

Preschool *Explorers*

Parenting Wisdom
for Ages 3-5



Dr. Scott Turansky
and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN
with Diane Snyder



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with Diane Snyder

Published by the National Center for Biblical Parenting

National Center for Biblical Parenting, 76 Hopatcong Drive,
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648-4136

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76 Hopatcong Drive, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648-4136.

First eBook release, 2011

First Printing, 2011

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Preschool Explorers: Parenting Wisdom for Ages 3-5

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ISBN 978-1-888685-49-7

1. Child rearing--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Turansky, Scott, 1957-

Miller, Joanne, 1960-

Snyder, Diane 1951-

Title.BV4529.T88 1996 649.1--dc22

The names of people who have come to the National Center
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About the Authors



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A large, light gray decorative swirl graphic that frames the title. It consists of several elegant, flowing lines that spiral and curve around the text.

Introduction

The preschool years are an exciting time of exploration and discovery. In fact, many parents enjoy these years because of the things they learn as well. As teacher and coach you have the opportunity to guide your child to try new things, understand different ideas, and figure out how life works. Learning opportunities happen every time you turn around. Sometimes the learning takes place through correction, and other times it's with the encouragement to try something different or as you explain what's going on. In short, during the preschool years you'll likely view yourself as a tour guide on the great adventure of life.

Not only will your child learn from you, but you will learn as well. It was Jesus who said in Matthew 18:3, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." As you watch your preschooler grow and develop you'll see trust in action, true honesty, and the humility necessary to get help or admit weakness. God knows that all people, young or old, need to advance to the next level in their personal development and kids are great models to reveal the path. Children have a way of keeping parents on their toes, especially when it comes to faith and trusting in God.

In some ways preschoolers are like sponges, ready to

soak up everything within their sights and reach. They're excited about learning and curiosity drives them forward. You'll likely spend quite a bit of time trying to form answers to their questions in a way that they can comprehend. You'll want to allow extra time in your schedule so you can stop to touch the caterpillar on the sidewalk, or watch the butterfly land on a flower and drink the nectar, or observe a dump truck spilling its load, or watch the fish in an aquarium swim and eat.

It's during the preschool years that children learn basic heart qualities to help strengthen them for life. They learn responsiveness to authority, the ability to cooperate with you and others, and self-control to manage their impulses and emotions. Preschoolers also begin learning about responsibility and independence. Sometimes children struggle to learn these qualities because of their strong desires or the intense emotions in their hearts. You'll want to keep the heart qualities in mind as you make choices and decisions for your preschooler. Learning to live on a schedule and respond to authority doesn't come easily for most. But these skills will develop the character in your child's heart to help him be successful in life and in relationships. Teaching self-control and responsiveness to authority can be a challenge, but your persistence will be worth it in the end. Parenting is hard work and requires wisdom that only God can provide.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." The word "train" literally means "to dedicate" and implies a commitment to the task. The work of training a preschooler is strategic so you'll want to have a plan. Preschoolers need to learn how to think, how to act, and understand how they fit

into this world. Your discussions, guidelines, and teaching are the primary vehicles God uses to accomplish this task.

One of the ways preschoolers learn is by watching what others do. They'll often imitate what they see, especially in their parents, providing you with a sense of personal accountability regarding your own habits and mannerisms. You'll sometimes see yourself through the words and actions of your preschooler, and just hope that what they reveal is what you'd like them to see. When you fall short, use it as a teaching opportunity. Don't hesitate to apologize to your child, and then re-teach a better way to handle a situation.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to your preschooler is to keep learning fun and exciting so that your child will enjoy being a lifelong learner. Use these years to get to know your child, have fun teaching, and give your child an excitement for learning. You'll want to look for ways to enjoy these years with your preschooler. Cherish the time and make it special, to be remembered by both you and your child. Make memories and hold on to keepsakes to reflect on later.

Much of the initial understanding of God comes through the parent/child relationship as children understand love, forgiveness, firmness, and what relationship is all about. The way you handle offenses, teach lessons, and take time to interact, all prepare the way for your child to understand how God wants to relate. You'll likely have many opportunities to introduce who God is and how he interacts as you build a relationship with your child.

We have lots of ideas and strategies to help your preschooler grow and develop. We'll show you how to build good habits, start new routines, and encourage healthy pat-

terns with your child. But as you look at all the details and practical advice in this book be sure to take time to formulate your overall philosophy of parenting. You'll have many choices to make about how to handle a particular situation, or what approach to take this time. The choices you make in your parenting are significant. There are a lot of good ways to parent, but not all of them are best for your child. This book will give you tools that you'll use over time to help your child grow and develop most effectively. We'll help you think biblically and practically as you coach and train your child during the preschool years.



Use Life as a Classroom

Preschoolers are eager to obtain facts to fill their data banks. New information facilitates learning, exploring, decision-making, and language development. In fact, providing a variety of learning experiences that appeal to multiple senses actually increases a child's intelligence. Look for ways to explain life to your child and encourage your child to ask questions. You're a great teacher and you'll enjoy seeing the world through your child's eyes as new information takes hold.

Preschoolers have so much to discover and learn, and your observations may be just what it takes to get the wheels turning inside their heads. Solomon knew the value of learning from life. In Proverbs 6:6-8 he says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." Even the bugs and insects can teach valuable lessons to the inquisitive mind.

Stating simple facts to preschoolers encourages their curiosity. They often want to know why and how. When you answer their questions, they learn that asking ques-

tions is good. If you stifle their questions, you hamper this curiosity and teach them that questions are an interruption. Questions are a key to learning and kids who find encouragement with answers develop confidence in the learning process. Those who don't, often learn to stay quiet, wondering about things that pique their curiosity but not wanting to ask, for fear of disturbing others. The preschooler who is allowed to take time and explore is usually the one who shows curiosity and is more inquisitive about things in general. This develops a love for learning that grows inside. By stating facts about what you see, hear, taste, touch, or smell, you teach your child about the five senses that God has blessed us with to enjoy the world.

Sometimes a preschooler will ask "Why?" over and over again. This question is sometimes just a request for you to talk more because your child knows that the word "why" keeps the dialogue moving. You may not need to answer the actual question but continue to talk about a related issue or concept. You can always turn the conversation around by asking your own question to encourage your child to talk as well.

When you speak to your preschooler, remember that everything you say is received in a literal manner. We often make jokes or insinuations with each other as adults, and preschoolers can become confused by what they hear. Watch a child's face when someone says something like, "It was so hot, I thought I was going to melt," and you'll often see the look that speaks volumes about what the child thinks was meant by what was said. You might want to translate adult conversation for a preschooler to encourage the right interpretation.

It's important to be truthful with your child, even when

it might be difficult. If, in order to encourage your son on the way to a doctor's appointment, you say, "It's not going to hurt," you may find that the doctor decides to give him a shot. By telling him that it won't hurt and then it does, you've violated trust.

When explaining life to your child, don't give more information than your child can comprehend at a given time. For example, telling a child that Grandma has cancer and giving all of the details about what will happen, her treatment, and how she will feel, is likely too much. Explain the information that your child can comprehend in small portions and leave out the confusing details. Giving preschoolers small bits of information at a time may help them to digest what's being said. Remember too, that children in this stage take your words literally and often don't understand multiple meaning for the same word, so it might be better to say, "Grandma's hair is falling out" as opposed to "Grandma lost her hair."

On the other hand, it's helpful to give your child a lot of information about a subject that he's interested in. Bobby wanted to learn about sharks. Mom didn't know much about them, but as she did research, she continued to give more and more information to her son. He was able to understand a tremendous amount and continued to hunger for more. It's amazing the amount of details a preschooler can memorize. It's important to go with the needs, desires, interests, and abilities of your child in order to teach, not only about the world and how it works, but also to encourage the learning process. Answering questions is a great way to build your child's data bank.

Remembering that preschoolers are literal also helps us understand why they say what they mean. They're of-

ten brutally honest, even though it might not be socially appropriate at times. Telling someone that their breath stinks or their teeth are yellow, or asking why someone is so fat, is not intended to be hurtful, but is a demonstration of a desire to be honest. Parents are often embarrassed by a preschooler who is too honest, but remember that your child is learning about life. Using these awkward social encounters to teach your child the appropriate response is a great teaching tool.

Kids need facts and like to anticipate what's to come. They like to know how things develop and what to expect in their own lives. Some preschoolers are easygoing and go with the flow of life, but most benefit from an understanding of what's on the schedule for today. Preparing preschoolers for what's to come is helpful. In a preschooler's mind, knowing the schedule and what's coming up represents security. The preschooler is often more willing to cooperate when expectations are clear. When they know what's to come they're less likely to resist.

Of course, some children have pretty strong opinions of their own and warning them of the next event seems to have little benefit, but that's because they need some more training in other areas of their development. Keep in mind that self-control and responsiveness to authority come into play when it's time to stop one activity and begin another. So, your day is filled with character-building opportunities. To help in the transition process, it's good to give information about the upcoming schedule. You may want to try a picture chart if you have a particularly busy day. Draw pictures of what will happen in what order and allow your child to cross each one off as it is completed. This helps the preschooler feel more a part of the activities of the day.

Older preschoolers are usually ready to learn the basics of telling time, working with money, and information about the weather. As you introduce these concepts, your child will learn more about how the world works, laying the foundation for deeper understanding in the coming years.

Keep in mind that life is a classroom and that you are the teacher. Preschoolers learn a lot about life. Daily experiences provide new information for the present as well as to build on for the future.



Four Things to Avoid

You can get your kids to do what you want using a number of different tools and strategies. Here are four that you'll want to avoid because of the dangers associated with them.

Reverse psychology coaxes a child to do the opposite of what you're actually saying. You tell a child to do what you don't want him to do, in order to motivate him to do what you want instead. For example, Dad, wanting his son to eat the green beans, says playfully, "I'll be right back. Don't eat those green beans while I'm gone." When he returns, and his son has taken a bite, he reacts with shock and playfully says, "You ate those green beans. Don't eat any more. I'll be right back." Upon returning he sees that his son has taken another bite.

Reverse psychology works because it appeals to a child's desire for play and sometimes appeals to the desire to do the opposite of what the parent has asked. Although it may seem cute and harmless, it's a dangerous tool because it encourages children to oppose your words. Encouraging kids to disobey, even in play, builds unhelpful patterns and can have negative results over time.

Another tool that may work, but that you'll want to avoid, is bribes. "If you're quiet in the museum I'll give you some gum," or "If you clean up your toys I'll give you a quarter," are simple attempts to motivate kids—and they work. The problem is that bribes appeal to a child's selfishness and actually encourage children to think about "What's in it for me?" Getting kids to change behavior to gain a reward often misses the heart. Remember that your goal is to develop an internal responsiveness to authority. We want children to do what's right because it's right, not just to gain a reward.

Instead, teach children about self-control to be quiet in the museum or train children to be responsible to clean up after they play, and you'll be advancing the character they'll need in other areas as well.

A third technique you'll want to avoid is motivating your child with threats. This strategy appeals to a child's fears by stating exaggerated consequences. "If you don't come now, I'm going to leave you here," or "If you don't clean up those toys, I'm going to throw them all away." Replace bribes and threats with firmness. Many children lack the internal character to do what's right. Working hard to teach children what's appropriate can be challenging at times but parenting shortcuts rarely build positive character.

In a similar way, yelling is counterproductive. Yes, it too works in the short run. If you're trying to get your kids in the car, raising your volume level will do the job. Or if they're getting wild, you can yell at them to settle down. The problem is that yelling takes a toll on the relationship, building distance between parent and child. Children who live with yelling hear messages in the tone of voice that

says they are inadequate, unloved, and incompetent.

Some parents use yelling to try to teach respect. Their underlying idea is that children will turn their fear of the intensity into some kind of respect for authority. Respect is a good thing to teach children but yelling and anger aren't good vehicles to bring it about. In fact, the approach won't work for long. Kids actually develop a disrespect for a yelling parent. It may seem to work in the short run, but yelling damages relationships over time.

Again, firmness is the key. Teach children how to respond to your words without having to raise your voice. You do this by following through on your instructions. Most parents need to develop a way to communicate firmness without some form of manipulation attached to it. Often that involves a clear and authoritative voice, moving close to the child, or actually physically redirecting the child to indicate that resistance isn't an option. Although the child may react emotionally, that doesn't mean that you have to be drawn into the intensity. You're simply showing your child what you expect and what self-control and responsiveness look like in practical terms. Children learn that you mean business when you act upon your words, and yelling doesn't have to be part of the equation.

Reverse psychology, bribes, threats, and yelling are all shortcuts. When parents don't have good strategies they sometimes resort to less-than-helpful tools and end up paying a significant price later on. Because you're looking at life as a classroom, you're the teacher or coach, and responsiveness to authority and self-control are the curriculum, you'll want to help your children practice doing what's right. Parenting is hard work but the pressure you put on your child helps develop character in strate-

gic ways. Hebrews 12:5-7 says it this way, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline.”

If you view discipline as training then you’ll think more strategically about your parenting. Many parents take shortcuts with their kids when they are preschoolers, only to find out a few years later that they’ve done some significant damage to the training process.

As you continue through this book you’ll discover many practical strategies that are far more effective in building character and maturity in your child. Look for ways to reach your child’s heart. Teaching character and maturity take work and the effort you exert is strategic. Choose your approaches wisely in these early years and you’ll build significant patterns that will last a lifetime.



Teach About Authority

“I was surprised by his comment and I didn’t know how to respond,” said Rhonda. She was confused. “I told my four-year-old, Jake, to take a Break. He wasn’t responding to my instructions and we had exchanged some heated words. He turned to me and yelled, ‘Mommy, you go take a Break.’

It was true I needed to cool off, but can kids put their parents in a Break? I want to be friends with my son so we can work together and enjoy our relationship. I want us to be a team, but something seems wrong here. How should I respond to him when he tries to give me an instruction or discipline me?”

That’s an interesting question. Here are several things to keep in mind. First, parents need to apologize to their kids when they’ve done the wrong thing. Rhonda’s angry words are out of place and hurtful, and asking forgiveness from Jake is healthy for their relationship. Furthermore, as parents, we recognize that God sometimes disciplines us through our kids and our response models a positive way to handle offenses.

It’s important for parents to look for ways to be friends

with their kids, but in this case, Jake has a problem. Rhonda's desire to be a friend with Jake has blurred the issue of authority for him. A parent has responsibilities and privileges that a child doesn't have. People in authority use their positions to correct and instruct and set limits in a way that a person under authority can't. That's not only true in the family, but is also true in government, work, and other areas where authority exists. The family isn't simply a group of housemates living together as equals. Both parents and children have a job to do. Parents have the responsibility to pass values on to their kids and to teach them what it means to be mature. Children have the responsibility to learn those things. Preschoolers in particular need to learn self-control and responsiveness to authority.

Proverbs 1:8 is just one of eleven times in the book of Proverbs that God gives instructions to children to listen to their parents. It says, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." You have many things to teach your child. Some of those will take place in dialogue and discussion, while others will happen when you give instructions, correct, or set limits.

Rhonda's desire to be a friend to her son is a good one. Playing together, talking and listening, and making cooperative decisions foster cooperation. It's helpful for strengthening the relationship. But sometimes the desire to be a friend leads parents to avoid conflict, become more lenient than is helpful, and give in when a child is demanding. In those moments, the desire to please has crossed a significant line.

A careful balance must take place in the parent/child relationship in order to maximize a child's growth and understanding. If you overemphasize authority your child

may miss some of the benefits learned through fun, play, and working together. If, however, parents don't teach their children how to respond well to authority then all kinds of problems develop.

You'll want to monitor your child's perception of you and your relationship together. Teaching children what cooperation is in practical terms is helpful. Cooperation means that individuals give and take in order to accomplish an objective. However, some children only give when it's convenient and many haven't learned what it means to sacrifice or give up their agenda for others. Older preschoolers are just coming into the ability to understand what that looks like in everyday life. If you see your child taking advantage of the relationship by becoming demanding and self-centered, you'll want to pull back and require changes.

It's interesting that children who have a healthy understanding of authority, balanced with strong relationship, actually have a closer relationship with their parents than those who are indulged. Parents sometimes think that being permissive or lenient with their kids will increase relationship, but, in the end, those approaches diminish respect and increase a sense of entitlement.

Playfulness is a great quality. Tickling, teasing, and enjoying life together with your child fosters closeness. Take time to enter your child's world, allow her to lead in a game, and create ways to laugh and play together. Undivided attention is a tremendous gift you give to your child, and listening attentively and sharing stories demonstrates your love and the high value you place on your relationship. Even in the midst of those bonding times, however, it's important that you remain the parent. When a child crosses the line and won't stop the teasing or tickling game, you're

the one who must exert your authority to communicate that that game is over.

When parents set limits and stick to boundaries, kids learn to trust, and the parent/child bond develops naturally with respect and obedience in their proper perspective. It's often helpful to explain to your child what you're doing as a leader and why you're making the decisions you believe to be necessary. But don't feel you have to convince your child to agree with you. In the end, whether your child agrees or not, you need to decide what's best and your child needs to follow. Taking time to have fun and to spend time with your preschooler will go a long way to build the healthy and strong relationship you desire.

Remember that when you're in a group setting your child may behave differently than when you're at home. Preschoolers are still trying to figure out their place in the family and often don't understand the dynamics of a group setting. Parents who volunteer to teach in the classroom may find that their children don't quite know how to respond. In those situations, they're trying to apply what they've learned about authority and relationship in a new situation. Your children may need to limit their interaction with you as the teacher, allowing others to receive individual time, and not get some of the same "Mommy privileges" that they're used to at home. This provides another teaching opportunity about authority, roles, and responsibilities in life.

Maintaining a close relationship while still demonstrating authority will help your child develop trust and faith. Look for ways to balance authority and relationship with your preschooler and you'll have the strongest friendship possible.



What to Expect from a Three-Year-Old

Significant changes take place in a three-year-old's development. The two-year-old spent a lot of time wrestling with control, having found the ability to walk, talk, and start to do things independently. The three-year-old has typically worked through some of those control issues and is finding more of a balance between self-control and the need to be controlled by others. Now your child, can explore and use the skills developed earlier to learn more about the world and how it works. There are times, however, when the three-year-old reverts back to the two-year-old behaviors, so you'll want to be ready and not overreact. Often you'll need to retrain your child to get back to where you are now, so just take it in stride and don't be disappointed. It's part of the normal work of parenting.

Three-year-olds are usually eager to please Mom and Dad and they try very hard to do things the right way. Because three-year-olds can speak and communicate with an increased vocabulary, frustration levels reduce and the

child is often more willing to cooperate.

Now is a good time to teach manners and other social skills. Your preschooler will likely be surprisingly responsive to your teaching. A three-year-old trusts caregivers to do what they say, so it's important to keep your word and follow through to show you mean it. You don't have to become a sergeant, but you do want your child to know that when you say it's time to go out to do errands that you are actually getting ready to leave. Some parents talk and talk and talk with no action, and the child then learns that the parent doesn't mean it. Then parents have to resort to emotional intensity to get a child moving. Stick to your word and do what you say and you'll be pleased how well your three-year-old responds.

Three-year-olds learn to problem-solve and will often try to negotiate with others, including you. That's not necessarily wrong, but you'll want to have a way to communicate when dialogue is not appropriate and that this is a time to simply obey. Because language skills are much improved, three-year-olds begin to socialize and play together with other kids. The three-year-old can also begin to verbalize feelings, so taking time to talk about a situation is often helpful as you empathize with those emotions.

Because a three-year-old understands life in a more complex manner than he did when younger, fears may surface. It's usually helpful to talk about what's going to happen and imagine positive outcomes to upcoming experiences. In this way your preschooler will develop greater confidence to try new things and to overcome apprehension. You might say, "We're going over to Jillian's house today. I'm glad they have a nice dog. You're learning how to enjoy animals like Chewie. This'll be fun."

Because a three-year-old is able to think on a more detailed level, imagination increases and you child can now pretend. Sometimes you'll find the imaginary intermingled with reality. A three-year-old may tell a story that has some real parts and some made up parts and even have difficulty determining what part of the story is true and what part is not. This area of development can sometimes be difficult for a parent when trying to piece together what happened in a situation. Just remember that in the child's mind it may all seem true.

Your three-year-old may develop an imaginary friend. Playing along with the idea is usually better than ignoring it or chastising a child for having one. Imaginary friends come from a vivid imagination and a desire for relationship. They aren't necessarily bad. They're usually short-lived and can be a fun way to help teach a three-year-old about many experiences since an imaginary friend can do good or bad things and help your child learn what is appropriate and not.

Because a three-year-old is still learning social graces, you'll likely need to do a lot of teaching in the area of relationships. Often the child doesn't know how to deal with another child or adult, so you'll want to come a long side your child to interpret social cues and explain what's appropriate. Take time to practice greetings and to prepare a child for conversations with adults and children. Since preschoolers love to play, role-playing social situations is a great way to teach. Three-year-olds also develop a sense of humor and will begin to laugh at funny things. They may try to tell jokes and can get silly and do outlandish things to make others laugh.

Three-year-olds respond well to praise and compliments. Because they enjoy pleasing others, they love to receive praise. Many of the things a three-year-old does to gain adult approval will merit your praise, so give it generously. Be sure to praise the character you see developing, not just the fact that the child is pleasing you. Rather than saying "I like it when you obey," say, "Oh you obey so nicely, that must feel good in your heart."

Three-year-olds benefit from many experiences that develop large and small motor skills. Learning to hold a pencil or crayon can be a challenge, but it's good to offer experiences to help preschoolers develop these skills. Show them how to use child safety scissors and give them magazines or sale ads to snip. Allow preschoolers to finger paint, paint with a brush, play in the sand, and explore with a variety of objects while you supervise. A young child's intelligence is enhanced with a diversity of activities and experiences. You're filling the internal library your child will draw upon for solving problems and developing more advanced conclusions about life.

Three-year-olds benefit from books to look at by themselves as well as reading times with you. Reading develops vocabulary, increases knowledge, and provides a bonding experience with Mom and Dad. Learning to follow the words with their finger or to turn the pages helps to develop pre-reading skills, as children learn how books are set up. Three-year-olds love finger plays and simple rhymes. They love learning about colors, shapes, and numbers and enjoy working puzzles and playing simple games. All of these activities will help develop cognitive skills that prepare a preschooler for academic work, so make these times plentiful and fun.

Music is a great source of fun and learning for three-year-olds. Teach your child what it means to praise the Lord. Psalm 150:6 says, "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." In fact the whole psalm is a fun one for preschoolers to act out in order to demonstrate praise. It talks about using stringed instruments, cymbals, a tambourine, and dance.

Music helps children learn. You can make up simple songs to go with an activity you're trying to teach. It doesn't matter whether you can sing well or not. The tune helps a three-year-old engage both sides of the brain and improves memory. Add movement and you will help to teach coordination and other skills as well. Dancing along with the song makes learning fun and easy.

Enjoy your three-year-old. It's a treasured year of childhood.



What to Expect from a Four-Year-Old

Four-year-olds are excitable, inquisitive, and tend to be very social. They often like to be silly and fun one moment, and then ask difficult or serious questions the next. They can speak with honesty, and may express emotions intensely.

This is a great time to teach “academics,” because four-year-olds often have a significant interest in reading and learning. They love to explore and to figure out how things work. They learn quickly and thoroughly. Their reasoning and self-help skills improve rapidly at this age and they amaze you with what they know and how quickly they catch on to new ideas. They also begin to ask more detailed questions, so you may need to study the subject you are discussing in order to accurately satisfy their curiosity.

The most important academic thing you can do with your child is to make learning fun. Stop before it gets tedious, find fun ways to learn, applaud self-discovery and mastery of small incremental steps. Your excitement about learning will go a long way as your child continues to face educational experiences.

Four-year-olds often express emotions strongly. They may experience hurt, anger, or sadness as they encounter various situations. You might hear exaggerated statements such as “She won’t be my friend” or “I’m not going to invite you to my birthday party” or “I hate this family.” They’re trying to learn how to appropriately express themselves and are discovering what’s appropriate and not appropriate in a social setting. Don’t overreact or take the comments personally. Rather, teach your child that emotions aren’t wrong but what we say or do with them is important. Often four-year-olds will need guidance to learn how to handle emotionally disruptive situations, and correction can involve more dialogue to explain why.

Four-year-olds have now acquired the skills necessary to share toys and take turns, but that doesn’t mean they’ll always want to do so. The four-year-old can understand how to wait for an adult’s attention and begin to see situations from the perspective of others. Because of this new step in their understanding, they can often get along with each other, learn to solve their own problems, and figure out appropriate ways to handle new situations. Because they can do all of these things, they can also interact more with other children and with adults.

Four-year-olds are very observant and aware of what’s going on around them. They imitate the actions, words, and personality traits of adults. They love to please, so they’ll still do things to make you happy. But they’ll also start to show their own personalities and may begin to question your authority. A four-year-old may get angry easily, and may respond as she did when younger, but often will pull out of a tantrum and an angry spell faster. Your patience is an asset as you help your child move to the next level of

development in so many areas all at the same time.

You'll want to take time to share spiritually with your preschooler. Allow your child to make up prayers, instead of using memorized prayers. Your child will soon learn that prayer is simply talking to God. You might share a verse such as Psalm 55:16-17 that says, "I call to God, and the LORD saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." Not only can we bring our problems to the Lord as the psalmist does in this passage, but we can also share our delights and have open dialogue with him all day long.

Because a four-year-old is more proficient in the use of words, frustration levels can be defused more easily with dialogue and calm responses. A four-year-old is excited about using new words and may even try out some inappropriate words just to see what kind of reaction it brings. Be prepared to guide your child to avoid "potty talk" or words like "stupid." You might say something such as, "We don't use those kinds of words in our home." If the talk persists and you sense that it's moved to defiance, you'll want to use some form of correction to extinguish the behavior.

You can teach your child about sounds of letters even before they learn how to identify the letters visually. Rhyming and alliteration become more frequent as they try out new words, learn how to put words together to make other words, and begin to have an interest in reading. You might say, "Cat and rat sound similar. What are some other words that rhyme with them?" This is also a good time to introduce the awareness of the alphabet, teaching letter sounds and playing games like "Can you find a letter D?" or "Ball begins with what letter?"

Four-year-olds are often curious about body parts and

bodily functions. You'll want to talk openly and honestly about biology and teach what is appropriate and not appropriate to say or discuss with others.

Four-year-olds tend to have good coordination, being able to run, hop, jump, gallop, and sometimes even skip. They love activity so plan lots of movement in playtime to help exercise these skills. Don't expect preschoolers to sit for long periods of time without having behavior issues. It works well to alternate active, then quiet, then active times throughout the day.

Fine motor skills are developing rapidly for four-year-olds. This is the time to introduce pencil and paper, coloring and painting, and lacing experiences. The four-year-old delights in doing things independently, so allow many experiences for your child to be self-sufficient. Kids at this age can learn to button, zip, and snap and often dress themselves easily. In fact, a four-year-old may take offense with an adult who doesn't allow independence in this area.

Because the four-year-old has reached significant cognitive and relational milestones, now is usually the time to encourage social and academic learning experiences. If they have not yet become a part of an organized group or activity, this may be a great time to introduce it. Children learn much from exposure to a group-learning environment, both academically and socially. They use these opportunities to learn more about themselves and how they fit into the world around them.



What to Expect from a Five-Year-Old

The five-year-old child is developing significant maturity, often able to demonstrate responsibility, take on tasks, and get them done without much help. They're usually very capable of responding to social situations appropriately and have a greater ability to deal with problems on their own. Five-year-olds are naturally curious about more in-depth things, such as discovering how a tool works, learning how to assemble a project, or taking time to build a detailed village out of Legos. The five-year-old tends to be helpful, willing to please, and eager to learn, with occasional individual challenges that you'll want to address along the way.

Five-year-olds often have solutions to problems and offer them willingly. You might say to your preschooler, "You are great at solving problems," to encourage an awareness of this growing ability. They are often able and willing to solve their problems without adult intervention.

Older preschoolers love to do things the right way and are often sticklers for following rules when they know what they are. Developmentally, their ability to see how

things work and their relational skills have advanced to the place where rules make logical sense, but when others violate rules for good reasons, they are confused. They can be quick to point out when others aren't doing the right thing. Because of this, they may "tattle" and try to be the "boss" of another child.

Their desire to do what's right makes preschoolers ripe for teaching about God's standard, the Bible. As you read or tell Bible stories, explain about rules and why God includes them for his people. Ephesians 6:1-2 helps children understand their job description at this age. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise." You might even establish family rules such as obey, honor, and be kind. God knows that rules help guide inner convictions. That's why he gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments. Rules provide direction for a person's heart, but be sure to talk about the reasons and values behind the rules in order to help your child develop inner convictions.

Five-year-olds love to play with other kids and will share and often cooperate with them readily, although arguments still occur when there's a dispute over how something should be done. They have a more advanced motor skill system and can begin to participate in organized games and sports. The motor skills are much more refined, so balance and movement are ready for more of a challenge. A scooter is a good investment at this age, as is a balance beam or a dance class.

A five-year-old tends to have good language skills, so communication is much more refined. A five-year-old can tell a story, although it's common to hear imagined parts interspersed with reality. Fill-in-the-blank or "what would

you do?" stories are popular with this age.

Because five-year-olds want to do the right thing, it's sometimes hard for them to admit when they've done wrong. Lying can sometimes be a problem because the child doesn't want you to know what really happened. Taking a firm stand for honesty and teaching about the importance of the truth is often enough to foster a strong sense of conscience in your child. Furthermore, teaching children about mistakes, accidents, and taking responsibility for one's own actions is particularly effective at this stage.

About 10% of the world's population is left-handed. If this is true for your child, encourage innovation and problem solving. Although you may purchase left-handed scissors or a baseball mitt, many of the inventors in the world don't consider left-handed people, so there will always be need to improvise. When teaching a left-handed child (if you are right-handed), use a mirroring technique by facing the child to teach. The same is true if you're left-handed and your child is right-handed.

Be careful with academic workbooks. One of the most important gifts you can give to your child is a love for learning, so make sure that any workbooks are developmentally appropriate for your child. When your child shows interest, worksheets can be fun and interesting ways to learn. However, forcing a child to do workbooks when he isn't ready can lead to frustration and "shutting down." Learning comes with interest.

If your child isn't ready for workbooks then you can have some great fun without pencil and paper. A preschooler can learn letters in many other ways besides writing them. You might use a puzzle with the alphabet.

Or, try a game where the child can recognize letters, match them with upper and lower case letters, or connect a sound with a letter. Preschoolers learn by doing, so try to provide activities that the child can manipulate and experience. They may seem like games to you, but they're learning experiences for your child.

Parents of children about to enter school often feel pressure to compare their kids to others or the panic that their child may be behind. Because each child is unique and learns at a unique pace, keep moving forward according to your child's needs. Allow your child to excel in strong points. You don't have to expect that just because the neighbor's child is reading that yours should be doing so as well.

Five-year-olds benefit from lots of opportunities to test out their skills. They need experiences that encourage mature thinking and acting. A valuable gift you give to your child is your time. You might think in terms of "love minutes" that you offer to your preschooler. You'll be surprised at how just one minute here and there in the course of the day communicates your love, and many times those minutes provide opportunities for longer interaction. Be ready to take a tangent in your schedule to explore an interest or to engage in an important dialogue. Enjoying your preschooler at this stage will do wonders for your relationship as you head into the next developmental stage in just a few months.



Two Heart Qualities for Preschoolers

During the preschool years two essential heart qualities are ripe for development. They are responsiveness to authority and self-control. Developmentally, your child is learning to control emotions, impulses, and urges. Many children need help in this area to boost them forward. If you have a child who seems wild, overly emotional, or out of control sometimes, you may wonder if this is even possible. It's not only possible, but it's necessary for success in the next stages, and your parenting during these years can help greatly.

One skill that you can work on with your preschooler is the ability to come when called. For some children that's not easy because it requires that they stop what they're doing right away, and make a quick transition to come to you. This requires both qualities to work together, self-control and responsiveness to authority.

Please don't think that we are suggesting that you have to become authoritarian in your parenting, barking orders to your child, and always demanding instant obedience. However, some children don't have the character yet to give up

their agenda and they become demanding, always requiring a delay or adjustment to accommodate their wishes. If that's the case in your home, teaching and practicing the "Come when you're called" rule may be just the therapy needed to adjust the tendencies of the heart.

To begin developing this skill, have a talk with your child in an upbeat, positive way, saying, "We're going to work on something new in our family. This is a skill that will help you as you're growing up. It's called the 'Come when you're called' rule. It shows respect to someone when you to come right away. Let me show you how it works. In fact, we can play a little game to learn this new skill.

"You go stand over there by the couch and I'm going to call your name. When I do, you immediately come over to me, within three feet, and you say, 'What Mom?' Three feet is about this far (hold your hands out a few feet apart to illustrate three feet)."

Have your child go stand by the couch and call his name. When he comes close to you and says "What Mom?" then encourage him that he did the right thing. "Yeah, you did it! Wow, you learn fast."

You may change the words "What Mom?" to "Yes Ma'am" or "Yes Mom" or whatever seems respectful to you. The point is that your child is learning to separate from an activity, give up a personal agenda, and respond to your leadership.

Now that you've introduced the idea in a fun way, you might say, "Great. You've got it. Now, go and play and I'm going to call your name and when I do, you need to come right away, even if you're involved in something you think is important." After your child goes to play, don't wait long before you try it. In fact, we would recommend that you

practice this 10-20 times the first hour and many times the first day.

Typically, children do well at playing the game but find it challenging in real life situations. That's when the training starts. If your child doesn't respond, you don't necessarily have to move into a correction routine. You might simply go get your child, bring him to you and, using firmness, teach him that the new routine isn't optional.

Those who tend to get themselves emotionally invested in their activities have a harder time making the transition. Practice over time will change the patterns. A lack of responsiveness on your child's part is usually an indication that more practice is necessary.

When you call your child's name, don't give an indication of what you want. Sometimes parents give clues in their voices that communicate that the child is in trouble or that you're getting ready to go out the door. In this exercise it's best for a child to not know what it is that you actually want. All you're doing is using the child's name. He needs to learn to respond. After he comes, you may say, "I have a snack prepared for you," or "I just wanted to tell you that I love you." The point is that the child never knows why he's being called. His job is simply to learn to come when called.

Again, let us point out that it's not wrong to give a five-minute-warning or allow a child to finish a task before coming, but, for a period of time, you may have to require instant responses even though your child doesn't like it in order to teach the important ability to give up your activity in order to respond to someone else. The child who learns this skill in the preschool years will make a much better friend, student, employee, spouse, and team member someday. It's now, in the early years of childhood that

children begin to form the character they'll need for years to come.

Look for opportunities to play other games that develop responsiveness to authority and self-control. Preschoolers love games and learn through play. Try the "Walk with Daddy (Mommy)" game in the backyard or at the park. Instruct your child to walk next to you and stay right at your side without holding your hand. Play the game by alternating walking fast, then very slowly, and even making sudden turns. This game is sure to bring some giggles, but also it teaches your child to pay attention to you and make the personal changes necessary to keep up. Children need to learn to think of others and be aware of their surroundings. Picking up on the changes in your gait and direction will help to develop these skills. As you spend time with your preschooler look for fun ways to practice this kind of responsiveness.

When God instructed that obedience be learned at home, he hid within that quality a number of success principles that kids will use in adulthood. Ephesians 6:1 says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Kids who learn to obey learn self-control. Overtime they develop the ability to cooperate, take on a task without being reminded, and become responsible.

Your investment in your child's life in the area of responsiveness to authority will pay off significantly as your child grows and develops. His future employer will thank you, as will his teammates and future spouse. It will likely take some significant work on your part during the preschool years, but you'll be giving your child a gift that will last a lifetime.



Explore Your Child's Interests

One of the best ways to get to know children is to get involved in their activities. As you watch your child build with Legos, solve a puzzle, or read a book, you'll learn how she thinks. What does your son like to do? What things energize him? Excite him? Bring satisfaction? How does your daughter respond to frustration, conflict, or challenging situations? What does your preschooler talk about to himself or to others? As you take time to study your child, you'll learn more about what's in the heart. The information you glean will help you guide your child forward.

Matthew 6:21 says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." And Luke 6:45 says, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." The heart contains the things we value. It holds our beliefs and emotions. As you spend time with your child you'll learn valuable things that make up your child's uniqueness, discover strengths to encourage, and weaknesses to address.

Preschoolers love to spend time with you. They enjoy

the opportunity to play a game, build with blocks, put together a puzzle, or cook with you. But sometimes parents choose to spend time doing only what they like instead of thinking of the child's desires. Both are helpful. You might invite your son to bake cookies with you or clean out a closet. But take time to sit with him and play with his toys and engage in things that interest him as well. Preschoolers can find joy in the smallest of things, and your time is a gift they'll greatly appreciate.

Getting involved in your child's world gives you insight into your preschooler's character and personality. When you see that your son struggles with how to interact with other children, for example, you could teach him some simple social skills to help him do better. When you play, you can see when your child is frustrated and then help by teaching ways to handle challenges in life.

Preschoolers need process, not just product. Look for activities that require your child to engage, think, and make decisions. Some toys today have so many bells and whistles that kids don't use their own imaginations. Playing, reading, and exploring are great activities for a child and don't require a lot of money. Sometimes parents feel like they aren't providing well for their children if they don't buy them the latest video game or electronic toy. The opposite is often the case. Kids that use their own imagination and make up the games in their heads are often well ahead of others. Remember that learning doesn't take place in the stuff. It takes place in the process.

When getting involved in your child's activities, try to remember that you're there to help, not to do everything for your child. Look for opportunities to model problem solving, frustration management, and coach your kids to

succeed. Sometimes that means stepping back and allowing a child to do it herself, even if it takes a bit longer. You might say to a preschooler, “You’re doing a good job. Would you like another idea?” Or, “You sure are working hard at that. Let me know if you’d like a suggestion.” Frustration can be a great teacher. You can then be the counselor or coach, helping your child accomplish the task.

Becoming involved in your child’s school or church activities is a great way to help you learn more about your child as well. Often parents see in a group setting what they may never see at home. This provides good insight into your child and reveals potential issues that you might want to address later. Parents sometimes pick up on problem areas or concerns they might otherwise have missed when observing their own child responding to someone else’s leadership or reacting to other kids. It’s often easier to see what things you need to work on when your child is in a group setting. Schools and churches often encourage parent involvement. Playgroups and play dates are great learning experiences for children as well as their parents.

Another way to get to know your child is through extracurricular activities such as soccer, dance, or gymnastics. When children engage in activities outside your home, they’re able to explore new areas of interest, respond to different authorities, and learn new things about life. You’ll also discover areas of giftedness, likes and dislikes, and abilities you may not have learned in the home.

Sometimes you won’t know of a child’s interest until you try. The child who is active and likes to run and play with others might be a natural at soccer. The child who likes to dance around the house might enjoy a gymnastic class. On the other hand you might have a child who likes

to play alone, so you'll want to encourage social skills by joining a scouting program, or a child who is afraid of water may benefit from a swim class. Your goal is to choose the activities that will help your preschooler grow and develop. It's usually helpful to allow kids to try a variety of activities (not all at the same time!) so that they can learn what they like and develop competence in several areas.

Keep in mind that sometimes the best way to learn about your child is to not get involved but instead watch from a distance. Children sometimes respond differently to life situations when Mom and Dad are too close. Some preschoolers become fearful of new situations or activities with parents around. Helping your child to venture out without you is a good idea. If you are present in the group, but not always directly involved with your child, he may be less dependent on you and more confident to act on his own.

Remember that your encouragement is important. Kids need feedback. They need to know when they are doing a good job and they need to understand that you support them when they make mistakes. Constructive criticism can be helpful but be careful of offering too much in front of other children. Most kids are embarrassed when something negative is said in front of their peers, regardless of the age. Helping them to correct mistakes by teaching and guiding them is good, but constantly correcting them in front of others is counterproductive.

Parents often spend energy and money trying to provide elaborate toys or activities for their kids. Remember that your time is of great value and giving it to your child may be just the gift needed. You might say to your preschooler, "I'm going to give you a half hour to do whatever

you want to do.” Wow. What a gift. And, although you might not feel like playing with dolls or racing cars on the floor, it’s a great way to learn more about your child.



Encourage Large Muscle Development

“Frances doesn’t walk. He runs wherever he goes.” Irene was reflecting on her son’s abounding energy to her friend Hannah.

“I understand. When my kids get wild, I take them to the park. They love to climb on the equipment,” Hannah agreed.

Most preschoolers love to run, jump, climb, catch, and throw. They have a natural interest in play that’s focused on gross motor skills. They enjoy swinging, climbing, going down a slide, or walking across a wall as if on a balance beam. They never seem to walk slowly from one thing to another. It’s full speed ahead and almost anything is a playground! Children have a natural instinct that helps them move forward to develop their gross motor skills, so it’s important to allow ample opportunity. Although not all preschoolers attack life with intensity, they’re all developing strength and coordination in their large muscle systems, so they benefit from exercise and movement. Large motor skills develop coordination and help the child to move through space with smoothness and ease.

Keep in mind that large muscles develop before small ones. If a child is forced to work on small motor skills before gross motor skills are developed, the process will usually become frustrating because the child just isn't ready. For example, when having your preschooler write numbers and letters, it's often best to provide a fat pencil or crayon and encourage large strokes on a paper or use a whiteboard. This approach combines academic growth with large muscle movement. If you focus on small muscle coordination by doing pencil work, you'll likely experience resistance, but not because your child doesn't want to learn. It's just that the lack of fine motor coordination adds a frustrating element to the learning experience.

Encourage outdoor play. It helps your child obtain required vitamin D, and the fresh air and deep breathing strengthen healthy lungs. Running and playing outdoors helps children to grow strong bones and muscles and even improves attitude. Outdoor play also allows children to release pent-up energy, giving them more restful sleep, and encourages more calmness during their days.

What kids learn indoors through observation can sometimes be experienced outdoors in the real world. They learn best by doing. Lessons come to life when children hit the backyard. Watching birds fly, touching dirt, grass, and flowers, or simply experiencing sunshine or rain increases a child's knowledge base. Take time to talk about God's creation. Psalm 104:24 says, "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." Praise the Lord for what he has made. The need for large muscle activity often takes you into the classroom of God's grace: the big outdoors.

When kids are outside they're more free to exercise

those larger muscles by kicking a ball, skipping, or racing around the backyard. It's often during the preschool years that children learn how to pedal a bike or tricycle, shoot baskets into a hoop, or throw a Frisbee. All of those activities strengthen the large muscles and build coordination between eyes, ears, and larger muscles. Gross motor skills usually develop quickly once a child is given the opportunity and the equipment to do so.

If outdoors isn't possible on a given day, encourage activity indoors. Foam balls, a balance beam, a small trampoline, an exercise mat, hula hoop, or playing with large boxes can give kids some of the much-needed opportunities to use those large muscles.

You may want to encourage large muscle development through sports and other organized activities. Martial arts, dance, and soccer provide opportunity to explore interests as well as get the needed exercise. Keep in mind that preschoolers rarely keep track of the score and, although they often want to win, are generally more interested in playing the game. In fact, you might define winning as "doing your best" in order to cut down on a child's feeling of competition. It's more about competence and learning how to play, than it is about being in first place.

One dad reported, "I was feeling sorry for my son as I watched him play soccer. He tripped, often missed the ball, and spent most of his time just running around and watching other kids kick the ball. When the game was over, I asked him, 'Are you okay, Buddy?' My son looked up and said, 'Yeah. That was awesome!' I realized then that my son just enjoyed being on a team and playing the game." Organized sports can provide children with a sense of confidence as well as teach them things like learning to play

fair, how to win, how to lose, and how to work with others.

Many safety lessons are learned through large muscle activity. Don't walk in front of swings, or be careful when a ball goes out in the street, or take turns on the ladder, all help children understand what safety looks like in practical terms. Tie rules to life lessons so that children see that they're designed to keep the activity fun. When you play too rough, for example, someone often gets hurt. Children learn restraint, self-control, and better communication skills that will help them in other areas as well.

Large muscle activities are fun for preschoolers and often for the adults that work with them. Many parents use the opportunity to get their own needed exercise. And there's nothing like having preschoolers that helps keep grandparents young. Be sure to take the camera along. Your preschooler is developing rapidly and you'll be glad you took time to document growth with pictures, videos, or a scrapbook.



Encourage Imagination

Creativity and imagination come naturally to preschoolers. Children who can imagine and pretend are often able to entertain themselves with simple items. They learn how to do things by experimenting and by trying new approaches. They learn that it doesn't take expensive toys or gadgets to enjoy life. They can create their own fun with even the simplest items.

Preschoolers can pretend and play for hours in their own backyards with nothing but sticks and stones. They enjoy making a cave out of a blanket between the dining room chairs or splashing outside in the rain under an umbrella. Look for ways to stimulate imagination in children with suggestions that might interest them. Of course, you'll likely have to limit the use of technology such as video games, computer time, movies, and TV in order to provide motivation for this kind of fun. Kids will often choose the lazy way out by allowing electronics to provide the entertainment unless there are no other options. For this reason many parents have chosen to remove the TV from the living room and some choose to remove it from the house altogether.

The growth of a child's imagination is an important part of the developmental process. Children who imagine often become good problem solvers because they learn to think outside the box, looking for new and creative alternatives to the existing solutions available. Imagination allows children to empathize with others because they can imagine what the other person is feeling or thinking.

Creativity is an extension of imagination so you'll want to look for ways to encourage it. We're created in God's image and he's the great creator. You might imagine with your child what it might've been like on those days of creation, making different animals or forming the mountains and oceans. When you see what someone has created, you get to know that person a bit better. That's why looking at God's creation helps us get to know him more. Psalm 19:1-2 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge."

Creativity reveals more about who a person is on the inside. You can learn a lot about your child's heart by watching him create and then allowing him to tell you more about his work. Instead of giving a child a pre-printed color sheet, it's often helpful to provide blank paper and crayons or pens to encourage self-expression. When the child brings the project back to you, try asking her to tell you about it instead of saying, "What is it?" It might not be an actual picture and the child may use the opportunity to tell you about her thinking process while working with the various colors. Often the goal in art is the process, not only the result.

On the other hand, you may be surprised at the story behind a drawing that looks like nothing discernable to

you. A child may have a perfectly good explanation as to why the eyes and ears are not placed where you think they should be. The use of one color on a page may have specific meaning to a preschooler who has worked hard to create a picture of something from her imagination.

Creativity often involves mess, so look for ways to minimize cleanup. Try giving your child an area in which he can safely play with paint, cut with scissors, and create a masterpiece with scraps of fabric or paper. A corner of the kitchen with a child-sized table or a plastic tablecloth on the floor underneath an art project is often helpful. One of the best ways for a child to learn to cut is to give him a piece of paper on which you've drawn lines or a spiral. Allowing preschoolers to manage scissors to cut along the line helps to develop the small muscles necessary for them to be able to write and draw.

Of course, it's also important to teach the child about safety and what's appropriate. "It is fine to cut the paper on your table, but not the magazine Mom just received in the mail." "It's fine to snip with the pictures you have in your special area, but not your sister's hair."

You might want to save those stamps from the mail order magazine ads and let your child use them as "postage stamps" as they write letters and draw pictures to "mail" to friends. You can use a recipe for homemade play dough and let your child mold and experiment, seeing how the clay responds as it's manipulated into different shapes and sizes. You can make homemade finger paint and let your child experience the feel of the liquid between his fingers while creating a special picture for Grandma.

One of the best ways to allow your child to pretend and create is to allow him to do daily activities with you. Baking

cookies, washing the dishes, doing the laundry, or sorting clothing can result in many new ways to use household items. You might allow a three-year-old a place to stack the Rubbermaid containers in the kitchen while you cook dinner. A four-year-old might enjoy turning the handkerchief in the laundry into a mask or a hat. You might show your five-year-old how to sort the laundry into piles to be washed and be amazed at how high the tower of clothes can become.

Outdoor play is helpful for developing a strong sense of imagination as well. If you can spend just a few minutes each day outside with your child, you'll learn quite a bit about God's creations and will encourage your child's imagination at the same time. Creativity and imagination are important skills for preschoolers. You're often the one who will provide the opportunities, and, once you get started, your own creativity also starts to develop. You'll be surprised at the new adventures you'll have with your child.



Use Creativity to Enhance Fine Motor Development and Self-Concept

As gross motor skills develop strength and coordination, your child is able to work on fine motor skills more effectively. Kids then can participate in detailed and involved manipulations. Those children who are active and rarely sit down to color, work on a craft, use a pencil, or play with a puzzle, may develop good large muscle coordination but their fine motor skill development may take a while to catch up. As you provide experiences that encourage the use of smaller muscles, your child will develop coordination in those areas as well. The goal is a well-rounded environment that encourages children to grow and learn in many areas all at the same time.

One of the greatest tools for fine motor development is creativity. Not only does it allow children to test out the muscles in their fingers but it also provides their brains with experiences that encourage thinking outside the lines. Creativity in art and play in the young ages promotes better problem-solving skills later on. Look for ways to help

your child work out their ideas through creative use of their hands and fingers.

A child's safety scissors and a magazine or blank paper allows for creative cutting. Play dough is easy to make and children love to mold and create with it. The key is to allow your child to develop finger muscles more fully so that fine motor activities are easier to accomplish.

You might create a game using a pair of kitchen tongs and encourage your child to move cotton balls or beans or buttons from one bowl to another. You might even incorporate sorting skills by separating different objects by kind, size, or color. Your home has plenty of items that a child can use to strengthen the small muscles. Cleaning out the silverware drawer, drawing pictures for each person at the dinner table, or eating a snack such as Chex mix all require small muscle practice.

Preschoolers are rarely successful at coloring within boundaries or putting letters neatly on a line. Those skills come with much practice and experience. It's usually more productive in the preschool years to promote innovation by giving a child a blank piece of paper to explore the control of pencils, pens, and crayons with their hands. Those are the tools that produce an infinite number of works of art.

Many children who are first learning how to make letters, create them backwards or out of proportion. This isn't a concern until the child reaches elementary school. Right now, it's a matter of trial and error as children experiment with their writing and try to remember what letters actually look like.

It's fun to teach a young child to write her name on a paper. Of course, the first attempts are often illegible, but

that's part of the learning process. Knowing where to start on the paper and how to make the letters is a challenge for most children who are learning how to use a writing utensil. You may want to put a dot on the left hand side of the page to indicate a starting point, giving more room for a whole word without running out of paper. As your child gains some practice you'll want to teach her how to hold a pencil. You might want to purchase a plastic sleeve that slides onto the pencil to force the right grip in order to encourage good habits from the beginning.

Good writing technique happens over time. Offer praise for approximately right results and you'll encourage your child in the process. Kids need encouragement, and too much criticism may discourage a child who is learning to get hands and fingers to do what the brain wants.

Fine motor development helps children accomplish tasks like writing, tying a shoe, or opening a ketchup bottle. Pouring into a cup, putting a key into a lock, and playing with small pieces in toys are the benefits that come with practice. Providing opportunities to exercise the smaller muscles of the body opens new doors for children to solve problems for themselves, enhancing their confidence in life.

As you think creatively with your child, you encourage self-expression. Children are able then to test out their actions without concern about criticism either from themselves or from others. Creativity encourages the heart and builds a child's confidence. It also provides opportunity to talk about God as creator. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And that was just the beginning of his huge art project with a purpose. Understanding God as creator is good for anyone but es-

pecially preschoolers as they're beginning to comprehend God's character and person. The reality is that God created each person, and that means that God made each one special.

Understanding the creativity of God is one of the first steps of trust. You can help your child make small steps in their faith journey as you talk about God's creative powers and abilities and apply them to life. Psalm 139:13-14 says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

One of the ways you'll help your child develop a solid self-concept is to help him recognize God's specific work in his life. It starts with creating him and then designing a path that he should follow. Those children who understand God's love in personal ways early on form foundational spiritual strength that they can build on as they grow and develop.



Lying and the Development of the Conscience

As a preschooler's brain continues to develop, the imagination takes an important role, forming the basis for creativity. While much of the creativity is helpful, one of the common side effects is a child's ability to lie to get out of trouble or to obtain something desired. God has placed a conscience inside people to help point them in the right direction. Moral integrity is learned in the early years and fostered throughout a person's life. Lying demonstrates that a child lacks the internal character to withstand temptation. The desire to have another cookie, the fear of getting in trouble, or simply wanting to get more attention by exaggerating a story can tempt a person to resort to dishonesty to accomplish the goal. Teaching and training during the preschool years can contribute to a strong conscience, and building good character will give kids the ability to do what's right even under internal pressure.

One of the reasons you'll want to teach the Bible to your kids is because it helps provide a standard of right and wrong. The conscience doesn't determine right and wrong, but is simply a pointer to do what's right or to avoid what's

wrong. You'll want to teach biblical truths and tell Bible stories of people that took a stand for what's right, even when it was difficult. Noah obeyed God even though he had never seen rain and in the face of people who laughed at him. Moses felt inadequate but obeyed God anyway and was able to experience the power of God. Daniel refused to eat the king's food and continued to obey God and pray, even after the king outlawed prayer. Adam and Eve sinned in the garden and experienced guilt, but then enjoyed the forgiveness of God. Many more stories in God's word help children understand what it means to do the right thing, make things right, and be honest under pressure.

It's important to understand preschool development when evaluating what appears to be a lie. You don't want to treat children's imagination or magical thinking as dishonesty when instead they need guidance to know how to talk about wishes, desires, and fictional stories. When a preschooler says, "There's a lion in my basement," or "The dog told me a story," it would be better to talk about imagination than to assume it's deliberate dishonesty. You might say, "Since we really don't have a lion in our basement, it would be better to say, 'I wish we had a lion in our basement,' or 'Wouldn't it be crazy if we had a lion in our basement.'" Many preschool books contain stories of animals that talk so it's not surprising that kids would want to imagine the same thing in their own lives. A vivid imagination often needs to be guided by socially appropriate words in order to report the ideas in ways that are truthful. That's not necessarily lying.

But some children lie and know they are lying and need correction. In that case, a firm approach is important. Firmness helps clarify that there's a right and a wrong,

an important understanding for good conscience development. One of the goals of discipline is to clarify for children that sin has consequences, that God has created a standard, and then to help kids understand what that means in practical terms for them.

Once you've defined lying for a child and clarified that it's wrong, it's helpful to have children confess when they've been dishonest. One of the hardest things for someone to do who has lied is to admit it. Many times children want to cover up one lie with another or somehow refuse to admit a lie. Although there are some times when you may be uncertain about an incident, when it's clear and you catch your child in a lie, it's helpful to require a confession. When you ask the question, "What did you do wrong?" the answer needs to be "I lied." If your child refuses to answer the question then sitting in a Break for a bit to think about it may produce the desired results. The Break time often allows God to work in the heart and bring about repentance.

You'll have plenty of opportunity to teach about lying in real life situations. You can model honesty by giving back the excess change when the cashier makes a mistake, telling your mate the truth even when it reveals your weakness, and explaining to your child that a shot might hurt a bit instead of saying that it won't hurt at all. Children learn about honesty by watching their parents handle ethical dilemmas or situations where lying would be the easy way out.

Children who lie don't have the internal character to do what's right. They take shortcuts instead of doing the hard work necessary to be honest. Surprisingly, one of the ways kids learn to do the right thing is to learn how to work hard.

You might want to concentrate on perseverance and thoroughness by giving your child more chores or requiring the completion of a tough task and then offer affirmation for a job well done. It's helpful then to talk about being strong on the inside, not just on the outside. Inner strength is demonstrated by being honest under pressure.

The apostle Paul made an important statement that describes the work of the conscience in Romans 9:1. He said, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit." A strong and clear conscience helps a person feel good about being honest and provides an integrity that others see. If your child has a weakness in this area, your work to strengthen the conscience will go a long way to develop a lifestyle of honesty both now and for the future.



The Way You Give Instructions Teaches Important Lessons

When giving an instruction, how does your child know when you mean business? Some parents talk and talk and nag and nag and then explode with anger. It's during the preschool years that children figure out where the "line in the sand" exists in their interactions with Dad and Mom.

To find out this valuable information, your child will likely test the limits. Some children will do this more than others as they seek to find the firm boundaries they need. Remember that this is a natural part of a child's development and that kids must find out where the limits are in order to feel safe and secure. When parents allow the limits to constantly change, a child feels insecure and has a harder time with boundaries in general, always wondering if they're firm. It's helpful to children when parents communicate their expectations clearly. That often happens when they follow through on what they've said.

Take five-year-old Sharon, for example. She's having fun drawing a picture when her mom announces that they're going out to run errands. But Mom often says it several times

before they actually walk out the door. Although Mom told Sharon to put on her shoes, Sharon knows that Mom will probably give the same instruction at least a couple more times before they're actually ready to go. Sharon continues to draw her picture, and sure enough, Mom comes around with more warnings but no real indication that she's moving toward the door. How does Sharon know when she actually has to put her shoes on? When Mom bursts into the room hot with anger. Now it's time to go, so Sharon gets up to get on her shoes.

Most children are like Sharon who pushes the limits until she knows that her mom really means it. If Mom were in the habit of telling Sharon to get her shoes on and then making sure she starts complying, then Sharon would learn that Mom means business the first time she says something.

Sometimes children will act out in their attempt to determine what's considered acceptable. Furthermore, kids want to know if the boundaries established at home also work in other places such as the grocery store or at church. And, do they still hold true when you have a friend over or if you're on the phone? Children can learn what's expected in all of those situations, but parents often have to demonstrate that they mean what they say first before kids get the message.

The challenge for many parents during these childhood explorations is the frustration that kids aren't doing what you expect. Some parents take the testing personally, further increasing their anger. The angry explosions of parents create confusion for kids. Now the kids have two problems. One is finding the boundaries and the other is avoiding emotional landmines.

Every adult caregiver communicates to children when they're serious and expect action. Each says it differently

and kids pick up on the cues. That's one of the reasons children respond better to one parent than another, or better to the preschool teacher than they might for the Sunday School teacher. Kids learn how to "play the game" of life in each situation and adapt accordingly.

When Mom says what she means and then backs it up with action, it helps the child to know just where the limits are. Children also learn what techniques to use to get what they want from Dad and the different things they need to do to get what they want from Mom. Kids have a way of putting on the charm when they want something or turning on the whiny voice to get a parent to give in. The reality is that when arguing, badgering, and complaining work, kids tend to use those techniques more often.

Children get to know their parents and their predictable responses to various situations. This helps the child to know when the limits can be pushed and when it's worth a battle to get what's desired. Most children can see when Mom or Dad is close to the point of giving in. Children also learn how to determine if it's worth the fight to get what they want.

Because the security of a preschooler is wrapped up in boundaries and clear limits, it makes a huge difference when parents give consistent signals. We call the pattern that exists between a parent and a child during the instruction-giving process a "relational routine." We know that kids respond well to schedule routines because they know what to expect. The same is true when parents provide structure in the way they give instructions.

You might want to sit down with your preschooler and have an honest talk about the cues. In fact, it's often fun to ask a child, "How do you know when I actually mean busi-

ness and that this is one of those time when you had better act or else?" Kids often report that anger is the cue. You might suggest that you want to make some changes because anger isn't the best way to have a close relationship. In fact, James 1:20 says, "for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." So, to communicate that this is an instruction and not just a suggestion, you'll use the word "now," "you need to," or their name as a cue.

The key then is in the practice. Draw attention to the new cues and follow through right away to develop a sense of cooperation with your child. One caution is to avoid using the words "I need you to" with kids. Obedience isn't about your needs as a parent. It's about their need to obey. The words "You need to" are more appropriate when communicating the responsibility to obey.

Giving your preschooler simple directions and having him report back builds good patterns. A complex instruction involving several steps is sometimes confusing for a young child. When cleaning up the play area, for example, giving one step at a time will get better results. As you see that your child is able to respond well to one instruction, you'll want to increase the complexity over time. This skill will not only help increase obedience, but will build critical thinking skills and develop responsibility as well.

Remember that the work you're doing to teach your preschooler to follow instructions will help your child both now and in the future. When children learn to obey they learn responsiveness to authority, cooperation, and responsibility, all great heart qualities for success in life. The work of maturity and independence in a child starts right here in learning how to follow instructions.



Morning Routines

Preschoolers are ready to learn about responsibility. They can take on chores and are often eager to please, but they need training in order to develop the necessary skills. Getting ready in the morning is often a great training time for children. They can learn to complete assignments, manage themselves, and take initiative to get things done.

Unfortunately, parents sometimes miss training opportunities by doing more for kids than is necessary and by allowing them to rely too much on parental prodding in order to move forward. Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of your morning experience whether you are all headed out the door or if you are home for the day.

Take some time and sit down with your child and explain the plan for the morning. If you have a specific time to be out the door, explain that as part of the challenge. If you aren't leaving the house, set a time and help kids understand that you are moving along toward a goal and a clock is part of the motivation. Even though most preschoolers can't read a clock, they do understand the urgency associated with a time crunch.

Next, identify the tasks that your child needs to get done including getting dressed, putting pajamas away, eating breakfast, and taking care of bathroom things like combing hair and brushing teeth. You might also want to add things like making the bed, feeding the dog, and cleaning up the breakfast dish.

Teach your child that, in the mornings, we're on a mission to be ready for our day. That means that the primary job in the morning is to complete the tasks, help others do the same, and be ready to go out the door or to start the day's events. Some children believe that their primary goal in the morning is to watch TV, play with toys, or go back to sleep. In part, you're changing the beliefs that a child has for mornings, but you're also helping your child develop the early foundations of responsibility. You can define responsibility in a number of practical ways for kids but basically it's an uncomfortable feeling that I have a task to complete before I'm free. The way you handle morning times can help your child develop that discomfort associated with maturity.

Don't use yelling to accomplish activities in the morning. Raising your voice increases a different feeling of discomfort and it's unnecessary and counterproductive. Instead, view the mornings as small missions of responsibility, each one focusing on a reasonable task. One way to increase responsiveness is to get close to a child before giving the instruction. It does little good to tell a child to get his shoes on while he's engrossed in cartoons or his favorite game. It's better to call the child over first before you give the assignment. You might get close to a child, obtain eye contact, and say, "Al, it's time to get your shoes on. Please go get your shoes and bring them to me and report

back." When you require your child to report back, you're developing accountability, an important part of responsibility training.

When Al returns, offer encouraging words and then have him put his shoes on right there near you and report back. Then continue the tasks until you've made it through your list. Work through the same process of calling the child over, giving the task, and requiring the child to inform you that the assignment is done. Start with basic self-care and then move to other chores and ways that your child can contribute to the family such as making sure the bathroom is orderly or that the dog has food.

When the child has completed the required assignments then it's important to release him by saying something like, "You've done a good job. We have about 15 minutes of free time before we walk out the door. You can now enjoy your toys for a bit. I'll let you know when it's time to clean them up so that we can leave." The release you give your child is an important part of responsibility training. You not only want the child to feel the discomfort of an unfinished task, but you also want to encourage the feeling of freedom when the tasks are complete.

As your child develops more responsibility then you'll want to add initiative to the training process. Initiative helps children be more independent and not rely on the parent to provide the continual prompters to move forward. You might create a chart that a child checks off each morning. Now your words change from small missions of responsibility to calling for quick updates of accountability. "Al, please come and give me an update. I want to hear how you're progressing on your chart." Moving to this level of responsibility training is important because it reduces

the reliance on parental prompters and moves children toward internal motivation.

Parents using this kind of approach in the mornings see significant results in their kids at other times in the day as well. You may continue a similar plan when you come home, or in the afternoon chore time, or as you're moving toward bed. The reality is that you're using the daily activities of the day to build character and strengthen a child's heart.

The Bible compares our Christian lives to running a race. It has a goal and the new patterns require work. It may be helpful to look at your morning routine as part of your calling before God to run the race with purpose. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The passage encourages us to be responsible, do the right thing, and persevere. That's a great encouragement for our kids both now and for the rest of their lives, and it starts right now the way we handle our morning time.

A decorative graphic featuring the number 15 in a large, bold, black font. The number is centered within a complex, flowing, grey-colored swirl design that resembles a stylized ribbon or calligraphic flourish. The swirls are layered and have a slight gradient, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

15

Helping Children Learn from Life

One of the pitfalls we experience as parents is that we want to try to rescue our children from harm and hurt. Although that isn't bad, sometimes life lessons are best learned from the consequences of their actions. Because our natural instinct is to protect our children from the bad things in life, we often step in and prevent them from experiencing important lessons on their own. Trying to keep them from harm may prompt us to interrupt the process of learning. It may be difficult to allow them to go through a painful situation, but sometimes the lessons learned are worth the process. It's in many of these tough times that our children learn the most. The challenge is to know when to step in.

Natural consequences happen regularly and life is the teacher. For example, Joey plays rough with the cat and gets scratched. Michelle goes too fast on the skateboard and falls off. Jack throws the Frisbee too close to the tree and it gets stuck in the branches. These kinds of things happen every day and provide learning experiences that add to your preschooler's growing knowledge base.

How should parents handle these situations? The best

response is to become the counselor or coach. Your empathy is often all that's needed. Sometimes an explanation about life can be helpful as long as it doesn't appear critical. "Ouch, Joey, let me see that scratch. Ow. I bet that hurt. Cats have sharp claws, don't they?" Or, "I'm sorry that the Frisbee is in the tree. Those things can really get flying and sometimes you don't know where they're going to land. It's probably best to stay away from houses and trees." You might then coach your child toward a solution.

Unfortunately, some parents miss the opportunity to be the counselor and instead become the consequence. Their parental anger adds to the life lesson to somehow make it stick. Or, maybe the parent just isn't thinking and reacts out of anger because of irritation. Either way, the opportunity for life to teach the lesson is blunted by the parent's poor response.

Other times, parents rescue their kids too quickly so that the life lesson loses its effectiveness. "Oh here, let me fix it for you," isn't wrong but often teaches kids that parents can fix the problem so they don't have to change their actions. When children make mistakes or get themselves into a predicament, both they and their parents feel the frustration. The temptation is to relieve the frustration by solving the problem. However, frustration is a good teacher when it's met with confidence on the part of the child. You might say, "Jack, would you like an idea for getting the Frisbee out of the tree? You might be able to reach it with the broom in the garage or you might try throwing a ball to knock it loose." When the parent becomes the coach, the child learns to solve the problem himself.

Learning from life builds confidence. It's often making mistakes and then fixing them that gives kids a sense

that they can develop their own solutions. Instead of stepping in and taking over, you might offer suggestions. When Chrissy spills cereal while pouring from the box, she looks at Mom for a response. If Mom says, "I told you to pour slowly. Here, give it to me," then the child tends to fear making mistakes so as not to frustrate Mom. But if, on the other hand, Mom says, "Oops, that's okay. Just scoop the rest into another bowl and you'll be fine," the child learns that mistakes are okay and that problems aren't to be feared because they have solutions.

Parents often react too quickly to situations their children find themselves in. Jumping up in surprise and moving into "fix-it mode" may not be the most productive. Sometimes just pausing for a moment allows you to recognize that dropping a box of juice on the kitchen floor doesn't necessarily mean you have to race to stop it from leaking. A little patience may provide a child with the knowledge that "It's okay. Messes aren't necessarily disasters, but they do need to be cleaned up." You may have to come back after the fact and do a more complete cleaning but you've allowed your child to learn something important in the process.

Encouraging children to learn from natural consequences isn't always appropriate. Obviously, if the child is in harm's way or if someone else is about to get hurt, then it's time to get involved. Furthermore, if your child isn't learning from the natural consequence then you may want to use another strategy to teach the life lesson. For example, if Joey continues to tease the cat, then natural consequences may not be working and stepping in with another form of discipline may be helpful.

Jesus was a master at involving his students in the

learning process. In Mark 6:37 he told his disciples who were concerned about the hungry multitude, "You give them something to eat." Then he allowed them to be part of the solution by sitting the people down in groups and distributing the food that was provided by the miracle from the boy's lunch. The disciples needed a lot of life lessons to develop their faith. Later that evening, Jesus let them learn through a storm on the lake that he has the power to calm the waves. The disciples learned through experience and Jesus knew the best time to step in to help them grow. You can be like Jesus every day as you watch your preschooler attempt challenges or bring you problems. Knowing when to take control and when to allow your child to be part of the solution is important. And kids will benefit from your patience in allowing them to learn.

There are many ways to learn. Experience is only one teacher. We all learn lessons from life on a regular basis. In order to help your child mature and grow, you'll want to equip her to learn from challenges and mistakes. That often means stepping back, choosing more carefully when to get involved, and coaching your child through to success. It's fun to see the delight on a child's face as a reward for accomplishing a task that requires struggle.



Channel Your Child's Growing Independence

Have you ever heard a child say, "I did it!"? If so, you know that every child enjoys the satisfaction of accomplishment. If we do too much for our child, we take away that excitement of achievement. One of the goals of the preschool years is to develop a healthy independence. This doesn't mean that your child should be allowed to do everything alone. It simply means that you'll want to encourage confidence and skill building in the course of everyday life.

Think about what you do for your child and ask yourself if this is something your child could do independently. If you constantly put on your son's coat, for example, it's time for him to learn to do it himself. The easiest way for a child to put on a coat is to lay the coat down on the floor, opened up with the head of the coat closest to his feet so that it appears upside down. The child reaches down putting his hands in the sleeve holes and picks the coat up over his head sliding his hands down the sleeves.

Look for ways to break down advanced tasks to simple steps so that even a preschooler could do them. For ex-

ample, when your preschooler wants a drink of juice or milk, the process of pouring would likely make a mess if the preschooler were to attempt it on her own. But, if you purchase a small child-size pitcher, now even a three-year-old would be able to pour with less of a mess. Furthermore, if the child had access to a plastic cup in a lower drawer, she could use the dishwasher door as a table, pour her juice, put away the pitcher, and close the dishwasher door to easily get rid of any mess. Not only are you helping your child get a drink independently, but you're also encouraging muscle coordination and the confidence to overcome mistakes.

Most parents would say that they want their children to be independent and able to care for themselves, but in our busy world it's often too time-consuming to wait for a child to do the task. Look for ways to simplify the chore. For example, you'll allow your child to pick whether to wear flip-flops or sneakers, but the decision needs to be made early. If the child can't find the choice of shoes, then you may have to go with what's available.

Children learn from experience, but experience often takes more time if they don't have the skills or the ability to accomplish the task. By allowing a bit more margin in your life or doing a little pre-planning, you can provide your preschooler with more opportunities to learn and grow.

Jesus encouraged independence as he trained his disciples. He invited Peter to come out on the water with him in Matthew 14:29-30. " 'Come,' he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus used that experience to teach Peter an important lesson about faith.

Mark 9 contains a story about a boy that had an evil spirit. The disciples tried to be independent but couldn't heal the boy, so after Jesus did it they were willing to learn more about the power of God. Independence training is part of life and children can start early as their parents learn to be the coaches to encourage them onward.

Of course, some preschoolers are a bit more independent than is best. Preschoolers sometimes want to do it themselves when they aren't quite ready for the experience. It's unwise, for example, to allow a preschooler to use a sharp knife to cut the apple even though he may want to do so.

One common power struggle between parents and their preschoolers takes place in this area when a child wants to be independent at times when it's inappropriate. It's at this point that preschoolers need to learn another heart quality: responsiveness to authority. It's important to help children know the difference. Sometimes you can do it yourself and other times you can't.

Start with small steps like learning how to put on shoes and tell if they are on the correct feet. For lunch, your child could spread peanut butter and jelly on the bread for a sandwich with a small butter knife. For the afternoon outside, your daughter could put on her own coat and zip it up. Imagine the time you could save if your child was able to do these things without your assistance! A small investment now can pay off with a large return later on.

One of the ways you can help your child grow in independence is to teach him to put things away. In a classroom environment, a preschool has certain rules about getting out a game or an activity that parents can mimic at home. In the classroom, the child first gets out a mat. Then the

child selects the activity and puts it on the mat and enjoys it. When he's done playing, he then returns the activity to its proper place and puts the mat away. That kind of neatness can happen at home too. It just requires practice, teaching children the operating principles in your home.

This doesn't mean that every child has to be a "neat freak," but it does mean that children who learn how to clean up and how to keep track of things will have a much easier time in life.

Preschoolers benefit from having chores because they encourage responsibility and independence. Be sure to choose chores that are appropriate for the age level. Even the smallest of children can help dust or fold laundry when taught. They love to do it like Mommy or Daddy, so let them have a chance to do so. Scrubbing the sink (make sure the cleaning product is safe for children) or taking out the trash (with a bag that is of manageable size and weight) can be helpful chores for preschoolers. Allow them to help you shop for groceries by looking for certain products on the shelves. Young children can assist you in tasks around the house—handing tools, cleaning up after a mess, or holding a flashlight so you can see better. All of these activities help them to learn about life while developing independence.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The number 17 is centered within this graphic.

17

Use Choices to Teach Decision-Making

Life is a great teacher and your child is learning every day. Sometimes you'll want to allow your kids to make choices in order to learn from them. Kids who learn from life often develop greater confidence to solve problems, and greater humility because some of their choices were not the best. Furthermore, some children find a high need to control their lives and the lives of those around them. Allowing them to choose from options is often helpful as you guide them forward.

Of course, some children like to use their freedom to choose as an attempt to control the situation beyond the available options. When you give a choice of cereal for breakfast, your child may demand something completely different and then when the answer is no, start to pout or use angry words to express disapproval or to motivate you to change your mind. Kids at times can develop the belief that because they get to choose that they are in charge of the family. Parents can then end up bouncing between meal choices or arguing with a stubborn child about wearing that favorite shirt for the third day in a row.

If your child turns choices into a power struggle then you'll want to take a different approach for a while, balancing the freedom to choose with the recognition that submission to your authority is also an important value. Balancing both of those concepts will help children the most.

Florence told us her story. "My five-year-old daughter seems to change her mind several times in a morning trying to figure out what to wear. So we started a new plan that seems to work pretty well. We allow her to choose what clothing to wear the next day before going to bed at night. The rule states that, unless the weather is different than we expected or there is some extenuating circumstance, the clothing choice cannot change in the morning. Even when we do make a clothes switch at the last minute, we don't have all the drama of unlimited choices that we had before."

There is usually less chance for a power struggle when the child has some control over choices. If you want your son to choose but need some say in it yourself, allow him to choose from two or three options that you specify. This way, you still have enough control to make sure the child has a good selection from which to make a choice, but the child still gets to choose.

You can use choices as a way to teach children during discipline times as well. You might say to a child, "You have a choice. You can sit down and take a Break and settle down and then come back and we can try again with the puzzle, or you can miss out altogether." Or, when giving instructions to your child you might say, "It's time for bed. Would you like Daddy to put you to bed or Mommy to put you to bed." Choices are offered in that case, but there's no

doubt that bed is the next activity on the agenda.

One of the biggest lessons learned from decisions is how to live with the consequences of the choices made. If a child with \$5 at the carnival chooses to purchase the stuffed animal and his sister chooses the decorated balloon, he has to live with his decision. As parents we can empathize with his regret, but it's often best to allow him to experience the situation and not try to make him happy by buying him a balloon.

When children see that choices are one way to address life situations, they can use the same approach with others as well. Allowing someone else to choose is often a sign of graciousness. When a friend is over, you might encourage your preschooler to say to the friend, "Would you rather play outside with the ball or inside making an art project?" The wisdom of giving someone else a choice is a way to lead and be responsive at the same time.

You might tell your preschooler the story of Abraham, who gave Lot the choice of which land he wanted. In Genesis 13:8-9, Abraham said, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." To avoid conflict, Abraham let Lot choose. Preschoolers can be like Abraham and let a friend choose first. In the story, God blessed Abraham for his willingness to allow Lot to pick what appeared to be the best piece of land. God will bless your child as well for being unselfish and allowing someone else to choose, even if they get the bigger piece. There's nothing like the satisfaction that you've done the right thing, even when you don't get the best option.

When a child learns to make decisions on the small things, it will be easier to make choices on the big ones. Because of this, it's often helpful to allow a child to make simple choices. "Would you like apple juice or milk to drink?" "Would you like to go to the park or play in the back yard today?" These simple decisions allow a child to learn to make choices without harmful consequences. Even adults sometimes have a hard time making decisions, so practicing early can help children develop the heart quality of decisiveness.

As you make decisions or change plans, take time and explain why you did so. A child usually only needs a simple explanation behind the new plan. "We can't go to the store as we planned because it's icy outside." Or, "We have to change our plan to go to the aquarium because we have company coming over today." These types of explanations go far in justifying why we have made an unpopular choice, and they allow the child to comprehend why.

Decision-making is a part of life. Although sometimes you will be directive with your child and give instructions that involve no choices, just simple obedience, other times you'll want to provide opportunities to teach them options to wrestle with.



Prepare Yourself for Surprise Challenges

Children learn how to respond to challenges by watching their parents handle problems. That doesn't mean that they always imitate the way their parents handle emotions, but kids tend to ride the emotional waves of their parents. As you're teaching your child how to face obstacles and surprises in life, consider how you model your own reactions.

People in a family are all emotionally connected, some more than others. That's why you feel tense when your kids start arguing or why a child may retreat to the other room when parents fight. Other times children want to step in to make things better, because each person has their own way of dealing with their emotions when faced with stressful situations. Some of those reactions are more helpful than others.

If you can plan your responses to challenging situations, you'll be more effective at teaching your children important lessons about life. When your child falls off a skateboard and hits his head on the driveway, do you gasp in horror and race over and pick him up? Or, do you pause

for a moment, and watch him get up and brush himself off to try again. Sometimes a parent's need to comfort is greater than the child's need to receive it. Often if you wait a second or two before reacting, you'll be able to measure how serious the injury might be. If you react too quickly you might hinder your ability to accurately assess the situation.

Your reaction to your child's pain or fear is important. Kids look to their parents for clues about how they should handle the emotional challenges they're facing. One mom said it this way, "When Rick slipped and fell, he looked at me as if to see my reaction. When I just smiled, he got up and continued on." It was Mom's confident assurance, communicated by a calm smile, that gave Rick the cue for his internal response.

If you're at the park and your child is playing on the equipment, and every other statement is, "Be careful," what message is your child receiving? Maybe she's learning that the most important thing in life is to be safe, therefore don't take risks or try anything new. If your child tips a cup of water in the kitchen, what's your response? If it's instant anger or even a panic reaction to clean it up, your child may learn some negative things about mistakes. Instead, what would happen if you simply said, "Oops. Looks like you spilled your water. The sponge is in the sink," and then continued to read your book? It's surprising how children take charge and learn to solve problems when given a chance. Your reaction communicated the message, "We all make mistakes. When we do, we just have to clean them up."

Although the best response when ambushed by a problem is often to be still, sometimes a look of surprise or

a reaction of sadness is appropriate and even helpful on the spot. When you open the door and see that your child is writing on the wall, your response can have a significant impact on the child's heart. Anger is rarely helpful. A better response is sorrow. Anger often builds walls in the heart. Sorrow opens windows and appeals to a child's heart in a powerful way. It's not only what you say, but also how you say it in that moment that touches a child's heart.

Similarly, when your child reports an exciting story you want to outwardly express joy in the moment, or when she brings you a gift you'll want to receive it with delight. Positive emotional responses are a great way to bring emotional connectedness between people. That's why God said in Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Notice that it doesn't say, "Get angry with those who get angry." Some emotions are good to reflect and others are not. It's important to know the difference.

When your child does get angry, you'll want to remain calm. Facing off with kids who are angry not only results in hurt in their hearts but it teaches children to fight fire with fire, rarely a helpful way to solve problems or strengthen relationships.

Look for ways to respond to life to teach valuable lessons such as, "There are always solutions. If I don't know what they are, I can find them." Or, "You don't have to panic. We can solve this." Or, "Mistakes are part of life. We just have to take them in stride and keep going." Of course, knowing how to respond in any given situation can be a challenge. Sometimes we just need to be still and calm down, because panic rarely works. In fact, emotional reactions often cause regret. Other times, we need to move

quickly to show people that we care. Wisdom and experience teach children the difference.

The best way to have a good response to surprises is to plan now how you'll react. Think about how you want to respond when your child comes in crying in sadness, or gets hurt, or breaks something, or hurts someone else. Sometimes you'll want to react strongly and other times you'll want to be still. Think about it in advance and you're more likely to respond in helpful ways when the situation actually presents itself.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The number 19 is centered within this graphic.

19

Make Correction Strategic

Correction is part of your job. If it's filled with anger, frustration, or intensity, then relationships become strained and children rarely learn the necessary tools to address their weaknesses, such as humility, repentance, and the ability to take responsibility for their own actions. On the other hand, if you are firm, direct, composed, and confident in your correction approach, your kids learn that mistakes are inevitable, how to learn from failure, and how to change their hearts. Here are a few things to guide you in one of the most common activities of your day: correcting your kids.

When possible and appropriate, give a warning. You don't have to threaten taking all the toys away for a year. Just simply say, "Jimmy, I asked you to clean up your paper project from the table." Clear, simple, and firm, communicating to Jimmy that you mean what you say. When possible minimize starting your statement with "If" and instead use words such as, "You need to..." Although your "if" statements will be necessary some of the time, those words often move to consequences too quickly, a common parenting mistake.

If your child doesn't respond, then move forward in the correction process. Remember that your goal is a change of heart. You're trying to mold the heart of your child by building cooperation instead of resistance, kindness instead of meanness, or self-control instead of reactive anger. Whatever you're working on, correction is a great tool for change.

When parents move to consequences too quickly, the consequences lose their effectiveness over time. The main purpose of consequences is to raise the motivation level for repentance. Most children will need consequences, but much of the day-to-day correction can be handled more powerfully with a Break. It not only slows down the emotional intensity but it teaches children important lessons about changing their hearts.

The Break concept taught by the National Center for Biblical Parenting is modeled after a biblical understanding of repentance and comes from a study of church discipline as God teaches principles of correction for his family the church (Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). We're not suggesting that you excommunicate your kids. But the principles that make correction work are clear. 1) Separation from the benefits of family life is the motivation for change. 2) The focus of the Break is a change of heart. 3) The fact that the child helps determine the length of time spent there transfers responsibility for repentance to the child. 4) Restoration and forgiveness are the goal.

A Break is a valuable tool that helps children learn how to pull back instead of pushing forward in the correction process. When your child is unresponsive to your words of correction then say something like, "You need to go take

a Break on the bottom step, change your heart, and come back and see me when you're ready." By allowing the child to initiate the return instead of setting a timer, you send the child on a mission to change the heart. Sometimes settling down takes one minute but more likely it will take ten minutes or a half hour or longer. Some children spend the first part of time in the Break fuming or trying to push parental buttons to increase the conflict. Don't get sucked in. Children often have to wrestle a bit in their hearts before they realize that there are no other opportunities but humbly returning to work on the solution.

Typically you'll see repentance in a child's countenance upon her return. If instead you see defiance, you may need to send her back to the Break for a bit longer. The length of time spent in the Break isn't as important as the work done there. Some children can change their hearts in a minute or less, while others need the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives for much longer.

Many children have a hard time learning the Break because they want to push forward and they often use some form of dramatics to derail the process. Or sometimes the very fact that they have to pull back and sit for a few minutes is hard because the child doesn't want to admit fault. They then resort to a host of manipulative techniques to sidestep the Break. Some kids become defiant, throw temper tantrums, or try to bargain their way out of going to a Break. Those are often indicators that the child actually needs the Break, so your persistence often helps to build the necessary internal responses to correction. The very act of going to the doorway or bottom step to sit for a time requires some important change inside your child's heart. Many kids don't respond well to correction and they need

help to learn how to do so. If your child has a hard time with a Break, your persistence in practicing it does some valuable heart work.

When the child returns, have a debriefing about the problem and talk about how to handle the situation next time. Keep in mind that the word “discipline” means to teach, so avoid a justice mentality that dishes out punishment. Instead look for a change of heart and, over time, your discipline will reap strategic results. Hebrews 12:11 says, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Correction is hard work. Having a plan that you and your child both understand can make the process more predictable and more effective. Good correction routines help you navigate the emotional challenges it often creates. Furthermore, the practice you do now can build good patterns so that your children can handle correction well, a skill they’ll use for the rest of their lives.



Firm but Gentle Correction

It's important to have a toolbox of discipline strategies to handle a child's misbehavior. If you see a problem once, you might just make a comment about it. If it's a pattern, then you'll want to develop a strategy to make some significant changes. The parent who believes that a child will just grow out of a bad attitude, or who says that the resistance to instructions is just a result of the current stage of a child's development, often waits too long to do the necessary training. The reality is that kids often grow into bad habits and need help to build godly patterns.

When a child has a tendency to react in a particular way, or an inclination to act out, it's a heart issue. Jesus explained that tendencies exist in the heart. He said in Luke 6:45, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." Often it's hard to know exactly what's in the heart of your child, but behavior is a good indicator of areas that need to be adjusted.

As you think beyond just behavior to the heart of a child, you'll want to consider ways you can change be-

liefs. Often a change in what children believe results in an adjustment to their behavior as well. For example, some children believe that if provoked by a sibling, they have the right to hit back. Others believe that their primary job in life is to have fun, so things like work should be avoided at all cost. One of the tasks of a family is to teach children a right way to think about life. You'll want to use a number of strategies to accomplish this task.

One of the tools you'll rely on is firmness. Yelling at kids is counterproductive, but a firm approach teaches children to respond well when given an instruction. Children can learn through your firmness to avoid arguing when told no and that unkindness isn't tolerated. Firmness says there's a right way and a wrong way and we're going to do it the right way. Children need firmness to help them understand life more clearly.

Another tool that's quite helpful with preschoolers is simple observations about life. Your words can have a significant effect on a child without further action required. As you pass by the bedroom and say, "I appreciate the way you're playing nicely with your brother," or "You're good at cleaning up after yourself," you are forming a child's understanding of what kindness and responsibility look like without even using the terms. Likewise, when you say, "It looks like you've moved into the whiny attitude," or "You're dawdling when you should be cleaning up that mess," your comment raises the awareness level of negative behavior. Sometimes all you need is a comment to see your children make significant changes, because they've taken your words to heart and adjusted accordingly.

Sometimes parents overuse consequences in their discipline and correction times because they lack other tools

to motivate change. Firmness is important, but it doesn't always involve consequences. You might find that distraction is helpful when a child is unhappy or bored. Dialogue often moves a child to a better place or helps evaluate a certain course of action. You might even use a form of non-confrontational correction by saying something like, "Josie, we've got a problem. Lately when I give you an instruction I see a bad attitude and resistance. We can't continue like this. Can you work on the problem yourself or do we need to have a discipline time? What do you think?"

Getting kids involved in the solution or allowing them to take responsibility for a problem helps to promote change. When correction is needed, avoid reacting; think "strategy" instead. Often a little thought about the problem, why it's happening, and then forming a plan for change can go a long way to produce the heart adjustments you're looking for. Preschoolers learn best by practicing the right response instead of just receiving a consequence for the wrong response. So spend time role playing and practicing good responses.

Sometimes children need time to think about their situation in order to feel a motivation to change. If emotions are strong, it's hard to change. Having a child take a Break is helpful. Send the child to sit quietly on the bottom step or in the doorway with the instruction to settle down and come back when ready to talk nicely about the problem. By transferring responsibility for change to the child, you'll see the heart response you're looking for come more quickly.

Always remember that God is the one who changes the heart. The Bible never says that parents change the heart of a child. We're simply the tools that God uses to help

motivate that change to take place. When a child changes his own heart then the Bible calls that repentance. As a parent, you can facilitate the repentance process by asking children to suggest a better response instead of acting out. Repentance isn't only stopping an undesirable behavior but it's doing the right thing instead. Your dialogue about the right thing can help change the focus of a child's thinking.

The way you discipline children is very important. Remember to do it in a way that produces hope that change is possible. Many children don't have the life experience to see that things can be different, and discouragement is often the result. Accompany discipline with teaching and hope and you'll increase the motivation for a child to make the appropriate adjustments.



Dealing with Anger Episodes

One of the tasks of the preschool years is for the child to learn more self-control. Major life lessons find their foundation during these important years as kids learn how to handle their hands, feet, mouths, and emotions. It may seem, at times, like you're disciplining for the same things over and over again, but the training you do now can establish healthy patterns that can last for years to come.

Preschoolers sometimes feel overwhelmed by their emotions and need help developing the skills to manage them well. If you focus on helping your child address two emotions—disappointment and frustration—you'll make huge strides to handle the emotional challenges they'll face.

Disappointment often takes place when you say “no” to a request, or when the child can't have what he wants. Kids sometimes throw temper tantrums when they see something they'd like but can't have or must leave an activity they'd rather continue. Unfortunately, their subsequent reactions often take place in public places, making parenting all the more challenging. The solution for public challenges is to practice in private. So, you may have to just

leave the grocery store or the park, but use the incident as a reminder that your child needs more opportunities with situations that simulate the public setting.

Frustration often takes place when a child's goal is blocked or a right is violated, so interaction with other children often generates significant emotion. Kids then respond with fits of rage and sometimes even violent reactions. They need a plan. Parents become the primary strategists for preschoolers as kids learn to deal with their internal struggles.

Children who tend to become overwhelmed must learn to pull back instead of push forward when they feel intense emotion. Venting is often touted as a good solution but it isn't as productive in learning self-control. In fact, Proverbs 29:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." Your work to teach your child to control emotions is an important part of the training process.

You can use several strategies to teach your child to pull back and control the internal emotional turmoil. The solutions usually aren't in one simple technique. You'll need a multi-faceted approach. First, look for patterns. If you can determine the arena where the triggers take place, you can develop a preemptive plan both for yourself and for your child. We're not suggesting you avoid the triggers, but talk with your child in calm moments about what you're seeing. You might say, "I noticed that a challenging time for you is when I tell you it's time to leave an activity to do something else." Or, "It seems that when your brother grabs something from you, you react pretty strongly."

Then develop a plan for your child in advance that contains things she can say to herself and things to do dif-

ferently in order to respond better. You'll use this plan as you move forward both in discussions and in your correction when needed. Allowing your child to help develop the plan is most beneficial because it provides ownership of the problem and its solution. When you're in the arena where the child often experiences the emotion, talk about it before the trigger takes place.

When the emotion erupts, take a firm, calm approach. Often, it's best for the child to pull away from the situation, sit down, and calm down. Rarely does that plan fit in with the child's desires at the moment. That's because overwhelming emotions provide an internal desire to push forward, often resulting in hitting, screaming, or other poor responses. Your continual work to force a child to take a Break and settle down does the therapy that will demonstrate significant results over time. Even if children have a temper tantrum when told to take a Break, you're communicating the reality that pushing forward is not going to work.

You may even need to physically restrain a child who becomes violent, but remain calm and don't engage in increased emotional intensity. Your refusal to enter into the anger episode with your own anger communicates that this is the child's problem. Over time you'll use this and other tools to teach your preschooler that the best response to feeling overwhelmed is to pull back to regain self-control.

Teaching your child emotional management in this way helps children understand James 1:19 in practical terms, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Children will learn to see their emotion coming on and take action to keep it in check.

After your child settles down, a debriefing is often quite

productive, but be careful about unleashing your own frustration, as that will usually diminish the benefit. Remind your child about the arena where he commonly experiences that overwhelming emotion in order to continue to raise the awareness. Talk about emotions as “physical energy” experienced inside the body that sends a message that it’s time to pull back. Take time to ask questions such as, “How could you tell that you were starting to feel overwhelmed?” “What could you do next time to practice self-control in that kind of situation?” Talk about specific suggestions that your preschooler can understand and embrace.

Identify times when your preschooler handled a situation in a challenging arena with self-control and ask the question, “What was your secret to success?” Or, “What did you tell yourself to keep your emotion under control?” This kind of concrete affirmation provides learning experiences that your child can draw upon for future strength.

Developing emotional control isn’t easy. Your calm, firm approach, balanced with dialogue and prayer, can go a long way to help your child grow in emotional development.

Teaching Faith in Simple Terms

“**M**om, I hate rain,” Larry complained as he looked out the window.

“I understand,” Mom responded. “Rainy days limit our ability to go outside and enjoy the sunshine. But do you know why God has it rain?”

Larry turned around, eager to hear Mom’s response. It was as if Larry hadn’t thought of God and rain before. Mom went on to explain to Larry how rain waters the grass, trees, and flowers, and cleans the air to make it fresh and more enjoyable for us when we go outside. Mom could see the gears engaged in Larry’s mind, recognizing that the pleasure of playing outside wasn’t the only important thing in life. Mom didn’t hear one more complaint about the rain all day.

As your preschooler asks questions, take time to teach about God and his ways. For example, you can teach your child how our Heavenly Father is intricately involved in the creation process, designing flowers, bugs, weather, and animals. The more they can learn about how the caterpillar turns into a butterfly or the tadpole becomes a frog, the more they begin to understand God’s design and the rea-

sons for each thing he created. You might have to do some research yourself in order to answer questions, but that's all part of the growth process for both you and your child.

Be careful though what you teach about spiritual things. Sometimes parents try to teach preschoolers the "fear of God" during discipline times. When parents scare children into compliance because "that wouldn't make the Lord happy" or "God will get you for that," kids get a skewed view of God and view him primarily as judgmental. Sometimes parents, in an attempt to be biblical, use the scriptures and pray during every correction time. Although that can be helpful at times, it can also give children an unhealthy view of God as disciplinarian instead of a loving, compassionate father who affirms, guides, and leads through life.

Remember that preschoolers are concrete thinkers, so they comprehend things differently than you do. They take everything literally and exactly as you say it. So when you say to them "Jesus lives in your heart," the preschooler tries to figure out how and why he gets in there!

When you say, "you are as cute as a button," they try to figure out why you think they look like a button! Remembering this simple fact will help you as you teach your child about spiritual matters. Try to state spiritual topics in literal terms and not abstracts. Give them as much information as they can understand, but not so much that it confuses them. Don't feel like you need to teach spiritual subjects that require deeper understanding at this point. They will understand those as they develop their brains into abstract thinking after the age of six years.

Spiritual truths are best explained to preschoolers by giving them simple facts that they can understand concretely. Their spiritual building blocks should be centered

on God, Jesus, and the Bible. Telling them about God's love and the things God created helps them to begin to grow in his love. Telling them about Jesus and his good deeds allows them to learn that Jesus did good things for people so that when you tell them to follow Jesus they can understand more about why. Helping them learn the basics of faith builds the foundation they need to understand deeper thoughts as they develop and grow.

For example, Kirk tried to pressure his son, Sam, to comprehend the death and resurrection of Christ at Easter. Reflecting later he said, "I realize now that trying to explain the theology to my son wasn't very helpful. Sam began to focus on the death instead of moving forward to the abstract thinking of coming back to life. He got stuck on dying, trying to figure out what that meant, and then started thinking negatively about Jesus' death and resurrection. He got the idea that Easter is about Jesus rising from the dead but just couldn't put that together with Grandma dying, an event that he was still grieving over. For a while it seemed that Easter was a more scary experience for him than a happy one because he just wasn't able to understand it."

Preschoolers love stories, so, as you teach them about the Bible, take time to look for application to real life experiences. Regular prayer throughout the day helps kids connect the spiritual world with their personal lives. Open and honest faith is a treasure, and watching preschoolers grow in their understanding of God and his work is often fascinating. Enjoy the process yourself.

In Deuteronomy 6:6-9 God gives a command to the Israelite parents that's helpful for us as well. About spiritual training he says, "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.”

Life is a great classroom and you are the teacher, helping your child understand the complexities of life in simple terms. As you talk about God and his Word, you’ll be doing exactly what God instructed the Israelite parents to do. It has lasting results that will pay huge dividends later on.

A decorative graphic featuring the number 23 in a large, bold, serif font. The number is centered and surrounded by elegant, flowing, light-gray scrollwork and swirls that extend across the top and sides of the page.

23

A Spiritual Milestone: Memorizing Scripture

Children learn valuable steps of faith during the preschool years. Some make early commitments to Christ that parents nurture over time. Others receive spiritual training and come to a personal point of commitment in later years. The foundations of faith, however, grow significantly during the early years.

Some steps of faith just happen in the practical activities of life. In fact, many of the things you do every day and the responses you have to your child model the way God cares for us. When you drop your child off at school or a friend's house, he has the opportunity to learn to trust that Mom or Dad will come back to get him. Children learn to bring problems to their parents to solve, and how to receive comfort when they're hurt. They learn limits, convictions, and values. All of these daily interactions prepare children to call on God as Heavenly Father and provide significant steps of spiritual enrichment. When parents give their preschoolers appropriate ideas about God, kids learn to trust, love, and follow him.

You'll want to teach all the Bible stories you can to

kids at a young age, but be sure to do it in terms that they can understand. Many times that means focusing on Bible characters and historical stories of faith in action. Teaching about Jesus' life and ministry is likely more powerful at this stage than talking extensively about the Holy Spirit and his role in our spiritual growth. You might introduce the idea of the Holy Spirit to a preschooler, but realize that they'll be able to grasp the depth of his work in their lives more fully at later stages of development. Jesus was God in human form, giving kids something to see and imagine in concrete terms.

Sometimes parents put their kids in a Christian preschool or take them to Sunday school to make sure they receive good teaching. Those are often helpful, but be sure to also ask the question, "What am I doing at home to help teach my child about spiritual matters?" Young children learn in a lot of different ways. Teaching Bible stories is one helpful tool, but kids also learn by watching parents handle life situations. As you make choices, experience frustration, or solve a problem, talk to your child about your values and why you are handling life the way you do. That's another great way to help your child grow spiritually.

Preschoolers are at a great age to start memorizing Bible verses. They might not understand all of the words or what they mean yet, but getting the verses into their memory is often the first step to getting them into their hearts. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Even at a young age, children can begin the process of hiding God's Word in their hearts. Many children who memorized Bible verses at an early age find that the verses come back to them

just at the right time when facing a temptation or trying to understand something about life. In fact, as you choose developmental spiritual milestones we would encourage you to make scripture memory an important part of the preschool years.

Here are several Bible verses that are helpful for preschoolers to memorize. Genesis 1:1, Psalm 119:11, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Psalm 19:1, Proverbs 1:8, Ephesians 6:1-3, Joshua 1:9, Galatians 6:9, Ephesians 4:32, Philippians 4:13, Romans 6:23. And, if your child is eager and ready to memorize a whole psalm, you might try Psalm 121, a beautiful psalm of trust that even a preschooler can understand. You might want to set a goal of memorizing one verse a month. Not only is it good spiritual training, but memorization is good for brain development and for strengthening intelligence. Don't underestimate what a preschooler can accomplish mentally. Remember that those who take longer to memorize a verse usually retain it longer as well.

To help a child memorize a Bible verse, take it apart into phrases and help your child learn the pieces before putting it altogether as a whole. These verses are not just for kids so you might want to memorize them yourself as well. You'll be surprised at how they'll influence your thinking. Make the memorization process fun and take time to share what you're learning with others.

Reading Bible stories to children is a great way to introduce them to the Bible as God's book. Reading to your child is always a good thing and what better way to do it but to read stories from God's Word! It's often best to look at Bible stories from an appropriate children's Bible or retell the story in preschool language to maximize the excitement. Your goal is to teach your kids that the Bible is exciting and

relevant for them. That's why, when you've finished the story, you want to ask the question, "What is the lesson learned here?" That question helps preschoolers make the application to their own lives. The scriptures are powerful and the Bible always has an application to a person's life, even for a child.

Remember that the language of preschoolers is activity, so take time to act out Bible stories and imagine what it might have been like to actually be there. Spiritual development is taking place in your child so talk about it and help guide the process.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The number 24 is centered within this graphic.

24

Develop Reasoning Skills

Part of a preschooler's cognitive development involves the ability to reason. Although it happens naturally, your encouragement can give a child a significant boost, increasing their ability to put information together to develop conclusions. Reasoning skills form the basis for math and science and become helpful for developing the ability to solve problems. You can teach your child important skills, so look for opportunities to help kids learn how to think logically, solve problems, and put information together to develop conclusions. Often just a few minutes of instruction and supervision can lead to many hours of enjoyment for the child and peace for you.

Puzzles are a great tool for teaching your child how to reason. You might start by giving your young child puzzles where one piece fits in one place. Knob puzzles make it easier for the youngest child to manipulate the pieces, so you might want to begin with these. When the child has mastered the simple puzzles, move to ones with more difficulty. As a general rule, puzzles with eight or fewer pieces are good for beginners. Progress to puzzles with more pieces and ones where each item in the puzzle may have

two or three pieces that must fit together.

Teach your child to look for colors and items that match. For example, a farm animal puzzle may have three pieces to the cow. Teach your child to look for the missing items. "This cow does not have a head, let's find it" or "Where's the cow's tail?" This helps them to develop reasoning skills by determining what's missing and what it should look like. The next step would be to teach your child about piece shapes. You might point out edge pieces and about how different pieces have different shapes that match each other. These reasoning skills will then lead to more in-depth thinking.

Sometimes parents avoid buying puzzles for their child because of the number of pieces involved. Puzzles sometimes get mixed up with other puzzles or pieces get lost. Make it easier on yourself by numbering each puzzle and then putting the corresponding number on the back of each puzzle piece. This way, when several puzzles get dumped on the floor and pieces are all confused, you can easily find which pieces go to which puzzles. Children who know how to work puzzles often can assemble them faster than adults with practice. The number of pieces in the puzzle will increase over time, giving a child the challenge of mastery and the feeling of accomplishment that comes with success.

Sorting is another good exercise for developing reasoning skills. Putting the silverware away in the drawer or organizing the pots and pans can teach children what goes where. That requires thinking and solving skills. Sorting clothes that go into the laundry based on color and then sorting them when they come out based on whom they belong to can also test a child's cognitive skills. Counting,

determining differences between two pictures, or finding a certain object on a page all encourage thinking and reasoning ability.

You might also look for ways to help your child figure out a solution to his own problem instead of solving it for him. For example, when a child can't find his shoes you might teach him to stop, sit down for a moment, and think about when he had them last. If he can remember, then he'll be able to go straight there to find them. If he can't, then you can show him what it means to systematically look for them in every room of the house.

Reasoning skills can extend into many areas as you begin to expand your knowledge of what to do. Think of "learning opportunities" in daily activities. When you pour water into a cup too fast, it will usually spill. Allow your child to pour the water but teach her to pour slowly and give her a smaller container from which to pour. Allow her to pour over a sink or on a tray to begin. It usually takes a few mishaps to learn to pour without spilling.

A sand and water table or tub is a great way to allow a child to experiment with pouring without danger. Use a small dishpan on a plastic tablecloth if you cannot go outside to do this activity. Spills are caught by the tablecloth and can easily be transported to an area where they can be dumped.

What else can you do to help your child learn reasoning skills? Be creative in your own thinking first. While you go about your daily routine, look for ways to help teach your child to think through activities or problems. You might want to have your child help gather items you would need to make cookies. Instead of telling him what you need, involve him in the process. "What do we need first?"

You might even read the recipe to your child and allow him to gather all of the items. "How are we going to bake the cookies?" Let the child figure out that you will need an oven turned on and a pan ready on which to bake the cookies. This begins the process of teaching a child how to prepare for a task. What happens if you begin making cookies and you are missing some of the ingredients? By preparing and assembling items first, the child can see what's involved. Who knows? You might be training a future chef!

Assembling or building things also develops reasoning skills. Lego or Duplo blocks are great for teaching how things go together, while at the same time allowing the use of creativity and imagination. Teaching your child that there are different ways of putting together an item or that different objects can be made from the same blocks helps them to use reasoning skills, as well. When a Lego item has been made from the picture on the box, then expand to encouraging your child to create something new using the same blocks. You might have a future architect in the making!

Although you do not know what's in your child's future, God does. He says in Jeremiah 29:11, " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' " One of the ways you can prepare for your child's future is to teach character and how to approach life with confidence. Then, no matter what God has planned, your child will have the internal strength to meet the challenge. Strong reasoning skills are an important element of cognitive development.

By using a little creativity yourself, you can help your

child develop reasoning and problem-solving skills naturally. The time spent in the initial instruction will begin a process that will continue to develop in your child. When a problem occurs, instead of solving it for the child, allow her to figure out a solution. Try to step back and not attempt to fix everything for your child. You'll transfer an important life skill in the process.

A decorative graphic featuring the number 25 in a large, bold, serif font. The number is centered and surrounded by elegant, flowing, light-gray scrollwork and swirls that extend across the top of the page.

25

Use Rules to Clarify Expectations

Preschoolers need firm limits. Sometimes parents, in an attempt to build relationship, use persuasive techniques to gain cooperation, sugarcoat instructions, and distract kids from limits by offering other attractive choices. Although those parenting strategies may be helpful at times, it's also important that preschoolers learn what it means to obey first without discussion, accept no without arguing, and experience consequences for poor choices.

Please don't misunderstand. We aren't suggesting that parents become bosses, ordering their kids around or treating them with disrespect as slaves. But kids learn character when parents demonstrate firmness. Furthermore, when preschoolers understand the rules they develop a greater security and inner confidence.

The term "rules" used here doesn't necessarily have to do with written guidelines. Sometimes those rules are the understood operating expectations for your family. It would be unreasonable to write them all down, but kids learn what they are by the way you interact and by what you require. Clearing your plate from the table after be-

ing excused or saying “thank you” when given a treat are relational rules that children learn through parental teaching. Children learn what you expect by what you enforce. You don’t have to be mean to develop these patterns, but they do involve training. Be deliberate in deciding what you want and look at behavior as ways to develop heart qualities. Manners are behaviors that demonstrate respect. Sharing and taking turns are behaviors that promote kindness. You’ll encourage heart qualities by the relational rules you require.

Matthew 22:36-39 relates a story of a man who came to Jesus to clarify the rules of life. He asked Jesus “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus responded by summarizing them for the man. Although God gave hundreds of instructions to the Jewish people to help them know how to live, they are all summarized in two relational principles. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Jesus simplified God’s requirements for the man with two basic principles.

Children benefit from a similar approach as parents use rules to provide the tools that govern life situations. Rules are important because they help us understand in practical terms what it means to love God and others. Part of your job is to teach your children what this looks like, and making expectations clear is one of the ways you’ll accomplish that goal.

Most preschoolers will try to cross the line at times. For example, when a parent is on the phone or you’re out

in public, kids will test the waters to see how much they can push the limits. That moment is a very important one in your parenting, and a number of lessons are learned by your response. Pausing your phone call or taking your child away from others for a discipline time communicates that the rules transfer to those situations as well.

A regular routine, a set of reasonable rules, and firm boundaries will help your preschooler thrive. On the other hand, when the playing field is constantly changing, preschoolers often have a hard time understanding how life works and what actions make sense. These children sometimes resort to manipulations of various kinds. Tactics like whining, badgering, arguing, and emotional dramatics may appear more effective because they work.

Here's what's happening in your child's development. The ability to understand cause and effect more clearly gives preschoolers a greater desire to figure out what works in various situations. Relationships are complex. So many factors influence the way we relate and make decisions that preschoolers are on the hunt for structure that brings order to the perceived chaos. Greater communication skills and heightened motor skills provide preschoolers with tools to solve problems. They recognize that they have the growing ability to maneuver in life, solve problems for themselves, and get what they want without as much reliance on parents.

Preschoolers are learning that there's a right way and a wrong way to accomplish an objective. Furthermore, there's an easy way and a hard way to get to the goal. When parents provide structure for their children, they help form the inner rules kids need to sort out appropriate ways to relate. The goal of external rules is to build internal

rules inside a child's heart. The heart contains the operating principles of a person. Governed in part by internal influences such as the conscience, emotions, and desires, the heart needs workable principles to guide the person through life challenges. Learning how to live by the rules, submit to someone else's leadership, and give up their agenda for the good of the family are all valuable lessons learned as a preschooler.

It's helpful when kids see some kind of consistency among the caretakers when it comes to rules and relational patterns. But keep in mind that dads always do it differently than moms and teachers may emphasize a different approach. Grandparents and babysitters usually have different ways of relating. Kids are smart and learn how to play the game of life in each of its venues. That's why kids act a different way at school than they do at home. Look for ways to get on the same page with other adults but don't get overly stressed by the differences. Teach your child how you relate, and require that structure in your relationship. Kids will learn many things from a mom or a dad who provides a clear way of addressing life situations.

Develop routines for handling bedtime, morning time, mealtime, chore time, and other schedule-related tasks. You might even draw a picture chart or create a list to articulate what you expect. It's unrealistic to believe that all problems will be solved by establishing rules, boundaries, and routines, but those things clarify expectations, and thus reduce conflict and develop a greater confidence in children that they know how to maneuver through life effectively.

Teach your child what rules and boundaries are non-negotiable and what ones can be more flexible. Rules

sometimes have exceptions so children may find that puzzling but that's another life lesson and you're a great one to teach it.

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26

Teach Responsibility through Chores

Chores teach children what responsibility looks like in practical ways. It's true that doing things yourself, such as packing your child's backpack or putting his coat on, takes less time, but requiring children to do things for themselves is an investment in their hearts.

Sometimes parents put teaching responsibility on the back burner because of the time required to give the instruction, monitor progress, and check the work. But planning a little margin into your life may be just what's needed to turn a morning routine into a training time instead of simply getting out the door. Preschoolers can step up to the plate when the expectations are clear.

Quite often we make chores just like the word describes—hard to do and no fun at all! When preschoolers learn that chores are part of living in a family and that everyone must contribute, they learn that life isn't all about having fun. Parents contribute to a change in perception by requiring participation in family tasks and responsibilities. You can try making chores enjoyable and encourage a positive attitude, but the reality is that not all of life is

pleasant and sometimes we have to just do what needs to be done.

Children often benefit from seeing how their chores impact family life. You might say, “We work together and we play together in our family. After we get this kitchen cleaned up we’re going to play a game.” Or, “In order to have fun on our picnic, we must gather all the items that are necessary to enjoy the outing.” When all family members pitch in and help, the workload is shared, making the event more enjoyable for others. In this way children learn that privilege and responsibility go together.

Clearing the table, loading the dishwasher, and putting clean silverware in the drawer are reasonable tasks for a preschooler. In fact, by the time a child is five years old, just about any kitchen task that doesn’t require a sharp knife or a hot stove can be a reasonable request.

Children benefit from regular responsibilities that come on a schedule such as feeding the dog or taking the trash out. They can also take on spontaneous chores such as taking a fallen branch to the leaf pile, or picking up a mess created by the baby. Some chores require that a child take care of personal needs such as bathing, cleaning up the bedroom, or making the bed. However, other chores contribute to the family as a whole such as vacuuming the hall, sweeping the kitchen, or bringing in the mail. Creating a sticker chart or check-off list provides a visual reminder of what they need to accomplish.

Preschoolers can also help empty trash cans from around the house, vacuum floors, and clean bathrooms. They can care for pets by feeding them and cleaning up their messes. Preschoolers can assist with a younger child and help straighten areas of the house. They can help with

laundry by gathering the dirty clothes, moving loads from the washer to the dryer, or folding the clothes and putting them in the appropriate rooms. Preschoolers can clean out the car, help you shovel snow, and rake leaves.

You might want to give your preschooler a job that requires initiative, the ability to see what needs to be done and take care of it. For example, you might say to a child, "When the toilet paper roll is empty, it's your job to put on another roll." Or, "Before you go to bed, always check the fish tank light to make sure it's off." One aspect of responsibility is taking initiative, and now's a great time to start.

Chores aren't optional for preschoolers. Kids need responsibility to increase their maturity level. Instead of complaining, whining, or having a bad attitude, children can learn how to complete a task that's a challenge, do things they'd rather not do, and keep their negative comments to themselves. Parents sometimes shy away from chores because of the work necessary to overcome a child's selfishness, but your persistence now is a treasure and your child's future mate will be eternally grateful.

A helpful verse to post or memorize is Philippians 2:14, "Do everything without complaining or arguing." Chores are work, and kids can learn what it means to work hard at a young age, building significant character that will help them throughout their lives.

The way you give the assignment is important. It's often best to call the child over to you before revealing the task. Then, have your child report back when it's completed. It's always a challenge to give a task and then come back an hour later to find your child playing when the assigned task isn't complete. When challenged, the child may respond, "I did it," but the standard of the work may

not meet your expectations. You can alleviate much of that frustration by requiring the child to report back. In fact, you might say to your child, "The job isn't finished until you report back."

After the child reports back be sure to check the work. When you go and see the completed job, you teach your child more about expectations. If you go into the bathroom and find the trashcan on its side or pieces of Kleenex still on the floor, then the trash wasn't emptied to your expectation. Remember that the critical parent always finds fault and the lenient parent lets too much go. A careful balance will create a standard for your child. You may adjust that standard over time, and your inspection of your child's chores gives you an opportunity to provide much-needed feedback.

Be sure to express affirmation and appreciation for completed chores. When everyone works together, it builds a team effort. This strengthens families by giving them a sense of purpose and a chance to work together for a common cause. As in any team, working together increases bonding and a sense of unity and identity.

What about Using Rewards?

Rewards work with children because they offer something that piques their desire to do what they wouldn't ordinarily do. For example, a child doesn't want to clean up his trucks and put them away. The negative feeling he has about doing work is overcome with a desire to obtain a treat. Gold stars and candy bars work because kids want them, and the internal heart scales are tipped in favor of doing what's asked instead of resisting because of the promise of a reward.

Unfortunately, rewards used too often have their downside, so you'll want to be very careful about overusing them. Rewards may be effective at obtaining temporary compliance but do a poor job at making lasting change or building better attitudes. When you say to a child, "If you do this, I'll give you that," they focus on the "that" and not on the "this." In other words, kids simply do what needs to be done in order to get the reward. Incentives then tend to decrease internal motivation. Kids tend to do the minimum necessary to get what they want and rarely do things simply because they're the right thing to do.

Behavior modification backfires over time because par-

ents must continually up the incentive. It's like they play "Let's Make a Deal" with their kids. As preschoolers you can give them a candy bar. At seven years old you have to give them a dollar. At twelve years old you give them \$20. Teens then expect you to pay them to get good grades and you eventually have to buy them a car to get them to graduate from high school. Some families today resemble a game show as parents offer fabulous rewards for common household tasks.

On the flip side, parents start taking things away as punishment to motivate kids to do what they want. Eventually the child has nothing left in his room besides a mattress and parents complain, "I've tried everything with this kid. He won't change." Those are the extremes of a behaviorist model of child rearing, but they are so common in families today. If you're not careful you can start negative patterns right here with your preschooler that you may think work, but end up creating a bigger problem than you expect.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees for their behavior-based approach to spirituality. In Matthew 23:27-28 he said, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." The Pharisees focused on outward behavior instead of inward change. An over-emphasis on rewards teaches children to put their focus in the wrong place.

Rewards decrease creativity and thoroughness because the child focuses on obtaining the reward instead of on the task. Heart work focuses more on changing what children

believe, building patterns through continual training, and teaching children to do what's right and how to work hard. Children who rely on rewards prefer easy tasks and look for the minimum amount to do in order to complete the job.

So, what place do incentives have in a heart-based approach to parenting? Yes, you can use them, but keep your eye on the internal motivation you're trying to develop. Rewards are most useful when starting a new habit or getting over a hump. You may, for example, raise the motivation level for a child to use a public toilet, a common problem for children who do well at home but feel uncomfortable in a strange place. You might say, "If you can use the toilet at church today, then we'll celebrate by allowing you to play with your special hero toy on the way home." In this way, you're trying to get over the challenge and discomfort of a new situation.

Or, you might say to your daughter, "I'd like to teach you to pick up your pajamas each morning and put them under your pillow instead of leaving them on the floor when you get dressed. So, here's the plan. I'm going to create a chart and after you put them away then you can check off the box on the chart." In this case you're starting a new routine and the incentive is designed to raise the awareness level. You might use this approach to encourage initiative for cleaning up one's own messes, or remembering a task such as feeding the dog each morning.

You can use rewards and incentives at other times too, but if you do, be sure to talk about the internal motivation. The goal is to use external motivation to build internal motivation. So, when you see your daughter adding a check mark, you might say, "I see you remembered to put your

pajamas away and you're marking it off on the chart. It feels good to be responsible, doesn't it?" It won't be long before the chart disappears and the habit remains because the child views putting clothes away as a step of responsibility. A reward can help a child who struggles in an area to develop new patterns that will eventually build the character necessary to continue doing the task without the reward. But be sure to keep the focus of your comments on the heart and on the task instead of on the incentive.

Sometimes parents use food to reward kids. Maybe that's because the original behaviorists made behavior modification popular by giving food to dogs, or because animal trainers give food to their pets to get them to accomplish tasks. But there are other kinds of rewards that are more constructive. After all, in western culture we have plenty of eating disorders and issues with obesity, so we don't need to build unhealthy patterns of rewarding ourselves with food.

Instead you might use stickers, stamps, a chart, or collecting coins in a jar. Sometimes a chart or a bowl of marbles on the table can demonstrate steps forward and becomes an encouragement for both children and their parents. Seeing the progress helps raise awareness of the distance to the goal. Put a chart on the refrigerator, set the marble jar on the kitchen table, or place the coin bowl in a visible place where everyone can see progress. You might use this approach for a short time to increase cooperation in the mornings, working together to clean up after meals, or having positive attitudes during homework.

You might decide to work toward a family goal and provide a reward to motivate everyone to participate. For

example, you might reward for teamwork with the whole family receiving a benefit because we work together to accomplish a task. "Let's see if we can get the yard cleaned up as a team, without complaining. If we do, we'll enjoy playing soccer together afterwards." The focus is on the teamwork and the reality that we work together and we play together.

Rewards aren't the only way to build motivation. In fact, there are better ways that involve strengthening the heart. Giving children a vision for being mature, discussing ways we mutually contribute to each other's lives, and simply practicing doing the right thing also contribute to good patterns.

Giving kids rewards to get things done is easy. It's a quick fix and some parents end up developing a whole parenting style based on bribery. "If you will pick up your toys I will give you a piece of candy." Almost every task in family life is met with some kind of incentive. These parents develop a culture in their home of "do this and I'll give you that." They then sometimes find their children returning the favor. "If you want me to be quiet, then give me a cookie."

Be careful about rewards. They are often shortsighted and too much emphasis on external motivation weakens children on a heart level. The reality is that sometimes we just have to do what has to be done because it's the right thing to do. Kids can learn that, and the preschool age is a great time to start the education process.

Social Skills Training

Preschoolers move from a view of the world that's centered on self to an understanding of working with others. They learn how to respond to authority and how to cooperate with peers. It's because of this significant developmental step that they are ready for training in the development of social skills. When you stop and think about it, relating to others is a complex process and your mentoring of your child in this area will provide important tools to use and build upon.

Two qualities children need in order to relate better socially are sensitivity and self-control. The sensitivity creates an awareness of what's going on around, and the self-control provides the ability to restrain impulses in order to relate effectively. Preschoolers learn how to “read” people, determine what's appropriate in interaction, when to speak up, and when to be quiet.

Take interrupting others, for example. Knowing when and how to step into a conversation or get help when someone else is engaged in an activity requires training. You might tell your daughter, “When I'm on the phone or in a conversation with others and you want my attention,

here's what you can do. Come over and place your hand on my arm. I'll recognize that as a signal that you'd like to talk to me. I'll put my hand on your hand to let you know that I'm aware of what you want. I'll continue my conversation until it gets to a place where I can take a break and then I'll stop and talk with you." This visual and tactile approach may be more effective than simply having the child say, "Excuse me," at will and expect your attention.

Manners are simple etiquette rules that give children guidelines for social interaction. Greeting others, asking to be excused after a meal, and saying "please" and "thank you" are common courtesies that are learned. Be careful about overemphasizing table manners to the extent that they monopolize the mealtime, but learning how to ask that a dish be passed, or how to talk after swallowing, are helpful tools for developing sensitivity to other people.

Some children need more work on social skills than others. The child who gets in your face to talk, can't whisper in the library, or runs around wildly in the department store all have one thing in common: the need for training. Teaching children what's appropriate can be a daunting task, especially with children who are not naturally gifted with social grace. Your continued work pays off as you firmly and gently teach children how to navigate in all kinds of situations.

One mom said, "We're working on three things right now with our four-year-old: flush the toilet when you're done, take your plate off the table when you're excused from a meal, and saying thank you when someone gives you something." This mom is wise to choose a few things instead of bombarding her daughter with too much. Correcting kids in the area of social skills can be oppressive, so

you'll want to make it as positive as possible and teach the skills a few at a time.

The child who knows how to relate to others socially does better at making friends, accomplishing goals, and works better on a team. You might even start talking about the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Notice how many of those are relational qualities. Now's a good time to talk to your preschooler about how God works inside of a person to develop those qualities.

When a child develops sensitivity to social situations and begins to pick up social cues, it's often an indicator that the child can also pick up on internal cues provided by the Holy Spirit and the conscience. The internal promptings go a long way to help children increase sensitivity to others and to the Lord. You might say to your five-year-old, "I see that you went over and helped the baby when he was fussy. You didn't wait for me to tell you to do that. Something in your heart prompted you. Do you think that was the Holy Spirit, or do you think that was your conscience?" Of course, sometimes we don't know whether the inner prompting comes from the Holy Spirit or the conscience but we do know that it takes place in the heart, and that's an important lesson for children to learn. Internal motivation is important and your work now to help children pay attention to inner promptings can help develop it.

Another area that young children can work on now is seeing things that need to be done and doing them. This again requires sensitivity. You might encourage a child to go into the living room and look for problems and fix them. Maybe he'll find newspapers that need to go into the recy-

cling bin or dishes to bring to the kitchen. When kids learn to identify needs and respond to them, you'll want to encourage their progress. Of course, sometimes children may initiate to do something, not realizing what they are actually doing. The child who puts a dish in the dishwasher only to find out that the dishwasher contains clean dishes is trying to do something right. Be careful to affirm the initiative.

Sensitivity and self-control are excellent qualities that preschoolers start developing when parents set the stage for their growth. Look for ways to encourage them and the work you do now will have lasting results.

Help Your Child Make Friends

Some preschoolers are good at making friends and can find themselves totally engaged with a child they just met within minutes. In fact, many preschoolers are like magnets as they attract other children. Quite often they'll strike up a conversation with others, children or adults, with no intimidation or fear of being rejected. When approaching others, many preschoolers aren't worried about what the other person is thinking about them.

Other kids tend to be more shy and hesitant to meet new friends or enter into a conversation. Whether your child engages easily or has a harder time, you'll want to do some helpful training when it comes to social interaction. Children can learn about sensitivity to others and to the situation in order to pick up on the social cues evident around them.

Preschoolers learn a lot about social awareness from their parents so you might want to talk about what friendliness is and how you demonstrate it with others. Try not to focus so much on stranger danger that you instill fear in your child and create reluctance to speak to anyone. A child who can't communicate because he's too shy and

afraid will have trouble until those social skills improve. Once they learn how to master these skills they'll be able to practice and use them with discernment.

One of the ways to build friendships is to be cheerful and to greet others. Proverbs 17:22 states, "A cheerful heart is good medicine." Helping children to see the value of cheerfulness will help them go far in relationships with others. Another helpful verse for a preschooler may be Proverbs 12:25, "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up." You can build friendships with people by saying kind things and trying to encourage others. This is true in your home, with friends you already know, and even with new friends you're just trying to meet.

"How do you teach a shy child to be more outgoing?" One way is to practice in safe social settings with people your child knows. This will give your child more confidence and help him to be successful facing his challenges in relationship. Forcing your child to interact usually backfires, but encouragement often works well. You might discuss interactions before you go to the park, talk about questions to ask such as, "What's your name?" or "Would you like a turn?" as tools for beginning dialogue. After you return from the park, talk about what you saw. You might use others as an example by saying, "I saw that boy in the red shirt come over to you and say, 'Do you want to play?' That was a good question to ask to start a friendship." Praising your child for attempts encourages success, resulting in greater confidence over time.

"What if I have a child who is too friendly?" The child who never meets a stranger may be missing the filter necessary to discern a safe person from a dangerous one. You can step in and teach the appropriate skills to help deter-

mine what's appropriate and what's not. Take some time to explain about stranger danger to your child and help her learn when it might not be best to approach a stranger. For example, preschoolers can feel safe talking to other adults or kids if you're nearby. If a stranger approaches your preschooler when you're not close, then that may be an indication of a problem.

Play dates, church situations, preschool experiences, parties, babysitting co-ops, or simply going to the local fast food restaurant with a playground can provide good experiences for social interaction. Role-playing at home or in a safe setting where you can coach your child to develop new skills can also build confidence. For example, if your child approaches another child and that individual turns away, you might teach your child that this is a cue that the person doesn't want to be approached.

When a child turns and walks away, you can teach your preschooler that this may be a cue that the child doesn't want to play right now. By teaching your child to look for cues, you can help him to learn how to appropriately respond in each situation. You can also teach your child gracious responses he can make when he doesn't want to play. Once again, role-playing helps your child to actually see how each situation looks, helping to visually display social cues. This kind of experiential learning makes it easier for your child to picture real-life situations.

You might teach your child that just because a person walks away or isn't interested in what you're doing, doesn't necessarily mean that that person doesn't like you. This is a challenging lesson for some children to learn because they may take things personally. As your preschooler becomes more social and experiences more social cues,

personal offenses often reduce. Talking about them often helps children understand more about what's going on instead of jumping to conclusions.

A two-year-old tends to be self-centered and really doesn't care much about the social interaction taking place. A three-year-old just wants everyone to be his friend but often doesn't know how to make it happen. A four-year-old often has the social cues to begin conversations and start cooperative play. The five-year-old can often jump right into dialogue and interaction and can discuss disagreements or challenges that relationships bring. Wherever your child is on the social development scale, you can encourage sensitivity, compassion, cooperation, sharing, dialogue, and other successful relational skills to coach your child through the maze of interpersonal relationships.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines in shades of gray, creating a sense of movement and elegance. The number 30 is centered within this graphic.

30

Teach a Plan for Sibling Conflict

Sibling conflict reveals weaknesses in a child's heart. It may be things such as jealousy, selfishness, or anger. Or it may be habits of meanness, criticism, tattling, or boasting. Some children entertain thinking errors such as, "My parents love my sister more than me." Still other kids determine their self-worth by comparing themselves to others.

The good news is that you can use your home as a classroom to work on the heart and sibling harmony is a required course. Take time to determine what weaknesses your preschooler demonstrates when he's in conflict with his brother or sister. Then sit down with him and develop a plan to move forward. Be careful that you don't just focus on what not to do, but instead set your sight on a heart goal to replace the weakness.

For example, instead of jealousy, a child may need to learn how to rejoice in a sibling's strengths or accomplishments. Encouragement can replace criticism, and patience can ease angry reactions. Thinking errors can change from competition and comparison to an appreciation of strengths and gifts and an acknowledgment of the differ-

ences between kids.

Sibling conflict reveals character weaknesses. Once you identify the heart response your child needs, then you can use sibling interaction as practice sessions for forward progress. You'll have to watch the interaction between your children a bit more carefully and when you see an example of the child acting out, you can point it out or call the child out of the activity for a short dialogue. Take time to remind your child about the goal, what you saw, and determine a better response. Then send the child back in to practice. In the course of an hour you might pull the child out of the activity ten times to go over the new action plan. It's that practice that produces significant change in the patterns of interaction.

Conflict between children involves weaknesses in each child, usually different problems in each kid, so correcting both children at the same time is rarely helpful. It's usually best to pull one child out of the situation, do some coaching, and then send that child back in to practice. You might have a similar plan for another child and call her out of the activity to work on her response. The point here is that working with children independently is more effective than telling kids in a group to just "get along." By working with each child, you're able to develop a significant action plan in order to move things forward.

Look for ways to develop each child's uniqueness. Learn each one's love language, personality, and interests. This will help you interact with each child most effectively. When sibling conflict takes place, work with one child at a time and give that child a plan for dealing with the selfishness of the other.

One of the tools for helping children change is the Bi-

ble. A number of stories in the scriptures help children see themselves in the mirror of God's Word. Saul was jealous of David throughout the book of 1 Samuel. James and John wanted the best seat in Mark 10:35-44 where Jesus explained to them the value of being a servant.

The first case of sibling conflict in the Bible is quite instructive for preschoolers. Cain was angry with his brother and determined to look for revenge. God made a statement to Cain that can apply to any of our children. He confronted Cain in Genesis 4:6-7 and said the same thing that our children need to hear at times. "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Of course, Cain didn't do what's right and God had to further discipline him. Preschoolers are at that valuable developmental stage where, with training, their social skills can advance quickly. Their ability to speak, reason, and control emotions all comes together to develop skills for relational interaction. But they need help. Your continued work in this area will equip your preschooler to integrate foundational tools for relating.

Sometimes the sibling conflict takes place when a new baby comes along. If that's the case, look for ways to have individual time with your preschooler so that she doesn't think you've abandoned her for the baby. Babies naturally need more attention, and sometimes older kids resent this. By involving your child in the process of taking care of the baby, you can help her feel important. Simple tasks such as bringing you a diaper or helping to entertain the baby while you assemble what's needed will help your child feel

like she is growing into a new role as big sister.

Sometimes you have sibling rivalry between children who are close in age because they share similar interests, abilities, and even toys. Children who compete over the same items, activities, or friends sometimes become bitter rivals one moment and best of friends the next. You'll want to avoid a sense of comparison between your kids and develop workable relational plans that are simple enough for your child to put into practice.

It's important to have a plan for resolving conflict. In a family, kids can learn valuable skills such as acknowledging the other's feelings and apologizing when they have done something wrong. However, saying "I'm sorry" when it's not heartfelt may not be the best. Instead it might be better to say, "I was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

As a parent, it can be frustrating to deal with sibling conflict. Always remember these three points. First, sibling conflict reveals weaknesses in a child's heart. Second, kids need a plan for handling challenging relationships. And third, practice builds new patterns of relating. Your home is the classroom and you're the teacher. Sibling conflict isn't something to simply be tolerated as normal behavior. Your goal isn't simply to raise a normal child. Your goal is to help your child develop the skills that God wants for them to be successful in life.

Consider Schooling Options

Preschool isn't for all children, but many benefit from the structured learning it provides. Academics, socialization, and the ability to work in a classroom environment often help children develop in ways they might not at home. Of course, learning at home can often accomplish the same objectives and kids in that environment often benefit from being independent learners and enjoy the freedom of expanding their knowledge base in areas of their own interest. Both homeschooled children and their preschool counterparts grow socially as they interact with other kids in a variety of contexts.

If sending your child to a preschool seems best for your family, then you'll want to take some time to do the research to find one that meets your standards. It's important to examine the basics such as safety, cleanliness, and professional standards. You'll want to ask questions about the school's policy regarding sickness, teacher/student ratios, and teacher qualifications and experience.

The best preschools are those that provide a variety of hands-on activities that are appropriate for the age of the children attending each class. You might visit several pre-

schools in your search to find the right one for your child. There are many different methods, philosophies, and practices used so you'll need to find one that meshes with your idea of what a preschool should provide and one in which your child can thrive. Talk with other parents with children in preschools and see where they attend and where they feel comfortable. If you visit several schools and you don't find one you believe is suited for your child, do not settle for something mediocre, but instead, keep searching.

Some preschools emphasize structure with a clear schedule, directing children through group time, table time, and assignments throughout their learning experience. They may tend to do more worksheets, sit at tables, and use seatwork to simulate a child's future school environment and prepare them accordingly. Others provide less structure, emphasizing the initiative of the child, and use play as the best approach to discovery and learning.

A Christian preschool has the added benefit of integrating faith and the Bible into the daily interaction with children. Although you want to view yourself as the primary spiritual trainer of your child, it's helpful when other adults reinforce the values you're trying to communicate. After all, the Bible is the best tool for learning about life. Psalm 1:2-3 reminds us of the importance of God's Word, and what better time to establish good patterns than early in a child's life. "But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers." Integrating faith and scripture into a child's learning experience is a treasure and helps formulate healthy spiritual patterns for life.

Look for ways to enhance each piece of your child's growth, whether your child attends a preschool or not. Learning numbers, letters, shapes, and colors is important but so is learning how to solve problems, how things work, and the ability to tell a story. You'll also want to teach self-help skills so that a child learns how to take care of things, put things away when done, and work independently.

Formal training at home or in a preschool helps children learn more than reading skills and math facts. Kids learn how to follow instructions, interact graciously with others, and strategies for dealing with their own frustration. Children often learn through practice, so look for ways to teach life skills that will add to your child's growth and development.

Keep in mind that your excitement about learning is contagious. If you take interest in the picture your child created at school or delight that he has now mastered the ability to recognize capital letters, you're teaching an important lesson about the value of education. After all, life isn't all about having fun. Sometimes it's hard work, but there's a certain sense of accomplishment that's enjoyed when we reach a goal or master an idea or skill.

One of the joys of teaching is the privilege of seeing the "light bulb moments" as your child suddenly learns something for the first time or is able to figure out the answer to a question independently. You can help your child discover and learn by providing a variety of experiences even if your child is involved in some form of education outside the home. Household chores and activities are learning experiences, both academically and for the strengthening of character. Furthermore, many academic lessons can take place as you're living life. You can turn the learning of the

ABC's into a fun activity as you drive along the road. Looking at road signs to find the letter of the day can be a great activity to make learning fun and keep the child occupied at the same time.

As you buy groceries you might have your child help look for certain items you need to buy. If you need multiple quantities of something, have the child help count them with you. The child who is exposed to education in this way usually becomes very inquisitive and enjoys learning much more. Making teaching a part of your everyday life helps the child to experience the importance of education and of making learning a lifelong process.

The Challenge of Separation

“Noooo! I don’t want to go.” Charlie gripped Mom’s skirt and hid behind her as she tried to pull him forward.

“You’re going to be fine. This is Sunday School. You’ll like it.”

“No. I want to stay with you.”

As Mom pried her four-year-old’s hands off her and handed him to Mrs. Carlson, he cried and put out his arms in one last plea.

Mom left with that pit in her stomach. A few minutes later a friend reported, “I just dropped Brie off and Charlie was doing fine. He’s playing with puzzles at the table with another friend.”

Separation anxiety is a common stage most children go through between eight and twelve months of age but it doesn’t necessarily go away for good and that point. Trouble separating may return at times of stress in a child’s life and can come from a number of factors: a different environment, a child’s difficulty with transition, strong attachment to the parent, stress about other areas of life, fears, lack of confidence, and sometimes even a demandingness on the

part of the child. The good news is that a preschooler can develop new ways of coping that were unavailable at an earlier age.

It's important to handle the separation of an unwilling child carefully to maximize independence training while caring for a child's emotions at the same time. Two beliefs in a child's heart will help with the separation process: the recognition that you will return and the realization that the child can enjoy some fun time without you. As with most fears, taking small steps of risk in a safe, loving environment is the best approach. Although some children have a hard time separating, most kids benefit from the process and develop a greater confidence that they can handle new situations. Many need a bit of persuasion to move to the next level of their personal growth.

Most preschoolers do best with advanced information and practice. Let your child know ahead of time that you'll be leaving or that the child is going to be dropped off. Casual comments ahead will help prepare your child emotionally. Then when it's time to leave, make it quick and simple. Don't just sneak away, but say goodbye and then leave quickly. Most children are fine after a few minutes. However, if you come back or check on them, you can complicate the process, reigniting the challenge of being away from you.

When you inform caretakers about your child's care and make your exit swiftly, the child has a chance to demonstrate to you and to himself that he can do fine without Mom or Dad having to be constantly in sight. When you leave with confidence, you communicate that you believe that he will do well in your absence. Even if you stay at

home with your child, you can plan a time for him to be left with another adult to help build greater independence. You might want to join a gym, attend a Bible study, or join a playgroup where parents take turns watching each other's children.

Remember that separation anxiety is a natural stage of development. Most children go through two or three phases of separation issues as they develop. They need to go through these stages in order to help them grow and learn about themselves and new environments.

A child who struggles with the process may benefit from taking something familiar along as a reminder of home. In this case, a favorite toy, a picture of the family or pet, or a comfort item may help. If you have a child who doesn't adjust when being left consistently with the same caretaker, your child may just need more time before encouraging this stage of development.

Some children have such strong reactions to separation that they need a slower, deliberate plan for progress. Some of these children are so attached to Mom that they have a hard time being left alone with Dad, let alone someone unfamiliar. In that case, you'll want to plan short outings away, maybe even 15 minutes at a time, when you explain in advance that you're going to run an errand and you'll be back soon. Leaving your child in the capable hands of a loving adult while you're gone helps to increase the ability to separate more effectively over time.

The separation process works best when the parent and the caretaker work together to ease the transition. When possible you might prepare the teacher or babysitter by asking her to take your child and get the child involved in something while you say goodbye and exit.

In some situations the caretaker may be quite busy and unable to dedicate significant time to your child. Most children do fine and the busyness of the environment aids in the distraction process. Children have an amazing way of adapting.

However, if your child has persistent separation issues, you might want to arrange in advance for an assistant to be available or ask that a friend of yours help for a bit to ease the transition. Those who work with preschoolers know that separation is a common problem and they're typically quite capable of helping your child adjust. Keep in mind that comfort in the separation process takes time to develop, so give your child many opportunities to practice before you choose a different alternative.

You may also find it helpful to practice the process of separating at home. Julie's daughter had a hard time going to daycare. She cried every morning, which of course broke Mom's heart. Julie found that "playing daycare" at home helped her daughter become more accustomed to the idea and more relaxed about the transition. Preschoolers like games that imitate the real world. They like to be the mommy or daddy and play house. By being the mommy and dropping the doll off at daycare, then returning to retrieve the doll later, separating may become more routine.

Your gentle but firm approach models what God does for us and our fears. He wants us to learn to trust him and allows us opportunities to practice that trust. Psalm 27:5-6 describes the confidence that we have when we learn how to trust God more in our lives. "For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who sur-

round me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD." That psalm illustrates the confidence one can have when relying on the Lord. Your preschooler will learn how to trust in new ways while working through the separation.

A child learns in family life what trust is all about. But trust doesn't always involve safety. Sometimes trust involves risk. As you give your child opportunities to trust you even when you leave for a bit and return, he grows in a new area of maturity that will help him develop a greater confidence in you and in the God he is learning more about.

What to Do about Fear

Fear is an emotion that comes from uncertainty and a feeling of not being in control, or comes from a perception of danger. Some fears are helpful while others are not. Helping your preschooler discern the difference is important and can be a challenge at times.

Some kids have very little fear at all. They'll wander off, talk to a perfect stranger, or attempt death-defying feats that cause parents to wonder if their kids will live to see their adult years. Others seem to be fearful of many things, unable to try new activities, are shy around people they don't know well, or are afraid of dogs, water, or bugs. Here are some suggestions to help your child increase or decrease fear.

Teaching fear is important in some situations, especially where danger is involved. Children need to be careful about crossing the street, cautious of strangers, and avoid the dog that might bite. In these instances, a healthy dose of fear is necessary for protection. The challenge is that the child often doesn't have enough life experience to determine what to fear, what to respect, and what to embrace.

Of course, when teaching your child to be careful, the

goal is to stop short of instilling so much fear that your child doesn't want to venture out at all. For example, the mother who jumps up, gasps, and yells "Oh, no," and grabs a child who just fell onto the floor encourages that child to respond differently than the mother who waits to see if the child is hurt before acting. Most children will get themselves up off the floor, dust off, and keep on going unless they are seriously hurt, but if parents overreact in every situation, the child learns to become more fearful than the situation warrants. It's important to teach children to respect certain dangers while teaching them to be independent problem-solvers at the same time.

Some parents themselves tend to be fearful that their children may get hurt. Those parents tend to reflect their own fear in their continual comments. Cheryl realized this was true and said, "I don't like to see my son get hurt but I realized that I was overemphasizing safety and wasn't encouraging him to have fun. I changed what I said at the park to be more affirming of him. When I saw him taking a risk that made me feel uncomfortable I asked, 'Do you feel safe?' That helped him realize that he was in one of those situations where he might get hurt and he could decide whether he wanted to proceed or not." Obviously some children take foolish risks and need parental intervention. But many other situations can be used for developing confidence.

Rules often help the child who isn't as cautious as you'd like. For example, "When you cross a street or parking lot, you'll always hold the hand of an adult." "When we're in a store or a crowd, you must always stay where I can see you and you can see me." "When we're in the car you must always wear your seat belt." These are safety issues that are

simple enough to enforce, and your consistency will teach valuable lessons that will keep your child safe.

When dealing with a child who is overly fearful, keep this formula in mind. Fears are overcome with small steps of risk over time. Sometimes just an explanation as to what to expect can help a preschooler get through the situation with less anxiety. The best policy is to be honest with the child about what's to come and help prepare for the experience ahead of time.

Giving your child some control in a fearful situation can be helpful. If your preschooler is afraid of the dark, take a trip to the store together to pick out a nightlight. Allow your child to turn the nightlight on each night and then pray together for a peaceful night sleep.

Quite often, fear comes from the unknown. Once the child understands what to expect, it often helps calm the fear. Answering questions the child may have will help him to think it through. Sometimes role-playing helps a child anticipate what the situation will look like.

It's important to remember that, to your child, the fear is real, whether or not you think it's warranted. Some fears are overcome by facing them. Others require a change of thinking. If a child continually talks about a fear, it may be best at some point to refuse to dialogue. After all, the dialogue sometimes feeds the fears. Sometimes the solution is that the child needs to think about something else. You might say, "This is one of those times when your continual talking about this is making the problem worse. So, you need to stop and talk about something different."

With loving guidance you can teach your child about healthy fear on the one hand, and about trusting that everything will be fine on the other. Your confident calmness

in life can go a long way to communicate the wise handling of emotion. If your anger, fear, or anxiety keeps you on edge, you'll want to learn more about peace in your own heart. Your child will learn to model emotions based in part on watching you interact with your own feelings.

John 14:27 says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Peace is your calling. Even when life situations tempt you to lose your emotional balance, remember that you can trust the Lord in every situation. God is with you and has empowered you, and you can accomplish the task or bring about a solution. Learn to trust God in that process when things aren't resolved, not just when everything is fine. Your children will benefit greatly from your ability to confidently trust the Lord in your life and you'll then be able to teach your child to handle fears in a godly way.

The Power of Encouragement

Preschoolers love encouragement and you can use it to touch them on a heart level. Those who use a simple behavior modification approach also use encouragement, but they do it in a way that's less effective. If you'll learn a few simple principles for offering praise to your child, you can make a significant impact on the heart.

When offering words of affirmation to your child, focus on heart qualities rather than simply praising behavior. Instead of saying, "You finished cleaning up the stuffed animals. You can have a snack now," you might say, "You are a good organizer. The way you cleaned up those stuffed animals says some important things about you." Or, instead of saying, "You did a good job making your bed. You can go outside now," you might say, "Your bed looks good. It's fun to watch you grow up. I'm sure you feel good inside when you do something responsible like that." Instead of focusing on rewards, use your encouragement to focus on heart qualities your child is developing. By drawing attention to the heart and to maturity, children see that their behavior isn't designed simply to please others. It's a statement of who they are.

Furthermore, when correcting a child, use your words to amplify what you want your child to do next time instead of simply focusing on what the child did wrong. Look for ways to state instructions in a positive way. For example, you might say, "Use your walking feet" instead of "Don't run." Preschoolers respond much better to positively stated commands than they do to negative ones. When commands are stated in a positive way, the child knows what to do instead of wondering, "Okay. I did something wrong. What should I do now?"

Instead of saying, "Cut it out. You're being annoying. You're bothering me. Stop doing that," try saying something like, "Remember to manage your energy," or, "It looks like you need to go sit down for a bit and think of something different to do so that you're not annoying others." It's surprising how many parents spend their time focused on what the child should not do when they could be drawing attention to what the child could do instead.

Your positive words to your child help provide internal affirmation. When you say, "I'm glad you're my son," or "I enjoy spending time with you," or "We sure work well as a team together," your child experiences something deep in the heart. That sense of affirmation you give to your child is the same one that we experience from God on a regular basis.

2 Corinthians 1:20-22 says, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

When we are God's children he gives us a sense of affirmation that we are his. He's put the Holy Spirit in our hearts as a deposit of what's to come. That sense of affirmation and belonging is a treasure and something that every heart needs. As you love your kids and encourage them in their relationship with you, you're meeting an inner need that previews God's love and affirmation that they'll eventually learn to cherish as well.

It's interesting that some children gravitate toward negative attention in their lives. They act out because it gives them the attention that they so need. This can happen for a number of reasons. Sometimes the child isn't getting enough encouragement on the positive side, or other times the child enjoys the negative attention for various reasons. No matter what the cause, the solution is often the same. These children need practice doing what's right and receiving positive attention for doing the right thing. You may want to practice giving your child instructions and then offering encouraging words and appreciation for being a helper or for looking for what needs to be done and doing it. The bad behavior usually begins to fade and the good behavior becomes more prevalent.

Although children may resist at times, it's best to require that they help out and participate as part of your family. For example, when you're cleaning the house, you might give your preschooler a dust cloth and some instructions of how to use it. When the child completes the task, even if it's not perfect, offer encouraging words. Remember that you aren't looking for perfection. Instead, you're looking for approximately right behavior. If you offer praise along the way, kids continue to grow in their ability to accomplish more and more with greater skill. As children get

older, you can increase the difficulty and expect them to complete tasks more thoroughly.

One of your goals is to build internal motivation in your child. The children who only do chores in order to get the verbal praise fall short when no one is around to offer it. You might say to a child, "I can tell you do things because it's the right thing to do and not just because you want a reward or a statement from me. That's a sign of maturity."

Keep a coaching attitude in mind as you interact with your child every day. You aren't adversaries. You're on the same team. Even when you have to correct, if you'll keep the coaching attitude in place, your positive sense of encouragement can go a long way to strengthen your child's growth and maturity.

Children who live with criticism learn to be cynical and untrusting. Encouragement helps preschoolers know that they are headed in the right direction and that someone notices forward progress. Offer praise and encouragement generously.

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Make Mealtimes Special

One of the signs of a successful family is that they enjoy meals together. There's something about sitting around a table and enjoying conversation that draws people close. As the early church was just getting started, the believers enjoyed their newfound relationships by eating together. Acts 2:46 says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Relationships grow when people fellowship around food. The same thing takes place in healthy families, even those with young children.

We live in a busy world and many families view preparing meals, serving them, and cleaning up as chores. Getting kids fed seems to be a step toward more important things. Take a moment and consider how you might use mealtimes to strengthen your family. The challenge takes place when kids don't want to cooperate. Sometimes they don't want to eat when we do, or they don't like what you've prepared. Kids bicker with each other or demonstrate selfishness around the table and ruin what might otherwise have been a pleasant experience. It seems like the dream of enjoying a meal is shattered by the reality

of actually living with kids. Here are some ideas that may help you.

First, plan the food element of the meal. Look for ways to balance what kids like with what they need. Keep both desire and nutrition in mind as you plan your menu. You might take suggestions from kids but usually that results in someone not getting exactly what they want. You're not a short-order cook trying to make everyone's favorite meal. So, it may be good to take a wish list but communicate that you'll consider everyone's ideas over time, not at a particular meal.

Next, plan the social component of the meal. Bring stories, riddles, read a chapter of a book, teach a lesson in a creative way, or show an interesting picture. Use the time together to encourage relationship, realizing that an activity or story often makes the food taste better. Remember that it was at a meal that Jesus in John 13:12-17 taught about servanthood by washing the disciples' feet. In fact, Jesus was a master at using food and mealtimes to teach. Zacchaeus committed himself to Christ during a meal (Luke 19:8). The disciples and the multitudes learned about Jesus' miraculous power at a meal as he fed the people with a little boy's lunch (Matthew 14:19).

When it's time for dinner, everyone needs to come to the table. If a child says, "I'm not hungry," you have an opportunity to teach that mealtimes aren't only for eating. They're also for building relationship. So hunger isn't a prerequisite for dinnertime. Turn off the television, don't answer the phone, and don't allow toys at the table, all of which distract from relationship building. Sitting at the table is much preferred to eating in the family room for the majority of the family's meals.

Be thoughtful about how you arrange the seating at your table. The traditional idea of Dad at one end and Mom at the other often doesn't work in a real family. It's often best to have kids separated by parents and parents closer to the center of the table to assist children throughout the meal, both with the food and with behavior.

Teach children to wait when they come to the table before they start touching the food. Allowing everyone to arrive at the table and praying before you begin is not only good manners, but it reveals that the social component of the meal is important as well. Some children are more quiet while others tend to dominate the discussion. Try to draw others out. Use questions to involve all family members in the dialogue, and teach children how to take turns talking and listening.

Manners are important, but if you emphasize them too much at mealtime you'll lose any ability to enjoy the meal. Policing how kids eat with their mouths open or reach across the table or requiring "please" and "thank you" is important but don't let it get out of hand. Use a gentle reminder technique that allows manners to take a back seat to the enjoyable time you're having. When a child wants something from another part of the table they can learn the three-step plan. First, say the person's name, then say, "Would you please," and then say what you'd like. With practice, preschoolers can learn these simple and valuable social skills.

When children act out at the table, give a warning and if that doesn't work, then have the child leave the room and sit out in the hall or on the floor just outside the room. Explain that the mealtime is a pleasant time, and bickering, complaining, and whining aren't appropriate. It's impor-

tant, however, to tolerate a bit of rowdiness as part of the fun. Many a dramatic mealtime is remembered long after the fact, so you might want to pause the eating so that your child can reenact the drama created earlier in the day, tell a story, or sing a new song. Don't be afraid to stretch the line that you might normally consider wild if the passion is contributing to a good time.

Be careful to avoid making mealtimes discipline times. Some parents use dinner to explain to Dad all the problems experienced during the day. It's best to handle those issues after the meal when necessary and keep the mealtime positive. Furthermore, some parents over-emphasize nutrition, and consequently eliminate a nutritious social experience. Getting kids to make healthy food choices is addressed in the next chapter. For now, make sure that you try to keep the social interaction healthy.

Making an occasional meal special by using party plates or decorating the table with items the children have made can help to make mealtimes fun for everyone. Try a winter "picnic" on the living room floor using a tablecloth, everyone sitting on the floor, and roasting hot dogs over the fireplace. You might even add some marshmallows for dessert to extend the special time. Mealtimes don't have to be boring and uninviting. You can spice them up occasionally to add to the joy of your family's special bond.

After the meal it's helpful to teach children at an early age to help clean up. At least preschoolers can learn to move their plate, silverware, and cup to the counter. At times it's also helpful to have them wash or dry dishes and help put food away or sweep up under the table. Helping to clean up after a meal is a polite response and acknowledges the hard work required to put the meal together.

Approach mealtimes with a goal to encourage family unity and build a sense of camaraderie. You likely won't be able to accomplish your goal at every meal because of bad attitudes, busyness, or other issues, but if you try to move in that direction you'll experience some great times together as a family.

Healthy Eating without a Battle

Children are all different and most have strong opinions when it comes to food choices. Some kids consider a balanced diet alternating between pizza and macaroni and cheese. The good news with preschoolers is you still have most of the control over the choices available. Children become familiar with foods they see at home. If you don't buy cookies often, then your children won't be battling for them everyday.

As parents, you know the importance of good nutrition for a healthy body and the sooner kids start, the better. But how do you get kids to eat a balanced diet? That's not an easy question today with all the packaged and pre-cooked foods that are so tasty, but often lack nutritional value. Here are a few suggestions.

Consider your own attitudes and preferences and determine to pass on only the helpful ones. If parents expect children to not like vegetables, then your expectations may be fulfilled. But if you keep an open mind, and enjoy a variety in front of your kids, they will likely follow suit.

Preschoolers like to explore new things and love to pretend, so be creative in the way you introduce new foods.

Jonathan loved playing with and learning about dinosaurs so when he saw the raw broccoli put out for dinner, he became a brachiosaurus and gobbled up “the trees.” Raw vegetables tend to be more appealing than cooked, so consider them in the snack choices you offer as well.

Preschoolers need to eat approximately six times a day, usually about two hours apart. Three meals and three snacks can fill out the menu. If all of the options are healthy, then you have less to worry about. Snacks might include apples with peanut butter, cheese and crackers, carrot sticks, cucumbers, or even frozen peas. Meals should contain some protein and carbohydrates, but if a child ate a banana for snack and cauliflower at lunch, then eating the peas for dinner may not be as important. Looking at a whole day, or a series of days can offer the balance needed in a preschoolers diet.

The key is to provide healthy choices. Most kids will gravitate toward cookies and chips when given a chance. If those aren't an option except on special occasions, then kids tend to eat more healthy foods. Look for ways to offer a variety of experiences for children when they're young. Exposing kids to different foods expands their knowledge and experience, whether they eat much of those foods or not. You'll likely be surprised when your child gravitates toward a new vegetable or a dish prepared in a different way. A good strategy is to introduce different foods often and repeatedly so that your preschooler has exposure to many choices instead of just a limited few items. Forcing a child to try something new is typically less effective than eating it yourself without a word. Preschoolers love to imitate, so set a good example and let your child decide when to follow.

If your child refuses a food, it doesn't mean that the food needs to disappear forever. Many times children haven't yet developed a taste for strong flavors and you might want to try various sauces or seasoning. Don't take it personally, however, when kids don't like what you've prepared. Sometimes, children need a chance to adjust to the flavors and as they grow their taste buds change to enjoy other foods.

An interesting Bible story to tell kids takes place in Numbers 11:1-3. The Israelites complained to God about the manna they had to eat. God disciplined them with fire, and some of the people died. The point is that complaining about food is a heart issue. It often communicates selfishness and a lack of gratefulness, a great lesson for kids to understand.

Some parents turn mealtimes into a battle that they win only at great cost. It's been said that more meals are ruined at the table than at the stove. Kids go through growth spurts and need more food at some times than others. In fact, some kids don't need as much food at certain times so when parents require kids to eat everything on their plates, they're often doing more harm than good. Hunger should be the motivation to eat and children need to learn that fullness is the sign to stop eating. It's hard for parents to be the gauge of such things, so teach your children to read these signals for themselves.

Children have preferences just like adults. There are likely some vegetables or dishes that you wouldn't choose. Allowing children a bit of freedom in this area is okay, especially if all the options are nutritious.

When kids don't want to eat or they dawdle at a mealtime, you don't have to move into sergeant mode. Just

announce that this meal will be over in five minutes and the next eating time is a snack in two hours. If kids don't eat, just end the meal. Remember, at times kids actually don't need to eat as much so skipping a meal isn't really a problem. But it *is* a problem when whining and complaining take place afterwards. That's not a meal issue. That's a discipline problem and you can handle that by firmly requiring the child to stop complaining and find something else to do. If more action is required, you'll find ideas about correction elsewhere in this book. The point is that children learn that eating times are set, and that begging between those times and negotiating at meals are not acceptable.

Sometimes making a simple game out of mealtime or snack is helpful. This doesn't mean that you need to play a game at every meal, but how you present food can make a difference. You might try a "bunny buffet," introducing several salad items that a young child can easily manage to eat. Making the presentation something different than the usual salad meal can sometimes encourage your child's curiosity to try a new food. The fruit that you can't seem to get your child to try may be more inviting when cut to look like a "mouse" or a "cat."

Try to avoid using food as a reward for doing something good or behaving in an acceptable way. Sometimes children learn to view food as an incentive for accomplishment or as a comforting reward following a difficult task. The last thing you want to do is to contribute to an eating disorder by viewing food as anything but the nourishment it was intended to be.

The Challenge of Day and Night Potty Training

Potty training involves two things: muscle control and motivation. Although there is little you can do with the first, there's a lot you can do with the second.

Although you may hear of friends and neighbors who potty train their kids when they're one year old or do it in a day, beware of the promises. Those things work for a few, but most parents and children have a bit more of a challenge with the process. Children develop at different rates. In order to be potty-trained, children must have the ability to control their muscles. This isn't just about willpower. It's about physical development. For some, this happens early and for others it happens later. Most young preschoolers are able to control their bladders during the day but many are still wearing pull-ups at night.

As your child develops the ability you'll want to be ready with the motivation. A sticker chart when your child uses the toilet can be helpful, with a simple reward coming after three or four times of success. Some parents provide a reward when the child can stay dry all day, only using the toilet.

Although you may use a chart or some kind of incentive, remember that the biggest motivation for young children is the internal satisfaction of knowing that maturity is happening and that they are developing a significant self-help skill. This is an important lesson parents must learn as they help their children throughout life. External motivations aren't as important as the internal ones. Do what you can to reinforce the internal motivation and you'll strengthen your children on a heart level.

Any method you use should be accompanied by lots of praise. When the child is potty training she's often trying to please you. When praise is forthcoming, your child wants to continue the process because she knows what will follow. Praise makes for much quicker success. Use your praise to focus on the child's accomplishment rather than overemphasizing your pleasure. It's good for kids to know that they please their parents but it's also important for them to value the joy of accomplishing a goal or making a wise choice.

Making potty training a relaxed learning experience will lead to quicker success than worrying or hurrying the process. The old adage of "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again" is a helpful way to look at it. For some, it takes time. Some kids get so excited about their activity that they wait too long, or they minimize the small cues given by the body until the urgency sends them running. All of this is part of a learning process and your gentle encouragement plays an important role both now and for future learning experiences.

One of the best indicators that your child is ready for potty training is interest. "Would you like to try?" is the best way to get things started. And although the child may not

produce any results those first few times, the ideas begin the process. Some kids, however, need a bit more encouragement. So, take it one step at a time.

The first goal is to get your child to urinate in the toilet, and then later you'll work on bowel movements and nighttime. If you believe your child has the muscle control but just isn't motivated then you may want to have special reading times on the toilet. Potty training requires that the child learn by experience, so you'll want to provide opportunity for success and give encouragement when something good actually happens. You can encourage the opportunities by giving your child plenty of liquids and making regular trips to the bathroom. A child seat or small potty-chair may also help. Sometimes little boys like to do target practice with two or three Cheerios in the toilet.

As you proceed, remember to allow for the possibility that your child may not be quite ready for potty training. A child needs to be emotionally ready as well as physically ready. Boys tend to be a bit slower than girls in starting the process, but boys also tend to train in less time than girls. Most children are successful in bladder control before they are successful at bowel control. If you try to potty train your child and you're not yet successful, let it slide for a few weeks and try again when your child may be more ready.

Remember that even children who are potty trained still have accidents from time to time. These may happen when they enter a new situation, when times are stressful, when parents are having difficulty, or just when the child gets too busy playing to make it to the bathroom in time. The accident is usually embarrassing for the child already, so making a big deal about it isn't helpful. Disgust,

anger, and intensity hinder the process. Remember that the training is just as important as the result. You're teaching your child how to learn and positive ways to respond to mistakes.

Your attitude when a child has an accident is important so plan your response well. "Oops. We have a problem. Let's go solve it," communicates that we have a plan for handling this and any other challenges that may come along. When you leave the house, be prepared with an extra change of clothes. Be aware of where the closest bathroom is and give your child ample opportunities to use it. These tricks will help you and your child to be more relaxed and able to handle the unexpected challenges.

Handling daytime toilet issues is a major accomplishment. Nighttime is yet another challenge. Bedwetting is common for preschoolers and many children don't actually develop significant control during the night until six or seven years of age. To help, you might reduce fluid intake before bed and maybe even wake your child to go to the bathroom later in the evening before you go to sleep. Many preschoolers continue to wear pull-ups at bedtime until they are dry for a significant length of time. When your child has an accident, don't get upset. Just clean it up as part of the learning experience and go on.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to your child is patience in the learning process and grace when making mistakes. Galatians 6:9 gives some helpful advice that can give you internal strength. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Hang in there. This stage won't last forever. Do what you can to keep the process going and be patient as you move forward.

Outgrowing Immature Habits

Kids can develop irritating habits and some of them are downright embarrassing. It's sometimes hard to know how to respond without feeling exasperated. Some bad habits are just annoying. Repetitive acts like twirling hair, fidgeting, or rocking can get on a parent's nerves over time. Other habits tend to generate fear in parents because of their potential harmful effects; teeth grinding and thumb sucking are common examples. And still other habits are embarrassing because they aren't socially appropriate like nose picking or biting fingernails.

As you try to change the unwanted behavior or break the habit, it may be helpful to understand the cause. Most of these self-soothing strategies increase when kids are stressed, bored, tired, unhappy, insecure, or frustrated. Some kids engage in comfort strategies when they're trying to fall asleep or the habit may be a way of calming down in the midst of a stressful situation.

Most of the time children simply grow out of these habits as they mature, so you may want to just ignore it or express simple disapproval without drawing much attention to the problem. Negative attention such as yelling,

embarrassment, and shame isn't helpful and often adds additional problems to a difficult situation. You may have to set limits or do some teaching to cope with the problem until the child makes the appropriate changes.

One of the more common concerns parents have is thumb or finger sucking. Many babies outgrow the need to suck by their first birthday but sometimes the habit continues on well into the preschool years. Even then, many children give up the habit because of peer pressure or the connection to being a baby. Sucking is a self-soothing strategy and many kids use it at bedtime to get to sleep.

Comfort is a heart issue. Even adults resort to less-than-helpful strategies to obtain the comfort they so long for, resorting to unhelpful strategies such as over-eating, self-medicating, or shopping. The ultimate solution for any person, young or old, is to learn to find comfort in God. Psalm 121:2 describes the importance of finding help in the Lord. "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." Although it will likely be hard for you to convince your child to give up thumb sucking for God's comfort, you can certainly set good patterns now that the child will eventually grow into.

To encourage a child to stop sucking on fingers or a thumb you might start with a few basic strategies. In fact, you can use this approach with most of the challenging habits children develop. If you find you need more help then you can develop a specific plan involving motivation and correction, but these ideas used for a concentrated period of time usually produce the desired results.

Gentle reminders and praise for success go a long way. You might develop a signal with your child that simply says, "Think about it," to draw attention to the unwanted habit

and help children move back to their plan for change. Recognizing progress is motivating by saying something like, "I see that you're letting your fingernails grow out. They are looking nice." Appealing to the child's desire for maturity is also helpful by saying something such as, "You're almost four years old now. I think you'll be giving up this habit soon because you're growing up."

If your child tends to engage in the habit because of boredom it's often helpful to keep active so that hands are busy and the mind is distracted. Physical exercise and outdoor play often reduce the need for self-soothing strategies.

If you have concerns and aren't seeing progress you might want to consult your pediatrician. A pediatric dentist, for example, may offer some additional solutions for teeth grinding or thumb sucking that involve a device worn in the mouth for a time, especially at night. Most dentists, however, don't take any action until a child's permanent teeth begin to come in and that usually takes place around six or seven years of age.

Nose picking is particularly aggravating to parents because it is socially unacceptable. Children will need some teaching to understand that this kind of behavior isn't appropriate in public. Furthermore, sickness is more common because of the passing of germs. Using a tissue or going to the bathroom to take care of the problem can be part of the solution. If the nose-picking has caused a bloody nose or aggravated the lining of the nose then it's often soothing and helpful to use a nose ointment or jelly to allow healing and discourage the use of fingers in the nose.

Many bad habits are very difficult to break until the child becomes willing to let it go. In some cases the child just loses interest but in many cases the habit is replaced

by something better. For example, the little girl who bites her nails may be willing to give it up because of the benefit she receives from a manicure. Instead of directly confronting, you might try gently redirecting your child to do something different. You might say, "I know you're trying to stop sucking your fingers. Instead, you may want to hold onto your stuffed animal."

If you look at it from a heart perspective you'll understand how change actually takes place. Comfort is a need of the heart. To overcome the unwanted behavior, the child will need something stronger in the heart than the habit. It might be a conviction that the habit is not good, a desire to grow up, or a vision for something better. Convictions, desires, and vision are all in the heart and are great tools for change on any level. In fact, some kind of heart solution will provide a strong foundation before you use a reward system. External rewards may be helpful for removing bad habits but they only work if the child wants to change. Otherwise you end up with temporary change to get the reward and miss out on the lasting change you desire.

If your child engages in a habit because of stress you might want to explore other alternatives in those situations. Try to find out what's creating the stress and look for ways to talk about it. It's surprising to see how much peace children can receive by talking about a particular problem.

Remember that getting the child involved in the solution is the best approach. Look for ways to transfer the responsibility to the child. By getting the child to own the problem, exploring solutions that are unique to that child, and then coaching the child forward you'll make the fastest progress.

Teach Your Child about Sex

Setting good patterns of thinking and behavior in regards to sexual identity and understanding of biology starts in the preschool years. Although specific discussions about intercourse will come later in the child's development, now is the time to talk about gender differences, names for body parts, privacy, and appropriate touching. As you have open conversations with your child about these issues you'll set the stage for healthy interactions later regarding sexual purity.

Using appropriate names for body parts is important because it demonstrates your willingness to be open and straightforward. Preschoolers benefit from knowing words like "penis," "vagina," and "breasts," for example. Using other names for these body parts isn't helpful and just opens the door for them to embrace more vulgar terminology later. Stick with their proper names and you'll save yourself some challenges later on. Of course kids also need to learn that those words are private and we don't talk about private body parts with friends.

It's usually around four years old that a preschooler develops a sense of privacy and may want to dress behind

closed doors or have the door shut when sitting on the toilet. That's normal and healthy and if your child hasn't developed that desire you might want to encourage it in order to teach the importance of privacy. You might say, "Mommy is going to get dressed now so I'm going to shut my door. You can go get dressed too." Or, "I'm going to shut your door while you use the bathroom." Teaching privacy is important because it helps children understand that there are some things best kept to self instead of talked about or shown to others.

If you do happen to catch your child acting out in curiosity by exploring the baby's genitals, playing show-and-tell with a friend, or talking about private things inappropriately, don't panic. Simply take a firm approach that makes it clear that those kinds of behaviors are inappropriate. Furthermore, you can prepare your preschooler against sexual abuse by teaching about touching. You might say, "No one should touch your private parts except a doctor. If someone else tries to touch you, you'll want to report that to me right away. That includes other family members, friends, or people in charge of taking care of you."

Some children engage in self-satisfying stimulation. They gain pleasure or comfort by touching their own genitals. Although not wrong, it can be irritating to others if done while others are around and it can become a preoccupation in some children. If that's the case, then you'll want to balance a healthy view of sexuality with firm limits to try to extinguish the behavior. Busyness, lots of physical activity, and minimizing alone time all help to reduce self-gratifying sexual touching.

You'll want to do some important teaching during the preschool years. Most of the conversations you have with

your child will happen spontaneously because life provides the opportunities. If you're blessed to have a girl and a boy in your home or you're babysitting or getting ready to have a baby, you'll likely be able to do some in-life teaching. It's often best, however, to sit down and read an age-appropriate book together that shows drawings of the differences between boys and girls, giving you an opportunity to do some explaining.

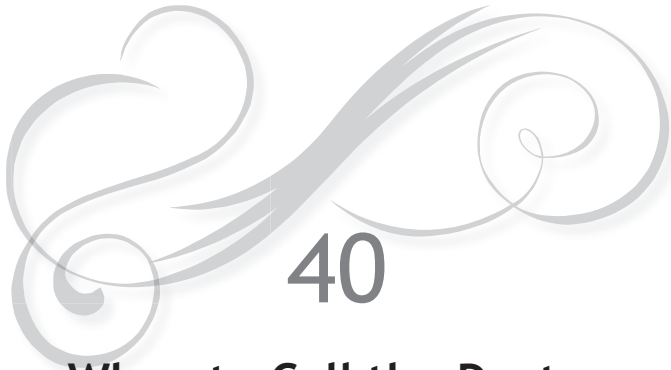
You might even talk about how God created men and women in the beginning of the world. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Not only can you introduce the new vocabulary words of "male" and "female," but you can also talk about how God as our creator designed the differences intentionally.

It's often during the preschool years that you'll have opportunity to talk about pregnancy and birth. A baby growing inside the mom of a person or an animal makes for an interesting science lesson. Some children are quite inquisitive and have a lot of questions. Answer the questions to the level of the child's maturity. If pressed about how the baby got there, you can talk about how a piece from the mom and a piece from the dad come together to make a baby. You don't have to go into specifics about sex at this point in order to answer the question. In fact, teaching children about intercourse is best left to later elementary years when they can understand it more fully.

If it doesn't come up in natural conversation, you'll want to create opportunities to talk about gender and the biological differences between boys and girls. It's usually not helpful to stereotype by saying that boys play with trucks and girls play with dolls. In fact, it's often helpful to

encourage boys and girls to explore a variety of interests. That's not a problem. But you'll want to help children gain a sexual identity by describing how boys turn into men and often fathers, and girls turn into women and often mothers.

If you don't have both a dad and a mom living in your home, you'll want to help your child have a healthy understanding of manliness and womanhood. Both are important. Even if two parents are living in the home, talks about sexually related issues can take place from either parent and are most effective when both parents participate. You want to communicate to your child that you're comfortable talking about sex on any level so that when they have questions you'll be able to help address them. If you feel embarrassed talking about this subject you'll want to get over it, and the easiest way to do that is when children are young.



When to Call the Doctor

Now that your child is a preschooler, knowing when to seek professional medical attention is a little bit easier than during infancy and toddlerhood. Preschoolers may need to see a doctor when they're sick or hurt, but many of the common ailments and problems can be handled with attentive parenting. Your preschooler is now more stable physically and can likely handle a stomach virus or superficial fall. But still some problems will require either a call to the doctor or possibly a visit to the local emergency department of a hospital. Here are some guidelines and tips to keep in mind.

A call to 911 is important if your child has fallen and lost consciousness. Confusion after falling or nausea is also a sign for immediate medical attention. Falling and then not moving an arm or leg require emergency medical help as well. A bleeding wound is best stitched up for one of two reasons. Either the bleeding won't stop, even with pressure and elevation, or the laceration is in a place where cosmetically a scar should be avoided. Cuts on the face are usually stitched as well as on the hands or near joints.

Preschoolers are active explorers. Accidents happen.

Your attitude in the midst of crisis is just as important as the medical attention you'll seek. Your child will pick up your emotional cues. Remain calm and matter-of-fact, even if you're panicking inside. You want to communicate to your child that you're in control and will help to make everything okay again.

When comforting your sick or injured child, be sure to communicate honestly. It does no good to tell a child "It won't hurt" before a painful experience. A wiser response is to say, "I'm here Honey. I will help you." Parents can model God's response to pain when kids are hurt. God doesn't promise to take the pain away, but he promises to be with us through the trials. 2 Corinthians 1:4 says that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." Receiving comfort is a skill and the preschool years are a great opportunity to develop it. It starts with parental comfort and will eventually move to receiving comfort from God.

Injuries that may seem severe but resolve quickly are bumps and bruises that result in a swollen "goose egg" on the forehead or a finger stuck in a toy. Although traumatic for the moment, these issues usually resolve quickly and a bit of comfort and then distraction are usually all the treatment that's necessary. Often a mild wound would benefit from a bit of ice to decrease swelling or stop the bleeding. Unfortunately, requiring a preschooler to hold ice on a "boo-boo" can be torture. Wrapping the ice in a washcloth may help, or just substituting with a cold wet washcloth can be the best solution. Giving a child a bowl of ice water to play in for an injured finger or toe can be helpful, or giving your preschooler an ice pop to eat for a bruised lip can also

do the trick. Think playtime and fun, even in the midst of sickness and injury, in order to help gain the cooperation of your child.

Fevers and dehydration are still a concern at this age. Although three to five-year-olds have more reserve, they're still at risk when sickness persists. Fevers over 102 that last for two or three days are reason enough to call the pediatrician. Vomiting and/or diarrhea that lasts more than three or four days are cause for a doctor visit as well. Ear and throat infections are now easier to diagnose since your child can tell you what hurts. When these symptoms occur, you'll want to call the doctor during regular business hours to see how soon he or she would want to see your child.

Runny noses can be common occurrences at this stage, especially if your child goes to preschool or daycare. Minor congestion shouldn't cause alarm but if the discharge is thick and green or yellow, and accompanied by a cough or vomiting, you'll want to get a medical evaluation. Any wheezing in the lungs is also a sign that your child needs treatment.

By this time in your child's life you likely know what a passing virus looks like, and when the child is sicker and needing some help. Rely on your instinct and things you've learned in the past, but if in doubt, call the doctor or nurse practitioner to get another opinion. Sometimes it's a hard call, so play it safe and get some help when in doubt. There's nothing like a doctor's opinion to give you peace of mind.

When you do need to make a trip to the doctor, whether for a well visit or sickness, keep in mind that your preschool child is now able to remember and anticipate. Often preschoolers develop a fear of doctor visits and even can create

quite a scene, so take some time to prepare your child and talk about what to expect. Keep it simple and matter-of-fact, but a little preparation can go a long way. Since three to five-year-olds love to play, and learn through acting things out, role-playing the doctor visit may alleviate some anxiety.

Your child may enjoy bringing a special toy along, a “sick” teddy bear that needs care, or even a superhero cape to help him be brave. An appropriate amount of information will be helpful, not enough to instill fear, but to give the child some amount of confidence in the situation. Knowing what to expect coupled with a helpful dose of distraction can ease the stress.

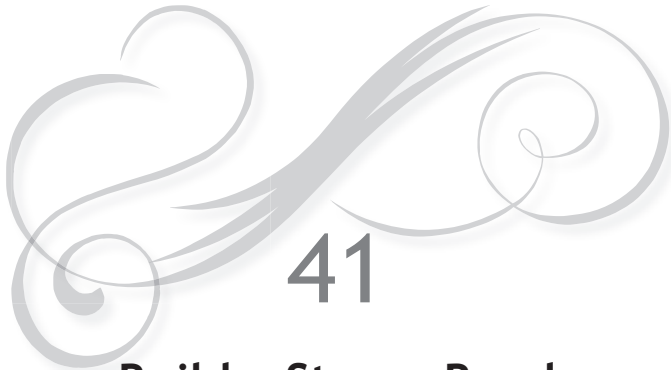
Of course some children will resist no matter how much preparation they receive. In that case, just do the right thing, whether your child likes it or not. Your child may try to convince you that she’s not sick any more, or that she really doesn’t need that shot. The reality is that you’re the parent and the child must go. Don’t try to persuade; it’s not a debate. In situations like this there’s an easy way and a hard way. If the child chooses the hard way, that’s okay. As parent, you need to stay calm and make it happen.

On the same note, some preschoolers can put up quite a fuss when it comes to taking medicine. The sooner they realize the battle isn’t worth it, the better. Chasing a four-year-old around the house for a dose of antibiotic or trying to convince and bribe a child to take the “yummy” Tylenol will backfire in the end. The bigger and stronger they get, the harder life will be for you and them. Make it clear from the start that they will take it, and life will go better for them if they do it without a battle. Stay calm, and stay in control. Keep dialogue to a minimum and stand your ground.

Although we don’t advocate rewards for every little

accomplishment, you may find a well-chosen sticker for cooperation during the doctor's visit, or a special drink after the medicine may be an appropriate reward for "being a good helper" or "being brave."

Going to the doctor and taking medicine are character-building experiences. Your child will develop skills that he'll use for the rest of his life. Take these opportunities to train your child and you'll both be grateful in the end.



Build a Strong Bond with Your Child

Some of the greatest treasured moments with a preschooler take place when you laugh together, snuggle while reading a book, or see those big eyes of delight and gratitude as you stop for ice cream. Closeness with your child is valuable, not only because it reinforces the bonding experience, but also because it helps to offset much of the normal energy drain on relationships required by the business of family life. The tension that comes with correction, saying no, and getting things done often creates friction that wears away at closeness, so doing what you can to keep relationships strong provides a helpful balance.

The Bible gives us helpful suggestions for increasing that underlying closeness. It takes place in the heart. In fact, when describing closeness in the heart, the Bible provides several illustrations that we can apply to the parent/child relationship. In 1 Samuel 14:7 Jonathan's armor-bearer says, "Do all that you have in mind...I am with you heart and soul." Their partnership in working together resulted in the same kind of heart connectedness that can take place when parents and children enjoy the satisfac-

tion of completing a task together. In Acts 4:32 the disciples in the early church “were one in heart and mind,” as they grew spiritually together. When parents and children pray, read God’s Word, and serve the Lord together, closeness increases.

All people are different and the factors that keep two people close may not mesh at times. Sometimes a parent wants to connect with physical touch, but the child seems irritated with attempts at a hug. A child may want gifts and feel distant from a parent who refuses to provide what he wants. Both parents and children learn valuable things about giving and receiving love as they interact with each other. Keep track of connecting points and look for ways to outwardly affirm their benefit. One dad said to his son, “We enjoy working on these Legos together. That’s a special activity that we share.” His son looked up in agreement as the truth of their camaraderie settled in. A mom told us, “I look for times in the day that my son and I connect and I point those out. Every once in a while he does the same thing. The other day I was recounting a story from my childhood and he said to me, ‘Mom, I like it when you tell me stories like that.’ I knew that he was affirming the closeness we enjoy by sharing meaningful conversation together.”

At times you’ll want to enter into your preschooler’s world, get down and play on the floor, or kneel down, so that you can have a discussion on the same level. Making eye contact and being a responsive listener often open doors to other helpful dialogue. At times, you’ll require the same attentiveness from your child. Learning how to listen instead of interrupting is a skill that enhances relationship. You don’t have to move into discipline mode, but you might simply say something such as, “I wish I could talk,

but when I start to speak, you interrupt me.” Often a simple observation with preschoolers guides their thinking.

Sometimes children are quite strong-willed and determined to get what they want. Parents then can fall into the trap of giving in, with the hope of increasing closeness by reducing tension in the relationship. When children are driven by selfishness, compromise and indulgence on the part of parents rarely works to bring long-term closeness. In fact, the opposite happens instead. The parent gives in and the child seems pleased for the moment, but it’s not long before selfishness is back, resulting in demandingness.

It’s during the preschool years that children learn valuable lessons about cooperation. It means that we give and take. Unfortunately, some children don’t understand the balance and often do more taking than giving. If that’s the case, then you’ll want to use some firm strategies to teach this foundational concept. For example, you might define cooperation in practical terms for your child. You might say, “Cooperation is giving up what you want sometimes so that we can both enjoy the result.” Or, “Patience is waiting with a happy heart.” Or, “Love means that we think about other people, not just ourselves.”

Other chapters in this book focus on teaching children how to handle correction, following instructions, and receiving a no answer. They’re all part of an important lesson designed to teach children how to relate effectively in life. When those lessons are emphasized in family life then the child grows in the ability to understand what love looks like in practical terms, forming a foundation upon which real closeness can develop. Don’t settle for a counterfeit closeness by giving in to a child’s selfishness. It’s in those

moments you'll see the need to do the hard work of parenting. You'll be surprised when you teach children to give up selfishness, how much they are then able to draw close in relationships. It's all part of the process. Look for the balance between firmness and love and you'll contribute to a healthy relationship with your child.

Develop a Bedtime Routine

Getting kids into bed often creates tension in the relationship as children resist, argue, or complain. It's important to have a plan for getting kids into bed and then keeping them there all night. The work parents do in the area of bedtimes and nighttime routines helps children develop self-discipline and independence, important heart qualities they'll need for years to come.

Although individual family schedules sometimes require flexibility, having a set bedtime each night is helpful because it gives an objective cue to keep things moving. Marcy said it this way, "We have a bedtime set at 7:30 pm and when we stick to it, the next day seems to go better. It seems that by setting a specific time, it's as if I'm not the bad guy anymore. The clock provides the cue and I just use it as a reminder, and then keep things moving. It's funny, my son can't even tell time but he knows that his bedtime is 7:30 pm."

To get kids into bed with as little resistance as possible, it's usually best to start the process about a half hour before. Getting pajamas on, going to the bathroom, getting a drink, and brushing teeth are important in order to remove

the common excuses children raise once they're in bed. Having a few minutes after bedtime chores before actually getting into bed allows you to read a story, play a game, or have a significant conversation. When children know that you're going to read another chapter before bed, it makes the tasks of getting ready a bit easier.

Once a child is in bed, a prayer, hugs, and some affirmation is a great way to put kids to sleep. When you first begin to enforce a bedtime, your child may resist, seemingly removing the benefits of the relational time spent, but over time, as your child realizes that fighting you about bedtime is useless, the relational approach is a strong asset.

When you're done saying goodnight, it's time to leave the bedroom with the expectation that the child will stay there. If your child is prone to call out or get out of bed, you might want to do some training about bedtimes by sitting in the doorway or hallway every night while your child goes to sleep. If he starts to talk, gets up, or wants to play, you'll want to keep your response to one sentence, maybe something such as, "It's time for bed so you need to lie down." Your firm approach communicates that there's no other alternative and that bedtime means lying quietly in bed. As you move further away from the door or use a monitor to make sure your child remains quiet, you'll teach the importance of staying in bed. What you don't want is to allow your child after you leave the room to develop a habit of getting out of bed, turning on the lights, and having playtime in the bedroom.

The process of teaching independence at bedtime often takes a few weeks of firm practice. As with many routines you've developed, your child may regress when you break

the routine because of vacation, evening events, or other circumstances that interrupt the schedule. If that happens, just go back to your plan and over time your child will get back on track.

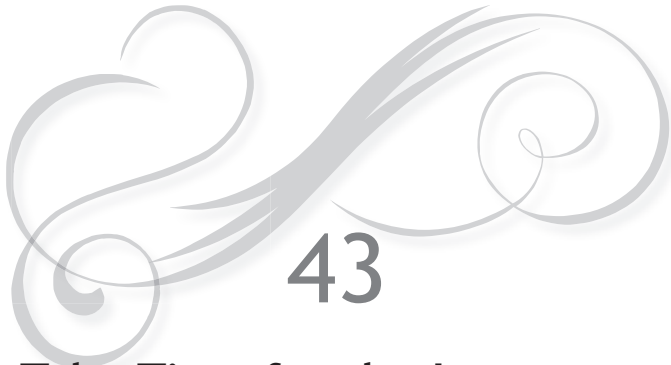
Training kids to stay in bed at night is a whole different problem. It's not wrong to have your kids sleep in your bed. After all, it's only in the last hundred years or so that kids even have their own beds. It used to be much more common to see families sleep in the same room and often in the same bed. But there comes a point in all families when having kids sleep in your bed creates more challenges than the benefits provide. Kids move around, making it harder to sleep, or remove the privacy parents need for their alone time together.

If it's time to train your child to stay in bed at night, you'll want to talk about it first. You might say something like, "Honey, you're getting older now and it's time that you learned to stay in your own bed. You're in the habit now of waking up and then just coming into my bed. We're going to change that now so that you can be more independent at night. I wake up sometimes too but I put myself back to sleep. That's what most people do as they get older. Now that you're growing up we're going to work on that for you as well. If you need to go to the bathroom or get a drink then you can take care of that yourself. And then, just go back to bed and lie there quietly and you'll be able to go right back to sleep."

One of the challenges at night, since you're asleep, is knowing when your child has slipped into your bed. You might wake up and find your child there with you, not even realizing what happened. Don't be deterred. Sometimes children wander in out of habit and fall asleep and

don't realize it themselves. Whenever you recognize that your child has come into your room, get up and put him back into his bed. Dialogue during the day and firmness at night will teach your child the character necessary to stay in bed.

Many Bible verses can help children understand more about God, especially at night. Psalm 4:8, for example, says, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." It's often at night as a child is drifting off to sleep that thoughts about God, and his protection and leading, feed a sense of faith and trust. As you pray for your child at night, it's helpful to thank God for his love and care for each of us, and ask God to provide good dreams and a good night's sleep. That's a great gift of a loving Heavenly Father and you help your child understand God's grace at night. Firmness for a while may be required to build the character, so hang in there and change will take place over time.



Take Time for the Important

We have spent much time in this book describing ways to learn more about preschool development, providing strategies to guide your preschooler to grow in the way God intended, and to help your preschooler become a productive member of society, while keeping your own sanity. We'd like to leave you with one more tip to help you deal with your child in this busy, active lifestyle: look for ways to slow down the pace.

A bit of forethought and strategic planning can go a long way to help you maximize the preschool developmental stage. There are likely ways that you can arrange your day to reduce the frustration often created by maintaining a tight schedule. A regular routine for waking, eating, napping, and bedtime will go a long way in helping you and your preschooler have a smoother day. But, the biggest help is to slow down and allow you and your child to experience life.

When walking with your preschooler, take time to notice the beauty of God's creation. Watch birds fly in formation or observe a momma bird pick up a worm and feed it to the young baby bird in the nest. Watch the sunset or

take time to view a rainbow and see what colors it has. Spend a moment on the swings at the playground and teach your preschooler how to pump. Allowing your child to explore is time well spent. You'll not only open windows for learning but you'll also end up with significant conversations and closer relationships.

One of the privileges of parenting is that you get a front row seat to watch your child grow and develop. It's a treasure to see the look of satisfaction when your preschooler successfully pours water into a cup, or buttons his own shirt. It's rewarding to listen to the intelligent questions that come from your preschooler as you try to interact about the world around you. Make the most of the time you have with your preschooler and enjoy this stage of development. With the rapid changes taking place it can sometimes be dizzying to watch, but it can also be a fun time for both you and your child.

When you slow down the pace, you may find that you enjoy more of life right along with your preschooler. God gives each person 24 hours in every day. Be strategic as you make choices in how to spend your minutes.

As your preschooler grows and develops, plan to document as much as you can about your child's changes and accomplishments. Some folks like to take videos of each event. Others like to take pictures and put them into a scrapbook. Still others will write things in a journal to keep for future reading. Look for ways to remember these exciting times. They go by very quickly. Enjoy the time you have with your preschooler. Take time to thank the Lord for the privilege of raising this unique child.

Parents are always on duty! There's always a responsibility, a chore, or a question to answer. Realizing this can

be overwhelming and sometimes very daunting. In fact, sometimes parents see their own imperfection and wonder if they've ruined this kid. Remember, God uses imperfect people to accomplish his task. The difference is made up in what he calls "grace."

Grace provides the strength to continue on each day, complete the tasks when you are tired, and have wisdom to respond well in a difficult situation. God's grace also works through our failures so that when you apologize to your child or share your own struggle, good things happen. We all need to stand under the spigot of God's grace. He showers it on us to provide strength for the present and forgiveness for the past. The most important thing in parenting isn't to be perfect, but instead to be growing. When kids see parents that are learning and growing, they too are able to accept their imperfection and develop the confidence to move forward.

Paul wrote encouraging words in 2 Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." Those words are not just for the people of ancient times, but they are an encouragement to us as well. God provides the strength to do what's right, persevere, and when we come up short, he fills in the difference with his grace.

A family is a place for all its members to learn and grow. As you help your preschooler develop the skills necessary to survive, you'll gently guide and shape the heart. In doing so you'll help children be all that God intended them to be. And in the process, God always does something in your heart as well. It's all part of his grand design he calls the family.

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