarily motivate him to change his attitude, or his clothes.

Negotiate and develop a plan together. Some people prefer morning showers. Others prefer to take one in the evening. Daily showers aren't as important as a commitment to personal care and thoughtfulness of others. Sometimes an evening shower is required because the child dawdles in the morning. If your child prefers a morning shower, you might allow it only if responsibility is demonstrated.

Refusal to shower might also indicate a problem with confidence and body image issues. Your child may be noticing the first signs of puberty and feel self-conscious. Speak openly about it in a matter-of-fact way. If you're nervous, your child may interpret your cues differently than you intend. If you have your own body image issues, this might add to the problem. Children can mirror parents' feelings of inadequacy. This is something to pray about and give over to God. You can pass on a new heritage of a healthy body image based on the confidence of knowing who you are in Christ.

Showering is one of those routine requirements that

may produce stress and tension in the home for a period of time. However, when you set clear but firm limits and make independent showering a demonstration of responsibility, kids learn the new routine and eventually adapt to it. Explain the importance that God places on cleanliness. Scripture calls our sin filthy and compares the finished work of Christ to washing us clean. In Ezekiel 36:25, God promises future restoration for His exiled people with these beautiful words, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities." Post this verse on your bathroom mirror to remind your entire family that while showering makes us physically clean, God makes us spiritually clean.





## Listening and Following Instructions

“**M**y kids don’t listen to me. I have to repeat myself over and over again. I wish they would respond the first time I tell them to do something.”

Many parents express frustration over this common problem, but react only with a roll of the eyes and a shrug of the shoulders. If you’re having an “in one ear and out the other” problem in your home, the fact that this weakness is almost universal is probably not particularly comforting. Parents often feel like they’re talking to a wall, but there are practical things you can do to increase cooperation. In fact, teaching children to follow instructions is a life skill learned in your home, so the work you do now has long-term benefits. The Bible clearly instructs children that they have a job description in family life. Ephesians 6:1-2 says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother.” Armed with that important mandate for parenting, what can you do when your kids don’t listen?

When parents hear the word responsible, they often

think about kids who follow instructions, on their own, without being reminded, and doing a good job. That kind of responsiveness comes through training. In fact, for some parents it requires some rethinking about the roles and relationships in family life. For example, some parents need to reevaluate the balance between their job as “friend” and that of “authority.” Some parents, in an attempt to have a strong relationship with their kids, deemphasize their role as leader, thus creating a peer-to-peer relationship. The problem is that when you then ask your son to do something, he may believe that the subsequent dialogue is appropriate since his perception is that you are simply equals, discussing who’s going to get up and accomplish the task. The reality is that parents have a job to do, to lead the family, coordinate its activities, and keep things moving. And, they have a responsibility to teach kids important life skills such as cooperation, responsibility, and responsiveness to authority.

Kids need to understand that you want to have a close relationship, but not at the expense of allowing them to become lazy, rebellious, or unhelpful in the home. That doesn’t require that you lead with an iron fist or yell at your kids to get them moving. It means that you have healthy dialogue and use firmness to work through the relational challenges you’ll likely face. Both relationship and training are possible, but it takes work on both sides to make it happen. Overemphasizing one without the other results in weakness in the child.

In the minds of some, the word obey has fallen out of fashion. It’s been replaced with the softer listen. Little ones are told to put on their “listening ears.” This is a good instruction, but it falls short of your actual expectation. Once

your child has listened, you want him to actually do what you said. God understands the difference between listening and doing, because he instructs us in James 1:22, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” This passage is speaking about obeying God’s Word, but the truth can also be applied to any form of obedience. The point is that listening is passive, but obedience is active.

Teaching your children to listen-and-obey begins with deliberate, focused communication. You’ll want your child to understand the difference between the instructions you give and other interaction such as ideas, suggestions, or opinions. Sometimes parents expect that their children will interpret their ideas as instructions when a child hasn’t learned that adult skill yet. For example, you might say to an adult, “Maybe you could help me take this box to my car?” The other adult might say, “Sure, where’s the box.” But if you say to your son, “Maybe you could help bring the groceries in from the car?” he might say, “Maybe not.” Kids need to learn when parents are giving instructions so that they know what to expect.

Children sometimes have trouble receiving instruction because they’re focused on something else. Breaking your child’s concentration before you begin your instruction is usually best. Say his name, and wait for a response. For example, “Bobby, I’d like your attention.” Then wait for Bobby to look you in the eye. If he grunts and continues his task, repeat your initial statement. You may have to keep doing this until he stops what he’s doing and looks at you. Or, if it’s a continual problem, you might need some additional discipline.

Some children may also require a touch on the shoul-

der to get their attention and break their concentration. This is a technique that teachers sometimes use in the classroom to refocus children who struggle to stay on task, or to redirect children who have trouble paying attention. Once you've broken concentration and made eye contact, then you can give your instruction. Eye contact not only establishes a listening ear, but it's also a sign of respect and an important social skill.

After you give the instruction, require an answer back such as "Okay, Mom." With children who are especially challenged in this area, you might require that your child repeat your instruction. This creates accountability, and avoids the drama that often follows the discovery of an un-completed task.

Sometimes when parents find that their child did not obey, they get frustrated and begin yelling. Rather than express anger, you might want to use your child's poor response as an indicator that remedial work is necessary. If your son ignores you, then it's time to follow through in order to train your child that your words of instruction are important. Setting up a consequence may be helpful, but the most strategic approach is to require practice sessions where children need to demonstrate following instructions well several times before they're free to go on with life.

Once your daughter has completed a task, inspect it before you release her. Kathy realized a typical pattern in her home. As her kids would run out the door to play, she would yell, "Did you finish your room?" and receive a short, "Yeah." Then Kathy would continue in her busyness, never making sure that her kids actually did the job. Later, she would discover the unfinished task and feel frustrated and angry. She determined to make a change by checking

the work before her kids were free to go. This tightened up her instruction-giving process and helped her kids actually do what she expected.

When your son completes a task, he should come to you and say, “Mom, I finished cleaning up my room. Can you come check it now?” Children who haven’t learn to report back need to add that to their routine. You might say to a child, “The job isn’t done until you report back.” Then comes the hard part. You must stop what you are doing and go check. This inspection will give you the assurance that your child obeyed you, and provide the satisfaction that comes with completing a task successfully.

When you teach your children to acknowledge your instruction, listen when you speak, and do what you say, you are building a life skill, one that will be used for years to come. Most importantly, learning how to follow instructions prepares children to listen to their Heavenly Father and follow his instructions. When kids make this connection, they’ll enjoy the blessings that come with a life of obedience.



## Admitting Fault

“**S**tephen, that wasn’t nice. Apologize to your sister right now.”

Stephen: “Sorry.”

Sister: “That’s okay.”

This exchange is frequently muttered between unrepentant offenders and unforgiving victims. Getting children to apologize is one thing, but getting them to mean it is another. A forced apology may get the words out, but it doesn’t address the heart issues that brought about the offense in the first place.

One of the tasks of responsibility is to admit fault and take responsibility for one’s offenses. If your child is learning how to take responsibility for things, then another step is to take responsibility for actions. Children sometimes have a hard time accepting responsibility for their actions because they believe that if they didn’t intend an outcome, then they’re not responsible for it. If Stephen didn’t mean to knock over his sister’s tower, then he may believe that he is not guilty.

It’s helpful for children to learn that an apology can fol-

low several different types of actions. The first, of course, is when you meant to hurt someone. The child who says mean words because of anger or makes a sarcastic remark out of meanness, can and should apologize and take responsibility for the offense even if the other person is also at fault.

The second type of offense that can draw an apology is when the child inadvertently or unintentionally hurts someone else. The accident or mistake is best followed by the child taking responsibility for the error, even without bad intentions.

The third way to use the words "I'm sorry" comes when the child had nothing to do with the offense or the pain of another. This is a form of maturity that goes above and beyond and reflects an internal sorrow because the other person is hurt. "I'm sorry that you didn't get that part in the play that you were hoping for." That form of empathy expresses a sadness and an identification with the other person's pain.

Learning that the words "I'm sorry" can mean several different things helps children begin to process offenses and the pain of others in more mature ways. It's important to realize, however, that children who apologize on command may parrot what you want them to say, but they won't be happy about it. The apology may well stem from a desire to stay out of further trouble, rather than a desire to right a wrong or care for someone else. When a child is forced to apologize, his demeanor usually indicates the condition of his heart. A mumbled apology delivered without eye contact, and with a drawn expression, shuffling feet, and slumped shoulders is not a sincere apology.

Don't allow a poor attitude to deter your determination

to teach your child a good response to correction. Even teaching a resistant child to apologize has some benefit. Going through the motions is an attempt to move from behavior to the heart, not the most desirable solution, but certainly better than nothing at all. Another approach, however, may be more appropriate. Instead of saying "I'm sorry," it may be better to have the child say, "I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" Even if a child doesn't feel empathy for someone else, accepting responsibility for an offense is important.

When a child has done something wrong, God's solution is confession. Admitting an offense is the first step toward moving forward and learning from it. Whether it was a mistake or on purpose, a child can communicate that the action was wrong. The questions you ask your child during correction are important. Some parents encourage defensiveness in their kids by asking the wrong questions such as "Why did you do it?" or "Who started it?" Kids use those questions as a launching pad to deflect guilt instead of responding properly and admitting fault.

If your child is unwilling to admit fault, then it may be best to have him take a Break for a bit, sitting alone in the hall or on the bottom step of the stairway to think about it before returning. It's amazing what a little time of reflection does for a child when no other opportunities are available. Don't set a timer. Rather, tell the child to take a Break and come back when he's ready to admit what he did wrong. Some kids take longer than others, but your use of time as a discipline tool is strategic for heart change. You're not in a hurry and some kids often need a longer period of time in order to muster the humility necessary to admit fault.



Then comes a mature apology. If your child lacks the humility or courage to apologize you might require a written apology in order to formulate it properly. Saying “I’m sorry” may not be helpful, because sorrow is an emotion that the child may not feel at the moment. Some kids don’t feel remorse at the time. They can still apologize. A mature apology has three parts. It starts by saying, “I was wrong when I did...” Next, it often envisions a more positive response by saying, “The next time I’m in that situation I’ll...” The last part simply says, “So, will you forgive me?”

That kind of mature apology reflects what repentance really is, a change of heart, moving from one course of action to another. Sometimes an apology is not enough and reconciliation is needed. If someone was hurt or property was damaged, then this is the time to make it right. It may mean cleaning up a mess or making restitution. These can be hard consequences to enforce, especially when children resist. Parents may feel bad for the child, especially if the problem truly was an accident. But teaching your child to accept responsibility is a life skill that will help in future relationships down the road.

Enforcing responsibility need not be harsh. For example, if your son damaged the neighbor’s flowers while playing Frisbee in the front yard, then an apology is necessary. The whole experience may be embarrassing for all involved, but your leadership will be a life lesson for your child. If necessary, rehearse what needs to be said when approaching the neighbor. An offer to replace the plants is an appropriate step and helps your son see that real consequences happen in life.

If your daughter said something hurtful to her best friend, or disrespectful to an adult, she should apologize.

You can pray with her about it, and possibly even go with her if she would like, but requiring the apology teaches a life skill. So many relationships are ruined over harsh or misunderstood words. Kids can learn how to repair relationships by a willingness to admit when they're wrong. Everyone makes mistakes. It's the ability to own and correct them that builds responsibility.

Taking responsibility for offenses recognizes that there's accountability in life. It may take place in the short term with parents or teachers, but ultimately we are all accountable before God. When we think of responsibility in light of accountability, spiritual implications begin to take shape. Hebrews 4:13 says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Ultimately, the gift of salvation begins with the willingness to admit fault, a spiritual act. Older elementary age children now have the developmental faculties to realize that their part of the problem may be wrong even if others are also at fault. These children can understand sin in new ways and thus can appreciate salvation with more meaning. The daily apologies made are a part of a bigger picture of a willingness to admit wrong and seek forgiveness. It's a godly skill and an important one that restores relationships. It's God's design, and now is a great time to build the character necessary to practice confession, receive forgiveness, and make restitution.



## Learning to Manage Time

“I don’t like what I see in myself in the mornings,” said one frustrated mom. “I feel like I’m nagging all the time just to keep my kids moving.” If your morning routine leaves you feeling frustrated, you’re not alone. The morning can be a stressful, headache-inducing time of day that an extra cup of coffee can never remedy. But there is a way to teach your older elementary child self-management. It just takes some training.

Responsibility implies that a person is internally motivated to take care of something instead of relying on someone else, in this case Dad or Mom, to get things done. When children must complete a list of things in a defined period of time, they’re learning responsibility in practical terms. If you’re finding yourself giving instructions about every little thing each morning to keep your child moving, then it’s time for a different plan. Now’s a great time to transfer the responsibility of getting ready in the morning to your child and to do some teaching about time management.

One of the keys to developing responsibility is to get

the child involved in the plan development stage. After all, this is a child problem, not just a parent problem. Internal motivation requires that a child own the solution.

You might start with a meeting and ask your child to identify a list of the things that have to get done from the time he wakes up until the time he gets out the door. The first thing of course is to get his feet on the ground and out of bed. Likely that list will have 7-10 things on it including getting dressed, making the bed, tidying up the room, getting down to breakfast, brushing teeth, combing hair, etc. Just making the list often helps kids catch a vision for doing better. But some kids need more, so you might break the list up into two groups, one for before breakfast and the second for after breakfast, and maybe even have him post the list.

Lists are one way that adults remember to be responsible, so as you're training your son for the morning, be sure to emphasize the bigger picture of teaching responsibility, not just getting out the door. A second way that adults maintain responsibility is that they watch the clock. Setting an alarm is one way responsible people stay on track, so you might encourage your child to use the clock to wake up in the morning instead of relying on Dad or Mom.

Creating the list may be just what it takes to empower your child to succeed and do more self-management. If not, you'll need to move to another step to encourage the process. Often responsible people work ahead, so getting things ready the night before is often helpful. You might have your child contribute to making a lunch for the next day after dinner before the kitchen is all cleaned up. Setting clothes out or making sure homework is gathered and in the backpack can also be helpful. Getting to bed at a rea-

sonable time is also a sign of responsibility. Kids often find attractive alternatives to bedtime so they end up getting less sleep than they need, making a rough start to the day. So, enforcing a bedtime will also help greatly.

If a child needs more guidance, then you might establish checkpoints in the morning routine, a set time for breakfast and another time to be completely ready to leave for the day. Watching the clock generally creates a sense of obligation, a very important uncomfortable feeling responsible people experience. Now, instead of giving instructions, such as “Go comb your hair,” you might coach by saying, “Watch the clock.”

If more help is needed, accountability may be in order. Having a child report in at certain times in the morning creates an additional layer of responsibility, and some children need more training than others.

It's important for kids to consider others, not just themselves. The morning routine can be just the place to teach this life skill. On the list, it's helpful for kids to have at least one task that gets them thinking about others. You might call it the “Honor Task,” or “The Extra Thing.” That means that on your son's list is the task of finding something that needs to be done and doing it and then reporting it to Mom or Dad. He might clean up the bathroom, put the breakfast dishes away, or help a younger sibling get his shoes on. Responsible people think of others, not just about themselves.

If you've been struggling with morning routines and want to make a change, don't lose heart. Training can be difficult in the morning because there's such limited time to deal with disobedience, distraction, or just plain laziness. Before implementing a new morning routine, you

might try to think through some appropriate consequences for noncompliance. The loss of an afternoon privilege or activity or an earlier bedtime are effective possibilities.

A key element in easing the morning routine is establishing a good one of your own. When children see that Mom and Dad are up and getting themselves ready for the day, they're more likely to be responsive to their own routine. Getting up thirty minutes before your children allows you to get out of your own morning fog so that you're better equipped to help them get out of theirs. Including a personal quiet time in this daily preparation will help you be more calm and focused when the children wake up. It would be great if your family would make the same kind of statement that we see in Acts 4:13, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." When other people see that you have been with Jesus to start your day, they will experience you in a different way.

It's often helpful to have a target time for the completion of everyone's morning routine that allows for a five minute blessing time before going out the door. It starts with parents. If you're rushing around at the last minute, it's hard to enjoy those last few minutes with your child.

If you're trying to get out the door by 7:30 am, you might require that everyone be in the living room by 7:25 am for the daily blessing. You might have a verse a month you're working on or just read a verse from the Psalms such as Psalm 121. The whole psalm is only eight verses and it's a great blessing for any morning. It ends with verses 7-8, "The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and

going both now and forevermore.”

Sending children off with a blessing in the morning is a great way to empower them for the rest of the day. Life can be challenging at times and our kids need all the help they can get. It will likely take some work to transform your morning into a positive experience, but keep in mind that you’re teaching responsibility. That larger goal can empower you to remain positive, recognizing that you’re building into your child a heart quality that will be used for the rest of his life.

Morning times are a great opportunity to practice time management. You might develop a similar plan for homework time or bedtime. Older elementary kids can rely on the same helpers that adults use including clocks, timers, alarms, and calendars. In order to help a child be more responsible with time, you’ll likely change your role to coach and draw attention to the clock or calendar instead of simply keeping your child going through your mental to-do list. It takes time for children to develop this kind of responsibility, however your investment not only helps develop the necessary heart qualities for success, but it also allows for an easier morning that can leave all feeling better as the day starts.



## Building Compassion

“It’s all about me.” From pop music to t-shirts, this slogan has become the mantra of the next generation. In a me-centered culture, how can we teach our children to “be kind and compassionate to one another”? (Ephesians 4:32). Philippians 2:3-4 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

One of your goals as a parent is to communicate an expectation that compassion isn’t optional but is required. This is a major shift for some kids who think that they have required tasks but don’t have to think outside of themselves. Life isn’t that way and the sooner children catch a vision for helping others, the better. If your child expresses resistance, you may need to embark on some teaching and training sessions to raise the level of expectations. After all, we see compassion in life in many practical terms and praise people for it.

On the athletic field, for example, when a player is injured, the nearest player extends a hand to the fallen



athlete and helps him up. It doesn't matter what team the injured player is on. This kind of behavior is considered an act of good sportsmanship, commended and even honored at awards ceremonies at the end of the season.

Sports and games of many kinds are a metaphor for life. In fact, it's during games that children learn what it means to show mercy, help out a teammate, or balance winning with compassion. In life, people who include other participants in their group are called team players. You can apply this metaphor to home and school situations with an important life principle for your child. When you see someone who is struggling, falling behind, or left out, stop what you are doing and help that person. That is the essence of compassion—seeing a need in someone else and doing something about it. Compassion sees people as more important than personal agendas.

Teaching compassion begins with family relationships. Siblings sometimes exploit each other's weaknesses in order to feel better about their own shortcomings. Parents can do much to minimize bullying in the home by ensuring that all children understand the value of others and of themselves. Often, children have patience for their friends that they don't have for their siblings. You might identify the strengths of each of your kids and discuss with them how those strengths enhance the family dynamic. It's easy to focus on negative, annoying behaviors. Siblings that bicker frequently find it difficult to think of anything positive to say about each other.

If this is a problem in your home, try this exercise. Sit around the table or in a circle in the living room. Focusing on one family member at a time, go around the circle and have each person in the family say one positive thing

about her. Traits cannot be repeated, and no negative statements may be made. Everyone must participate. Continue moving around the circle until each person has been the recipient of words of praise from everyone else. This exercise will be easier for some children than others, but forcing siblings to focus on each other's positive traits, and hearing about their own, will increase the sense of unity in your home. Compassion towards one another is often taught, and heart exercises such as this one help kids change patterns of selfishness.

“Leave no man behind,” is a military motto that determines the way soldiers behave toward their wounded and fallen comrades. That kind of commitment is appropriate in family life as siblings live, work, and play together. Teaching older children to come to the aid of their younger siblings builds the relationships between them. It instills compassion, and creates trust. Children should have the confidence that no matter what happens to me, my family is going to be there to lift me up. The military emphasizes the importance of honor and commitment to a common purpose. Imagine the possibilities if we lived with this honor and commitment in our homes.

Older elementary children have reached the developmental stage when they're more able to think beyond their own situations and experiences to those in the outside world. You can take advantage of this new development by planning service projects and making compassion a mission. Making a meal for a family in your church or a neighbor in need is not just Mom's calling anymore. One mom made a habit each evening of asking her daughter, “What random act of kindness did you do today?” The idea was that acts of compassion are expected in their family.

Our world needs volunteers. Your child can help out informally with those in need or participate in a church or organization's mission. Caring for others outside the home can do a lot to build a heart of compassion for relationships inside your home as well. If your child is struggling with sibling conflict issues, the heart therapy needed may be in this area of caring for others both inside and outside your home. Kids learn that you don't have to look very far from home to find others with significant needs. It'll help give them a heart like Jesus towards the needy, and give them a greater appreciation for their own blessings.

Short-term mission projects are a great way to broaden the thinking of the older elementary child. Getting out of your community and seeing how others live broadens one's perspective and can have a lasting impression on a child. Furthermore, seeing that God's word applies to people who are different is encouraging and contributes to spiritual formation.

A mission trip is not the same as a youth retreat. Children are expected to demonstrate maturity, a positive work ethic, and spiritual sensitivity. Keep in mind that much of the benefit of the trip comes in the preparation as they learn how to raise the money, prepare themselves, and pray. When a young person goes on a mission trip, others are blessed but the real work happens in the heart of your child. God can use ministry in that form to build convictions, passion, and empathy to others. It's easier then for them to understand the compassion that Jesus had for the lost, the sick, and the needy. Be careful with the comments you make about the less fortunate. It is easy to be judgmental towards those in need, concluding that they must have done something to create their problem or that they're not

doing enough to solve it. Jesus did not see people this way. He healed, taught, encouraged, and, above all else, loved people.

To encourage your child to develop responsibility in this area, you might regularly ask for ideas and plans a child has to contribute to life. This isn't optional. Kids should regularly be thinking about how to help and strengthen others. Compassion is more than just pity. Compassion requires action. We are much like Jesus when we reach out and think about the needs of others.



## Responsibility with Things

“**T**his house is a disaster! Everyone is always leaving their things lying around, forgetting where they put stuff, and the bedrooms are a wreck. I can’t take it anymore! Why am I the only one who ever does anything around here? Why can’t you guys be more responsible?”

Have you ever found yourself saying this to your children? These words are usually spoken in anger and frustration. We often admonish our children to be more responsible without taking the time to teach them how. This is an unfair expectation, since responsibility is a heart quality that requires training to develop.

Teaching responsibility is time consuming because it requires practice. It’s sometimes just easier for tired busy parents to do things themselves. While this may get a job done faster, it doesn’t teach responsibility. What kids often learn is that, if they resist long enough, they won’t have to do it. Or, they develop the opinion that cleaning up around the house is Mom’s job. Children can learn to take initiative in this area, but it takes some work.

Responsibility with things begins with kids caring for

themselves and their own possessions. If your son left his backpack in the middle of the floor for the umpteenth time, he needs a responsibility plan that includes clear expectations of what he needs to do with the backpack, a reminder system to get it done, and reporting if necessary. Your job is to coach him and to hold him accountable. You might say, "I've noticed that one of the areas you are working on in your responsibility development is to pick up your things such as your backpack instead of leaving it on the floor when you come home. I'd like you to take some time and develop a backpack plan and report back to me about what that plan is and how I can help you when your plan isn't working."

By transferring responsibility to kids and then holding them accountable, you're able to build internal motivation instead of being the parental motivation for your child. You might even establish a marker for your son to help him hold himself accountable by saying something like, "One of the things I know you like to do when you come home from school is get a snack. Maybe it would be good for you to establish a reminder for yourself that says that you need to put your backpack in your room before you can have snack. Then, if I see the backpack on the floor I can just point out that you're having snack and that will be a reminder to you that you haven't taken care of the backpack yet." When parents draw attention to these kinds of reminders, then kids learn to ask questions of themselves and associate the marker with their own personal responsibility.

Or, you might say, "I've noticed that when you leave the bathroom there are several things left undone. Remember that when you leave the bathroom, you need to turn

off the light. When your hand hits that switch, that's the time to look around and do a responsibility check before you leave the bathroom." All you need to do now is say, "Did you turn off the light in the bathroom?" and that question means a lot more than flipping the switch. Kids learn responsibility by developing internal motivation systems. Your job, as a parent, is to require them to develop the systems and then hold them accountable to use them.

If your daughter forgets or doesn't have time to make her bed before she leaves for school, you might shut the door until she comes home and then have a meeting with her. Require that she develop a plan to get that bed made, identify the excuses she says to herself, and then hold her accountable to that plan. Responsibility requires awareness of an issue, a plan, and the determination to work the plan and overcome obstacles including laziness. If your child lacks the character to choose to be responsible, you may have to increase the workload, remove privileges, or tie privileges to specific responsibilities more closely.

An effective way to enforce responsibility is to require children to report back when the task is complete. In fact, you might find yourself saying regularly, "The job isn't done until it's checked." You then can inspect the work, requiring an interruption to your schedule. But if you consistently inspect, then you'll be able to set a standard for the work. Your definition of a clean kitchen, for example, may be different than your child's definition. Inspecting clarifies expectations.

Responsibility builds a little discomfort into life. You feel a bit uncomfortable when you know that you must meet a deadline or accomplish a task. That uncomfortable feeling is important and motivates a person to pick up af-

ter themselves, check to see that a job is done, and finish the task completely. Many children don't experience the discomfort of responsibility and need a bit of parental discomfort to help build it. That doesn't imply being mean to your kids, but your reminders and the requirement of a plan increase that internal sense in a child that a task is waiting.

Jesus illustrated responsibility by using the word "faithful" to describe stewards who were left in charge of talents while the landowner was away. When he returned, he had each steward report back, and then to those who did well he said in Matthew 25:21, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" You might point out in that Bible story that it's the stewards who were faithful that received more privileges. Much like it is in your home each day.





## Maturing in Conflict Management

“Cut it out!”  
“No, you cut it out!”  
“I’m telling Mom.”  
“Go ahead, you started it anyway.”  
“I did not!”  
“Did too!”

Exchanges like these are all too common among siblings. Bickering often seems to be the only way that brothers and sisters know how to communicate, leaving parents emotionally exhausted and at the end of a very frayed rope. If peace only reigns in your home when everyone is hiding in their respective corners, or asleep, take heart. Enjoying family closeness while everyone is conscious may seem like a pipe dream, but there are steps that you can take to make it a reality.

Many parents feel like they have to be referees with their kids. Although that may be necessary at times, kids by this age should have the ability to take more responsibility for conflict. They need a good plan to accomplish that. You’ll likely still be involved, but the conflict situations can

teach children how to face the challenges of life. There's not just one way to solve conflict problems because they come in all kinds of different forms. But as you work through each one, you'll find that they will learn more skills over time that they'll then be able to put into practice.

Teaching children to deal with conflict often starts with their brothers and sisters. Sibling relationships are a child's first class in relationship school and you, as the parent, are the teacher, not just the referee. In these relationships children learn how to listen, compromise, persuade, assert themselves, and manage their emotions. Most children need training in this area and your home is the classroom. You'll also help children address conflict with you and with others outside the home. It's all part of their training.

Dealing with sibling rivalry must go deeper than "why can't you just be nice?" God calls us to "love one another deeply, from the heart." (1 Peter 1:22) Sibling rivalry indicates deeper issues of selfishness, and a lack of good conflict management skills or emotional control. If left unchecked, siblings will carry these problems into adulthood and continue to have difficulty relating to one another. It's almost impossible to get to the bottom of "who started it?" Trying to referee arguments usually means that parents must choose sides, which only creates more hard feelings among siblings.

Rather than yelling at the kids to "work it out," try pulling them aside individually and speaking to each one alone. You can help them calm down, get each perspective on the conflict, and talk through what they are actually upset about. This is also a time to reassure each child that you understand his position, but explain the other child's point of view. Once everyone is calm, you can act as mediator in

a discussion between the offended parties. Referees make the call, but mediators listen and help guide the conversation to reach a mutual understanding. As your children mature into adolescence, this foundation for conflict resolution may preserve their relationships with one another. Hopefully, they will eventually be able to resolve conflict without you, but in the mean time, mediation is important in teaching peaceful conflict resolution and kids learn a lot by watching. You might even have a debriefing later by evaluating the resolution together and identifying what you did to bring it about.

Sometimes, however, you may want to have your children sit in chairs facing each other and work it out for themselves. You might say, "You need to sit together and develop a plan of how you're going to share the video game. When you have a plan, let me know and then you can move forward." Transferring responsibility to the child to solve the conflict gives opportunities to practice the new skills. You, of course, must closely monitor the interaction in order to determine areas where training is needed.

It's natural for people who live together to sometimes be annoyed with one another. The traits that make each person unique are sometimes the same ones that can irritate our loved ones the most. To offset this reality of life, children must develop tolerance and patience in their lives. It's not optional. Kids who use putdowns and sarcasm to display their irritation are being mean and must learn kindness in order to grow.

Playing games with children and encouraging them to play with each other is a great way to provide them with opportunities for addressing conflict. Games provide opportunities to take turns, win and lose graciously, and

handle issues of fairness and humility. Having fun with your child also provides much needed relational bonding to offset the work of family life. Older elementary children still enjoy and need these activities with parents, although they're less likely to ask for them now than they were a few years ago. By playing games with your children, you are strengthening both your bond with them and their bonds with one another.

You'll likely use correction as a primary tool for addressing conflict between kids and with you. But don't fall into a pattern of simply pointing out what children are doing wrong. It's best to be proactive about conflict management and resolution. Kids need to learn skills such as how to listen without interrupting, looking for common ground, and affirming others.

You'll want to look for ways to develop an identity for your family as people who work things out, solve problems together, and work as a team. You might repeat common phrases over and over as you work with your kids such as, "We work things out," "We treat each other with respect," and "Brothers and sisters love each other." Just repeating these things over and over again helps children view themselves in positive ways. Friends come and go through life, but family is forever.

In Biblical terms, love is a choice, not a soft fuzzy feeling. 1 Corinthians 13, the famous love chapter, is so familiar that it's easy to overlook the power of what it says. Read this chapter with your children, and ask them to complete as many "love is..." statements as they can. Then reread verses 4-7, substituting each child's name for the word love. For example, "Bobby is patient, Bobby is kind. Bobby is not easily angered. Bobby keeps no record of wrongs."

Then ask Bobby if these statements are true of him. Hopefully, some of them are. Begin by pointing those out. If he struggles with everything, recall certain times that he demonstrated an attribute of love. Then discuss areas where he needs to improve, giving real-life solutions that he can understand and readily apply.

You might also take each one of those parts of the love definition and put them down the side of a paper and define them with your child. What does it mean to be patient and kind? In one family, the kids realized that one of their main problems was “self-seeking,” and it became a good discussion tool as parents continued to help them navigate the waters of sibling challenges.

One of the tasks of responsibility in children is to handle conflict well. Some kids need remedial work in this area. You'll likely apply extra effort with some children more than others. That's okay. It's an investment that kids will use for years to come. We can't make our children feel warm and fuzzy about each other, but with God's help, we can teach them to treat one another with love, deeply, from the heart.



## Finding and Keeping Good Friends

“Don’t follow the crowd.” “Choose your friends wisely.” “If everyone else jumped off a cliff, would you follow?” Do any of these phrases sound familiar? Perhaps your parents shared these bits of wisdom with you as a child. They each possess an underlying truth about seeking and maintaining friendships. But without further explanation, they won’t be enough to help your child navigate through the complex social structure of their lives.

Choosing good friends is actually a point of responsibility and children need to see it as such. Keep in mind that children tend to choose friends based on something they want drawn out of themselves. The child who wants to be funny enjoys spending time with kids who are funny. The child who wants to do well academically tends to choose friends who help in that process. The same is true on the negative side. The child who has an inner desire to be mischievous is attracted to kids with those similar tendencies.

Now is a strategic time to talk about the value of being a good friend to many kinds of people, yet choosing close friendships wisely. You might guide your child’s thinking

about friendships by pointing out the different ways Jesus used relationships. Jesus was known as “a friend of sinners.” Sadly, this was intended more as an accusation than a compliment. Jesus reached out to everyone: the sick, the sorrowing, the needy, and the outcast. These were not people the Pharisees considered worthy of their time. But Jesus showed them love, compassion, and a path to forgiveness. You can teach your children to show this kind of love as well, but it usually requires that you be intentional in your efforts.

Your child can be Jesus to her schoolmates in several ways. Sitting with a child who usually sits alone at lunchtime, inviting someone who usually sits on the sidelines to play, or helping a classmate who is struggling with schoolwork, are all things that Jesus would do. School can often be about survival of the fittest, but that’s not how God’s kingdom works. Doing well at school isn’t all about academics. Peer relationships are another measure of your child’s success in the school environment. You might ask your child not only about how she’s doing with classes and homework, but also about whom she notices being left out. Encourage her to reach out to those children. She may not always get a positive response, but she’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that she’s doing what God wants her to do, and she may wind up with a lifelong friend in the process.

While Jesus was a friend to everyone, he was not close friends with everyone. He chose twelve men to come alongside him, learn from him, and share in his ministry. Within that circle of twelve, only three, Peter, James, and John, were given an intimate glimpse into his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. And only John was known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Today, he probably would

have been called Jesus' best friend. These were the men Jesus confided in and shared his most personal moments with.

Help your child identify kids that might be best friend candidates by looking beyond the exterior to the character traits that God values. In choosing a new king for Israel, God gave Samuel this advice, "Do not consider his appearance or his height... The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

It's helpful to talk about what qualities are good in a friend. Traits like honesty, loyalty, and integrity should be at the top of the list. One way to help your child recognize these traits is to first identify negative behaviors. You'll likely hear stories about kids who cause trouble among peers or get into trouble with teachers by telling outrageous stories, changing allegiances depending on who else is around, or trying to "get away with" breaking the rules. Point out the character flaws that these behaviors reflect and encourage your child to choose wisely. Memorize this scripture together: "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.' " (1 Corinthians 15:33) While it's important to avoid keeping company with such kids, it's often true that negative behavior is the result of some deep insecurity. Your child may be able to encourage someone who is lying, following the crowd, or getting into trouble with simple acts of kindness or a wise comment.

Many children need help with the social cues required for making and keeping good friends. For example, if your child is complaining about being left out, there may be some skills to learn like taking initiative, greeting others by name, learning how to listen, and how to be part of good



conversation. These skills are mysterious for some children and require mentoring and discussion with parents.

It's particularly important for parents to be strategic in this area by looking for ways to expose your kids to good relationships. You can nurture positive friendships by providing opportunities for interaction with other Christian kids. Church and scout clubs, Sunday school, homeschool co-ops, play dates, and parties are all venues for forging good friendships. You might want to host play dates in your home and make your house attractive so that kids want to be there. You then are able to control activities, observe interactions, and become familiar with the friends. Make your home a place kids feel comfortable, including your own child. Allow her to act silly, take risks, or test out relationship skills without feeling the threat of critics. It's better to have a messy house and an empty pantry than a child who never wants to be home.

In your discussions about friendship, emphasize the role that Jesus plays as the perfect best friend. Your child's relationship with Christ is the most important friendship and when a choice must be made between friends, choosing Jesus is always the best long-term decision. And remember that, although you must be the authority, the friendship part of parenting is also important. Eventually, when your child is older, you'll want to have a friendship that's deep and meaningful. Building that relationship starts now.



## Anger Management

**S**creaming. Crying. Slamming doors. Name-calling. This sounds an awful lot like a temper tantrum, doesn't it? Wasn't this supposed to be over in the toddler years? Temper tantrums may have taken on a different form, but many young people still have them.

For most parents, the older elementary years are a relief compared to the busyness of endless diaper changes and sleepless nights. Kids are more self-sufficient and helpful. The work of parenting is certainly not as physically demanding. Unfortunately, this relief can sometimes lead parents to let their guard down. You might not be chasing a toddler anymore, but parenting can be much more emotionally demanding.

If you are dealing with regular outbursts of anger from your child, you may want to begin with a little self-examination. Sometimes parents use anger and intensity in family life to solve problems. Unfortunately, that anger is contagious and kids are quick to pick up on it. James 1:20 is a good reminder to not solve problems with anger. It says, "Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life

that God desires.” The way you solve problems and address challenges can model appropriate emotional restraint.

Some children seem to have an extra scoop of emotion in their hearts. Those with anger issues are often kids who easily get excited and can be the life of the party. But knowing how to manage the wave of energy produced by anger is challenging for most people. Feeling overwhelmed by emotion often leads to reactions that are self-defeating and counterproductive. Children who do not learn how to manage their anger now are at high risk to grow up to be angry adults. The consequences of an inability to manage anger can be very serious in adulthood.

Children often feel as if they are victims of their emotions and don't recognize how a little work can bring about much control. One effective way to help children develop a plan for managing their anger is to transfer responsibility to the child to develop a strategy. You might say, “Working on your anger problem is important. I'd like you to think of 5 things you can do or say to yourself when you start to feel angry.” Children often need ideas, but it's best to say, “Here's a piece of paper. I'd like you to write at the top ‘My Anger Plan.’ I can't write on that paper because it's your plan. I can give you ideas, but so can others. It might be good for you to interview other people or just sit down and think about what works for you.”

Feel free to share your ideas about anger management but give your child freedom to think of his own. Kids come up with great solutions sometimes: Get out of the situation, walk around the room, or take a deep breath. Some kids say to themselves things such as, “Getting upset isn't worth it, I can handle this without anger, or controlling my anger is a sign of maturity.”

Helping a child develop a plan is important because it gives the child ownership and control. It doesn't mean that you stop disciplining, however. You might continue the dialogue this way: "We have the Mom Plan that I use when you get angry but I don't think you like that too much. If you can use your plan then I don't have to use mine. Working on this now will help you for the rest of your life."

The next hurdle is to use the plan under emotional pressure. Developing a plan in a peaceful moment is great, but implementing it under pressure is the real test. It takes practice. If your child gets angry, keep the problem the child's problem. Don't enter into the anger episode. You might walk away or you might require your child to take a break from life and sit in the hall until he settles down.

A debriefing after an angry episode is often helpful. Talk about what went wrong and what could be done better next time. A good plan backed up with firmness, while the parent remains calm, often produces positive results.

Rarely is it helpful to dialogue with a child who is enraged. Their anger is controlling them and they can't think straight. It's usually best to have a productive dialogue after the emotion has subsided a bit, and not just in the child. Parents also can think better when their anger level has reduced.

Keep in mind that anger often has underlying causes and that working on anger directly may just be dealing with the symptom. Anger can stem from bitterness, jealousy, or feelings of inadequacy. It can also result from an inability to receive correction or a no answer. Kids sometimes have problems separating from an activity when asked to do something else. In those cases and many others, it may be better to teach children to handle those challenges first.

Once kids have a plan, then you can view life as practice sessions to work the plan into the heart.

Give your child the tools he needs to manage his anger appropriately. Make acceptable and unacceptable responses clear. In addition, look for ways to strengthen relational bonds between you and your child. A high sense of relationship makes hurtful responses harder.

Sometimes, as parents, we focus so much on what not to do, that we forget to teach our children what to do in difficult situations. To help your child handle his anger positively, you could look at several examples in the Bible of teachings about anger. For example, you might read together the gospel account of Jesus' anger in the temple in John 2:13-16. You can use this example to highlight two key questions to ask when anger arises: why am I angry, and how should I respond? Jesus' anger was righteous, because it was in line with God's will. The moneychangers had corrupted the purpose of the temple by using sacrifices, which were biblical, for personal gain. Jesus responded by chasing them out of the temple to restore reverence for God's house.

Frequently, human anger is selfishly motivated, but there are times when your child will feel a righteous anger with siblings, friends, teachers, or even you. So what can he do to acceptably handle it? Pray with and for your child that God would produce the patience, peace, and gentleness, much needed character qualities often built when living in anger-producing situations.

For most families, these tools will be enough to get an angry heart under control. For families dealing with extreme anger problems, outside help is critical. God established the church as a supportive community. Pastors,

elders, godly role models, and youth leaders have experience and gifts that may provide just the answer you're looking for. Sometimes this accountability is enough to inspire a change in behavior. If not, seek the help of a professional counselor. It's hard for many parents to take these steps, but God calls you to direct your children on the path of obedience. He never said you have to do it alone.



## Responsibility with Speech

**M**ike and Pam grew more and more concerned over their eleven-year-old son Robert's unkind words to his brother. He would put down his younger brother and use sarcasm and meanness on a regular basis. They decided to do something about it.

At their next family Bible time, they asked Robert to read Ephesians 4:29, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." They then took out a large piece of paper and drew an outline of a person on it and asked the boys to identify tearing-down words. As the boys mentioned things such as sarcasm, put-downs, and mean statements, they would go up to the paper and make a rip of some kind, representing the damage done.

Then Dad and Mom asked a different question. "What kinds of words would build someone up instead of tearing them down?" The boys thought of several good ideas and Dad and Mom made suggestions as well: "I like you. You're good. You did it. You do that well. Let me help you." They

also talked about listening, sharing, and thinking about others. Over the next couple of weeks Mike and Pam continued to work on the negative speech, being firm when it happened and requiring positive responses as well. Now they look back on that period of time as the pivotal change point for transforming the way their kids talked. They continue to work on the problem, but strategies are in motion in their family now to get rid of the put-downs and unkind words.

Poor speech habits come in several categories. Sometimes it's getting rid of foul language, cursing, or toilet speech. Other times families decide that certain words such as "stupid" are off limits in their home. Commonly, parents are eager to reduce the unkindness demonstrated by the words children use toward each other. In each case, parents are looking for ways to increase a child's sensitivity to speech.

When transferring responsibility to children to handle their speech well, it's important to emphasize what they should do, and not just talk about what they should stop doing. Placing an emphasis on the positive can go a long way to help children change. Sherri told a story of how she did this in her family. At the end of every day, she would ask her kids, "What ways did you encourage someone today?" The idea she communicated to her family was that encouraging others is expected and that each person needs to be on the lookout for ways to build others up.

Proverbs 15:4 says, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit." A combination of teaching, firmness, and prayer helps emphasize the importance of speech. In addition, though, it's important to encourage kids to practice right speech. In or-



der to say positive things, kids need to work on it over and over again, both inside and outside the family. Your careful observation can guide their thinking and move them forward.

Sometimes children engage in self-inflicting words, putting themselves down or engaging in negative self-talk. Those children need to learn more positive things to say in their hearts and practice saying them. Psalm 19:14 says, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." It's often the words that kids say in their hearts that come out in their speech.

The power of a parent's words can't be overestimated. As you choose the words you use to correct your child, focus on the positive way you'd like your child to respond instead of the negative. It's amazing how the words of parents affect the hearts of kids. As you say things such as, "Manage your energy" or "Think before you speak," you're actually giving your child exact words to say in the heart. Your correction is more than trying to stop an action. It's about replacing bad actions with good ones. Kids benefit when parents focus on the positive they'd like to see instead of the negative they'd like to get rid of.

An important area of maturity has to do with speech. Talk to your child about the use of the tongue and its power. One of the signs of responsibility in children is a greater awareness of their speech and a recognition of the need to nurture others. Some kids just say what they're thinking. That's usually not the best. It's important to put a guard at one's mouth to measure the words before they're allowed to escape.

Helping children develop good speech habits when

they're young can go a long way in equipping them for the future. People with controlled speech make better dads and moms and employees and employers. They do better on teams, and learn to add to the atmosphere in any situation.

Kids need firmness when they misuse speech, but they also need a vision for something better. Some children believe that they have the right to say whatever they are feeling, or that somehow being mean with words is more acceptable than physical violence. Part of their training requires that they learn responsibility for using speech to help, encourage, and guide people forward, not just to express their displeasure.

It's not enough to get rid of negative or hurtful words. The child who is being responsible with speech looks for ways to add to the lives of others. Instead of taking away a privilege as a consequence for poor speech, you might want to require several positive demonstrations of speech as the correction response. Mike said it this way to his son, "Before you're free to go and play, you need to think of three kind things you can say to people in this family and report them to me." In fact, Mike made this approach a regular part of their discipline, requiring his son to practice doing what's right instead of just stopping what was wrong. It took work but he began to see significant change take place.

When kids begin to recognize that one of the tasks of responsibility has to do with the mouth, they often start to take charge of this powerful area of maturity. In fact, working on positive speech, especially in negative situations, can be a family exercise that teaches all of the individuals in a family how to set a guard at their mouths.



## Chores

If you're teaching your kids responsibility, chores are going to be an important part of the training. Of course, it's much easier to do the chores yourself than it is to fight with them to do simple things. Sometimes kids have an entitlement mentality that creates a shocked response when it's suggested that they might have to do some work. Other kids seem offended that you would ask for help in the kitchen because they believe that's Mom's area of responsibility. If that's the case, chores can be a great tool for building a new way of thinking.

Chores not only get things done, they're also important for a child's development. Children learn valuable life skills by assuming some of the regular household duties. The first category of chores has to do with keeping one's own space clean and neat. Making beds, putting clothes away, cleaning up the bedroom, and putting away toys and activities in common areas are all part of managing one's self. Each person in a family can take responsibility to care for messiness. Most children first need to learn how, and then secondly to develop a feeling of obligation to do it.

You'll likely have to help your kids learn some organizational skills. Give kids a designated spot to hang up backpacks, jackets, hats, and to store shoes. Kids can learn to make their own beds, clean their own rooms, put away their own laundry, and deliver dirty clothes to the laundry room. They're even capable of sorting it themselves. They can also clear away their own dishes from the table and leave them in either the sink or dishwasher, as the family policy dictates. Personal responsibilities need not be compensated with an allowance. You can include personal responsibilities on a morning or bedtime routines checklist.

But don't stop there. Kids need to contribute to the family and look for ways to help out in the common areas of home life. Jobs like dusting, vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms, folding laundry, and doing dishes are ways to help out. Weeding, clearing yard debris, raking, gardening, and mowing the lawn are outdoor chores.

Adults manage their own lives using to-do lists and calendars. Kids can do the same thing. You want them to say something like, "Today is Tuesday. What do I need to do today? Oh yes, this is the day I need to vacuum the living room." That means that you as a parent aren't saying, "Son, today's the day you vacuum the living room." Rather, you're saying something like, "Son, be sure to complete your chores today and report back to me. Be sure to look at your to-do list and the calendar to remind yourself what's on your list."

When a child completes chores, be sure that you inspect the work, especially at first. One of the signs of responsibility is to complete the job to the parent's expectation,

not to just get by with the minimum. By having a children report back, you're creating a sense of accountability and that tends to improve the quality of work. Children who complete a job half-heartedly or with lots of grumbling communicate a message that they need more chores or work. You may have to double the work for a while in order to help your child build the character and rise to the task so that chores don't seem so difficult when being asked to do simple things.

One more category for the chore list is the "honor task." If you're creating a chore list, you'll likely want to make this the last item. You might explain it to your child this way. "Honor does more than what's expected and looks for things that need to be done and does them. One of the items that's always on your to-do list is to look around and find something yourself that needs to be done and do it. It might be straightening up the bathroom or living room, putting the dishes in the dishwasher, or helping a younger sibling get ready." Parents who teach honor in the home develop children who consider others' needs, not just their own. If you want your kids to fly straight, teach them how to obey. If you want them to fly high, teach them honor.

Scheduling a time to do chores may seem impossible since families tend to be quite busy. Look for ways to build time into your children's schedules to complete chores. For example, kids can usually complete daily chores, such as sweeping or taking out the trash, before school. After school, and after homework is done, kids may have to complete a chore before they can play. In fact, if a child balks at that idea, you might say, "You don't have to do your chores in the afternoon. You can do them in the morning so that you can go straight out to play after homework. It's up to

you.” Children can learn that free time is a privilege that comes after the work of the day.

Doing chores not only contributes to the running of the household, it instills a positive work ethic in your child. Chores give children a sense of ownership in the home by investing in family productivity. They also increase family bonds as everyone works together toward a common goal. Parents often think of fun activities as the best way to foster family bonds, but an organized family workday can have the same benefits. When the leaves fall, it’s time for everyone to grab a rake and pitch in. When it’s time to plant the flowers, give your kids their own garden tools and let them help.

Parents can model a servant’s heart that children may not immediately appreciate, but will long remember. Eventually, children will emulate our attitudes, positive or negative. The idea of “going above and beyond” may seem unattainable for your ten-year-old, but it’s possible. You might even teach Colossians 3:23-24 as you work. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”



## Idolatry or Entertainment

**E**ntertainment is a big business today and children must learn how to manage it in order to enjoy it effectively. Entertainment obsessions can easily go to an extreme. Part of the training of your older elementary age child is to build the necessary governing abilities to manage life's options and responsibilities. That process starts now with something as simple as electronic entertainment.

Video games have gone from a technological novelty when they were first introduced in the early 1970's, to an integral part of typical childhood. But this is more than just child's play. Video games are America's multibillion-dollar favorite pastime. Adult gamers spend many hours a week playing video games, often shirking such "grown-up" responsibilities as family and work. How can you teach your child to develop good habits to balance entertainment with the important responsibilities of life?

Video games are a form of entertainment. Entertainment in any form has an influence on the person, encouraging certain aspects of character, intellect, emotions, and personality. TV, for example, can be a good

way to learn, but there's a big difference between what's learned from a history channel and learning from watching music videos. Furthermore, too much learning from TV may contribute to a passive learning style instead of actively engaging with the material by reading, creating, or writing.

Researchers are continually analyzing the science of gaming in terms of its effects on brain function and social and emotional development. Many video games do have educational qualities. Educational video games provide immediate, individualized feedback and can improve motor skills, making them useful when used wisely. They build confidence, develop strategy, and teach problem-solving skills. Video games are a fun way for kids, and adults, to spend their free time, and they can be a good way for a parent and child to connect and gain some closeness.

But too much of anything can be detrimental. When something consumes a person's life, the Bible calls that thing an idol. All people of any age can find themselves moving toward idolatry. That's why the first epistle of John ends with this warning, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21) Modern idols aren't always easy to identify because they're such an accepted part of our culture, but an idol is anything that takes first place in your life. That place is reserved for God alone.

You might use a play on words, such as, "Don't let an idol make you idle," to remind your child of a proper attitude towards gaming. By defining both terms, the phrase is a good reminder that gaming is entertainment and too much of it prevents a person from getting other valuable things done.

If he resists your direction, it's probably best to make



video games off limits until your child is ready to accept the new policy. You'll know by demeanor and countenance when your child is mature enough to handle video games properly.

You may want to set a limit of one or two hours of screen time per day or only allow video games after homework is completed and between three and five o'clock in the afternoon. For many children, the late afternoon or early evening may be the best time for play, after the busyness of the day, but not right before bed when overstimulation can create sleep problems. You may want to allow your child to have input into the gaming policy and pray together about it.

Explain to your child that you are primarily looking at the heart. That means that we ask different questions than, "What's wrong with it?" Rather, we're asking questions about developing character, attitudes, and passions about life. Too much video game time may overly influence a child's attitudes or rob him of important time that might be used to develop other areas of interest and expertise.

You might require the completion of other responsibilities, time outdoors, and with friends earlier in the day. Limits like this help provide a balanced perspective on gaming. You will likely feel better about the time your child spends playing video games when your child has completed chores and is pursuing other interests.

When setting a time limit you might want to use a timer to track video playtime. Then you don't have to be the bad guy by arbitrarily determining that gaming is over. It's your part then to make the boundaries firm. Don't be lured into pleas of, "Can I just finish this level," or, "Just one more thing." This inevitably winds up taking more

time and misses the point of staying within a time boundary. The goal should be that when the timer goes off, he stops play and puts away the game components without being told. If he does not hear the timer, a simple, "The timer's going off," is all that should be necessary from you. Kids who can't stay within time limits are likely not mature enough to play the game.

How much is too much? Although each child is different, there are some common indicators that provide the warning signals requiring some kind of adjustment. Take note of your child's attitude during and after game time. You may need to restrict gaming for a time while your child readjusts a negative attitude. Take a break for a day, several days, or longer, depending on the severity of the problem.

When the restricted time is over, you can try again. You might say something such as, "I'm watching to see if you are mature enough to play video games. I'll know that because I'll see that the games are not encouraging aggressive and disrespectful behavior. Furthermore, I'll see that you're cooperative when I ask you to put the video game aside and do something else or help out around the house."

Violent video games, like violent TV and movies, influence the heart and mind of your impressionable child, so you'll want to determine certain games to be off limits. You might use the rating system that's required on all video games as a guide, but you know your child best, so determine what games are acceptable in your home. Your limits are based on your convictions, so talk about why particular video games are unacceptable in your home.

Setting limits on video games doesn't mean that all war or fighting-related games are evil or that they will warp your child's mind. God designed boys with an innate need

to “conquer the bad guys.” It’s okay to allow children to play fighting games, both in the backyard and on the gaming system. The balance comes with what you allow in both the level of violence and the gruesomeness. Much of the Old Testament is filled with tales of conflict, battle, and war. Christian parents need not avoid these topics, but rather handle them in a God-honoring way.

Entertainment must be kept in balance with responsibility. This connection can be applied to many areas of life and will help your child set personal limits even in adulthood. Good habits and patterns are developed now, and kids can learn that their choices are important both for themselves and to God.



## Putting Limits on the TV

The television is a great source of information and can be good for entertainment and learning. However, it's very easy for it to become another member of the family. In some families the TV is on before school, after school, suppertime, bedtime, and even in the car. In fact, if it's off, some families feel like something is wrong. Most children spend more time watching TV than they do interacting with family and friends. Since moral and spiritual development are sensitive at this age, it's cause for concern.

Imagining a world without television may seem impossible, maybe even frightening for some people. Yet humanity has survived for thousands of years without it. Before electricity, our ancestors followed the rhythms of the day. They went to bed when it was dark and got up at dawn. Now people spend many hours after dark “vegging out” in front of the TV. Despite the modern comforts we enjoy, Americans today suffer from more sleep deprivation, stress, and anxiety than the hard-working, self-denying generations before us. What does TV have to do with this?

Entertainment imitates life, and eventually life comes to imitate entertainment. Media in all its forms has an unprecedented influence on the way we think, what we buy, and how we live. It seems that impressionable minds are influenced at a younger age with each generation.

Parents sometimes defend their TV habits by arguing that children need exposure to the “real world.” This is a well-intentioned, but misguided argument. For example, exposing children to the harsh realities of poverty and suffering in the world will help develop desirable character traits like empathy, sympathy, and compassion. It may even inspire a heart for ministry. On the other hand, exposure to the sin-saturated media will only nurture an appetite for sin. The Bible gives clear warnings that directly apply to what believers and their children should be watching. Look at these verses and imagine them in our electronic age.

2 Timothy 3:2-7 says that in the last days, “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.”

The biblical description of people in the last days sounds like much of what is portrayed on television today, and sadly the actors who portray it. If you don't want your child to reflect ungodliness in attitude, behavior, or dress,

be careful about whom your child is hanging around with in the virtual world of television.

In the Bible, King David fell into sin after watching a beautiful woman take a bath. His sin multiplied when he tried to cover it up. He may well have had that experience in mind when he made this covenant in Psalm 101:3, "I will set before my eyes no vile thing." You can make a similar covenant with your family, and you might post this verse on or near your TV.

Take control of your family's time by limiting TV viewing. You might consider eliminating TV on school days. Even with afterschool activities and homework, kids can find time for more meaningful leisure pursuits when TV isn't an option. You may be surprised at how your family time is enhanced when you unplug the tube and plug in to each other. Additionally, regularly watching TV right before bed can disturb normal sleep patterns, due to overstimulation or upsetting images. You might read with your child before bed instead, or allow time to read alone before lights out.

Take time to set clear boundaries about when the TV can be on and for how long. This will help eliminate a lot of the begging and whining that often accompanies requests to watch TV or reactions to turning it off. You can handle whining, begging, or arguing by taking away the privilege altogether. Children who know that their negative reaction will result in a loss of TV privilege are much more likely to comply with the rules. You might want to make TV a weekend privilege and even turn it into a family experience. Friday or Saturday night can be family movie night.

You can manage your family's viewing habits in several ways. Some families block certain cable channels, limit

their cable packages, or get rid of it altogether. Other families watch only what they want by recording programs and viewing them when everyone is together. Internet streaming services give access to a wide variety of TV shows and movies. There are parental controls available for some of these services.

You might apply Philippians 4:8 as a litmus test for evaluating television programming. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” When your child wants to watch something on TV, you can turn each aspect of this verse into a question that needs a positive answer. If it doesn’t meet these criteria, then it may not be appropriate. You can create your own checklist and keep it by the TV for quick reference.

What is the result of guarding our hearts and minds? The answer is in verse 9, “And the God of peace will be with you.” When we guard our children’s hearts and minds, as well as our own, then God’s peace can more easily reign in our children’s hearts.



## Useful and Necessary Technology

Cell phones. Chat forums. Email. Facebook. iPad. iPod. Texting. Twitter. We're a wireless nation, connected twenty-four hours a day. If you need information, you need look no further than your next Google search. The tools for digital communication are endless, and it seems like something new is introduced every other day. We have the world at our fingertips, and we can access it anywhere. Our children are the heirs of this technological revolution, and they embrace it whole-heartedly. But for parents who remember a time when computers had to be plugged in to work, car phones needed an antenna, and the best hand-held device around was an Etch-a-Sketch, the technology flood is overwhelming. Well, maybe the Etch-a-Sketch is a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the idea. How can we help our children navigate through the technological tidal wave?

There's no doubt that technology has revolutionized our lives, and in many ways improved it. We can shop, communicate, work, pay bills, and balance the family budget on the computer or a smart phone. What was a luxury has become a necessity in modern life. Children also use the computer to supplement their primary job as students, researching



and typing reports, and completing homework assignments. Some educational classes are completely online and a child today is often required to interact electronically in order to learn in the educational system. Technology is revolutionizing not only the way we live, but also the way we learn.

With everyone spending so much time on the computer, it's important to establish clear, healthy parameters for usage. Differentiating between the computer as a tool and a toy is a good place to start. A tool is required to complete a task, while a toy's purpose is entertainment. A computer can be used as a toy, but that's just one of its uses. The temptation to overuse it for entertainment can become a detriment to other areas of life. As a parent, you'll want to limit electronics time.

If you were raised with a computer in the house, you most likely used it primarily for word processing and playing disk-based games. Handheld gaming devices have been around for over twenty years. The difference today is the inclusion of the Internet, which has added a whole new dimension to these technologies and increased the need for more active parental oversight. Think of the Internet as you would any public place your child has access to. Similar safety precautions apply. Rules such as "Don't talk to strangers," "Don't go to unfamiliar places alone," and "Choose your friends wisely," take on a whole new meaning in the Internet world. You'll want to install some kind of a reliable filtering program on your computer. Filtering software is available for most popular mobile devices as well. If your child owns a device with Internet access, use the same kind of safety measures as you do on your home computer.

Carefully consider access to social networking sites. Children need a lot of supervision and direction. Most par-

ents are wrestling with appropriate ages for unsupervised activities like staying home alone or going to the mall with friends. Think of social sites in the same way. Your child is developing the ability to anticipate the consequences of actions, but mastering this skill is still a long way off. How many adults have realized too late the damage that can be done to reputation and relationships by inappropriate posts? Children cannot possibly fathom the implications of their indiscretions.

Sometimes social networking can be useful for staying in touch with distant family or a friend who has moved. You must judge readiness based on your child's maturity, trustworthiness, and your ability to supervise usage. Age alone can't be the deciding factor. Once you allow access to social sites, get your own account if you don't have one already, friend your child, and require passwords and login information. Check up on activity regularly. This isn't an invasion of privacy. It's part of your duty as the parent. You know the friends your child interacts with in reality. You also need to know the friends in the virtual world.

It's best to keep the computer in a public part of your home and not in the child's bedroom. Children with Internet access in their bedrooms are in the same danger of exploitation and abuse as unsupervised children in the bad part of town. The virtual world of the Internet gives an illusion of safety. Teach your child about Internet dangers and how to identify warning signs. Don't underestimate the power of temptation, even on "good kids." Even accidental exposure because of misspelled words in an Internet search can open a gateway that may be difficult for your preteen to shut. Exposure to images and information that is "too much too soon" can warp your developing child's understanding

of healthy, appropriate behavior and leave scars on the mind. If your child has a hand-held device with Internet access, shut down your wireless network at night. Lights out. Network off.

Many preteens have become the proud owners of cell phones, though there may be little true need at this age. If your child wants a phone, you might explain the costs involved. One mom said it this way, “Cell phones are nice. First, you’ll have to pay about \$200 for the phone and then you’ll have to pay about \$50 a month to keep it going. That means that you’ll have to get a job. You could probably mow lawns or do housework for someone to earn the money. Did you want me to ask my friends if they are looking for a young person to hire?” Her daughter quickly decided that she wasn’t ready for a cell phone yet.

In some instances, however, it is necessary for a pre-teen to have a cell phone. If this is the case in your family, try limiting the texting and minutes package. Check in regularly on the calling and texting behavior. Children who know they will be checked up on by a parent are less likely to engage in inappropriate behavior on their cell phones.

An important lesson kids need to learn now that will help them for the rest of their lives is that just because something is popular doesn’t mean it is necessary. In 1 Corinthians 6:12 Paul writes, “ ‘Everything is permissible for me’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me’—but I will not be mastered by anything.” You might memorize this scripture with your young person and talk about how it applies to technology use.



## Personal Money Management for Kids

“**T**wenty bucks?! Thanks, Grandma! Hey Mom, Grandma just gave me twenty bucks. I’m rich!”

When kids get money for birthdays or holidays, it’s tempting to allow them to spend it all, since it was a gift. But this is a good opportunity to teach proper money management and responsibility in this significant area of life. Money is a good motivator for anyone but must be kept in proper perspective. Teaching kids self-discipline to save, contentment to not spend it all, and generosity in giving are important and the preteen years are an excellent time to work on it. Kids have a greater ability to earn money now and they can understand its value. Furthermore, they can grasp the need to build heart qualities and wrestle with the challenges that having or not having money presents.

It’s usually best to provide kids with a system and hold them accountable to it. It’s helpful to implement a system now, before your child gets a part-time job in high school and has more money to manage. The temptation to be self-ish with money is great, and most kids need help to build

good habits for the future. You might, for example, allow your child to keep a certain amount, maybe up to 50%, for spending and divide the remainder into three parts. One part for saving, another for giving to church, and a third to give to someone in need of their own choosing. This last category requires that children be on the lookout for needs and recognize practical ways to meet them.

You might open an interest bearing savings account and show your child a bank statement. You can talk about long-term goals, such as college or a car, for which they'll need to bear, or at least share, the financial responsibility. It would be helpful to keep rolled coins on hand so that children can divide money properly, rather than "owing" certain categories that they will pay later. This extra money inevitably winds up in spending, and never makes it back to the category it belongs in. That way you can avoid instilling a "robbing Peter to pay Paul" money management mentality. When you have promised to pay for a completed job, honor your word and pay immediately. Nothing is more frustrating to a kid than being owed back allowance. It breaks trust.

An allowance can be a good way to teach money management as long as it's properly implemented. Most financial experts agree that an allowance should be linked to specific chores rather than an ambiguous dole of money on Friday afternoons, or worse yet, whenever kids ask for it. In real life, people get paid for work, not just for existing. Linking money with work gives your child more respect for financial resources and can help avoid entitlement attitudes. Once kids begin earning money, they can assume the responsibility for purchasing some of their things, and saving up for things they want.

There are two ways to look at an allowance. The first is

to view it as a benefit of living in your home. There are also responsibilities for living in your home involving work. We work in this home and we experience benefits of this family. The allowance given is one of the benefits of living in this family and work is also expected.

The other way is to eliminate a regular payday and only associate income with work accomplished. In both cases, some work is required and other work is optional, providing opportunities to earn additional income. Either plan teaches valuable lessons and you may start with one plan for a while and then switch to something else as needed.

Be sure that your child learns that there are normal chores for which no payment is received. Those are tasks everyone does because we live in a family. Furthermore, those aren't just about self-care, such as cleaning your room or cleaning up your messes. Some chores contribute to the well-being of the family such as cleaning the bathroom, washing clothes, or cleaning up after dinner. We don't get paid for those chores. They're just a fact of life.

Out of the income children earn or receive it's important to allow discretionary spending money. There's nothing like a little freedom with money to teach some great lessons about delayed gratification, guilt from wasted spending, and prudent shopping. Kids also learn the satisfaction of saving up for something and then enjoying it. You'll want to coach children in this area but give as much freedom as possible to allow life to be the teacher. Your advice can go a long way to build internal convictions in children, but experience is also a great teacher, and best to start working on the life lessons now. Waiting, working, and saving for something are lessons learned over time and sometimes come by making poor choices and determining next time to do it differently.

If your child wants to buy something and believes that time must be now, resist the urge to loan the money. Children are experts at pushing parental guilt buttons. The whining and crying of the toddler years are replaced by pleading and begging that's still enough to wear even the most stalwart parent down. Allow your child to experience the hard work and diligence that go along with saving, or the delayed gratification that comes with waiting until the next gift-giving holiday rolls around. Sales come and go and some children get convinced that if they don't buy now, the opportunity will be gone. That is true sometimes, but going into debt to purchase today is rarely wise. Chances are, he may lose interest anyway by the time he can have it.

Don't set yourself up as a moneylender. It changes the relationship between you and your child. Proverbs 22:7 says, "The borrower is servant to the lender." Money can damage a relationship between a parent and child so be careful about getting yourself into a place where you are your child's creditor.

Help your child develop impulse control by warning against frequent spending every time a few dollars are available. This is part of maturity. Control of spending habits builds independence and self-confidence. When you make money management part of your child's spiritual life training, you're developing heart qualities to be used well into adulthood. You might use Proverbs 21:5 as a starting point for conversations about money: "The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty." You might place this verse on a piggy bank as a constant reminder of good money management.



## Spiritual Training

**E**ach developmental stage requires different approaches to spiritual training. When your children were younger, telling Bible stories and memorizing scripture may have taken a major part of your teaching and rightly so. It's during the later elementary years, however, when children do more integrating, evaluating, and challenging of ideas. For that reason, you'll want to take advantage of their newfound cognitive abilities to help them embrace the faith at this level. In many ways, kids must recommit themselves to Christ at each developmental stage because God, salvation, and personal relationship with him take on new meaning.

Don't be taken aback by your child's new questions or doubts. They are the backdrop out of which new understanding of God, self, and one's place in the world can develop. Likely you'll involve your child in church-related activities over the next few years. That can be quite helpful as kids hear God's message in creative ways from others, not just you. But remember that God has called parents to be the primary Christian educators of their children.



It's always great when fathers take the spiritual lead and touch their children's hearts with God's principles. But if you're the mom, and that isn't happening in your home, there's plenty you can do. In Exodus 4:24-26, God was angry with Moses because he hadn't circumcised his son. At that point, Moses wasn't being the spiritual leader God expected, so his wife, Zipporah, stepped in and circumcised the boy and God stopped his anger toward Moses. A godly mother took spiritual initiative and saved the day. It's interesting to note that many godly men and women of the past credited their mothers, not just fathers, with the spiritual training that most shaped who they became.

There's a call to dads and moms of this generation to be spiritual leaders in their homes. In Deuteronomy 6:6-9, God tasks the spiritual training of children directly to parents. "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

No pastor, Sunday school teacher, youth leader, or Christian schoolteacher can replace your spiritual leadership in your child's life. Ministry leaders are a valuable resource to parents. Take full advantage of their ministries according to your needs, particularly if your family situation does not include both parents or two believing parents. God uses his people to fill in the voids of family circumstances. But when parents leave the spiritual training of their children to others, it can create a gap in the child's understanding and acceptance of God as Heavenly Father.

Training takes time. The passage in Deuteronomy provides three things, that when all put together, contribute to the passing on of the faith to your kids: Build relationship, share scripture, and practice faith. If you will regularly put those three things together, your kids will catch what it means to follow the Lord. Let's look at each of those three things in more detail.

Build relationship. In our busy culture, busyness dominates most of our lives. We often don't spend much time "sitting at home" as the passage suggests. That may be an important motivator to cause you to reevaluate your schedule. You cannot train your children if you are not with your children. However, the next phrase says, "When you walk along the road." Maybe if God were writing that today he might include the trips in the van, a time when kids and parents are together and have an opportunity to talk about Christian values. The beginning of your spiritual instruction may begin simply with a reordering of the family schedule.

Other relationship-building opportunities include mornings or evenings, and a few adjustments to those times may turn them into spiritual training moments as well. The key thing to remember is that relationship is the vehicle through which values are passed. A meal together, a game, an activity, or some time outdoors each set the stage for the next two components necessary to pass on the faith.

Share scripture. Keep in mind that adults learn through discussion and reading. Kids learn through activity. So, sharing scripture with kids is likely going to mean that a biblical truth is combined with an application, a game, or an exercise of some kind. Those creative touches often bring the scriptures alive for kids and help them to see that the Bible is relevant and exciting.

Practice faith. Later in Deuteronomy 6:20, it says, “In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him...” The idea is that you’ll have opportunities to explain your faith and illustrate it to your kids along life’s path. By praying with your children, serving the Lord together, opening your home with hospitality, or giving money to help others, you are demonstrating what it means to practice faith.

Some parents think of their faith as a private matter, just between them and God. If you don’t practice it with your kids, they’re likely to believe that faith is not relevant to the here-and-now and then decrease its value for their personal lives. Beyond talking, your example of everyday faith is like a hot brand on your child’s heart and mind. Your child will have a hard time believing what you teach if it doesn’t come out in your life. Find joy in worship, service, and daily obedience. No matter where your child goes later in life, or how far he may wander from the faith, he will always remember your steadfast faith.

If you yourself are new to the faith or don’t feel qualified to teach your child spiritually, take heart. It doesn’t take Bible college or a seminary degree to pass the faith on to your kids. It takes parents who are growing themselves. You might use this time in your life to learn more about God’s Word yourself so that you have answers to the questions your child has. Biblical knowledge is essential to daily holy living, but head knowledge without heart knowledge does not produce saving faith. Balance spiritual training with an emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Hopefully there will be times when your child asks difficult questions, maybe more difficult than you feel

comfortable answering. That's great. Find the answers and share them with your child. Or better yet, show him how to find those answers himself and report them to you and others. Your humility and willingness to discover biblical truths together is a teaching exercise in itself.

Encourage a personal quiet time by giving your child a children's Bible. There are so many Bibles available that are geared specifically toward boys or girls or have interesting comments and questions that are developmentally strategic. God speaks through your child. You might want to encourage your child's independent spirituality by asking, "What is God saying to you?" When a child reads a passage of scripture and God speaks, then that message may be an encouragement to others as well. Allowing children to be conduits of God's grace is one of the ways that spiritual independence and responsibility are developed.

The spiritual training of children must be deliberate and purposeful. In both specified times and unplanned moments you are sowing seeds of faith in your child's heart. The later elementary years are a critical time for spiritual training as children begin developing their own beliefs and worldview, independent of their parents.



## Viewing the Church as a Treasure

God designed his church to be a place where community is developed, God's Word is taught, and where people are disciplined in their faith. Children sometimes complain that church is "boring" and, if we adults were honest, we would have to admit that sometimes we feel the same way. But does this really reflect an inherent problem with church, or something else? The key is to realize that church is not just a place one goes to receive, but it's a place to give, and older elementary age children are at a great stage of life where they actually have something to contribute.

Children often need teaching and training about church in order to gain the most from it. The work starts at home. You might encourage kids to listen to a sermon or a Sunday school teaching, knowing that they'll be asked afterwards, "What was the lesson you learned today?" Or, a better question may even be, "What did God say to you at church today?" Knowing that there will be a debriefing on the way home or a discussion after church can give kids just the right mindset. Furthermore, as parents share what

they learned and how God spoke to them, kids develop a greater appreciation for their own church experience.

One of the challenges is that children often have an entertainment view of church and when the worship doesn't provide the same excitement as TV or a video game, they view it as boring. Recognizing that God speaks in different ways to different people can help kids recognize the importance of being on the lookout for a meeting with God. You might tell your kids the story of Elijah, who saw God do dramatic things on the mountain, sending fire down from heaven to consume the altar and prove himself to be God.

But then Elijah felt discouraged, and, by the brook, God wanted to teach Elijah that he doesn't always communicate in dramatic, explosive ways. He had Elijah stand in the entrance to the cave and wait for him to speak. In 1 Kings 19:11-12 it says, "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire." The next thing that happened was powerful, because God spoke in a whisper. If Elijah were only looking for the spectacular, he would have missed the voice of the Lord.

If kids expect church to compete with Hollywood, then they're likely to miss what God has to say. God speaks to kids, and one of the ways he does so is through God's church and the experience of being with others, worshipping the Lord and learning from God's Word.

Older elementary age kids can also serve, viewing church as a place to exercise a spiritual gift or minister in

one way or another. Sometimes it means helping in the children's ministry with younger children or assisting the ushers by handing out bulletins. You might choose an area of service yourself, knowing that it's an opportunity for your child to serve alongside you.

Kids benefit a lot from watching their parents practice faith. Actively and enthusiastically participating in worship demonstrates to your children the attitude that they should also have. By bowing your head to pray, paying attention to the words of the songs, opening the Bible when Scripture is read, and taking notes during the sermon, you model what active participation in worship is in practical terms. While your children may not always eagerly follow your lead, this is part of their spiritual training. Attending the children's programs is great, but the real work of passing the faith on to your kids happens as kids see you engaged with God at church and at home. If passing the faith is like learning how to drive, then the church classes are the classroom experience, but partnering with you spiritually is the behind-the-wheel experience.

If you struggle with a particularly sour mood about church in your child, it's often best to address the problem before the busyness of getting out the door on Sunday morning. You might want to listen to see if there is a particular reason that you need to address. Sometimes the problem is simply a self-absorbed view of life. If that's the case, then you'll likely want to work on serving others and contributing to family life in ways that are not only church-related. A child who is self-focused about church is likely experiencing that same selfish tendency in other areas of life. An attitude of contributing and gratefulness will certainly help in other areas and then will demonstrate itself

in positive ways at church as well.

Remember that worship isn't reserved for Sundays. Your comments about God's graciousness or creative genius at other times are a form of worship that teaches your child to integrate faith into all areas of life. Hospitality is another way to demonstrate godliness and a servant heart. Having a friend over isn't only about personal benefits. It's a way to use the home to bless others. It might be helpful to ask the question, "How can we help your friend to have an enjoyable time today when he comes over to play here?" Getting kids thinking outside of themselves teaches them valuable things about service and thoughtfulness.

If you feel like church has lost some of its meaning for your child, now is a great time to pray and ask God to breathe life into your child's church experience. Your modeling, as well as getting your child involved in other ways, may be just what's needed to help your child bring faith into this developmental stage. Some kids view previous commitments to the Lord as childish as they move to a new stage in their development. That's why it's important for you to help bring faith into life in new and fresh ways so that your child can view faith as relevant and practical now, not just something for the past.





## **A Vision for Eating Thoughtfully**

**C**onvincing kids to eat their broccoli is a struggle parents have faced for generations. But the topic has received more attention in recent years due to the prevalence of childhood obesity and obesity-related health problems. Nutritional challenges increase for parents of older children when kids are away from home more frequently at extracurricular activities. Many parents find this shift frustrating, especially if they're already dealing with poor eating habits at home. Ideally, good eating habits are established from the time a child starts on solid foods, but for many reasons, it continues to be a challenge.

Children at this stage are busy with school all day, dealing with the pressures of increased homework and after-school and church activities. Busy bodies need fuel. The quality of that fuel is important. While younger children tend to either eat or refuse to eat what their parents put in front of them, you may be able to give your older elementary child a bit more freedom with food choices within limits. The goal is to coach your child toward wise food choices without inducing undue guilt about eating less

healthy foods.

By now, your child has learned about food at home and at school and knows a bit more about what's healthy and what's not. Discussion about food, reading labels, and modeling your own choices are great ways to continue the dialogue. When it comes to eating, we all need to make choices to eat what we should and not what we want. You might ask your children some questions that you want them to wrestle with in the heart. At a non-meal time, for example, you might ask, "How do you discipline yourself to eat things you know are good for you even though you may be attracted to those that are not?" Just raising the question points to the issue at hand. Or, maybe you'll make a statement such as, "It's better to eat to live than to live to eat," pointing to the need to satisfy healthy needs instead of arbitrary desires. The truth is that you can eat most anything you want as long as you limit the quantity.

Your kids will learn a lot through your modeling. This is a good opportunity for you to assess the example that you set for your child, the things you say about food, and your own emotional attachment to food. It's not likely that your daughter will want an apple and a glass of water if she just watched you eat a chocolate bar and drink a can of soda. It's also best to avoid using food as a reward for good behavior or for accomplishing a goal. Those who consistently reward themselves with a bowl of ice cream for a job well done end up with a problem over time.

Look for ways to limit snacks or provide healthy options such as fresh or dried fruit, cheese and crackers, yogurt, and nuts. Chips, candy, and cookies are treats that are best eaten in moderation since they don't provide much nutritional value. Drinking soda can be addictive, and more

healthy alternatives or just water are good habits for health. Buy in bulk cautiously, since buying junk food in bulk often leads to eating it in bulk. If you have a “grazer” who is wired that way, you might need to dramatically change your lifestyle so that the only options available in your house are healthy ones.

You can improve the quality of mealtime by making it a priority and eating meals at the table whenever possible. Keep in mind that your child’s stomach starts out only as large as her fist, so set reasonable expectations for appropriate food portions. You might allow your children to serve themselves and determine how much they want to eat. On the other hand, it may be helpful at times to leave the food at the stove, prepare small portions on plates, and allow children to get seconds from the stove if they are still hungry. Kids can learn to “listen to their bodies” to know when to stop eating. Don’t require your son to finish everything on his plate. It’s more important that he learn to read body cues about hunger and thirst. This sometimes comes through trial and error. Your son may think he’s done eating but then get hungry an hour later. If this is a pattern, you’ll want to point it out and, if you do offer a snack later on, make it a healthy one.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to say to a child who tends to skip meals and eat snacks, “The kitchen is closed after this meal until breakfast.” It usually doesn’t take but a few times like this for a child to learn to eat at mealtime.

Later elementary children are old enough to help with meal preparation, and this is a great way to get them more interested in what they’re eating. It also gives them a greater appreciation for the work that it takes to prepare a meal. When you’re planning dinner, you can talk to your

child about representing the major food groups with protein, vegetables, and grains. If your daughter prefers mixed vegetables to peas, let her make that choice sometimes. If your son likes mashed potatoes better than baked, then honor his preference. Many children don't like salad, and a veggies-and-dip tray can make a suitable alternative. Talk about food preferences. Acknowledge that, although preferences within families vary, they can't always be catered to. Do your best to plan meals that everyone will enjoy, but avoid being a short-order cook. Children benefit from being exposed to new foods, and it trains their palates to recognize many different flavors and textures. They'll then be a delight to have as guests in other people's homes.

On busy nights when there's little time to cook, pack a cooler with healthy options rather than stopping at a fast food restaurant, or plan a cold menu dinner for home with sandwiches, salads, and fruit. Save eating out for special occasions. Then you won't have to be as concerned about what your child is selecting at the restaurant, because you know that good food choices are taking place at home. You can also plan ahead by preparing larger quantities on the nights you do have time to cook so that you have enough for another meal. This not only saves on prep time, it also saves on clean-up and the grocery bill.

Farmers' markets and community gardens have become popular in many areas. Part of the maturity that's taking place in your child is an increased awareness of the world outside her own. Take advantage of her budding interest in social issues. Talk about where food comes from and buy from the people who grow it. You might even want to plant a garden, or buy a plot in a community one. Not only does local food taste better, it often costs less and cre-

ates less environmental impact. Children are more likely to try new vegetables that came from a garden they helped to cultivate.

Talk to your child about eating foods as close to the way God made them as possible. When God created Adam and Eve, he put them in a garden to cultivate and enjoy. Our modern society has made food production a scientific endeavor and eating an obsession. Eating and taking care of one's body is a spiritual issue. God says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

You might consider taping that verse to your refrigerator or pantry door to remind your family of the physical and spiritual importance of healthy eating.

Always keep in mind the balance between healthy eating and the social component of the meal. Too much emphasis on diet can ruin what might otherwise be an enjoyable family experience. Take time to enjoy conversation, invite friends over, and use mealtimes to build relationships.



## Godly Stewardship of Family Resources

**C**an we go out for dinner?  
Can I have a treat?

I need new shoes, new pants, and new gear.

My class is going on a field trip Tuesday. You have to send in twenty dollars by tomorrow or I can't go.

We're out of milk,

Out of bread,

Out of gas,

And out of money.

No matter how much parents work, scrimp, and save, it seems that there's no end to the financial demands of having children. Managing a budget for a family requires creative financing that would wow the most seasoned CFO. As children enter the later elementary years, they're old enough to become part of the budget conversation because they can understand limited resources in the midst of high demand. In fact, this is an excellent time to help them learn to live within limits in practical terms. It's a lesson they'll need for the rest of their lives.

You can start teaching your children the principles of money management with a study of godly stewardship. Electricity and water, for example, cost money. You might do an actual study based on your electric bill to find out how much money it takes to have the bathroom light on continually for 24 hours. You don't have to leave it on to test. You can calculate it yourself using some simple math. Here's how.

First calculate how many watts are used per hour (Four 60-watt bulbs, for example, use 240 watts per hour) and then look at your electric bill to see how much your electricity costs per kilowatt hour (that is, price for using 1,000 watts for one hour). You might do this in the evening during family devotions. If the bill says 16¢ per kilowatt hour, then it costs  $240/1000 \times .16 = \$0.0384$  per hour to leave the light on. If you continually leave that light on for 5 extra hours a day, then the cost for a month would be  $.0384 \times 5 \times 30 = \$5.76$ . Multiply that by other lights in your house and the bill can go up pretty quickly.

It's also helpful to talk about money and its God-given purpose to meet needs and help others, not just to satisfy self. God's word has a lot to say about proper money management, the borrowing and repayment of loans, and giving to the needy.

One of the most misquoted texts in all of scripture is 1 Timothy 6:10. The popular paraphrase, "money is the root of all evil," is simply not true. Money allows us to provide for our families and help the needy. What scripture actually says is, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Now, that is certainly true and a good concept to teach kids. The verse goes on to say, "Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced

themselves with many griefs.” Sadly, we see evidence of this everywhere today, perhaps even within our own families. Developing healthy patterns of thinking in regards to money starts during the later elementary years.

Money provides a great way to teach about several heart qualities such as responsibility, working hard, patience, and diligence. One of the more important heart qualities kids learn has to do with contentment. Paul said in Philippians 4:12-13, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...” What’s his secret? Keep reading! “I can do everything through him [Christ] who gives me strength.”

Money is also a great way to teach generosity. In fact, you might create a family jar that kids can contribute to and then help decide where that money goes. Blessing a person in need or a mission work can help kids see that their money can help others. In fact, we have an obligation to share with and care for others. It’s part of who we are as a family. One of the ways to pass the faith on to your children is to practice your faith openly with them. Handling money wisely and talking about serving the Lord with finances is an excellent way to do that.

The grocery store is often a tough place to go with kids, but it is also a valuable teaching tool. The familiar rule, “don’t shop when you’re hungry,” can be extended to “don’t shop when your kids are hungry.” But older elementary kids are often able to be more of a help than a hindrance at the food store. Food shopping can become a life lesson. Making choices between available options requires wisdom and your discussion and openness about shopping difficulties can help children become more aware of the challenges of the tasks. Watching for sales and using



coupons also can help kids understand ways to be a good steward.

Before heading out to the mall on your next shopping adventure, make a list of what your kids need and their sizes. Establish a budget for each child and let them know what it is, including how much you are willing to spend on a particular item, like shoes. Then you can stay focused when bombarded with the temptations to buy impulsively at the stores. If they find something they want that's not on the list of needs, they can pay for it themselves with birthday or allowance money or you can just say, "To be wise shoppers, we need to stay with what's on the list." Prepare them for this ahead of time and have them bring their own money. If they can't afford it, they can't have it. No exceptions. You might choose to pay with cash when shopping with your kids so that they can link shopping with an exchange of goods for money. Swiping a credit card not only gives you a cushion to overspend, it gives kids the feeling that the credit card is the ticket to freedom.

Finances can be an uncomfortable subject to discuss with your children because, for the most part, family finances are a private matter. However, it's possible to teach your children how to manage a budget, without divulging your annual salary or your mortgage payment. There's nothing wrong with children understanding not only that things cost money, but also what they cost. Children living in a materialistic, egocentric culture need a reality check when it comes to money. It will not only ease your stress in managing the family budget, it will give your children lifelong tools to break the generational cycle of debt that has consumed our nation.



## Boy/Girl Relationships

Somewhere between pigtails and prom dresses, little girls stop thinking that little boys are “icky.” Boys, too, may no longer think that girls are infected with the cooties. When does this shift happen and what is a parent to do about the early interests young people develop?

For parents, these signs of puberty always come too early. But before panic strikes, rest assured that it’s normal for many kids. That doesn’t mean that everything they do is acceptable. It simply means that they need some training in this particular area of their lives. As the hormones kick in, kids develop a whole new perspective on the opposite sex. This shift usually comes earlier for girls than boys, as does the onset of puberty. Playground whispering and giggling may now focus on who likes whom, in addition to the regular childish teasing.

As with many developmental shifts, your reaction is important. If you forbid or dismiss discussions about her budding interest in boys, your daughter may simply stuff her emotions or find someone else to talk to. Either way, she’ll likely keep thinking about it. This establishes a com-

munication disconnect that may be difficult to repair in the upcoming years.

You can find out what's going on in your child's social group through natural conversation. Talk about how the boys and girls in class or at church interact. If your son talks a lot about a particular girl, don't overreact, or he may immediately change the conversation or shut down. Rather, maintain your composure and keep the conversation going by responding as naturally as possible to what he says. Remember, listen more than you speak. When you do speak, keep your comments direct and short. Share your own experiences with relationships at that age if it's helpful.

You want to communicate several things. First, you want to communicate a positive attitude toward relationships and sexual interest. But you also want to teach about appropriate actions and desires. Furthermore, you'll want to communicate about God's overall design for relationships and how your child's current interest fits into the larger picture of God's plan for life.

Budding interest will likely increase interaction with kids of the opposite sex. While children may have early crushes, they need to know that dating and courtship are still several years away. Discourage references to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Many young people in seventh or eighth grade are using older teen language to describe their relationships. Words such as dating and going out are best reserved for later in adolescence. Your goal is to push off the exclusive relationships until more maturity is developed. It's best for now to require kids to interact in a group as opposed to allowing them to pair up with just one other person of the opposite sex.

There's a huge temptation at this age to put others down or make fun of others. Kids need to learn how to honor others with actions and in their words. That's true for kids of the opposite gender as well as those of the same gender. It's important to resist the tendency to put others down, gossip about others, or tease in hurtful ways. As you point out these dangers to your child, you'll raise the awareness of appropriate care of others in relationships.

Establishing some ground rules for your family and relationships will help guide your child forward. You may, for example, prohibit exclusive relationships, require appropriate dress, and make certain activities at school or elsewhere off limits. But rules alone create tension and, over time, may foster rebellion. It's also important to have a large dose of education and dialogue to communicate values and convictions that explain a lifestyle and a culture that's different than how others might live.

If your child seems unusually crazed over a friend or the latest pop star, you'll want to take note. Our culture is obsessed with romantic relationships, something your ten-year-old should not be involved in for many years to come. The media often contributes a norm to kids that exceeds their developmental readiness. Contrary to what TV networks may want you to believe, many programs geared towards children are not at all age-appropriate. The characters are obsessed with fashion, dating, and sex. Kids often emulate what they see and hear, and our culture often bombards kids with messages about sex, gender, and relationships.

You'll also want to be careful about other cultural influences such as clothes and accessories with pictures or names on them that represent social norms that don't

foster your own values. Concerts featuring contemporary artists or school dances often stimulate kids in ways that they aren't ready to handle. These social gatherings are intimidating and awkward for most kids, and foster opportunities for them to feel rejected. If the goal of these middle school dances is in fact socialization, that could be better accomplished with a night of fun activities for children where parents can comfortably chaperone and maybe even comfortably interact with their children.

As your child's awareness of the opposite sex increases, confidence may become fragile. Suddenly, your daughter's opinion of herself may be defined by a certain boy's opinion of her. If a boy likes her or shows interest in her, she may feel worthy. In the same way, if no one expresses an interest in her, she may feel unworthy.

Take time to teach your child what self-concept is and how to obtain self-worth from knowing Christ. Talk about true Biblical beauty. This is different than the "love yourself" message the world teaches that inflates the ego and focuses on self. Inner beauty shines the light of Christ from the heart and is perceptible on the face. In Proverbs 31:10, Solomon observes, "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies." Teach your daughter what it means to be a woman of noble character and your son how to be a man of God. Noble character will attract the right kind of mate at the right time. In the meantime, encourage your child to avoid the drama that often accompanies early "dating" relationships.

## Talking to Your Child about Sex

If there were ever a child-rearing issue that could make parents want to crawl in a hole and hide, it's talking to kids about sex. What is the right age? What should I say? How much information is enough? How much is too much? These questions plague the minds of nervous parents who would just as soon get a root canal as have "the talk" with their children.

The key is to remain calm and develop a confidence about discussions regarding this intimate issue. To do that, you'll want to break the subject into pieces. After all, you're probably okay with talking about privacy issues, appropriate touching, and correct names for body parts. To those discussions we'll now add information about the biology of pregnancy and childbirth. The most challenging discussion will be the one about sexual intercourse so let's take this one step at a time. Your comfort in knowing how to talk about this will make this a meaningful discussion with your child. If you can build good patterns of open and honest communication about sexuality, then you'll have a platform on which you'll have significant conversations as

your child grows through the teen years.

For some parents, the topic of sex is uncomfortable because of past sexual sin. Parents may feel hypocritical instructing their children to behave in a way that they themselves did not. But God has called you to train your children according to His Word, not according to your own past deeds. If you have sin in your past that you've confessed, then you need not be burdened by it anymore. Psalm 103:12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." If you have unconfessed sin in your past, then God is calling you to complete repentance. If you are living in sexual sin now, then you shouldn't talk to your children about sex until you have settled the matter. Your children learn from what you do. You can't keep your children from following in your footsteps by simply hiding your sin. Root it out of your life and build a legacy of sexual purity and faithfulness for your family.

With all of the information about sex readily available, it's important to talk to your child in order to provide a godly framework for understanding the purpose and design of sex. Kids can learn to be truth seekers instead of pleasure seekers. In doing so, your child can eventually enjoy a healthy marriage relationship without the baggage that comes with sexual sin.

One part of your conversation can focus on the physical changes that your child may already notice: pubic hair, weight gain, and body odor. Girls will develop breast buds as early as age 9, and may also experience a clear vaginal discharge. These changes are part of the body's maturing process. Older elementary age children need to be prepared for the advanced stages of puberty before they

happen. This will be earlier for most girls than boys. When you explain what to expect, the conversation often leads into discussions about the body getting ready to have babies. It's often best to take your child's lead in discussions about sexuality and satisfy the curiosity, stopping the discussion before it's too much.

These short conversations about God's design for puberty, pregnancy, biology of childbirth, and intercourse build a foundation of open dialogue. You'll also have opportunity to talk about gender differences, why homosexuality is wrong, and how diseases such as AIDS are spread through sexual contact. Kids can learn that physiology without purity reduces sex to a mere physical act. Deeper discussions about abstinence will come later in the teen years. At this stage, it is enough to explain what sex is and why it is to be kept for marriage. Plant seeds of purity in your child by emphasizing modesty, appropriate speech, and appropriate conduct.

Some children think that anything disgusting, inappropriate, or private is funny. You might have a serious conversation about humor and share Ephesians 5:3-4 which says, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving."

When your child begins to ask questions about sex, you may feel flustered or tongue-tied, but sexual curiosity at this age is innocent and natural. Your response should also be as natural as possible. If you overreact, you may create unnecessary embarrassment or shame and reduce opportunities for good healthy conversation. When you get



to the point of explaining what sexual intercourse is, you might say it this way. "God designed a way for a married man and woman to get together to enjoy their relationship and to create a family. There's a time when a man and a woman lie down together and kiss and during that time the sperm from the man passes to the woman and meets up with the egg. When the sperm and egg get together then a baby starts to grow inside."

That simple explanation may be all that's necessary at first. But eventually your child will want to know more, so you might say something like this. "God designed marriage to be a place where a man and woman enjoy each other. One way they do that is by kissing and holding each other. When they are lying down and enjoying each other in this way the man's penis becomes firm and it then can go into the woman's vagina and that's when the sperm from the man comes out and meets the egg inside the woman's uterus."

Some kids may not ask questions because of embarrassment, immaturity, or because they are getting information from other sources. You may then need to initiate conversation by talking about what your child is learning in health or science class, talking about a woman who is pregnant, or simply talking about what a family is and how babies are born.

The basic information about biology and sex is important and then will lead to more sophisticated conversations in the next stage of development as kids learn more about attraction, sexual purity, and sexual desire. It's God's design so you'll want to bring your faith into the discussion. Not all people obey God, but those who do are the ones who desire the special blessing he offers.



## **Modesty is the Best Policy**

“**Y**ou’re not leaving the house in that, young lady!”

The dread of dealing with inappropriate attire used to be reserved for the fathers of teenage daughters. But today, even little girls often don’t dress like little girls. Once girls enter the 7-16 size range, shopping becomes a challenge. Many clothes for girls today are cut too low, too high, or too tight for our daughters to maintain a level of modesty and still dress appropriately for their age. But the problem isn’t reserved for girls alone. Boys can also be attracted to immodesty, lowering their pants or wearing inappropriate slogans, for example.

Fashion reflects the culture, and our culture pushes children toward values and actions that are often counter to godliness. Many stores now offer styles that are simply inappropriate for anyone, of any age. Some young people think that they have to make a choice between modesty and style. That’s simply not true.

Another problem with clothes for boys and girls has to do with taste and making some kind of statement. T-shirt

slogans have become a staple of fashion. Many popular t-shirt slogans and images reflect the heart condition of our culture, promoting apathy, self-glorification, rebellion, and even violence. Consider not only the styles, but also the words and pictures you allow your young person to wear. The messages kids choose to display on their clothing reveal something about who they are. In fact, some stores make it a practice to use provocative advertising images in their advertising, prompting many parents to avoid those stores altogether.

Your child is, or soon will be, entering puberty and will become more body conscious and curious about sex. Discussions now about how we honor or dishonor God with our bodies is important. Maneuvering through clothing issues and styles will give your child an opportunity to see what taking a stand for Christ means in everyday life. Protests become opportunities for discussions about values and convictions.

Some kids say things such as, "All my friends shop at those stores," or "You're not up with the times today," or they believe that the only stylish choices are the ones that are inappropriate. You can use these opportunities now to teach lessons you'll be emphasizing for the next several years. For example, clothing styles are an outward reflection of a person's heart, all families make choices based on their convictions, and you don't make decisions about such things based on popular opinion. Be careful, however, that you're not just telling your kids what they can't do. You'll want to make sure you provide fashionable places to shop and choices that look nice but still reflect your values.

When you shop with your child, have a few destinations in mind before you head out. Meandering through

the mall can result in a power struggle over off-limits stores. This is also a good opportunity to introduce your child to the benefits of shopping at discount stores, consignment shops, and yard sales. You may be able to get some things that you couldn't afford at the mall. If you have restricted certain name brands, check the labels before you buy. Additionally, clearance or overstock sections of certain catalog/internet stores offer quality, modest selections at a discount. Everyone loves a bargain. You can teach your young person to be modest and frugal.

It's important for kids to understand what your standards are and the reasons behind them. Some of the choices you'll make about clothing have to do with preference, while others have to do with conviction. Standing in the middle of a department store with a begging, frustrated child is not the time to discuss these important life principles. If you set the standards beforehand, they will know what they can and can't ask for. Then any problems that arise can be handled as a discipline issue, not a lack of communication. Most likely, even if your child is unhappy that she can't have a certain outfit or shop in a certain store, she'll be better prepared to handle the situation maturely if you discussed it with her ahead of time.

When children are small, many mothers enjoy picking out clothes for their little ones. Once the older elementary years arrive, children often want to choose their own outfits, and doing so is part of their training. If your young person is particularly fashion conscious, emphasize individual style over name brands. Help kids see that developing their own style is part of being their own person.

Kids learn to shop within the parameters set by Mom and Dad. Once you establish direction and define the stan-

dards, you can encourage initiative and creativity on the part of your child. Allowing your child to wear something that isn't your preference is not only okay, but allows a bit of independence that's healthy. In modern society, clothing is an expression of personality so you'll want to allow your child to experiment a bit. Gently guide your budding fashion maven, but don't play fashion police. Your child's crazy outfit is not an expression of your personality, or a commentary on you as a parent. Kids need the freedom to develop their own styles. Otherwise, your child will resist, and eventually resent, your control. Fashion is not a battle worth fighting as long as the clothing is modest and appropriate.

Forcing children to conform to your wishes in every area sets them up for a large rebellion as an expression of their independence. Allowing them areas where they can be different and demonstrate that they are unique provides an outlet for independent expression that can head off a major teen rebellion.

The Bible talks about modesty and focuses the comments particularly at women. Why is this? First, we know that God has created men as visual creatures. Second, God knows that women can be overly preoccupied with their appearance. God never suggests that women shouldn't dress and groom well, but he does emphasize the importance of inner beauty over outer beauty.

You might discuss and even memorize Scripture with your child that emphasizes the importance God places on true beauty. In Proverbs 31:30, God summarizes the description of the virtuous woman with these words, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." This theme is also repeated in

the New Testament. For example, 1 Peter 3:3-4 says, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.”

Beyond an emphasis on inner beauty, God uses the imagery of clothing to describe the outworking of our faith. We are called to take off our garments of sin and death and to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3:12-14)

Use discussions about clothing as an opportunity for teaching character. Kids can learn valuable lessons now about convictions, sexuality, and even submission to your authority. The reality is that there will be times throughout your child’s life where the decision of a leader is inconvenient and may seem unreasonable. How one responds in that situation is a reflection of inner character. If you see some weaknesses in this area, discussions around the subject of clothes can teach lifelong lessons.



## When the Schedule Gets Overloaded

Soccer, baseball, music lessons, ballet, kids' club, arts and crafts, karate, scouting, extra tutoring, dance, and the list goes on and on when it comes to the opportunities young people have today. The choices aren't between good things and bad things. The problem is that far more good things are available and they can crowd out the best in family life.

Soon, the tension rises in family life as parents push to manage all of the opportunities. "Come on, let's go, we're gonna be late." It can be tempting to think that children need to be involved in as many activities as possible in order to make them well-rounded people and to be the best that they can be. While lots of activity can be good for kids, you'll have to draw the line at the place where it's excessive for your family.

Sports, music or art lessons, and clubs are all good ways for our children to develop God-given talents, build relationships with peers and mentors, and establish a level of independence. But ultimately, who your child becomes

has more to do with your influence as a parent than anything else. Family experience is the single most important indicator of how children function as adults in terms of spiritual commitment, work ethic, and relationships. Families out of balance often raise children who live out-of-balance lives.

To establish balance in your schedule, spend time with your spouse, thinking and praying about your goals for your family. Then plan activities accordingly. Allow your goals and vision for family life to drive your calendar instead of the invitations to pick up the latest activity. It's important to trust in God, not activities, to determine your child's path.

Focusing your efforts on who your children become, rather than what they become, can help evaluate some of the activity choices presented. Evaluate the family schedule with your stated goals in mind. You can create a checklist like the one below to help you evaluate the value of particular activities.

- What is the value of this activity?
- Will this activity line up with our family goals?
- What are the scheduling demands for children and parents?
- Can children be dropped off or does a parent need to stay and wait?
- Are parents required or given the opportunity to participate?
- What are the costs? Are there any hidden or additional costs that may not be included up-front? (Costs can also include travel expenses like gas, tolls, etc.)
- How many activities is the child already involved in?
- Will this conflict with other family obligations?



A little prior thought can save you a lot of future aggravation.

Too many activities can actually be counterproductive, since overtired young people can't perform optimally. Poor sleep patterns brought on by late bedtimes and stress lead to academic and behavior problems in school. It's unfair to expect over-scheduled kids to be at their best in a myriad of activities. As adults, we call this "spreading ourselves too thin," and we don't usually handle it very well. If your child enjoys soccer, you might allow him to play on one team rather than two. If seasonal and year-round activities coincide, you might decide to take a break for the weeks that the seasonal activity is going on and resume on-going sessions when the season is over.

Limiting activities to one or two at a time has many benefits for the entire family. For Mom and Dad, it means less running around and fewer scheduling conflicts to deal with. For younger siblings, all the running around can be daunting as sleep and meal schedules are often disturbed. Families constantly "on the go" maintain a stress level that's physically and relationally unhealthy. Because of the added stress, tempers flare and fights ensue.

Most importantly though, kids that focus too much on outside activities tend to minimize the importance of their role in the family and the home. Participating in chores and contributing to family life are important skills for kids to learn. Furthermore, children who tend to be busy, often have a hard time when they aren't on the go. Kids develop their creative minds when they must entertain themselves instead of relying on activity or electronics at every turn.

You might want to make family scheduling a teachable moment by involving your children in the planning pro-

cess. You can map out the weekly calendar and show it to them. Kids then can learn how each person's activities affect the other members of the family. Considering others is a character trait that comes through training. You might ask your child to prioritize desires. Explain your family goals and work together to meet those goals so that everyone in the family benefits. It's sometimes helpful to give your child the power to decide which activities he wishes to continue, and which ones he will eliminate.

In single parent families, the challenges are greater because there are often no other adults to share the load. This problem sometimes can be solved by enlisting the help of family members, neighbors, or close friends. Single parents are always on the lookout to create a reliable support system, and that's one of the benefits of active involvement in a local church. Even if family does live close by, either because of tensions or logistics, it doesn't always work to have them as the primary go-to people. It's often helpful to call upon the parents of friends who are involved in the same activities for support. Single parenting has extra challenges in the scheduling area, but the additional work may pay off by providing more mentors in your child's life.

Some children have a hard time managing any down time in their lives. These kids sometimes complain, "I'm bored," an indication that they're relying too heavily on external activity to guide their lives. Boredom is actually a gift that you give your child. Children need time for just doing "nothing." This is when they can become inspired to build, create, play, and dream. These are qualities we value, but require unstructured time to develop. You don't have to panic. Busting boredom is not part of your job description. You might need to make suggestions and take a

firm stand against whining, and see what your kids learn about themselves as they explore an internal motivation instead of relying continually on externals.

Kids used to spend much more time outdoors than they do today. That's likely because there's so much more digital distraction available. Requiring that children play outdoors not only provides fresh air, sunlight, and good exercise, but it also requires that they think for themselves instead of relying on a computer to lead them to the next level.

Finding that careful balance between activity and free time is important for every family. You can involve your child in the decision making as you seek to model a balanced life, including activity, time as a family, and time alone. In Ephesians 5:15-16, Paul gives this advice, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." That teaching is focused on individuals who must recognize the importance of time as a resource. May God give us all the wisdom to glorify him with our time.



## Evaluating the Schooling Options

**H**ow do I know if the school situation my kids are in is the best choice for them?

Families today have a variety of options for their children's education. Whether children are in public, private, or homeschool, parents often question their decision and wonder if they should consider an alternative. There are pros and cons to each method, and what works for one family may not work for another. Sometimes, even within a family, children have different needs that require different schooling options. Often in the later elementary years parents need to reevaluate the choices they made earlier.

As a community of believers, we need to give one another grace in the decisions we make regarding the education of our children. Ultimately, it should be a matter of prayer. Continually seek God's will for your children and family and be open to his leading. Avoid being fully committed to one educational option to the exclusion of all others. Rather, be fully committed to following the will of God no matter where it leads. Then you can be confident in your decision, even if others aren't supportive.

Why should parents re-evaluate where and how their children are educated? Because children change as they grow, and sometimes what worked at one point is no longer a good fit. This may mean switching schools, pulling children out of school to homeschool, or enrolling children in school who were previously homeschooled. Sometimes, it just means working with teachers to change the game plan, or for homeschoolers, switching curriculum to meet the needs of individual children.

Academics are a critical part of school choice, but not the only one. Parents may get frustrated with administration or staff, or children may struggle socially. It's natural for parents to worry about their kids, which is why prayer is so important. The grass on the other side of the fence never looks as green once you're actually there. Consider the options carefully. Talk with other parents you respect about why their children are being educated the way they are.

For Christian families in the public school system, the challenges are evident. Children come from homes with a variety of beliefs and values that may not line up with your own. This is a wonderful opportunity to talk to your child about "living in the world but not of the world." Kids are confronted with many popular TV shows, fashion choices, and activities that you, as a believer, simply don't allow. When your child struggles to make sense of why friends are doing certain things or wearing certain clothes, go back to your convictions and point out that they may not know the Lord the way that you do. Pray for friends, and encourage your child to share Christ in a loving way. This can become challenging for children, so keep an open dialogue about how things are going at school.

As parents, you can seek out like-minded families through ministries such as Moms in Touch International, which meets in support of a specific school or district to pray for students, faculty, and staff. While you may not be able to pray with your child's teacher in the public school, you can certainly let her know that you are praying for her. Even if she's not a believer, she'll likely appreciate your loving concern. Many vigilant parents have successfully guided their children through the public school system. In fact, being faced every day with the realities that people live ungodly lives, kids develop a keen awareness of right and wrong and evil and good. They see distinct differences between Christians and non-Christians, a blessing often not found in other educational alternatives.

For some families, the sacrifices required to send their children to Christian school are worth the investment. The school becomes an extension of the home and church, where children are educated like-mindedly. Rigorous academics and small class sizes make an ideal learning environment for many children. This environment is a natural place for the children of believers to make lasting friendships.

Sometimes, parents who enroll their children in Christian school do so with unrealistic expectations. Classmates will not always behave properly. Families will have different priorities, rules, and values. Teachers and administrators will not always make decisions parents agree with. These realities can cause frustration in parents who expected an idyllic Christian environment. When parents enter the Christian school community with realistic expectations, they can resolve problems based on the common foundation of the authority of God's Word. Many families

have found the Christian school to be a crucial partner in the biblical training of their children.

For homeschooling families, the concern over a “lack of socialization” is generally unwarranted, since children in school are just as likely to experience negative social interactions as positive ones. If you homeschool your children, the later elementary years are a good time to join some sort of organized co-op that meets regularly, if you haven’t done so already. It can be difficult to juggle if you still have little ones, are homeschooling multiple children, or are also working part-time. But there are lots of options available, and lots of help. The benefit of joining a group run by like-minded families is that others are sympathetic to your situation and your goals. On an academic level, your child will benefit from a shared learning experience. On a social level, friendships are often forged in these groups.

One of the benefits of homeschooling can be a strong family bond. But this close relationship between parents and children can become a challenge when you’re both the teacher and the parent. Struggling over assignments and dealing with bad attitudes at home can put quite a strain on the relationship with your child. You’ll have to build relationship outside of the homeschooling time as well because much of the task of school creates a tension that must be offset through other relational experiences. Many families have found homeschooling to be the best answer for an academically individualized, Christian education for their children.

No matter where your children are educated, the foundation of their Christian education must come from the home. No Christian institution, club or group can ever make up for what is taught, or not taught, at home. As par-

ents, we often feel the weight of the decisions we make for our children. By applying the principles of Proverbs 3:5-6, we can have the peace that comes with obedience. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." When you entrust your children's education to the Lord, He will direct you to the best school choice for your family.





## Peer Pressure in Perspective

The need for acceptance is universal. For young children, the family is the primary source of fulfillment for this need. A child's friendships are generally based on the friendships of their parents. As children reach the later elementary years, though, they make more connections beyond the immediate family circle. These peer groups are important and influential to your young person. The groups that children interact with influence their thinking, behavior, and how they dress.

Realizing that peer pressure exists in many forms and on many levels can help put some of your child's social issues in perspective. For example, a desire for acceptance may influence your child's thinking, behavior, and fashion. Many times this kind of peer pressure is a harmless part of growing up. Young people want to follow the latest trends in clothing, "kid vocabulary," and fads. These things may seem amusing, trivial, or even annoying to you, but they can be important to the culture and should be handled with care.

When your young person comes home using a new

word or refusing to wear the sweater Aunt Myrtle knit for her last Christmas, you can take it in stride. After all, connecting with the culture isn't always bad. Pointing out what's happening may help your young person to be a bit more sensitive to the surrounding influences. You might gently guide your child in the assertion of her newfound personality, and not belittle her for it. Your reactions may determine whether she turns to you or to her peer groups for help when she needs it.

Although certain peer influences are harmless, it is an opportunity to teach your child that they exist. The disciples probably thought that the Pharisees' influence was harmless, but in Mark 8:15 Jesus warned his disciples, "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." Those influences around us may not be as harmless as we sometimes imagine.

In addition to the harmless, amusing or annoying behaviors that peer groups inspire, there are more specific positive influences that peers provide. Positive peer pressure encourages young people to work hard at difficult tasks. When kids work in groups, such as at school or church activities, they're more likely to persevere than when attempting a difficult task alone. This can be particularly beneficial in developing the work ethic of an unmotivated child. In school, the fear of embarrassment can contribute to the overall quality of a presentation.

Another benefit of peer pressure is the elimination of socially awkward behavior. Children sometimes develop habits that are not considered socially acceptable, and time with friends can effectively eliminate these undesired behaviors faster than a thousand "cut that out" admonitions from Mom or Dad. While embarrassment is unpleasant, it

can sometimes be a positive motivator.

Yet another benefit of positive peer pressure is the inspiration to try new things. Even among best friends, individual interests will vary. This may be most helpful for a reluctant or nervous child. When young people are exposed to new things with their friends, they're more likely to try them. Peers may also recognize an ability in your child and provide the confidence to try out for an athletic or academic team or a part in the school play.

While there are many positive aspects to peer pressure, most tend to think of it in negative terms. Negative peer pressure comes in many forms, but the most common is the pressure to break the rules. The kind of friends your child chooses will determine the kind of peer pressure experienced. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Bad company corrupts good character." A good way to determine if your child has the right group of friends is to find out what they talk about, are interested in, and do when they're together. Another way is to get to know the friends and their parents, if possible. Friends who encourage one another to do well in school, try wholesome things, and are respectful to you when they come over to hang out, are the kinds of friends you want your child to have.

Parents often warn their children to go against the crowd, stand up for themselves, and do the right thing. This is all good advice, of course, but it can be difficult for young people to follow. The Bible has many stories and examples of people who faced pressures to do something different than God intended. Their inner character and God's grace helped them face the challenge. As kids develop a greater self-confidence, they have a greater ability to be influencers instead of being influenced when it

comes to temptation. A strong sense of self-confidence is best achieved through firm grounding in God's Word.

Some kids are more natural followers than others, which makes them more susceptible to peer pressure. Mob mentality is the tendency for people to do things in a crowd that they would not do alone. This mentality is rampant in upper elementary and middle school. Often, young people who get caught causing trouble say, "I didn't think that was going to happen." You can use the stories of people who gave in to peer pressure to teach kids an important lesson about wisdom. Wisdom is recognizing the consequences of one's actions in advance. The book of Proverbs has many nuggets of wisdom that make it an excellent devotional guide for preteen young people.

It's important to prepare your young person for the temptations that come with peer pressure. The generally prescribed tactics are: change the subject, offer an alternative, walk away, or find an adult. As you talk about life and point out peer pressure situations, you'll have the opportunity to apply wisdom to life in strategic ways.

For example, if his friends are telling dirty jokes, your son could offer a funny, but appropriate, joke into the conversation. If that doesn't work, he can try to change the subject, and finally walk away. If you use the names of his friends and classmates in the scenario, you may find out by his reaction who would do certain things and who wouldn't. For instance, in the example above, he may say, "Oh Mom, Sam would never tell dirty jokes, but I bet Charlie would." This conversation can help you learn more about his peers and direct him towards the friends who will influence him positively.

When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, Jesus responded with God's Word. It's easy to think that Jesus withstood this temptation because He was the perfect Son of God, but he experienced those temptations as a man who was tired, hungry, and thirsty. Because he was prepared, he stood in the face of real temptation. Your young person can have the same success against temptation when he stays focused on the big picture, as Jesus did, and not on the immediate pressure, no matter how appealing the temptation is.

Peer pressure is a challenge at any age, so having discussions about it now can prepare your child to handle situations well into the future.



## Fears in the Night...and Day

Shadows, dragons, and monsters under the bed may not be the subject of your child's night fear anymore, but there are plenty of worries that do cause sleep problems for young people. Children between the ages of nine and twelve are learning how to think differently. Their cognitive skills allow them to analyze and think out of the box a bit more than in earlier stages. Those new developments, however, can produce anxiety and fear as children are learning how to process those thoughts accordingly.

Fears are not only troubling, but may also be embarrassing for young people who think "big kids" shouldn't have these problems. Yet people of every age suffer from all sorts of fears. Many fears are irrational, but that doesn't make them less real to the person. Acknowledging fears and talking about them can often become a way to face and conquer them as the young person recognizes more of the truth. When kids learn about how unlikely it is to be struck by lightning, or to have a plane crash into the house, they often are able to release the thoughts that bother them.

However, some children can obsess about certain con-

cerns, stifling their ability to move forward in life. One of the strongest heart-based approaches you can use is to transfer responsibility to the child for the problem and the solution. That doesn't mean that you walk away and simply allow your child to work it out alone. It means that you help your child develop his own plan, and coach him to use it, sometimes firmly and other times gently.

For example, Richard gets homesick when he spends the night away from the house. Most kids feel a bit anxious sleeping elsewhere, but Richard's concern makes him feel sick and he then has a hard time enjoying the experience. It happens when he visits his cousins and on his boy-scout camping trip. It's turned into such a problem that Dad and Mom determine to help him with more than the normal comforting words.

"Richard, I'm sorry that you're having this struggle when you're away from home. I think it would be good for you to develop your own 'Richard Plan' to address your fears. If you do, and you start working your plan, then it will help you to be more successful as you face fears for the rest of your life. Many kids have to go through something like this to become stronger and we can help you do that for yourself.

"But we can't just give you a plan from someone else. It has to be your plan. We can share ideas but you have to choose what ideas will be best for you. I'd like you to get a piece of paper and, at the top of the page, write 'Richard's Plan for Courage When Away From Home.' Then on it list five things you're going to do or say that will help you when you start to feel afraid."

Richard was hesitant at first, but Dad and Mom made it clear that developing his own plan wasn't optional. Rich-

ard went away and came back with just one idea. It was a good idea of what he could say to himself when he started to get afraid, but it wasn't enough. Dad and Mom gave him some more ideas and sent him on a mission to talk to three adults to get ideas from them about what they do or would recommend for dealing with fears.

In the end, Richard had a practical plan. His plan included things he could do such as get involved in an activity with others, repeat a Bible verse he was memorizing about courage, and think about things he enjoyed. He also included things he could say to himself, such as, "Only two more days left," or "I can handle this," or "God, give me strength to think positively."

It took some time for Richard to see some progress but when he did, the positive experience was helpful at building the confidence he needed for moving forward. Dad and Mom often coached him through challenging nights and phone calls from the cousins' home, but over time Richard was able to move forward with significant success.

Fears are overcome by small steps of progress over time. Children learn to trust, change their thinking, and make choices to do what they know to be the right thing in the face of emotional resistance. Praying with and for children often helps them recognize that God is bigger than they are, he's watching over them, and loves and cares about even the little things in their lives.

Sometimes it's helpful to get other leaders or friends involved in your child's life in order to help him overcome his challenges. The child who has a tendency toward fears is often a naturally anxious child. Being conscientious is good but it crosses a line sometimes of being overly concerned and worrying. Kids benefit from seeing solutions in



God's Word for their tendency to worry.

Philippians 4:6-8 is one of those strategic passages that young people can identify with. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Analyzing the verse, defining the different words, and praying through it, can all help a young person begin to trust the Lord in some of the challenging areas of emotional struggles.

Inactivity, overstimulation, and inappropriate media content can all contribute to poor thinking patterns and can increase anxiety in kids. Being outdoors and getting good exercise are helpful and may come in the form of organized sports, or simply riding bikes, running, and playing outside with friends. Physical activity improves sleep quality and builds a sense of confidence. Watching TV or playing video games right before bed can make it difficult for some children to transition easily into sleep. Violent TV shows, movies, video or computer games contribute to unsettling images that may play over in his mind and when lying in bed at night, can generate unhelpful thought patterns.

One of the strongest ways to overcome fears for anyone is to strengthen a spiritual connection with God and to think in ways that God thinks. Practicing spirituality with your child in practical ways can make all the difference

and can help your child develop an inner sense that God is in control, that he loves each of us, and that he will work all things out in our lives.



## Managing Moods

**C**rankiness is something we all deal with from time to time, even the most joyful among us. As adolescence draws near, you'll notice that your child's moods begin to swing like a clock pendulum. These mood swings are brought on by both physical and emotional development. One minute, you've got a sweet, mommy-pleasing grade-schooler, and the next you seem to be going toe to toe with a ranting, raving lunatic. Other children may not be so explosive, but you may notice more melancholy moods. Bewildered parents and confused kids wind up in power struggles that nobody wins. So, what happened to that easy-going kid that used to live under your roof?

Cognitively, your child is making a shift to more abstract thinking. The success of this shift is important to your child's progress in school, with raised expectations and more complex material. Students sometimes struggle to adjust to these new expectations, creating stress. Preadolescents don't understand the feelings that stress creates, nor do they have the tools to cope with it. They don't have enough life experience to meet the challenges of having a

positive attitude when things get tough. They need help through encouragement, support, and involvement in their lives to successfully adapt to this new stage.

The increase in abstract thinking can help your child socially. Kids can now do a better job empathizing with others' perspectives and feelings. While this shift is taking place, it's important for parents to realize that a greater ability to handle emotions doesn't happen overnight, nor is it cemented in place once you begin to see evidence of it. Preadolescents vacillate between childhood and adolescence, sometimes showing signs of immaturity and maturity all at the same time. This contradictory behavior is normal at this stage, but that doesn't mean you need to tolerate poor responses, disrespect, or mean talk. On the contrary, it's important for you to challenge those misbehaviors now so that your child learns that, although the emotion isn't wrong, what you do with it may be. Careful guidance will give your child the confidence to succeed in relationships now and ongoing.

Preadolescent bodies grow in spurts. This growth includes hormonal changes in preparation for the onset of puberty. The average age of the onset of puberty is between eleven and twelve years of age, but the span is growing wider. It's first seen in weight gain, pubic hair, body odor, and early signs of acne. Girls develop breast buds and boys' genitals enlarge. Hormones affect feelings, so you'll want to be ready to address issues as they arise to help your child manage emotions well instead of allowing feelings to manage them.

A common misbelief among young people is that "If I feel upset, I have the right to display my displeasure and make others uncomfortable as well." On the contrary, each

person must manage emotions in a way that they don't dictate behavior. It's important for young people to understand that their attitude contributes to the environment of the room and they have a responsibility to add energy, not drain energy in each setting.

In order to help your child deal with moodiness and attitudes, you want to have a balanced response that includes both compassion and firmness. Compassion empathizes with the child and offers support and encouragement. Firmness says that there's a line that you can't cross because it means that you're bringing down others simply because you don't feel happy.

Children need to know that it is okay to feel tired and even to be cranky, but it's not okay to take it out on everyone else. Instead of telling a cranky child to "snap out of it," you might try saying something like, "Billy, what's wrong?" Most likely the response will be either, "Nothing," or "I don't know." You can help him along by saying, "You seem upset about something. Did something happen that you want to tell me about?" You may need to do a little more gentle prodding to get a conversation going.

If Billy still doesn't want to talk, you could say, "Alright, if you're just feeling tired or cranky, that's okay. You need to go do something quietly for a while until you feel better, but you must leave your siblings alone." Then instruct siblings to let Billy be. In smaller homes, it can be difficult to give everyone their own space, but even a corner of the couch that's off limits to everyone else for a given period of time can be a safe haven. Often, respecting your child's space will be enough to help him improve his mood, and firmness gives a message that there are appropriate ways to relate to others.

But absence of a bad attitude is not enough. It's important for children to add positive energy to family life. A good attitude is a great way to do just that. You might explain to your daughter, "Your attitude is an important factor in our family. When you display displeasure then it drains energy and when you're pleasant it adds energy. In fact, it means a lot to me when you look for ways to communicate a positive attitude in our home. It's a sign of maturity when you can do that even when you don't feel like it. That's extra effort and it will go a long way outside our home as well."

The Bible has much to say about adding positively to others. You might ask your kids what the numbers 11 and 25 have in common. Tell them to look at the 11:25 and the 25:11 in the book of Proverbs to find out. Just the thought of the similar numbers may intrigue your young person to look up the verses. What do they have in common? They both emphasize the importance of contributing to the atmosphere. Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." And Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

Raising the awareness of how one's attitude impacts others will help your children develop a greater sensitivity to their own responses and how they affect others. That's an important realization for any person, not just for young people. Your child will have a head start on maturity and catch this very important concept.



## **It's All about Attitude**

**O**ne mom said, "I know he has a bad attitude, but at least he's doing what I said." That parent is in for a big surprise if she continues to ignore the growing attitude problem she's seeing in her son. Kids don't tend to outgrow attitudes. On the contrary, they grow into them. The child whose actions seem to be okay but has a growing attitude issue will eventually reach a crisis point for both the parent and the child.

It's important to address a bad attitude as early as possible. It can be complicated at times, though, leaving parents wondering what they should actually do when they see one. Although you might simply force a younger child into good patterns of relating, you'll need a bit more finesse to address the attitude of an older elementary age child. Young people benefit from significant conversations, not just abrupt comments, in order to help them understand the dangers of a bad attitude and how it needs to change. It's good to have those kinds of conversations now before the teen years come. Then open dialogue will be a natural part of your relationship as you make the next parenting

shift. Many bewildered parents of teenagers wonder why their kids never talk to them, when, in reality, they could have built better habits of dialogue in the preceding years.

This doesn't mean that your home needs to become a democracy where everyone has an equal say. It's important that you maintain authority during these years while at the same time adjusting the way you assert it. When you talk openly with your child, you provide an opportunity to be heard. You are demonstrating respect by listening to your child and providing a strong foundation to require respect in return.

In addition to developing a good pattern of listening to your child, you'll want to keep in mind that another component of a good plan for addressing attitudes is firmness. This usually requires a good amount of self-control on your part to prevent your firmness from becoming harshness. You may have to take a deep breath and say, "I heard what you said, but you can't treat me unkindly like that. You're going to have to take a Break until you're ready to work this out with me." It's usually best not to continue the conversation until you see evidence of open ears and an open heart. Send her back to take a Break multiple times if necessary. The Break technique will help you to maintain firmness as well as give your child time to make a heart change. This method can be time-consuming, but it really does work.

When a bad attitude problem comes on suddenly, keep in mind that your child may be starting a developmental roller coaster ride of hormonal and physical change. Sometimes, all your ranting young person needs is a hug. Other times, she may need some alone time. Young people sometimes lose their temper, cry for no reason, and declare that they hate their parents, siblings, best friend, and even life



itself. You don't have to directly address the outrageous things point by point. Rather, address the temper, tone, and the spirit behind what is said. By doing so, you'll get to the heart of the problem, and help your child navigate through conflicting emotions.

Talking with young people requires a balanced approach. Remember that your child is not your spouse or your best friend. Avoid saying too much or talking too long. Instead, focus on the topic at hand, and be as direct and as brief as possible. This applies to matters of discipline and permission, but it also applies to the difficult questions kids sometimes ask about life and faith. Older elementary age children are usually not developmentally capable of sustaining a long conversation about difficult subjects. Those days will come, but for now, you may find that your child goes from asking about the meaning of life to talking about video games. Don't be insulted. Your child is merely evidencing the developmental stage, somewhere between a little child and an emerging adult.

Your child knows that the teen years are coming, and is likely already longing in some respects for the privileges and responsibilities that come with them. Carefully consider what you say to your child and in your child's hearing about the impending teenage years. If you communicate that the teen years are going to be a nightmare, then likely they will be. Your child will know that you expect it. Instead, speak about how you look forward to watching your child grow into a man or woman of God. You can then be like the woman described in Proverbs 31:25, "She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come."

God calls families to live together with honor and mu-

tual respect. It's unfortunate that many parents and kids today accept the way popular TV characters behave as a norm for family life. This isn't God's plan for families. Young people can voice their needs while at the same time demonstrating honor to their parents. Ephesians 6:1-4 talks about the mutual honor that God desires for families. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.' Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Bad attitudes can increase tension in family life and damage relationships. Look for ways to talk things out, set ground rules for communicating displeasure, and use firmness to teach kids that bad attitudes are not appropriate in your home. That takes work. You'll often have meetings with your kids to discuss what you're seeing and to determine new ways to handle the frustrations of life. Those are teaching times and well worth the effort.



## Doing Well at School

Some children find school more challenging than others. Kids who do well seem to have several things coming together at the same time that fuel them forward with a sense of accomplishment and confidence. Those who do poorly often need help on a number of fronts, but even small steps of progress can bring the hope needed to move forward with success.

Three things need to come together to help a child be a successful learner during the later elementary years: 1) Workable organizational skills, 2) Academic competence, and 3) Strong character. If your child isn't doing well, then the most important classroom is your home, and you're the best counselor for your child to help bring about growth in these areas.

By the later elementary years, even students that consistently performed well in the past may have trouble due to increased expectations, the difficulty of the work, and multiple teachers for major subjects. Add to that social stresses, rapid growth, and hormonal changes and you've got enough to overwhelm even the most well-adjusted child.

Organizational skills provide the framework for academics. Kids need to have systems for remembering assignments, bringing homework home, turning it in, and being prepared for tasks ahead. Take time to develop reminder strategies with your child. You can always fall back on the parent plan, but getting your child involved in the organizational process is most helpful. You might say to your daughter, "I'd like you to develop a plan for remembering your assignments and report that plan to me. Then, for a while, I'm going to monitor your plan to make sure it's working for you. If it is, I can release you a bit in this area. If not, I'll have to tighten up to train you to be more organized."

Kids need help. Accountability, consequences, reminders, and returning to school to retrieve missing pieces are all part of the process. Don't fall into the trap of saying, "Just let her fail, and then she'll learn." That strategy only works with kids who are highly motivated. Those who aren't, learn to be failures instead of learning to succeed. Instead, getting more involved by continually asking the questions and following up to make sure things get done is more productive at developing a more conscientious attitude toward schooling.

If the school doesn't provide one, you might purchase an assignment pad for your child that's organized like a day planner. Then he can see that even grown-ups have to write things down in order to remember them. Create a designated area for homework, and remind your child to put everything back into its proper place when he is done. Check in regularly with the teachers to make sure that the system is working both at school and at home.

Academic competence comes in many forms. For ex-

ample, you can teach your child to prepare for tests by making the most of study time. While study sheets may cover all the information, students frequently wind up staring at the page without actively taking in the information. The study sheet can be used as the basis for creating a set of flash cards. Homemade flash cards are an excellent way to memorize facts. They can be used for science, social studies, vocabulary, and math. It might be best for your child to make the cards. If you make them, you may be defeating some of the learning process. This method covers many learning modes as students read, copy, memorize, and summarize information. Mnemonic devices and acrostics help to memorize lists of facts. Flash cards are a great way to study independently.

You might encourage independence in studying for tests by having your child do self-quizzes first. You can then check areas to make sure understanding is clear. In this way, you are doing the training by transferring responsibility to your child and supporting, encouraging, and enforcing areas of need.

When it comes to math facts, memorization is the only way. You might use creative memorization games and strategies, but the reality is that kids need to know them well. Drills and practice can help, as well as writing, speaking, and reading them. Working through flash cards may be useful, but keep in mind that it takes a lot of time and energy to memorize, so stay at it for several months and you'll make significant progress.

In this technological age, students can use safe websites to study everything from language skills to geography. The benefits of studying on the computer are that you can specify the exact content to be covered and individualize

the work. Working on the computer is fun, so you are less likely to meet with resistance using this study method. Use the computer as an efficient learning tool, but not as a replacement for other effective study methods.

Character is an important ingredient for success in school. Some of the prominent heart qualities necessary are humility, diligence, thoroughness, and responsiveness to authority. You may want to work on those qualities in other areas besides schoolwork because they all transfer from one arena to another. In fact, you might ask your child to look up Galatians 5:22-23 and ask the question, "Of these nine things, which ones do you wish you had more of?" They are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Then ask, "Do you see where they come from at the beginning of that verse?" They are fruit that come from the Holy Spirit, a good motivation for parents and children to pray and ask God to increase those qualities in the heart.

Maximizing study time begins in the classroom with proper attention and behavior. If your child is goofing off in school, then it'll be difficult to make up the lost time at home. Older elementary age children are old enough to understand that if they actively participate during the 40 minutes or so devoted to each class period, they'll spend less time at home trying to learn or relearn the material. Set the standard and check in often with the teacher to make sure your child is paying attention and working hard. Open communication with teachers creates accountability, an essential ingredient for character development. With email and internet school management systems, you no longer have to wonder if the note you sent in his folder ever actually made it to school.

When contacting your child's teacher, do it calmly, keeping your comments focused on specific issues. If you are angry or upset, it is usually a good idea to wait 24 hours. When you wait, you can pray, talk with your child again, and take time to cool off. Then, you can evaluate whether or not it's really necessary to approach the teacher. Use the opportunity to teach your child how to handle problems maturely. Support the teachers and teach your child how to learn in various environments, even if it isn't your child's favorite.

If a parent-teacher conference is scheduled, write down your concerns before you go so that you stay on topic. Approach the meeting calmly and prayerfully with the attitude that everyone is on the same team. Avoid confronting the teacher without warning. The reality is that when teachers know that you're supportive, they're often more careful to work with your child in class. Conversely, don't neglect to communicate with teachers out of fear that it will make things worse for your child. Teachers are professionals who have their students' best interests at heart. If, however, you meet with resistance from the teacher, it may be necessary to approach the principal. If you do, be sure that you inform the teacher first. Even if the teacher is unhappy about it, she'll appreciate the respect you have shown.

For parents who have tried everything and found that nothing works, it may be time to find out if there are any cognitive or neurological problems that could be thwarting the learning process. In such cases, if a problem is identified, an IEP (individualized education program) can be put in place that is tailored to your child's specific needs. Then the teacher, child study team, and parents can work

together to implement the plan. Some parents resist having their children “labeled,” but the help that children with real challenges receive is essential to their overall success in school. Having your child evaluated, or even classified, doesn't condemn him to a path of failure or mediocrity. It gives insight to you and his teachers to help him achieve his personal best in school, according to his specific needs.

Helping children succeed in school can be a tricky balance between parent involvement and independence. Look for ways to guide your child without doing things for him that he could do for himself, or protecting him from the deserved consequences of poor grades or bad behavior. Someday, he'll appreciate not only what you taught him, but also what you allowed him to learn on his own. Use the school community as a support system. Working together, you can reach your common goal of a well-educated, well-adjusted child.



A decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray. The number 37 is centered within the flourish.

# 37

## Teaching Kids the Value of Honesty

**D**ishonesty cuts at the heart of any relationship, so it's particularly hurtful when children have a problem with lying, stealing, or being mischievous or sneaky. Even if your child doesn't have a problem in this area now, it's good to work on integrity, teaching kids the benefits of holding on to the truth and the pain of being dishonest.

There are many euphemisms for lying such as little white lie, a fib, bending the truth, or telling tales. All of these terms soften the harsh reality of what lying really is: sin. Some more accurate synonyms for lying are deceit, distortion, falsehood, falsification, forgery, misstatement, and misrepresentation. In court, lying is called perjury and is considered a crime. Understanding the seriousness of sin is essential for changing the heart. Sometimes children develop habits of lying to get out of trouble, or they exaggerate a story to make themselves sound better than they actually were.

It may be helpful to define lying in this way: *lying is any false or misleading information that you communicate*

*through words or actions with the intent to deceive.* Children often believe that if what they say is mostly true, then they're telling the truth. But this is simply not the case. Shades of gray are not acceptable in honest communication. Children may also be tempted to leave out certain pertinent details, believing that if they didn't actually say anything untrue, then they aren't responsible for the inaccurate conclusions that others draw. But because lying is both a problem of communication and intention, they're responsible to be clear and accurate.

Kids don't tend to think about how a lie might hurt others or damage relationships. Although it may be hard, it's best to not take lying personally. Your child needs correction, but when parents view it as a personal attack, they can end up overreacting, making helpful discipline elusive. While feelings of betrayal and disappointment are normal, remember that kids don't yet understand all the implications and consequences of lying.

So why do children lie? Lying is a form of self-preservation or self-gratification. Children lie to stay out of trouble, to cover up wrongdoing, or to avoid missing out on a desired activity. They may feel that certain rules are unfair and so they lie to get around them. Young people may also develop a habit of lying to their peers in order to impress them. While lying to parents may reflect rebellion, lying to peers often reveals feelings of inadequacy. Understanding your child's motivation will help you address the appropriate heart issues.

To avoid overreaction when you first discover that your child has lied to you, you may need to take some time to process what she told you and what her motivation may have been. Although some parents have a keen ability to

react instinctively in helpful ways by showing sorrow or hurt, most benefit from a bit of a pause to prevent some unhelpful reaction. A short minute or two to take a deep breath may be all that's necessary to help you respond in a way that's most beneficial for your child. It will also help you avoid the parental guilt that usually follows an angry outburst. Your correction and subsequent teaching will likely need a multi-faceted approach. Here are some of the pieces to consider.

First, you'll want to do some teaching about lying. For example, if you ask your daughter why she lied, she will likely shrug her shoulders, look down at the floor, and mumble, "I don't know." This answer may be frustrating, but it's probably the truth. You can help get to the heart of the problem by talking about the possible reasons why she lied, and what she can do to change it. For example, if she is hiding candy in her room, it may be because she doesn't like the restrictions you put on candy consumption. Her choice of lying is a wrong response to not liking the rules. It's a form of rebellion, a problem that reveals a heart issue.

Additionally, lying prompts a guilty conscience that often makes a child grumpy and short-tempered. When the lie is exposed, even though it brings consequences, it also has the potential to bring relief. You can use this reality as an opportunity to identify the weight of sin, and the freedom that comes from living in the truth.

Lying always has consequences and your firmness is important to make lying less desirable. Children lie because it's the easy way to get what they want or to avoid punishment. The discipline and training you do in this area helps children recognize that lying is actually the harder path. As you consider consequences, you might think in terms

of revealing the secrecy of lying. Having to admit, “I lied,” is probably one of the most difficult things for a child to do. Most kids want to create more lies to cover up the first ones. Furthermore, having to apologize to the neighbor or the store manager further make the consequences of lying undesirable.

Although you want to be careful about using the Bible only in corrective ways, it might be helpful in this particular area to have your child memorize some Bible verses about lying and honesty. Scripture has a way of penetrating the heart, so memorizing it can be helpful. You can look up several verses about lying and pick the ones that are most appropriate for your situation. For example, Psalm 34:13, “keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.” And Ephesians 4:29 reminds us of the importance of words in general. It says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Another important piece of the training for your child has to do with an understanding of integrity. You might define integrity for your child this way: who you are when no one is watching. Integrity provides many benefits that include trustworthiness and the benefit of the doubt. Those privileges are not to be taken lightly as they provide more freedom for children, whereas lying increases control and mistrust. Even children who don't have a problem with lying need to understand the benefits of holding tightly to their integrity.

Ultimately, lying is a spiritual problem. Jesus says that when we know him, we know the truth, and the truth will set us free (John 8:32). When you define lying and

truth-telling in terms of communication and intention, and combine that with the truth of Scripture, you give your child a solid foundation on which to build relationships. Lying is hurtful and damaging. Knowing how and when to tell the truth can be challenging. It's all part of building inside a child a heart that's strong and able to follow after God in the small things of life first and then in larger things over time.

## Maneuvering Around Homework Hassles

Homework is a necessary part of schooling for most children, and it's an opportunity to develop character in kids...and their parents! But when homework time gets carried away, then it can invade family time and often results in frustration and tears. When children enter the upper elementary and middle school years, homework intensifies and difficulty levels increase. This can create a dizzying merry-go-round effect in families that leaves everyone involved exhausted and ready to get off the ride. But like death and taxes, homework is inevitable. So how can a parent take advantage of it in positive ways?

There's value in having students practice skills at home that were taught in school. Beyond that, homework and projects teach important life skills. They require discipline, diligence, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving skills. These character traits are ones that parents like to see in their kids, but, unfortunately, they often require training, practice, and hard work to develop.

Several strategies can help ease homework time. Clarifying the schedule, allowing short breaks, and providing

a workplace away from distraction can go a long way. It's often best to consider your child's personality, space availability, and family dynamics in establishing a homework spot, since many children at this age are still too immature to complete homework unsupervised.

It's often helpful to share with your child that homework time is important for more than just getting tasks completed. It's about character development. For example, diligence, thoroughness, organization, and thoughtfulness all help kids do better. The difference between a good and great student has to do with character. You might choose one quality to work on. For example, if you're struggling with the amount of time your child spends on homework, then talking about diligence and then practicing it may prove productive. You might use a technique such as a timer to keep things moving forward, and to keep reasonable pressure on to build the desired quality. Each child is different, however. If your child tends to be anxious, has a learning disability, or struggles in a particular area, then the timer idea may be counterproductive. In those instances, you will likely have to remain close by and redirect as necessary. Either way, your focus isn't simply to get the job done, but to affirm growing character in your child.

Many parents question how involved they should be in their children's homework. The answer always depends on your child's character development. Some children do well developing responsibility and accountability with less involvement from you. Others, though, need more parental control to build organizational skills, thoroughness in turning in assignments, and thoughtfulness in order to excel instead of simply doing the minimum to get by. One of the benefits of homework is that it provides opportunities to

build self-reliance. If your child is relying on you to go step by step through each assignment, then it will be harder to learn how to work independently.

Children should write down their own homework at school, remember their own materials, and complete their assignments independently. Parents can then be available to answer specific questions and help children study, but it's a good idea to be busy at your own task during this time to avoid micromanaging their work. Don't hesitate to get involved when you see character lagging. It's during these years that good habits develop for future learning, so if a child starts to slack off, then you'll want to do remedial character work.

For children who struggle with organization, asking the teacher to sign the assignment book will ensure that homework was properly written down. Then each assignment can be checked off when completed, and Mom or Dad can sign off at home that they saw the completed assignment. If something is lost, the child at least has proof that it was completed and the teacher can handle the situation accordingly.

When children are doing their best and still not achieving top marks, putting the emphasis on a job well done, rather than the actual grade, will help increase self-confidence. We often underestimate the power of our words as parents. A sincere "I'm proud of you," will go far in quelling the frustration of a less-than-expected grade. Even if your child cannot resist the temptation of comparing himself to his peers, he will at least have the assurance that his best is enough at home.

In overcoming homework hassles, it's important to remind kids that not everything in life is fun. Kids aren't



always going to love doing their homework. Nor are they going to appreciate today the skills that they acquire through completing difficult assignments. It's your job as a parent to show your child that people often find pleasure in their work when they have the right attitude toward it. The reward is the satisfaction of a job well done. There are many daily household tasks that aren't pleasurable but are still necessary. The difference in the experience often has to do with attitude.

Scripture has a lot to say about our attitude towards work. For example, in Ecclesiastes 9:10, Solomon writes, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." A child's work is studying and being a good student. Throughout Scripture, God demonstrates the value he places on working from the heart. When children see their current position in school as a calling from God rather than a prison sentence, it can begin to reshape their attitude towards homework in particular, and school in general.

## When is it Okay to Stay Home Alone

**Y**ou just want to run out to the store for an hour or so. You tell your nine-year-old son to get himself ready to go, but he's very involved in his project. He looks up and says, "How old do I have to be before I can stay home alone?"

The answer to that question is determined not by age, but by responsibility. Parents who establish ages at which kids might receive more freedom to get a cell phone, babysit, or stay home alone are sometimes disappointed when that age comes around and the child is not yet ready. A better answer to those kinds of questions is, "It's not about age. It's about being responsible."

The privilege to be home alone is based on a child's maturity and trustworthiness. Some children might be able to handle time at home alone when they're nine. Others won't be ready until they're eleven, thirteen, or maybe even well into the teen years. You'll have to decide what's best for your child, and the same age will likely not apply to all of your children.

You'll want to consider several things when determin-

ing whether your child might be ready to stay home alone. How independent is he? How would he handle potential emergency situations? Does he show responsibility in his work? Is he trustworthy? Your answers to these questions will help you think more specifically about your own child's readiness.

Staying home alone is one thing, but adding babysitting to the list of responsibilities changes the scenario. In order to decide if your child is ready to be home caring for siblings, you'll have to ask several questions. How do your children interact? Will your little ones listen to an older sibling if they are together without adult supervision? If your four-year-old doesn't listen to you, he's not likely going to listen to his brother. Alternately, if your child is constantly picking on his younger siblings when you are around, it's safe to assume that he'll probably continue to do so, or worse, when you're gone. If a younger sibling creates or develops a problem, your child will have to be ready, willing, and able to address the challenge in your absence. Family dynamics and individual needs are important factors in this decision.

If you believe your child is ready, this may be a good opportunity to practice responsibility in practical terms. Take time to go over emergency procedures and problem-solving strategies. More likely your child will need to know how to handle temptations such as going outside the boundaries when no one is watching or lacking initiative to complete a chore or finish homework. Those are important tests to see if your child truly can handle the alone time.

When you and your child are both ready for the "home alone" shift, start with errands that are close by. Keep them short, maybe thirty minutes to an hour, and keep your cell phone handy. You might want to call to check in, find out

how things are going, and offer some accountability, but remember that one of the tests in this activity is whether your child is ready for the independence, so you may just wait until you get home and do some checking to help your child understand that you will inspect to see if expectations are met.

Make ground rules clear. Some of the rules have to do with safety, such as, “Don’t answer the door,” and “Don’t answer the phone.” Or if your child does need to answer the phone, then it’s best to say that Mom and Dad are “unavailable.” Kids should never tell anyone they are home alone. Other rules apply such as, “Don’t invite friends over while Mom and Dad are away,” or “Don’t turn on the stove.”

The challenges to parents in this technological generation are unprecedented. While early exposure to danger, temptation, and sin is not new, the free, unhindered access to these things is new. To quell your technology and media concerns, you’ll want to maximize the parental controls that are available to you. You can install security software on your computer that not only blocks inappropriate websites, but also blocks Internet access to certain users at certain times of day. These blocks are also available for many hand-held devices. Check with your service provider or security company to determine if your child’s device contains this capability.

Phone use, texting, and TV watching should also be limited during unsupervised times. Make the rules very clear to your child and check up as much as you can. Even “good kids” can, and do, get themselves into trouble, especially without supervision. Technology and media issues require a delicate balance of control and trust.

For working moms and single parents, inconvenient

scheduling often creates supervision problems. Training is essential and workable plans for handling life while you are gone are all the more important. Check-in phone calls can give you an idea of what's going on and can be a helpful reminder to your child to stay on track. If, however, you find your child isn't able to handle the responsibility of being home alone, you'll likely want to consider one of the alternatives. Having your child attend an afterschool program or stay with a neighbor or other trusted adult may be necessary for a time.

Older elementary age children often need help focusing through the transition of school to home, getting a snack, completing homework, and making wise choices. Some kids may be able to do this alone, but many can't. At this age, regular, extended parental absence usually requires alternate supervision.

Whether you decide that your child is ready to stay home alone or not, careful guidance is still in order. Frequent conversations about expectations and the ramifications of choices can go a long way to prepare children for the challenges that they face when alone.

One way to help your child develop inner convictions about doing what's right is to share Bible stories of people who did the right thing. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Joshua are good examples. When people were trying to get Daniel in trouble, the Bible says in Daniel 6:4, "At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent." That's a powerful statement about a man and it's no wonder he was given all kinds of privileges in life.



## Developing a Biblical Self-Concept

**S**elf-concept usually reaches a peak of importance just before the teen years. Words like self-acceptance, self-worth, and peer pressure are all influenced by how a child thinks about self. Some children have an overinflated view of self and others diminish themselves. When talking about spiritual gifts, Paul makes an important statement about self-concept in Romans 12:3, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” That’s good advice for anyone and is particularly important for the child who is approaching the teen years.

An important shift often takes place in the early teen years as young people tend to value their friend’s opinions more than they had before, and sometimes question the viewpoint of their parents. That’s not all bad. As teens learn to live in the adult world, they need to choose counselors and must evaluate the opinions of others. They then begin to build their own value system based on the teaching and influences of other people. Building a strong sense

of biblical self-concept now will help your preteen make that shift in the most gracious way possible, knowing how to value parental input while also considering others.

Some children go through some challenges in the area of self-concept by becoming overly concerned about style, disliking certain features of their bodies, or relying too heavily on peers for approval. You can do a lot to provide a solid biblical view of self in order to counteract those and other problems and set the stage for healthy development.

A biblical self-concept must start with an understanding of God's view of who your child is. Here are a few concepts to include in your teaching. The following paragraph is an honest list of statements that a person can understand in order to have some right thinking about self. Sometimes parents overemphasize the positive or the negative. The key is to provide the balance in order to maximize right thinking.

God created people in his image (Genesis 1:26). He formed each person with care and forethought, even in the womb (Psalm 139:13). Every person has a sin problem (Romans 3:23). Each person is loved by God and he gave the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (Romans 6:23). His work is ongoing and he continues to build and grow each person (Philippians 1:6). God has chosen to live inside the human heart and empowers a person through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26). Every Christian has a spiritual gift (Romans 12:6). God has prepared the future, providing you with hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

There is no better self-concept book than the Bible. When you know who you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives you the power to embrace who God created you to be. As a parent, you'll want to be careful how you talk to your child,

especially when you're frustrated or angry. Those words make a lasting impression. Correction is a necessary part of what you do, but make sure that your words communicate the right message and don't communicate an attitude that the child is unloved, unworthy, or unacceptable.

True humility means that kids need to learn to take responsibility for their own mistakes and offenses. In your desire to strengthen your child's self-concept, don't make the mistake of watering down the negative. The most healthy self-concept admits fault and then moves forward. Anything short of that will only be a band-aid with negative, unresolved feelings to eventually return.

Look for ways to address behavior problems as character flaws that need work, rather than personality traits that are part of your child's hard-wiring. For example, if you find that your son is becoming lazy, speak directly to that flaw and look for appropriate practice to move in a better direction. Avoid name-calling or saying something such as, "You're lazy." Rather, it's more helpful to say something such as, "Your laziness is preventing you from meeting your responsibilities and obligations. You need to change your behavior." One dad realized that he was using a negative approach to this problem by saying, "You're so lazy. You'll never amount to anything." He realized that his son was beginning to believe those negative words, and they were becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Angry words can have a greater impact than one imagines.

Self-concept often forms the basis for self-confidence in children. Your compliments can go a long way, especially if they are directed at progress, maturity, and character development, instead of on accomplishment and behavior. For example, you might say, "Wow, you got a good grade on



that paper. I can tell it's because you looked for extra to do instead of just doing the minimum to get by. That makes an important statement about you as a person."

While specific praise increases your child's self-confidence, constantly hearing how smart, beautiful, wonderful, and talented she is may set her up for disappointment. Be realistic and talk about weaknesses as well as strengths. Avoid comparing siblings to each other in a way that emphasizes one's strengths over another's. It's healthy for children to understand that they can't be good at everything. God has created each child with special gifts and abilities that provide uniqueness.

In an effort to increase self-worth, our society has shifted in the way it recognizes participation and achievement. Everyone on a team now gets a trophy just for participating. The first recipients of these participation awards have now entered the work force, only to find that employers and colleagues aren't handing out trophies for participation. If your child doesn't win a competition, earn first prize, or achieve the highest grades in school, congratulate her on giving her best effort and teach her to congratulate the winners. In life there's a lot of winning and losing. Our children need to be taught how to be gracious in both.



## Bedtime Routines

Activities. Appointments. Homework. Dinner. More activities. More homework. TV, computers, handheld devices. It seems that there's no end to the list of things that children get involved in between the afternoon and bedtime. Modern life is a constant run on a hamster wheel until families collapse into bed beyond exhaustion, only to be awakened by a blaring alarm clock the next morning and start all over again. It's certainly a challenge, so it's important to remind ourselves every once in a while about the importance of sleep for children.

Most children benefit from some unwind time in the evening before bed. Over-stimulated minds often have trouble shutting down immediately to go to sleep. It may have been easier to transition preschoolers from playtime to bedtime, but as children get older, many families become so busy that this transition time gets lost. However, a good pre-bedtime routine is just as important for older elementary kids as it was for toddlers.

Some young people still enjoy a family reading experience, but often their own ability to read launches them

into more independence. Sometimes, though, a family reading time can go a long way to contribute to family unity. Younger children can listen in too, and older elementary kids are usually at that stage where they can read to younger siblings. Sharing special family time together, even if it's only fifteen or twenty minutes before bed, often helps young people relax and prepare for a good night's sleep. You'll likely be surprised at how eagerly your child snuggles in close to you while you share a good book.

Sometimes the temptations of technology compete with your child's need to sleep. That's just one of the many reasons to keep all electronics out of the bedroom, especially at night. Children with televisions, computers, and handheld devices in their bedrooms often prefer them to a good night's sleep. Media and technology devices should be kept in common family areas so that you can monitor use and access. Kids can turn in handheld devices to Mom or Dad at bedtime, perhaps in a designated basket on the parent's dresser. Limiting media and technology use before bed will help quiet the mind and prepare for sleep. You'll usually need to set firm limits on these things, particularly as they pertain to bedtime.

All children function best with routine. Older kids crave and generally deserve a later bedtime than their younger siblings. This acknowledgment of their growing desire for independence will help build a greater sense of perception that they're growing up. However, privileges are not a rite of passage; kids earn them through responsibility. If your child is grumbling when it's time for lights out or is having difficulty getting up in the morning, then adjusting bedtime may become necessary to teach responsibility. Assurance that you'll revisit the later bedtime often inspires

maturity. Tying privilege to responsibility is a common strategy you'll use over the next several years, and bedtime is an excellent place to work on it.

Lack of sleep leads to tired and cranky kids. Sleep deprivation is a serious problem that can affect health, school performance, and emotional stability. We've all witnessed an over-tired child go into overdrive. This is a common symptom of sleep deprivation in children. If you want your children to do their best with school, activities, and peers, it might be best to say no to some activities and get your child to bed on time. Likewise, if you find that your child is struggling in any of these areas, start simply by analyzing sleep habits before enlisting professional help from the school or a doctor.

Most children between the ages of nine and twelve need about 9–12 hours of sleep each night. Many kids can vary that schedule a bit, recognizing that they can make up sleep the next night. However, losing sleep on the weekdays and “catching up” on the weekends tends to be a bad habit and counterproductive for a growing healthy child. The body generally needs consistent quality sleep to perform optimally. For most older elementary age children, that means that bedtime should be between 8:00 and 9:00 pm.

The most important thing that you can do for your child at bedtime is to pray out loud and ask God to bless the night. This special time can open up significant dialogue that may not be possible any other time of day. If you have taught your children to pray a traditional bedtime prayer, then now is a good time to move to more personal prayers. Ask for personal requests, share together, and pray about them. When you pray over your child, speak the promises

of God's Word as a blessing and place your hands on your child's head, shoulder, or back. Thank God that your child can sleep peacefully because God NEVER sleeps (Psalm 121:3). If your child is struggling with nighttime anxiety or fears, you might thank God that we are more than conquerors (Romans 8:37), that we can take every thought captive for Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). Pray that your child will "grow in wisdom, and stature, and in favor with God and men," just like Jesus (Luke 2:52). You might simply say, "Lord, I pray that you'll give Jonathan a good night's sleep and good dreams tonight," or tuck your child into bed every night with Psalm 4:8, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."

These kinds of nightly traditions build patterns of trust in the Lord and allow a child to experience God just before going to sleep, a strong contributor to good mental health in anyone.

In the end, you'll want to value bedtime as a strategic spiritual and relational connection point with your child. It won't be long before your child will have greater independence and these times may become fewer. So take advantage of them now and maximize their use.



## When Kids Avoid Family Time

“Come on, Sally. We’re all going to play a game together.”

“Aw Mom, do I have to?”

If your child is responding rather unenthusiastically to family time lately, don’t be alarmed. This is a normal part of the shift that takes place during this stage. Older elementary age children want to be recognized as “big kids.” Many feel like they have outgrown childish interests in princesses or superheroes. Part of this self-assertion may include refusal to participate in certain family activities. This behavior can seem hurtful to parents at times. Your reaction is important to your child’s development and to your relationship.

Here’s what’s happening inside your child. Brain development has reached a stage where your child is moving to more independent thinking. The ability to think more conceptually allows your child to develop opinions, beliefs, and judgments about life unlike earlier stages of growth. That independent thinking often leads to a pulling away from authorities such as parents. Children need some clear

direction, empathy, and, many times, firmness to help them incorporate the new thinking into their responsibilities in family life.

In some ways you'll want to allow your child some freedom to make choices, even ones that aren't your first choice. If she decides not to participate in a family activity such as a game or walk, you might allow it occasionally. Afterwards, make sure she knows that she was missed. Once you allow this freedom, you may find she is more willing to participate.

On the other hand, it's best to require some family activities. Mealtimes, going to church, and some of the family times at home are not optional. These times together will require that your children integrate their growing sense of independence with a commitment to community. Those parents who are more interested in pleasing their kids by allowing them to opt out of such activities are often sorry because these young people often aren't yet qualified to know what's best for them.

The home is a laboratory where each member in a family explores, experiments, and develops conclusions about life. By setting the stage with some required family activities you're adding a factor into your child's equation that causes them to think in ways they hadn't anticipated or even wanted to. It's in family life when kids can learn to choose to do what's right instead of what they want to do. Kids can practice having a good attitude and contributing to the family when they'd rather be doing something else. Relating to others who may be challenging is part of growth. All of this takes place in family interaction and older elementary age children need to face these challenges and work through them as they are growing in their

independent thinking.

As a parent, you can demonstrate a firm, but gentle approach. You might want to empathize with your child to help strengthen relationship, but firmness forces the issue and helps your child wrestle with things in the heart. You could say, for example, “I understand you’re not hungry and you’re very involved in your game. But mealtimes here at our home are family times. We need that interaction in order to keep our relationships strong, so coming now to the table is not optional.”

No doubt, some children will balk at your firmness, express disappointment, have a bad attitude, or want to argue. A gracious, firm approach will win in the end. Firmness doesn’t require harshness. Your calm determination will do more to soften the resistance than angry words. Many children, when given no other option, end up joining in and responding positively to the interaction. Those who don’t may need a bit more care, teaching, and firmness to help them understand how life works.

There could be an underlying reason behind your child’s lack of interest in family time. Rather than arguing, laying on a guilt trip, or strong-arming her into submission, try finding out what’s really bothering her. Some possible places to start may have something to do with trouble with siblings, issues with parental authority, challenges at school, or struggles with friends. The dialogue you have often produces good opportunities to help your child overcome mental and emotional roadblocks.

The important thing to realize is that kids at this age have the task of integrating values into their practical decision-making. They may resist good values because they don’t know how to, or don’t want to, consider them. By



requiring a certain level of family involvement, you give your child a healthy push to internally wrestle with important issues.

Forcing your child to participate in every board game, family walk, or movie night is unrealistic and won't, in the end, strengthen family bonds. However, requiring certain activities provides teaching opportunities and helps your child grow on a number of levels. At the same time, you'll want to provide times for independence and alone time. If you honor your child's need for a little space, who knows? She may be the one planning the next family activity. Then you can say with the Psalmist, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers [and whole families] live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1)



## Using Consequences Wisely

**O**ne discouraged parent came up to us recently and said, “I’ve taken everything away. I don’t know what else to do. My son only has a mattress in his room now.”

You may not have arrived at that point yet, but if it feels like you’re heading there as you give consequences to your child, then it would be good to evaluate the tools available to you as you work in the area of correction.

The goal of discipline is a changed heart. Consequences are one part of the discipline process, but keep your mind on the goal of the heart to maximize change. Unfortunately, many parents have more of a justice mentality that says, “You did that, so you get this.” Those parents often miss the heart of the child, but they think that they’re doing what they need to do because they’re punishing for wrongdoing.

First of all, keep in mind that most children need a multi-faceted approach to change. The child who is resistant or rebellious, for example, will likely need more than a loss of privilege to change. Children need relationship, teaching, dialogue, firmness, convictions, and practice doing what’s right, not just a punishment for doing what’s wrong.

Here's how Randy and Jill responded to the rebellion they were seeing in their eleven-year-old Jacob. "He was failing at school, treating us with disrespect, and generally heading down a wrong path in life. We had taken privileges away in the past, but we now realized that we needed a bigger plan. We started by strengthening our relationship with Jacob, having fun, engaging him in dialogue, and enjoying his interest in model trains. We also had significant talks about the dangers of being obstinate to authority. We talked about arenas where he found it most difficult to comply or go along with the leadership in his life. We used those areas to help him develop plans that would change what he thought and what he did in those situations. We partnered with the school and got those leaders more involved with us.

"One thing that seemed to be particularly helpful with Jacob is that we practiced doing what's right. If he treated us disrespectfully, we pointed it out and had him stop what he was doing and try to do it differently. We began to see some significant changes as we maintained a firm approach with him."

This kind of multi-faceted plan is often what kids need to stay on track in their lives. Consequences are a small piece of a bigger plan. The purpose of consequences is to provide the motivation to move forward with the plan, not simply to punish a child for doing something wrong.

Two common consequences that parents use at this stage are removing privileges and restricting freedom. You might even read the Bible story with your child from Matthew 25:14-30. It's a parable designed to prompt the disciples to be faithful to God with what they have been given because there will be an accounting in the future and they

will want to be found responsible. But the story provides an interesting illustration of the relationship between privilege and responsibility. When the steward does what's right, then he receives the commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things." The idea is that the person who is more responsible gets more privileges. Furthermore, the one steward who was lazy was told, "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." The person who was not responsible lost the privilege.

To make your consequence most productive in moving your child to a better response, it's best to avoid setting a time limit, but rather require positive action to earn the privilege back. Here's why. When you say to your son, "You were disrespectful to me, so I'm going to take away your video game privileges for a week," you've just taken away any hope your child might have for working on the problem. There's nothing he can do now. He just has to endure the punishment of not having his video game for the next seven days.

On the other hand, you might say to him, "Son, because you were disrespectful to me, I'm going to take away your video game privileges. Show me that you can be respectful to me and we can talk about getting that privilege back." Now, you're tying the loss of privilege to positive action, providing hope, a key factor in a heart-based approach to parenting. He will look for ways to earn his video game privileges back. Yes, that's still an external motivator and you'd really like to see him be respectful because it's the right thing to do, but you're creating a teaching experience.

You're showing your child what respect looks like and requiring that he practice it. Adding this approach to the other pieces of your discipline plan increases the forward progress in your son.

Having a child earn back a privilege will likely mean that you give it back and take it away more often, but each time you remove it, you're setting up a practice situation to help your child move forward.

Restricting freedom is another valuable consequence that involves things such as earlier bedtime, checking in more often, and not being able to go to a friend's house or hang out at school after the bell. The loss of freedom corresponds to the lack of responsibility a child is demonstrating. In order to regain those freedoms, it's best to have the child demonstrate responsibility in practical ways. For example, you might say, "If you want to go over to a friend's house, then you need to have a friend over and show me that you can do the right thing, even when the friend tempts you to do otherwise." Or, "If you can have a good attitude in the morning when we're getting ready, and treat me with respect, then you can stay up a bit later in the evening."

It's rarely wise to restrict your child from going to youth group, Boy Scouts, or other wholesome activity where other leaders and authorities might have a positive influence on your child's life. It may be that in that situation God uses another leader or authority to speak words that are just what's needed to contribute to a heart change in your child.

Heart work is all about strategy. But, be sure to spend time praying that God would use your work and provide grace for your child to change. God is interested in the heart and your prayers may be just the tool God wants to use to bring about significant growth in your child's life.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, flowing, light gray swirls that frame the word 'Conclusion'.

## Conclusion

One of the greatest things to remember about working with older elementary age children is to parent them with relationship as opposed to being controlling. Yes, kids need firm limits. They'll amaze you with thoughtful statements, determination, and a hefty skill at arguing at times and then turn around and act childish. One minute they look like they are taking amazing steps of maturity and then the next minute they can leave you in total despair.

The parenting shift during the preteen years is a significant one. Persuasion and influence are significant to help your child change, but that doesn't mean an over-reliance on incentives or threats. Consequences will definitely be helpful, but helping children change what they believe is much bigger than that.

The goal of your discipline is a changed heart. You'll become a master at many skills, including humility, as you look for ways to strategically bring about maturity and responsibility. Creativity and life experience will take front stage and dialogue will be high on your list of relational tactics.

Although some of the challenges you face will cause stress on your relationship, it's during these years that you can enjoy relationship in deeper ways than ever before. At the same time, the work of parenting during the pre-

teen years drives parents to their knees. It becomes more and more clear that parents don't control the outcome of a child's heart. They are just influencers. God is ultimately the one in control and he loves your child and enjoys the heart work that brings about closeness to him.

No one problem in a day is the end. We're all in process. God is in the business of changing people one step at a time. There's something very freeing about recognizing that your child is in process. You may feel at times as if you've lost the battle, and maybe you will in the short term. But always remember the long-term goals. As you work at instilling values and passing on convictions to your child, you'll be surprised at the positive changes over time.

Furthermore, always remember that God is using family life to do a deeper work in you as well. God loves you and desires that you grow and find strength in him. He wants you to hone your strengths and to learn to trust him in your weakness.

There's something very freeing about knowing God as your heavenly Father. It doesn't reduce your work, but there's a confidence you can have that he will provide wisdom, strength, and perseverance to continue on.

One of the greatest gifts we give to parents at the National Center for Biblical Parenting is hope. If there's any way that we can help you as you continue to strive to be the best parent you can, please let us know. We know that parenting is the toughest job in the world. It's our desire to make that job just a little bit easier.

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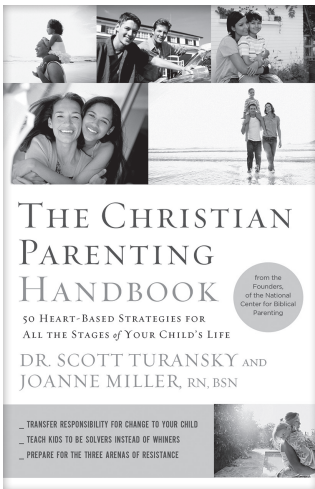
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