

Preparing Parents for Effective Parenting

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Introduction

“Society begets the future it moulds today.” That saying gives credence to the importance of parenting. The good counsel given in Proverbs 22:6, which implores parents and guardians to “train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” highlights the responsibility parents have of child training. The apostle Paul entreats parents further: “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:11, 12).

Jesus would have every Christian parent know that every child is God’s child. Every child is worth Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. Every child is called into God’s kingdom of glory. An important part of local church family ministries is helping parents become more effective in rearing their offspring for Christ.

Session 1: Parenting Principles from Paul

The apostle Paul seems to have understood much of what it means to be a father. He seems also to have understood what it is that children need. Paul presents three important principles that foster social and spiritual growth in all believers: “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, *encouraging*, *comforting* and *urging* you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11, 12, emphasis supplied). These principles—*encouragement*, *comfort*, and *exhortation*—are especially important for children and may be considered keys to more positive, effective Christian parenting.

Encouragement

The first attitude for effective parenting—*encouragement*—simply means to support, give courage or confidence. People often think encouragement is shouting at a player from the side of a football field, or offering some kind and uplifting words to somebody before an examination. But Paul points out that encouragement is an important part of the entire parenting process. In a sense, encouragement is not so much what you say, but rather more about who you are and what you do. I once heard Dr. Daniel Duda, Ministerial Secretary and Education Director for the Trans-European Division, explain in a seminar that the concept of encouragement in the original biblical languages had much more to do with *listening* than with *talking*. The greatest encouragement we can give is to listen and understand another person. Listening for understanding is perhaps the most important aspect of encouragement. So if we would encourage our children we must seek to understand them. Conversely, the feeling of not being understood is one of the most discouraging feelings. To point out our child’s failures and bypass the positives in our bid to encourage does more harm than good.

Comfort

The second quality Paul demonstrated to the Thessalonians, as parents do for their children, is *comfort*. Have you ever been comforted by somebody who just does not understand? The intentions of the person are likely very good, yet somehow it feels hollow. We are comforted best by those who understand us. Paul links comfort and encouragement in these verses as they should be linked in family life. Only through listening, truly listening, can you understand. It is only when you understand that you can truly comfort. Comforting is about travelling with a person in their challenges, joys and pain.

Just taking your child in your arms and holding him or her close when you know they have taken a knock—that is comfort. That kind of comfort will empower the individual to keep on to “fight another day” as they say.

Exercising disapproval for misbehaviour should not get in the way of showing comfort, for comfort is not about *approval* but about *acceptance*. Approval is about our judgement of somebody else’s behaviour or worth whereas acceptance is focused on the other person’s intrinsic value as a human being—God’s way of dealing human beings.

God’s attitude toward us does not depend on our performance but on the premise that we are His children through Jesus Christ and can grow in His grace. Parents need to do the same for their children. A child who is accepted is safe and secure and will likely grow up with a sense of worth and responsibility. We have a chance to show them the truth that they are unique and wonderful human beings with huge potential for God’s kingdom. We do that first by encouraging and listening, and then by comforting, accepting, empathising and showing that we have understood.

Exhortation

The third aspect of parenting as presented by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 is exhortation. To exhort is to urge strongly or earnestly. This is the bit of the process that we are usually too eager to do. When we see something wrong in our children’s lives or something that worries us, we grow impatient, and we want to jump in and fix it as quickly as possible. Under such circumstances some parents skip over the first two steps—encouragement and comfort—and go straight to exhortation assuming that they know what is going on. As parents we forget that, if somebody is going to change, they have to be ready to change. It is worth noting that it took a demonstration of understanding and an afternoon of listening from Jesus before Zacchaeus was ready to change. It was the same with the woman caught in adultery and the Samaritan woman by the well—exhortation always came after encouragement and comfort. So it must be in parenting. Patience and tolerance need to be exercised by parents in this regard. To be able to stretch towards the desired goal—living lives worthy of God—a child has to feel accepted, even in failure. These are the foundations for growth.

Class exercises. Here are several exercises from which you can choose to help make the above principles practical:

1. Give participants five minutes to share with the person next to them a memory from their growing up years which formed a significant base for their adult understanding of God and their feelings about the church. This memory may have been the source of a warm,

loving picture of God or it may have created a hurdle which they have had to overcome in understanding God as a loving parent and in feeling good about the church. After pairs of participants have had a chance to share, invite one or two persons to volunteer to share their story with the whole group.

2. Invite parents to divide into small groups and share some moments when, as children, they felt encouragement, comfort or exhortation from a parent, a relative, a teacher or pastor. Discuss together why these experiences are memorable. How can similar encouragement and comfort be given to the children and young people in our midst today? What must change in order for parents to incorporate encouragement and comforting as well as exhortation into their parenting?
3. Share this illustration and the discussion questions with the group:

Artie is an only child living in the poorer part of town. He would like to have friends, but has difficulty forming friendships. His parents both work away from home at low paying jobs and Artie often spends hours by himself waiting for them to return. Bullied by bigger boys in his class at school, he has tried unsuccessfully to defend himself. In despair he contemplates running away.

What needs for encouragement, comfort and exhortation does Artie have? How might his parents, his relatives, his teacher, his pastor minister to him?

4. Read together the following quotations from Ellen G. White that relate to these principles of encouragement, comfort and exhortation. (Distribute Handout #1 *Selected Quotations on Encouragement, Comfort and Exhortation*, so that participants can have their own copies. Work individually, in pairs, or as small groups to respond to the questions: How might these quotations shape the practice of Christian parenting? How can we be as loving, hopeful and accepting as parents as is presented in these quotations?)

Counsel from Ellen White on Effective Parenting

Ellen G. White offers the following counsel for effective parenting:

“But, fathers, do not discourage your children. Combine affection with authority, kindness and sympathy with firm restraint. Give some of your leisure hours to your children; become acquainted with them; associate with them in their work and in their sports, and win their confidence. Cultivate friendship with them . . . In this way you will be a strong influence for good” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 391).

“Home should be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love abide; and where these graces dwell, there will abide happiness and peace. Troubles may invade, but these are the lot of humanity. Let patience, gratitude, and love keep sunshine in the heart, though the day may be ever so cloudy. In such homes angels of God abide” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p.393).

“No barrier of coldness and reserve should be allowed to arise between parents and children. Let parents become acquainted with their children, seeking to understand their tastes and

dispositions, entering into their feelings, and drawing out what is in their hearts” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 394).

“Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p.394).

Surely there is a time for exhortation, for urging. Exhortation and teaching are an important part of our responsibility as parents (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). However, as Jesus demonstrated and Paul taught so eloquently, we may well find that our exhortations fall on deaf ears if we do not first listen and understand, encourage and comfort.

Session 2: Spiritual Development of Children

Many believers take the approach that it is the church’s responsibility to develop their children spiritually. A big challenge for local family ministries leaders is to help parents understand that, while the church may be able to augment the spiritual training of children, the primary responsibility rests with the parents. The family is undoubtedly the most powerful agency for making disciples of its members for Christ. “The work of parents, which means so much, is greatly neglected. Awake, parents, from your spiritual slumber and understand that the very first teaching the child receives is to be given to him by you. You are to teach your little ones to know Christ” (*Child Guidance*, p. 23). The child’s spiritual development should be of grave concern to Christian parents.

George Barna, a renowned researcher for Christian ministries in the United States, concludes that “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).

While accepting the church’s unique role in spiritual development of its members, we want also to uncover the Scriptural truths about the parental involvement in the spiritual development of children. What does the Bible teach about parents’ responsibility for the spiritual development of children? In this session we will look at some Scripture passages that talk about the spiritual growth of children.

The Bible on Parental Involvement in Children’s Spiritual Growth

Distribute Handout #2 *Scripture on Parental Involvement in Children’s Spiritual Growth*. Work in small groups to study the following passages. What do they express or imply with regard to parental involvement in children’s spiritual growth?

• 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.”

- 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 be shared with our children. He wants this teaching to take place first and foremost within the family. As Christian parents we are told to pass on the message of faith to our children.

Parents and Caregivers Who Shared Their Faith with Children

Scriptural accounts of several parents/caregivers and the children/youth in their households are helpful to us in understanding how parents may respond to the call of God to share their faith with their children.

Bible parents Scripture study. Distribute Handout #3 *Bible Parents*. Invite participants to work in pairs or small groups. Assign the various Bible parents to the groups for study and reflection on the texts and questions.

Abraham

1. What was the significance of Abraham’s construction of an altar in Bethel? (Gen. 12:8)
2. Why was this important here and elsewhere to Abraham? His household/the community (Gen. 12:7; 13:18)
3. How do you think Abraham’s spiritual values influenced the development of his son Isaac’s spiritual values? (Gen. 26:24-25)

Moses

1. How did the faith of Moses’ parents influence his life? (Heb. 11:23-27; Deut. 34:10-12)
2. Why do you think parents are so important in the counsel of Moses about passing on spiritual values? (Deut. 6:4-9)
3. What does Moses envision as the responsibility of parents?

Mordecai

1. Why did Mordecai encourage Esther to join the beauty-contest? (Esther 2:5-11)
2. Where did Esther go for spiritual guidance? (Esther 4)

Mary

What do you think Mary did to help Jesus grow spiritually? (Luke 2:52: cf. Matt. 4:4-10)

Lois and Eunice

1. Who were these women and what influence did they have on Timothy? (2 Tim. 3:14-17)
2. Why do you think the apostle Paul called attention to the home life of Timothy?

Conclusion

Our responsibility as parents is not to do it all and to perform with perfection. Rather, our work is to be diligent in our personal spiritual growth and be available as well as diligent for our children. We have a God who will walk beside us in all our struggles to fulfill this job we've been given and to which we committed ourselves when our children were conceived. Let us not get in children's way of coming to Jesus, but let us as responsible parents show them Jesus in our lives at home and in our fellowship at church.

References

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

White, E. G. (1954). *Child guidance*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

White, E. G. (1942). *The ministry of healing*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

Selected Quotations on Encouragement, Comfort and Exhortation

By Ellen G. White

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