

# Avoiding This Stumbling Block to Your Child's Spiritual Development

The period from 7 to 12 years of age is one of the most important in terms of a child's life—particularly, their capacities for growth. (We say 7 to 12, but each child develops at a different rate in every aspect of their lives, not just physically. These are more guides than they are rules.)

Kids in these years are not just growing upward. Their brains are changing as quickly as their bodies. Their muscles are, too. What's learned in this phase of development has more potential to stay with them than in any other season of their lives. That involves muscle memory such as sports or music lessons, cognitive abilities such as multiplication and spiritual truths such as developing identity. But as always, there are blocks that get in their (and our) way in terms of helping children reach this crucial milestone in their spiritual development.

**Over-Encouragement:** Just as we could call this the Age of Identity Development, we could also call it the Age of Lessons and Practices. For you, it could be called the Age of Carpool. Your child has piano lessons on Monday night. Soccer practice is on Tuesday night, dance is on Thursday and Boy Scouts are on Friday afternoons, plus a weekend campout from time to time.

As a parent, you're not only using these practices and lessons to build their skills; you're trying to build their confidence. And you're exactly right. Because of the way their brains are developing, this is the time these skills have their greatest boomerang effect. What's learned now is much

more likely to come back than what's learned at 18 or 30.

In the flurry of activities and building confidence, however, we can forget an even greater truth. We spend our time cheering them on, building them up and encouraging them. And again, rightly so. But in the midst of all of this cheering and building and encouraging, we can place too much emphasis on growing their confidence. We worry so much that their little self-esteems are fragile that we sometimes neglect growing their understanding of grace. We don't talk about sin because we don't want them to doubt God's love for them.

Several summers ago, we were at second- to fourth-grade camp. I was teaching on one of the "put off" and "put on" list verses, such as Colossians 3. You remember, Colossians 3:5 starts with putting off "sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust." We didn't stress those quite so much with the second- to fourth-graders. But the verse goes on to add, "doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God." It then goes on to include "bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk" and lying (Colossians 3:5-9, MSG). I'll stop there; I'm feeling convicted myself.

Anyway, we were talking about this verse from *The Message*. I asked the kids if they had any idea what they most wanted to "put off." Several of them said things like, "Sometimes I tease my brother," "I wasn't very nice to a boy in my class once." And then, the always helpful, "I can't think of anything."

In the midst of all of these non-admissions, one second-grade boy named Caleb stood up. Now, I have to say that Caleb has had really good teaching. I know his parents well and know that they have raised all of their children, Caleb included, to know the gospel. He stood up and simply but powerfully said, "I lie." The room was silent.

And then it wasn't. Hand after hand went up of kids who felt free to tell the truth. They spoke of cheating, meanness, bad tempers, grabbing whatever attracted their fancy. They were honest. And during the day that followed, they were freer than any day I had seen them at camp thus far. As Caleb knew, honesty is where grace really starts.

Kids in these years know they don't do everything right. They know they fail. Make mistakes. They may not be as familiar with the word "sin," but they know all too well when they've done something wrong. And they're looking to us for a response. {eoa}

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