

Bridging the Gap Between God and Your Kids

It's easy for today's youth to experience spiritual disconnection. It's our job as parents to help connect them with God.

Our children live in a generation in which all kids experience some level of disconnectedness. Families have split apart, leaving many of them lonely and isolated from caring adults. The church has lost much of its influence on them due to shallowness and irrelevance. And the culture is working overtime to separate them from the values of their parents' generation through filthy music lyrics, violent video games, sex- and profanity-laden movies and television programs, Internet pornography, consumerism, and much more.

What can we as parents do? By properly wielding the influence we have in our kids' lives because of our relationships with them, we can become the bridge that connects God to them and them to God. Being a bridge is our major role as parents, and it becomes more important as our kids grow older. We are called to be a relational connector between God and them.

In Psalm 78 God reveals the secrets we need to know to fulfill our calling: "Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done.

"For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come

might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments" (vv. 1-7, NKJV).

Based on this passage, what secrets to spanning the bridge must we bring out of hiding?

Secret No. 1: Help kids experience the power of God.

Experiences drive kids' lives. They prowl around all day looking for or creating the next adventure. Their adrenaline pumps, anticipating the next, the newest and the most satisfying experience. To gain influence with teenagers, we must engage them in experiences that move them out of the mundane routines of life.

In their fast-paced world of video games, the Internet, sports, drama, bands and so on, the church, which represents God, often seems boring. But God is *not* boring! Just the opposite.

Dynamic, supernatural power more closely describes God. The psalmist encourages us to find the secret of God's power and tell it to the next generation so they can experience "the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done"(v. 4).

So where do kids discover that secret?

My son Jonathan and I took a road trip to the Brownsville Revival in Pensacola, Florida, during his senior year in high school. Imagine that—going to church for a high-schooler's road trip. What would cause any high school kid to enjoy that?

For starters, people waited in line from 9 a.m. until 7 p.m. to get a seat in the church. Anticipation abounded.

Then when the action began, no one sat in his seat. Several times each night they had to tell those in the balcony not to

jump up and down out of concern that it could collapse. We exercised so vigorously during the worship that everyone broke out in a full sweat. People told about how God had radically changed their lives and then got baptized.

Sick people had someone pray for them, and many were healed. The service ended with prayer. Not boring prayer, but teams of people praying over people who had a need, often with a dramatic, on-the-spot demonstration of God's power. Jonathan and I couldn't wait to go to those four-hour church services.

"Weird," you may say, "we don't do church that way." Weird or not, my son loved it, and he certainly did not get bored. It reminded me of what the church must have looked like in New Testament times.

"And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people" (Acts 4:31; 5:12).

Put this New Testament norm next to our kids' normal church experiences, all the while remembering their penchant for exciting experiences. Now refer back to Psalm 78 and ask yourself a few penetrating questions.

- When did your kids last experience the wonderful works of the Lord in powerful worship?
- When have your children seen the power of someone being physically healed?
- When did your family experience the wonders He has done in bringing a person to Christ?

Exposing our children to the dynamic, supernatural power of God reveals one secret of spanning the bridge that connects them to God. Where can you take your kids to experience that secret now?

Secret No. 2: Teach kids the commands of God.

All teenagers try to kick down the fence that any authority puts around them. They don't like the closed-in feeling of boundaries. Instead they desperately desire that their parents and everyone else let them do their own thing. Yet wise parents know that authority gives structure, protection, and guidance and actually paves the path to the freedom our kids crave.

When we can offer our kids the opportunity to live under authority that leads to freedom, we have uncovered a secret worth millions, but for which most people won't pay two cents. God's secret? The authority of His Word. "For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children" (v. 5).

Interestingly, the book that is filled with the Word of God and with the words of God gives structure, protection and guidance, yet day after day is rarely opened by most Christians. What most of us pick up from God's Word tastes like ABC gum—Already Been Chewed. A pastor or teacher has done the chewing, and then offers it to us.

Gross. Tasteless. Left over.

No wonder kids think of the Word of God as boring. Since it has little appeal to them, they don't read, study or memorize it, much less apply it. When I ask church kids to quote a Bible verse, 90 percent of them can't get one verse past John 3:16.

Our kids' brains contain the words to hundreds of songs that they can quote verbatim. But their brains come up empty when trying to quote God's Word. If they don't know it or apply it, then God's Word has no authority in their lives.

Somewhere along the way the Word of God, as accessible as it

is to us, has become one of those *hidden things*. To connect God to our kids and our kids to God, we must bring it out of hiding. For our children's sake we need to divulge the secret.

Remember: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart"(Heb. 4:12, NIV).

Our kids like to experience things that are alive, active and sharp. We wield enormous influence with them when we pull the double-edged sword of the Word of God from the sheath and make God's Word alive, active and sharp for them. When we show our kids how to use the sword, they will learn to correctly handle the word of truth(see 2 Tim. 2:15).

At that point the internal influence of God's Word transforms their lives. It penetrates their innermost beings and points out to them God's thoughts and attitudes as opposed to their own thoughts and attitudes. Through His Word He shows them His heart so they can know Him intimately, and He reveals their own hearts so they can know themselves. Now that's a powerful weapon with authority!

How powerful? How much authority? Psalm 119:9-11 confirms that when God's Word begins to work in our kids' hearts, it produces three very positive results:

- It keeps our kids pure.
- It motivates them to pursue God with all their hearts.
- It protects them from sin (and all of its ugly results).

When we commit to teaching our kids God's Word, we will begin to see the authoritative Word work inside them. The internal Word sets the external boundaries. Instead of parents trying to get inside our kids' heads by making a bunch of rules they hate and then trying to enforce them over everybody's dead bodies, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of

God”(Eph. 6:17, NKJV) does the work. Eventually they will set their own boundaries.

Our kids then begin to see that Jesus, who is the Word, is better than they ever imagined. Their personal knowledge of God expands their thoughts about Him, deepens their experiences of enjoying Him and leads them to actions that honor Him.

They find their confidence in God and His Word soaring. They discover the guidance they need for following Jesus and the courage for making the hard daily decisions that come with following Him. Through this process He changes our kids from the inside out and empowers them with spiritual influence to lead others to change.

Now we know that teaching our kids the Word of God provides one secret to spanning the bridge. So what will you do to explore that secret for yourself and for them?

Secret No. 3: Pass on a passionate faith through disciple-making.

Parents get scared when their kids become teenagers. It’s as if they turn into werewolves. When our kids start acting weird and make it clear they want us to drop off the face of the earth, we panic.

One day they hug us, and the next day they hate us. One moment they want to be around us, and the next they treat us as if we have leprosy. True, but we make a huge mistake when we get caught on this roller-coaster ride and as a result pull back from our kids relationally and spiritually.

So how do we resolve this dilemma? We explore the secret of passing on a passionate faith to our children through disciple-making. That means we search prayerfully and creatively to find new ways not only to relate to our kids but also to intensify our spiritual investment in them. When we

unlock the secret of a disciple-making relationship with our children, over time they will learn to “set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments”(Ps. 78:7).

Every God-fearing family and church in the world wishes for these results—kids who genuinely trust God with issues such as rejection by a friend; who positively remember His deeds, such as bringing one of their friends into a relationship with Christ; who fervently keep His command to remain sexually pure when most of their peers have sex every weekend.

Godly characteristics don't appear automatically in kids' lives. Through the years I have observed that no approach other than investing in a disciple-making relationship with our kids produces these characteristics in them.

Most parents hand the spiritual development of their teenagers to the youth pastor or other volunteer youth leaders. When we do that, we make a tactical error of gigantic proportions. It's a big mistake because God has called parents to be the bridges, the primary loving relaters and spiritual leaders, to our kids. They desperately need us to play that role.

We partner with God in discipling our kids. More in tune than anyone else to our kids' needs, He entrusts their spiritual care to us. Our everyday adventure of following Jesus ourselves leads us down the path of taking our kids on that same adventure with us.

We have already confirmed that kids love adventure, relish relationships and desire the input of their parents, even when they cannot bring themselves to say so. Knowing that, we can boldly step out with confidence and pursue a discipling relationship with our kids.

Realizing that an important secret to spanning the bridge is passing on a passionate faith to our kids through disciple-making, will you decide now to pursue that secret?

A bridge solves the problem of disconnectedness. After the bridge opens, people can relate in ways not possible before. As we become a bridge and begin relating to our kids, we will have an influence on them beyond our wildest dreams. That influence will stir up the fire that already burns in their hearts.

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