

Leading Your Children to God Takes Heart Work

Little hands raised toward the sky, some steady, some shaking. Little feet moving swiftly, dancing, marching. Tearful eyes pressed shut with visions and dreams. Small bodies bowed low in worship and prayer. Tiny voices silencing entire congregations, warning and pleading with the hope of Jesus Christ.

These are the children of revival, fast-forwarding into the end times prophesied by Joel (see Joel 2:28-29). You'll find them worshipping, interceding, preaching and prophesying at churches across the country—wherever children's ministry is undergoing a revolution.

"Children need the power of God to overcome the fierce temptations of our day," says popular children's minister Mark Harper of Sauk Rapids, Minn. "One experience with the Holy Ghost can change their [lives] forever!"

Today, as the standard is raised in children's ministry, even the very young are being led into a more experiential faith. No longer content with Sunday school crafts and entertainment, kids of all ages are learning to pray, witness and use their spiritual gifts.

"It's not enough to merely teach children about God," says David Weldon, a children's minister who used to oversee product development for CharismaLife, a former publisher of Sunday school and youth materials. "Even the devil knows about God. It's more important to give kids the chance to experience His presence."

But even in times of revival, parents cannot rely solely on the church to cultivate this experiential faith in their children. Many kids are never exposed to revival meetings, and

those who are may not find a weekly dose of Pentecost sufficient to carry them through the rest of the week. They need to experience the Holy Spirit in the environment where they are most profoundly impacted: the home.

We know God is pouring out His Spirit on the younger generation, but is He also showing up with signs and wonders in the privacy of their homes?

That answer depends more on parents than on God, ministers say. Since parents set the spiritual tone of the home, children are apt to seek God's presence with the same tenacity they do.

"Church and home must be on the same page," says Harper, who ministers to thousands of children at conferences and at his Minnesota-based camp. He believes revival meetings have an edge because of the investment of prayer and preparation that go into them. But on the home front, he says, most Christian families don't even have a prayer or worship time together.

Welday agrees. "I love to put on a praise CD and worship around the house," he says. "I know that my teen-age sons are far more impacted by observing my lifestyle of worship than by my lecture on the subject."

Many Christian parents feel inadequate. Either they don't know how to impart spiritual truth to young hearts, or their own relationships with God are lacking.

"If you want to see a change in your kids," Harper says, "it's quite possible that change may begin in you." Parents who want their children to be impassioned for God must be "in the river" themselves, he says.

That's because children are wired to learn through imitation.

Do As I Do

Karyn Henley, an award-winning children's communicator based

in Nashville, Tenn., agrees. "God-encounters can happen, but the key is the parent," she says. "Preschoolers imitate the signs of faith of the significant adults in their [lives]," she explains.

Most people agree with the concept of role-modeling, but some are uncomfortable with the idea of children moving in spiritual gifts such as prophecy and tongues. Harper's popular SuperChurch curriculum, now used in more than 6,000 churches worldwide, came under fire for allowing puppets to use such "gifts" during puppet presentations.

Although he denies teaching kids to copycat tongues or prophecy, he does admit that children will imitate what they are exposed to. "If they are not imitating spiritual things, they're going to imitate something else because God created them to imitate," he says.

Harper says his motive is to expose children to the fullness of the faith, but he warns against pushing them into any spiritual experience, including salvation. Although his 20-year ministry has prayed with more than 10,000 kids to receive the Holy Spirit, he says children who respond to altar calls at his meetings are always screened to make sure they understand what they are praying for.

Imitating others does not prevent children from having genuine encounters with God. The more time they spend in spiritual disciplines such as prayer and worship, the more personal and mature their relationships with God become. For this reason modeling experiential faith should be combined with solid scriptural teaching, and parents should be careful to pace their instruction according to their children's levels of understanding.

The emphasis for young children should be learning to hear God's voice, Harper says. In his book, *Children and the Holy Spirit* (Mark Harper Ministries), Harper describes four ways

parents can teach them to expect to hear from Him: the inward witness, the conscience, the inner voice and visions.

Speaking what they hear is important, too. Although some people think children are too immature to speak God's message to others, Harper and Henley say the onus is on the hearer.

"Receive [prophecy from children] just as you would from an adult," says Henley, author of the original version of *The Beginner's Bible*, which has sold more than 3 million copies. "Weigh it and measure it against your heart, against the Word of God, and discern it as you would any other word."

Lenny La Guardia, director of *Passing It On Ministries* for children at Mike Bickle's International House of Prayer, Kansas City, Missouri, is convinced that children should be treated as fully functioning participants in the kingdom of God. He tells parents to allow their children to minister within the home. Asking a simple question such as, "Is the Lord showing you anything about our family?" can be a tool to teach children to listen to God's voice and minister to others, he says.

Keeping a Balance

In order for parents to model experiential faith, they must maintain a balance between structure and spontaneity, says Jeanene Thicke, founder of *Children's Vision International (CVI)*. Thicke is mother to more than 90 children in Bogotá, Colombia, where she established three orphanages for homeless street children.

"Structure creates order and discipline," she says, "which in turn makes teaching easier for children." Bible lessons at CVI are done at a specific time and place each day so that when children are gathered in that part of the home, they know what to expect.

But parents must also learn to capture life's teachable moments. Henley's book, *100 Ways to Teach Your Child About God*

(Tyndale House), offers simple ideas for drawing spiritual truth out of everyday things in life. For example, when you go to the car wash, you can talk to your kids about how sin makes people dirty, but Jesus cleanses us. Or you can instill a sense of God's creativity and humor by studying the animals at the zoo.

A passage in the Old Testament gives us the who, what, when and where of spiritual training: "'Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up'" (Deut. 11:18-19, NKJV).

"It's not a Bible lesson," Thicke says, "it's a life lesson! It's both all-day stuff and a designated time and place for devotions." Modeling everything from worship and prayer to helping the poor should be a natural part of every Christian home.

The children of CVI are taught to pray for everything from food and clothing to healing. When Angie, a 3-month-old street baby who was paralyzed in an accident, was brought to CVI, the children prayed for her, and within a few months she was walking and totally normal.

"That boosted the kids' faith to pray for anybody and anything, whether the fish is sick or it's one of the children," Thicke says with a smile.

When the World Trade Center towers collapsed, a group of CVI children immediately called the American staff members together. Falling on their knees and holding lighted candles, the children gathered around the adults and began to intercede for them and for America. That kind of initiative is a true God-encounter, Thicke says, because it's birthed in the hearts of the children.

Train Up a Child

Parents can block their kids' spiritual growth because they know them too well. Quoting Willie George, one of America's leading children's ministers, Harper says parents fail to see their children with a spiritual eye. "Most people know their children after the flesh," he says. "We must believe our children can know and experience God and be used by Him."

Jesus faced a similar problem when He went to Nazareth. He could not do many miracles in His hometown because the people had no faith in Him. To them, He was just the carpenter's son (see Matt. 13:53-58).

Henley says the key to communicating faith to children is to know them as individuals and to relate to them according to their developmental stages. Although these stages are universal, the ages attached to them are only a guideline.

Infants. Meeting an infant's physical needs for food, warmth and affection teaches him to trust. Exposing babies to soothing Christian music, prayer and scripture helps initiate the concept of God in their spirits.

Toddlers (ages 2-3). In toddlers, the conscience is not yet developed, so be patient with inconsistent choices and apparent disregard for others, including God. But take advantage of this selfish stage to teach about how God created your child special, beautiful and so on, Thicke says. Focus on teaching consistent obedience because obedience to parents precedes obedience to God.

Toddlers love upbeat music and dancing, so worship with instruments, shout, leap, kneel, lift hands, be active, Harper says. Bible verses set to music are easily memorized at this age. Don't worry, the words become more meaningful as children mature.

Because they don't comprehend death, toddlers can't grasp the meaning of the cross, Henley says. And they think very

literally, so watch how you articulate the gospel. She says some children are disturbed about “asking Jesus into their hearts” because they can’t figure out how to get Him inside their bodies.

Toddlers also cannot consistently discern between reality and fantasy, so tell them over and over when a story or character is real and when it is “pretend.” Also be discerning about graphic stories and pictures, even from the Bible. Focus on God’s love and kindness.

Preschool (ages 4-5). Around age 4, the conscience begins to develop. Allow preschoolers to see themselves as sinners, continually pointing to Jesus, who forgives and helps us.

Preschoolers compare themselves with others and copy heroes. “Because they’re looking at everybody else, it is the best time to teach them to become a helper,” Thicke says. She recommends Betty Lukens’ flannelgraphs as a tool to teach about the early life of Jesus.

According to James Dobson of Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the year from age 5 to age 6 is the most critical time for children to internalize what they’ve been taught. As they begin to distinguish fantasy from reality, they either believe or discard ideas about life, so parents must reinforce truth in tangible ways.

Expose preschoolers to spiritual gifts but don’t focus on them, ministers say. Encourage conversational prayer, and pray the Scriptures together.

Elementary (ages 6-10). During the elementary years, children begin to understand symbolism and rely on God more personally. Begin to study and pray about spiritual gifts together, but focus more on God’s promises, character and attributes.

Around age 7, the conscience develops more fully, and understanding of sin becomes more personal. Pray for a spirit

of repentance. Once your child learns to read, help him establish a daily devotional time when he can pray, worship and read his Bible on his own.

Preteen (ages 10-12). During preteen years, self-identity is key. As children begin looking more outside the family, parents should not feel threatened but should seek positive mentors and role models for their kids, LaGuardia says.

It's also important to begin allowing greater responsibility by building leadership qualities in your child that can be demonstrated both at home and at church.

Teen-ager (ages 13-17). Teens need to separate from their parents and find their own footings in faith, Henley says. Make sure they are challenged and shepherded by their youth pastor, and find ways for teens to serve in the church to give them a real sense of belonging.

"Relationship is everything," LaGuardia says. Stay aware of their lives, stay close, and keep the lines of prayer and communication open.

Seeking the Giver, Not the Gifts

Although supernatural experiences can revolutionize a child's relationship with God, limiting the work of the Holy Spirit to the spectacular may leave kids dissatisfied and doubting God's work in their lives. Some even see a danger in attending services in which people manifest the power of God in unusual ways, such as shaking or being slain in the spirit. Kids who don't have a profound experience in such services may feel confused, alienated or even manipulated into doing something disingenuous, so it's important to communicate to them that God works uniquely in each person's life.

"How do you define the presence of the Holy Spirit?" LaGuardia asks. "The Holy Spirit is moving in the corporate thing, and that's the real deal, but if it doesn't repeat itself at home, it's not the real deal? I think that's bogus," he says. "When

kids come home and just love on their parents, I think that's the Holy Spirit too."

LaGuardia says miracles in a child's world may sometimes be defined in smaller ways such as answered prayer, boldness to witness on the playground or restoring broken relationships in the home. He teaches children to minister to their families by praying for them and leading unsaved parents to Christ.

"You need to be real practical with your family," Thicke agrees. "It's the small things like teaching your children to forgive each other, love each other and love God."

Children need to be equipped with faith that is powerful and relevant, complete with real-life experiences. But basic disciplines such as worship, prayer and Bible reading are what bring a standard of biblical truth to experiential faith.

"It's really about how we model Jesus for these kids," LaGuardia says.

And any Christian parent can do that, no matter what age his children are. There is no better way than mentoring and motivating them on the home front to insure that God continues to powerfully touch this generation by the power of His Spirit as He has already begun to do.

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