

Parenting is More Than

A FORMULA



JIM NEWHEISER

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P U B L I S H I N G

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I thank God for Pat, Christina, Don,
and Darlene for all the help they gave me
in preparing this booklet.

I am also grateful to God for all I have
learned about parenting from the writings
of my sisters in the Lord, Elyse Fitzpatrick
and Leslie Leyland Fields.

RECENT SURVEYS show that 60 to 80 percent of children raised in Christian homes drop out of church upon reaching young adulthood.¹ Parents are alarmed. They want to know what they can do to prevent their children from becoming prodigals. They yearn for a formula to guarantee that their kids will turn out right. Countless parenting books and seminars claim to offer the answer. The options can be overwhelming.

- As we begin, consider your own views on parenting. How should a family decide how to educate their children?

PARENTS ARE LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Chip and Debbie reasoned that since they had gone to public schools and turned out all right, their

kids should follow in their footsteps. They became concerned, however, when their eight-year-old son, George, started using bad words he had picked up in school. Then their ten-year-old daughter, Sally, began insisting that she be allowed to make the same entertainment choices as her peers. They were also concerned about the non-Christian perspectives taught in science and history. The last straw was when their children brought home a note from school telling them to come to class on Friday dressed in the colors of the rainbow for gay pride day.

Chip and Debbie decided to pull George and Sally out of the government school and put them in the local Christian school instead. They appreciated the commitment of the Christian teachers and administration and the effort to instruct the children from a biblical worldview. The tuition was so expensive that Debbie had to go back to work to pay the bills, but she was willing to make the sacrifice for her family. There were problems in the Christian school, however. Chip and Debbie were shocked to learn that the police had raided a wild party where several of the high schoolers were caught with drugs and alcohol. There were also rumors that the girlfriend of the principal's son had had an abortion during the summer.

Some friends then suggested that Chip and Debbie try homeschooling their children. Chip and Debbie liked the idea of having more control over what their children were taught and how they were disciplined. They also realized that it would be cheaper for Debbie to quit her job and teach the kids at home. Their own parents offered some resistance, warning them that they were going to ruin the kids. But they got lots of great advice, bought curricula, and set up a schoolroom in their home. At first George and Sally enjoyed getting to stay home, and they liked the less rigid schedule. But as they reached their teen years, George became resentful of his mother's bossing him around all the time, and Sally wanted to go back to the public school that most of their friends attended. Chip and Debbie started to wonder where they had gone wrong, and they had no idea what to do next.

- What might be some reasons that Chip and Debbie's approaches didn't work as they had hoped?

- Did they do anything that you think was a mistake?

- Are any of Chip and Debbie's approaches things that you yourself have considered or tried before?

Mark and Annika both came from non-Christian homes. Mark's father was an angry man who would fly into a rage and beat Mark when he disobeyed. Mark determined that he would never beat his kids but would simply reason with them as intelligent human beings. By the time their son, Dirk, was four years old, Mark and Annika realized that this approach was not working. Whenever they tried to get Dirk to do something, he would throw a temper tantrum, often in public. Annika had a friend who gave her a book and some audios by an experienced Christian couple that taught a specific method for disciplining children. Annika and Mark listened to the audios

and started to implement the system. Initially Dirk resisted the new regimen, but over time he became much more compliant. When their second son, Dan, came along, Mark and Annika tried to follow those same techniques, but for some reason Dan didn't respond as well. Annika's friend said she must not have been following the program well enough. Mark wondered whether they were still missing something.

- What might be some reasons that Mark and Annika's approaches didn't work as they had hoped?

- Did they do anything that you think was a mistake?

- Are any of Mark and Annika's approaches things that you yourself have considered or tried before?

own family, and to predict what the results will be years down the road. They wonder, “Does the Bible teach a specific child-training methodology that guarantees that our children will grow up to be mature, productive Christian adults?”

MANY FORMULAS TO CHOOSE FROM

Many parents have relied upon educational formulas to ensure a good outcome with their children. In previous generations, parents trusted the public schools to give their children an education based upon Christian principles in a safe moral environment. Those disillusioned when court decisions forced prayer and religion out of the classroom have since turned to other approaches. Some have established Christian schools that incorporate prayer, Bible instruction, and a Christian perspective on learning. Many parents have made great personal and economic sacrifices to ensure that their children get a Christian education, with the expectation that these children will carry what they learn into adult life. Committed teachers have accepted lower salaries in order to serve the mission of the school. Other parents have become a part of the growing homeschool movement, devoting significant time and resources to preparing their

children for adult life. Among Christian schools and homeschooling, various approaches such as classical education have been promoted as the key to preparing children to live as responsible, godly adults.

Parents have also put their hope in a variety of church-based formulas, believing that they are giving their children a solid foundation by taking them to Sunday school, children's programs, youth groups, Vacation Bible School, and youth camps. There is always the danger, however, of relying too much on the church while failing to provide training in the home, and the Family Integrated Church movement has tried to counteract this by teaching that any program that separates children from their parents is wrong and harmful. They say that the key to parenting success is for the father to teach his own children while keeping a very tight control on any outside influences.²

Parents have enthusiastically embraced different formulas for training and disciplining their children in the home. James Dobson's book *Dare to Discipline* made a huge impact when it came out in 1970.³ Christians felt encouraged that a respected psychologist actually endorsed the spanking of children, as opposed to showing the permissiveness that characterized secular child-training theories of that

time. Other experts advocate approaches to child training that claim to come straight from Scripture. Many babies and small children have been raised according to the Ezzos' *Babywise* and *Growing Kids God's Way* programs, which emphasize structure and schedule even from infancy.⁴ Millions attended Bill Gothard's seminars⁵ at which he authoritatively set forth steps for success when working with young people. Tedd Tripp's excellent book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, which has sold over a million copies, seeks to help parents go beyond controlling external behavior by addressing their children at a heart level.⁶ Other parenting gurus, including Michael and Debi Pearl, offer detailed parenting advice to thousands of devoted followers.⁷ More recently, books are being written that emphasize the role of the gospel and grace in parenting.

- What parenting approaches or formulas have you already considered? These could include educational approaches, church-based approaches, or home-discipline approaches.

- What parenting methodologies did your own parents use?

Strengths

Most of these formulas do have strengths. While it may not be as easy for Christian families to educate their children in a public school as it was when a good education with proper discipline and order was the public-school standard (as some of us are old enough to remember), some Christians still seek to be salt and light in these schools as teachers and involved families. Others are enthused about the new wave of public charter schools, which allow a high level of parental involvement at minimal expense. Christian schools can offer a high quality, biblically-based curriculum with faithful teachers who are committed to discipling their students. Still other parents have seen their children benefit from the individualized parental instruction offered through homeschooling and have helped them to excel academically.

Many unchurched young people have been led to faith through Christian programs for children and youth. These programs can also be helpful supplements to the training that children from Christian families receive at home. Children can be greatly blessed, especially as they come into their teen years, by adults in church programs who can speak scriptural wisdom into their lives (see Prov. 11:14). On the flip side, Family Integrated Churches rightly encourage fathers to function as spiritual leaders in their own homes.

Books and seminars about child training have helped many parents to establish discipline and structure in their homes. Those that have emphasized the need to address children at the heart level with the gospel, as opposed to merely controlling their behavior, have been a great help to many families.

- What are strengths of the parenting approaches you have used?

- What are strengths of approaches you've seen *other* parents use?

Weaknesses

However, most of the formulas also have their share of weaknesses. For instance, public schools often promote an antibiblical worldview in the classroom and provide a moral environment where temptation from ungodly peers is not uncommon. Even Christian schools can have an equally questionable peer influence.⁸ Not all homeschool parents do an adequate job of educating their children. Others control their kids to such a degree that they are not prepared to take on adult responsibility.

Some parents are guilty of delegating the spiritual training of their children to the church and its programs. Some youth programs wrongfully separate young people from their parents and from the life of the church while also failing to provide sound biblical training. Children may memorize hundreds of Bible verses in order to

win a prize, while their hearts remain untouched by scriptural truth. Yet those in the Family Integrated Church movement, who make their view of the family into a test of fellowship, have caused some good churches to split and have created new churches that can be like “gated communities” where those who don’t follow their formula don’t fit in.

A weakness of some child-training formulas is that they have focused on controlling behavior while neglecting the heart. Other formulas go beyond the Bible and fall into legalism.

- What are weaknesses of the parenting approaches you have used?

- What are weaknesses of approaches you’ve seen *other* parents use?

- Why might the same educational or child-training approach have varying results for different children?

- What was good and what was bad about how you were raised?

- How did the way you were educated affect you?

WHAT NOW?

Such varied results lead parents from formula to formula, looking for the silver bullet that will solve all their parenting problems. An experience of failure in one system often leads to the creation of the next.¹⁰ Every year new books offer new formulas or

fresh twists on old formulas. It turns out that the key is to teach children more about creation science or apologetics, claims one book. What really matters is that fathers spend time alone with each child every week, asserts another. Or we are told that we must teach our children critical thinking through studying the classics. One expert teaches that we can motivate children with rewards, while another warns that we will ruin our kids if we “bribe” them. Certain experts say that it is best to have big families, while others tell us that “the fewer children a family has, the more likely they are to produce spiritual champions.”¹¹ One may be tempted to say, “Now that my children are grown, you tell me this?” or “I tried to follow the formula, but it didn’t work with my kids.” Leslie Fields writes, “You’re parenting the best that you know how, guided by the best-selling Christian books, but your children are not responding. Why aren’t they happy and content? What are you doing wrong? Why can’t you create the peaceful Christian home so many promise?”¹²

- What has made you feel overwhelmed or hopeless in the approaches you’ve already tried or read about for your children?

With all the competing formulas out there, parents can feel overwhelmed when trying to choose the best way to train their children. There are four things to keep in mind that will help parents to choose what is best for their families.

I. EXERCISE DISCERNMENT

Parents need to exercise discernment when examining child-training formulas. Paul commended the Bereans because they examined the Scriptures to see whether what he and Silas taught them was true (see Acts 17:11). An expert's claim that his or her formula is God's methodology for child training is no guarantee. Parents who fail to be good Bereans may unwittingly buy into formulas that are either unbiblical or extrabiblical. Therefore, we need to distinguish between what seems plausible and what is actually proven from Scripture.

Anecdotal Stories Do Not Prove That a Formula Works.

Parenting books typically abound with accounts of families that have been transformed by following

Parents can get lost in the jungle of formulas that compete for our attention, promising success with our children if we just follow certain guidelines. . . .

How do we navigate all the options?

Jim Newheiser teaches us how to discern the value of parenting methods and critique them against God's Word. Formulas may fail, but be encouraged: the gospel surpasses any formula.

"Jim Newheiser has given us a little gem of parenting wisdom and grace in this booklet! Don't be fooled by the size, because the content is rich and radical. Jim cuts through all the fog and hype of so much of the Christian parenting materials and . . . brings clarity to what we as parents can and should do."

—*Brad Bigney*, Senior Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Florence, Kentucky

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