

How to Open Your Child's Window to God

One of the most memorable moments for Christian parents is their child's awakening to faith. What God wants, and what any clear-thinking Christian parent wants, is for children to come to the place where they "own" their relationship with God.

Some children take the long route on their journey of faith and make their commitment to the Lord in their teen-age years—or later. While this may be nerve-racking to the Christian parent, not every soul is on the hoped-for evangelical timetable of "accept the Lord in the preschool years, rededicate or get baptized in the teen-age years and serve the Lord for life thereafter."

Helping your child own a strong faith in Jesus Christ begins with you, the parent. You must embrace the journey each child is on and get comfortable with the fact that you are not in control of this process. If you do try to control it, you may be ensuring that your child gets to his destination the long way.

DEFINING PARENTAL ROLES

What then is the parent's role in a child's faith development? There are two extreme schools of thought. The correct answer is usually in the middle. The following examples will help to illustrate my point.

Arnie's parents not only were in church every time the doors opened, but also believed in keeping up appearances. As long as their four children were under their roof, church attendance and "correct Christian behavior" were to be observed.

Forget enjoying and loving God. To Arnie's parents, the Bible was a rule book to be followed, and any deviation was met with

swift punishment. Predictably, Arnie spent most of the '60s and '70s in a drug-induced stupor, never even considering that there was a God who could be enjoyed, loved, obeyed and served.

Pam's family occasionally went to a mainline church where truth was relative. God was in nature, but the nature of God wasn't in Jesus; it was in good works, social justice and higher education.

You lived faith by trying to be good and "tolerant" of everything. With no absolute truth, no need for a Savior and no knowledge of divine intervention, Pam had no North Star to look to when life started throwing fastballs at her.

Pam's brother died of a drug overdose. Her sister became a lesbian. Her first marriage failed, and her college-aged sons were both kicked out of school.

With a bottle of pills in one hand and the phone in the other, she called a Christian she knew from work and said: "You act like life has meaning. I'll give you 10 minutes to try to convince me it does."

Both Arnie and Pam eventually found their way to the God of the Bible and the Savior from Nazareth. They most assuredly took the long route.

Perhaps a fallen world, fallen parents, ignorance and willful disconnection from God are reasons some souls must come to the edge of hell. But I believe that it is never God's intention for it to happen this way.

Unfortunately, even "perfect" parents have children who must be snatched away from the enemy at the last moment. This fact, however, shouldn't prevent us from doing the right things to help our children own their faith as they grow. What are the "right things"?

****Live and model enjoying God.**
****Live and model loving God.**
****Live and model following God.**
****Live and model serving God.**

Within our model of following God is the essential element of helping our child recognize that their relationship with God is their relationship with God. We can't give them our abundant life in Christ, but there is a great chance that if we help them discover how they can serve God with their unique gifts, our children will want to love and follow Him.

A FAITH OF THEIR OWN

Whatever age your children are, you can help them to realize the grace and forgiveness God has lavished upon them through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. The journey begins with the child's realizing he or she is a sinner.

Some little children understand their need for salvation. But others don't truly get it until they've experienced a bit more of life.

Parents help their children enjoy, love and obey God by giving them the full picture of their own sin and the full story of God's grace. Let me illustrate five ways you can do both:

Don't venerate Bible characters except Jesus. Bible heroes were all humans who most definitely weren't perfect.

How is God's grace shown? By the fact that these people made mistakes but didn't let their mistakes keep them from following God and doing big things for Him.

Don't venerate other adults the child looks up to. Grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles—whoever is close to your child can seem larger than life and may appear "perfect." In an appropriate way, talking about the total package or letting the significant adult talk about their human foibles won't burst your child's bubble. It will point

to God's goodness and grace.

Encourage the other adult leaders your child admires to share their faith stories. Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, even the senior pastor all need to be real people who have overcome mistakes by the power of God. Invite them to your home and have them share their testimonies.

Read and listen to the testimonies of those who have strayed far from God and then realized how much they needed Him. Read books or Christian magazines; bring people into your home or watch Christian television to allow your child to hear the faith stories of those who talk about the effects of sin and the grace of God.

Search for examples of people "learning the hard way." I know a couple who took their teen-agers to a local juvenile institution. It doesn't take long in this type of controlled environment to see where a series of poor choices—or even one stupid choice—can lead.

ENCOURAGING EPIPHANIES

Dan, a former church youth leader, understands the importance of a young person's making small but significant steps in his walk with Christ. One young girl named Jennifer who was in his youth group for six years did this.

Although Jennifer came from a stable and loving Christian home, she was the strong-willed type. By age 13, she had pretty much tuned out parental sermons, family devotions and adult church. But because most of her friends were in youth group, she kept within earshot of the Lord.

At church camp, between her eighth- and ninth-grade years, she listened to the testimonies of about a half-dozen high schoolers. In their own words, they admitted their imperfections and their need for the Lord.

Something clicked inside Jennifer's head. If they weren't

perfect, I guess I don't have to be either. The next summer, she came forward to, as she admitted, "give my life to Christ for the first time."

Two years later she rededicated her life to Christ. Three years later, she became a camp counselor for junior highers. Today, she's a full-time Youth for Christ leader, raising her own funds to disciple other women volunteers and teen-agers.

From the outside, it seems Jennifer's parents had nothing to do with all these epiphanies, but she admitted differently. "I'm sure they prayed for me a bunch, and they always found the money to get me to camp. I had to find the Lord on my own timetable and through my own discovery. I tested what they said all through high school, and I found out something: It was all true."

Thomas' parents had to be a little more proactive. They played into his artistic, inquisitive nature by choosing one man in the Bible who was like him. When he was about 8, they decided that David would be the biblical character they would constantly refer to.

To understand their son and to help him find his way to God, they first studied David's life. His ups and downs and his words served to help Thomas make his way.

When Thomas got pushed around on his seventh-grade football team, the lesson was "Goliaths will fall when courage and God are on your side." When he started writing poems, his mom read him some of David's psalms.

When Thomas was caught stealing candy with his best friend at a local supermarket, Psalm 51 served to show him that true repentance pleases God and makes you clean.

Giving Thomas the appropriate thirst for a "Bible friend" helped him make the transition to Jesus. Though David was a hero that was human enough to relate to, Jesus was a Savior

real enough to trust.

KEEPING SPIRITUAL WINDOWS OPEN

Kids will not share a faith they've borrowed. If they own it, they will share it with others. Without this essential step, they won't see the wisdom of obedience or the joy of serving. Here are some ways to make sure that once your child's windows are open to spiritual things, they remain open.

Keep the date. Get a Bible and mark down John 1:12 next to the day and time your child accepted Christ. Then tell your child to go to that verse anytime he or she doubts his or her salvation.

Throw a party. Go all out for your children's spiritual birthdays. Buy presents, make a cake and invite church friends over. That way every year they can mark when they first made the choice to become a Christian.

Give them permission. Romans 12:12 talks about presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. Help your children see that they can rededicate their lives to the Lord as often as they feel they need to.

Raise the bar. Make sure your children are giving God room to do miracles. Encourage them to be courageous in prayer and unafraid to ask for anything. God will mark their lives with miracles that will undeniably prove His love and personal concern.

Growing by doing. Give your children opportunities to share Christ in actions and words. As a family, invite your neighbors for a meal and share the Christmas story or show the Jesus film. Brainstorm together for ways to show God's love by helping others.

We all know by experience that faith grows in starts and stops. Mountain peaks and lower-than-low valleys in spiritual

progress are common.

Times of questioning are not only predictable but also necessary for some. The good news is that eventually, through prayer and persistence, tears and talk, a high percentage of people who grow up in a Christian home do put down the stake that says: "I give up. I'm yours, Lord."

While you're waiting for your child to show signs of a developing spiritual life, remember how God brought you to true ownership of your faith. Thank Him for those who cheered you on spiritually and also prayed for you—even when you were far off. Now, trust God to be as faithful with your children as He was with you.

Read a companion devotional.

Cheri Fuller is an inspirational speaker and award-winning author of *The One Year Book of Praying Through the Bible (Tyndale)* and 41 other books. For her resources visit .