

Our Children, Our Responsibility, Our Time

Being a Christian Parent Today

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Overview of the Seminar

This seminar targets those parents who wish to create families built on Christian values found in the Bible. The aim of the seminar is twofold: to raise the subject of parents as responsible for conveying Christian faith to their children and to present an opportunity to discuss the challenges parents of today meet when faced with distributing their time.

The seminar includes thoughts and reflections presented by the seminar leader, an opportunity for discussion in small groups of 4-5 people, and practical applications.

Introduction

Most parents today live hectic lives. Work and activities easily fill each day and family members are apart much of the time. Work is necessary to secure the family income. The mortgage on the house and car must be paid, and the desire to give our children the very best, including material things, rapidly empties the bank account. The children attend preschool or school, but on top of that parents often feel their children should have the possibility to develop in a variety of areas, like music or athletics. After busy days, when the family does get back home again, everyone needs to be fed, the laundry washed, the floors vacuumed and so on. At last, the long sought-for vacation time finally arrives. Asked what your plans are, your answer will probably be a long list of activities.

We keep saying that our days are full and we don't have enough time. Yet we have become experts in creating labour-saving devices and doing everything faster and faster. This is an interesting contradiction. Cars are faster now, so we can travel long distances more quickly. Computers make "instant mailing" possible; instant communication has become commonplace. We no longer need to heat water on a stove; we cram our laundry into a machine that does the job for us. Yet still we seem to have less time than ever before.

If you are a parent, you likely identify with these situations just described. When it comes to the issue of time, this seminar might be a challenge for you, but I hope it is a challenge you will take on!

In the first part of the seminar, we will look at what the Bible says about parents having the main responsibility for conveying their faith to their children. In the second part, we will look at that information in the light of what we already have concluded, i.e., our constant lack of time. Then we will look at the relation between the two.

Part 1

Our Responsibility

George Barna is a renowned and respected author and director of the Barna Research Group, a full service marketing research company in Ventura, California. Barna and his team specialize in research for Christian ministries. In his book *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* he has, among other things, looked at how the responsibility between church and family is divided. To get a clear picture of the situation he contacted a number of congregations in the USA. In chapter five he writes:

Parents across the nation admit that one of the greatest benefits they receive from attending a church is having the community of faith assume responsibility for the spiritual development of their children. Knowing that there are trained professionals and other willing individuals who will provide spiritual guidance to their children is a source of security and comfort for most churchgoing adults” (Barna, 2003, p. 77).

He continues: “Our national surveys have shown that while more than 4 out of 5 parents (85 percent) believe that they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three of them abdicate that responsibility to their church” (Barna, 2003, pp. 77-78).

Parents seem aware they have the main responsibility for the spiritual development of their children, but still often tend to abdicate this responsibility to the church. Barna’s conclusion is that since parents do realize their main role in this, they do what they think is best, namely, to leave this responsibility in the hands of those whom they find more capable for the task. Then they try to stay out of the way. But looking at what the Bible says about this shows us that this is not the way God intended it to be. Handing over the main responsibility for our children’s spiritual growth to the church is totally unbiblical.

The Bible on children’s spiritual growth. Let us look at some Scripture passages that talk about the spiritual growth of children:

- Deuteronomy 4:10 – “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they . . . may teach them to their children.”
- Deuteronomy 6:6-7, NKJV – “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.”
- Deuteronomy 32:46 – “Command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law.”

- Joshua 24:15, NKJV – “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

The biblical message is loud and clear. These passages all show the same thing: when the message of God is to be passed on from generation to generation God wants it to mainly take place between parent and child. As Christian parents we are told to pass on the message of faith to our children. The psalm writer Asaph wrote these words of wisdom:

- Psalm 78:5-6 – “He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them . . . and they in turn would tell their children.”

The Bible tells us that it is God’s wish that His will, His laws and His words are shared and that His name is glorified. God wants children to know about Him and He wants this teaching to take place first and foremost within the family. The teaching about God should be a part of the every-day life the family shares. The Bible challenges us to teach and rear our children so that God’s word becomes a part of who they are. George Barna expresses it this way: “After all, God never told His followers to take over the world through force or intelligence. He simply told us to have children and then raise them to honor God in all they do” (Barna, 2003, p. 18).

Small group discussion. [*Form small groups of 4-5 people and discuss the question: How does this responsibility make you feel?*]

Follow-up. [*Ask the small groups to report on their discussion and to share their thoughts and feelings.*]

To discover the biblical counsel regarding our responsibility for the spiritual instruction of our children can be sobering. At one recent parents’ meeting in a congregation in Sweden, the parents and Sabbath school teachers reflected on Barna’s research, found it really interesting and strongly agreed with it. When the issue of the biblical approach to parents’ responsibilities came up however, the room went silent. They discussed this same question: “How does this responsibility make you feel?” Some of their responses were: They felt insufficient, overwhelmed, ignorant and frustrated. So if you feel this way, you are not alone. Maybe this is how many of us feel when faced with this responsibility.

As we continue with the next part of our seminar, let us continue to reflect on this large responsibility toward our children and endeavour to find the ways and the time to perform this task.

Part 2 Our Time

Activity/exercise. [*Ask five volunteers to be seated on five chairs in the front, facing the group. Make sure they do not have access to any watches of any kind. Tell these five that they have to try to estimate how long two minutes are. As the group leader, you start the clock. When the volunteers think that time is up, they have to stand up. The object of the exercise is to come as close to two minutes as possible.*]

Debriefing. [*Debrief the volunteers. Did you feel group pressure? When the first person stood up, did any of you start thinking that maybe you should too? Maybe your heart rate increased and you started questioning your ability to estimate when the two minutes were up?*]

Group pressure to conform to group values. This exercise is interesting to me for it highlights what group pressure often does to people. If we see that people around us do things in a certain manner, we often start wondering if we shouldn't be doing it their way instead of our own . . . ?

Some of you might have read or heard about the New York Times bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. It is a true story about a former student (Mitch) who, after many years, contacts his old teacher (Morrie) again. By now Morrie is suffering from ALS, a neurological disease that slowly but surely leads to death. They begin meeting, generally every Tuesday. Together they discuss life and death and everything in between in a very honest and straightforward way. This is some of what Mitch Albom writes about their eighth Tuesday session.

When people die, you always hear the expression “You can't take it with you.” Morrie seemed to know that a long time ago.

“We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country,” Morrie sighed. “Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. *More is good. More is good.* We repeat it—and have it repeated to us—over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this, he has no perspective on what's really important anymore” (Albom, 1997, pp. 124, 125.)

We live in a world that puts a strong emphasis on money and materialism. The message “*More is good*” is repeated all through society. Group pressure keeps building; we are torn between what we see people around us emphasising and what we believe deep inside to be important. Our time is spent trying to “get more” instead of focusing on our inner values, the beliefs that really matter in life.

If we were to ask ourselves what we value the most, I believe many of us would have two lists of answers. On the first list, we would put those things that intellectually we find important. Those are the things we know deep down we ought to both value and prioritize. We know what “ought to be” on that list. Maybe it contains things such as “God,” “family,” “being with friends,” and so forth.

[*Use a flip-chart, a chalk board or a white board to list what the group finds important.*]

On the other list, we have our every day life and everything we prioritize on a day to day basis. This second list includes all that we allow to fill our schedules. Probably it is influenced by this world's group pressure and what many societies now repeat over and over: “More is good” and the

pressure we feel to conform—to not be too different. For many people, the first and second lists don't look the same.

Our perception of time. The second reason I find the time exercise interesting is because time is such a difficult issue to fathom. Perhaps our volunteers experienced that time was running both rapidly and slowly at the same time. Maybe time was hard to estimate; maybe they began to feel unsure as to how long a second really was. Time is something very relative. We can alter our perception of it depending on how we choose to approach it.

How we perceive this interesting phenomenon of time varies from person to person and from situation to situation. I think this is one of the reasons why it's possible to have the ability to do things faster than ever before and yet at the same time feel that there's never enough time. Whether this is true or not, I believe most of us parents today wish we had at least a little more time on our hands. If only there were a few more hours to the day . . . Maybe then we would have managed to do a little more of what we should do and want to do.

Part 3

Our Responsibility and Our Time: Being a Christian Parent Today

We are now going to pull together the two parts: the biblical responsibility of parents and our constant feeling of lack of time that we so often experience.

Larry Fowler is a minister and author who challenges us to look at our perceived lack of time in a different way. His book *Rock-Solid Kids* (2004) talks about the importance of educating our children and giving them knowledge of the Bible. He writes: "Parents, take seriously your responsibility to teach God's word to our children." He continues by dividing our mission into two parts:

1. Model obedience to God's word yourself. It's just too important to leave to others. Your own attitude toward God's word cannot be hidden from your children. They will know how you act, and that will be far more influential than what you say (p. 51).
2. Put teaching God's word first! It is never an issue of *time*. It is always an issue of *value* - and Scripture tells us that teaching our children God's word must receive the highest value of all. If you put teaching God's word first, you will find that there will be time left for other things (p. 51).

Small group discussion. [*Return to the small groups of 4-5 people and discuss Fowler's statement: "It is never an issue of time. It is always an issue of value." Do you agree? Why or why not?*]

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus talks about the things with which we fill our days. He watched people around Him and found that all their time was spent on getting food and drink and nice clothes to wear. All this frustrated Him. You can almost hear the frustration in His voice. Why do you worry so much about all of this? Why do you spend so much time on these earthly things? God knows that you need them and He is more than willing to provide them for you if you just let Him. God will see

to it that you get what you need for the day. After letting us know that this is God's responsibility, Jesus concludes His remarks by giving us OUR job description: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

Our job is to put God first on our list of things we value and then let that guide us in our priorities.

How? "Model obedience to God's word yourself." That was the first challenge Larry Fowler gave us as Christian parents. If we want to put God on top of our list of things we value, and if we really want to take our responsibility as Christian parents, we must make practical every-day choices that show we're serious about it. We need to organize our lives and our time in ways that show that God is important to us, intellectually as well as practically.

It is an old truth that children do as we do, not as we say. If our list of values never turns into action in our lives, our children will never take our words seriously. It is crucial that we put aside time to do what God has asked us—to seek His kingdom first.

Large group discussion. *[Make a list on a flip-chart, black board or white board of the large group responses to the question: What kind of activities would seeking God's kingdom refer to?]*

"Put teaching God's word first!" That is the second challenge on Larry Fowler's list. If we intellectually grasp that the spiritual development of our children is primarily our responsibility as parents, it follows that we must take appropriate practical action, i.e., to spend time and energy to make it a reality in our lives. We need to go back to those two lists of our values—our "intellectual" values and also the "actual" values, the things that take up our time, the things we actually put as our priorities on a day-to-day basis.

Our struggle, our biggest challenge, is to get these two lists to coincide as much as possible. We need to put the focus on aligning our inner values with our external life. How we spend our time reflects our true values.

Assignments. *[Make copies and distribute to each participant the handout "Our Children, Our Responsibility, Our Time – Assignments." They could also be prepared on a PowerPoint slide or written on your flip-chart, chalkboard, or white board.]*

As we come to the close of this seminar, we are giving you a handout to take home. There are four assignments written on this handout. The aim of these assignments is to give you the opportunity to take these thoughts that we've shared today one step further. The assignments will help you decide whether these ideas will actually result in change in your life and if so, how that can be done.

1. The first assignment is to write down a list of your inner values, things that you think are really important.

2. The second assignment is to write down the things that take your every-day time.

3. The third assignment will be to compare these two lists. Look at them closely and think about whether your inner values are reflected in the way you spend your time.

4. If these two lists are very different, the fourth assignment will be to pray and think about what it might be in your life that needs to change in order for you to carry out your responsibility as a Christian parent. As you make changes, start small with one or two things that you want to change. Taking on too much will be overwhelming and you might end up being discouraged instead of uplifted.

Conclusion

I really pray that each of us will let God take this place and time in our lives and in our families' lives. I fully believe Jesus' promise that if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness first, the rest will be given to us.

In the beginning of this seminar, we mentioned that some of the thoughts conveyed here today might be challenging to some. Perhaps you are wondering if the changes that need to be done are realistic. Maybe you wonder about whether it's really possible to get theory and practise to go together in real life. Maybe you feel like letting out a big sigh because this is just another burden to bear. If this is what you might be feeling, please know that this is not the aim of this seminar. The aim is to get us to think about our mission and our responsibility as Christian parents and to think about how this should affect the way we spend our time.

I believe that there might be some who may have mixed feelings about this responsibility and their ability to find the time to do this. Let us end this seminar with two promises:

Our responsibility is not to do it all and to perform with perfection but to be available and diligent in our personal spiritual growth of our children. God will do the rest, sometimes through us and sometimes in spite of us (Barna, 2003. p. 75).

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Jesus – Matt. 11:28).

We as parents do have the main responsibility of raising our children to be children of God. We are the ones who have been given this mission to pass on our faith to the next generation. But the good news, the most wonderful news, is that this is not something we need to carry alone. We have a God who will walk beside us in all our struggles to find the time we need to fulfill this job we've been given. And when this burden gets heavy and our inner values don't turn into practice as much as we'd like, we have One to whom we can go. Jesus has promised that if we come to Him with our burdens He will give us rest.

Prayer. [*Conclude the seminar with prayer. Adapt this prayer as necessary to make it your own heartfelt benediction on the seminar.*]

Heavenly Father, we pray that You will create in us a wish to take on the responsibility You have given us as parents. We pray that You will show us all the blessings that will come upon us when taking on this challenge. We also pray that You will be there in our struggles with making our two lists become one. Thank you, Lord, for being there for us. Thank you for carrying both our children and our struggles when we don't have the strength to do so ourselves. Thank you for Your grace and Your amazing love for us. Amen.

References

Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Doubleday.

Barna, G. (2003). *Transforming children into spiritual champions*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

Fowler, L. (2004). *Rock-solid kids*. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light.

