

Leading Our Children to Faith

Each Day, Every Day

By Joe White

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God has told us to teach our children to love and obey him. I have tried to do the following things, and I encourage other parents to do them too. Every day?even just once a day, but every single day:

- *Plant a seed verse in the heart of your child.*
- *Water that seed with words of encouragement.*
- *Back those words up with one-to-one time.*
- *Love your spouse with an abiding love.*
- *Be together at the dinner table.*

Now his parents and I can only hope to understand how he came to be perplexed. Tim dropped acid, and acid dropped Tim. The rest of us are left to mourn his death and to ponder a youth culture gone terribly awry.

Adrienne and her ninth-grade boyfriend lived another kind of nightmare. She had "puppy love" on her mind. He was thinking "backseat passion." As the automatic transmission of foreplay shifted through its steamy gears, he acquired locker-room bragging rights. She became pregnant.

And what became of the baby? Fast forward 10 years as Adrienne walks into Valley View Elementary on her first day as a third-grade teacher. As she sees the innocent faces and hears the steady stream of questions, she realizes that her own child could have?should have?been walking in with the other kids. If only she had stayed out of that backseat. If only she had ignored the roadside billboard that made the abortion clinic look so welcoming. There are many "if only's" for Adrienne, and she may be counting them for the rest of her life.

Learning the Hard Way

I am a summer camp director involved with the lives of some 15,000 kids from around the world. But no children are so important to me as the four whom I call my own. I work overtime to see that they don't become like Tim and Adrienne. But I learned things the hard way, particularly after my older son entered the world.

Brady shattered the family mold. He was long and slender and ... sensitive. Not the least bit like the rest of us in my family. I so much wanted Brady to be an athlete. After all, I was the director of an athletic camp, an ex-collegiate athlete, a pump-iron-until-your-arms-fall-off kind of guy. What did I know about rearing a son who was sensitive?

So I decided to cure him of it, and we set goals together. (Perhaps I should say that I set goals for Brady. But I told myself that we were setting them together.)

I pushed and I pushed and I pushed, all the while thinking that I was doing the right thing. But one day it dawned on me that all my pushing had pushed Brady so far from me that I could barely distinguish the faint signals that he was trying to broadcast to me: "It sure would feel nice to have a dad who likes me for, who I am, not for who he wants me to be."

When I finally heard Brady, my muscle-bound heart was crushed and ashamed. About the same time one of my colleagues said that my daughter had told her cabin counselor, "My father is too busy with his job even to write me a letter at camp."

That moment my eyes were opened to the truth about my poor parenting habits, and I resolved to make changes that will last a lifetime. I got down onto my knees and asked Brady to forgive me, though I'm certain he didn't believe a word that I said. In fact, it took a long time for him to see that I had meant what I said.

The same was true for the rest of my family. They didn't know what to make of their new husband and father. Nevertheless, the changes that began in me that day were authentic, and they are still with me today. They have formed the basis of something that I call Faith Training.

What I am about to say is no formula for guaranteed success. Rather, it is obedience to Scripture that can help any dad or mom to guide a child into a deep

love for God. It is demanding but simple, time-consuming but rewarding. For me, the end results have been four words that I long to hear every day: "I love you, Dad."

The mandate for Faith Training is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

Plant a Bible Verse Each Day

Each day?even just once a day, but every single day?from the time your children are age three until they are 18, be with them at bedtime, pray with them and place a Bible verse in the treasure chest of their souls. As the years roll by, the verses will become chapters, the chapters will become books.

When my kids reached the age of nine, I told them that if they memorized two books in the Bible (like James, Philippians or First or Second Timothy), I'd find a set of car keys for them when they turned 16. The assignment was actually to me, because I knew that I would need to commit to spend time with MY children nightly, individually, taking on the happy task together until the goal was reached in tandem.

Speak the Language of Encouragement

Each day?even just once a day, but every single day?speak the language of encouragement that can quench a youngster's thirst like a desert spring: "Way to go, son." "I'm proud of you." "Super job." "That's terrific!" "Wow, awesome!" "Hold that follow-through while I call a sports magazine to take a picture of you." "I love you."

If you'll make the time to match these words with special events like fishing at the lake, camping in the backyard or walking in the park, your kids will not only hear your words, they will believe them too.

Demonstrate Love for Your Spouse

Each day?even just once a day, but every single day?do something nice for your

spouse. Make your wife feel special. Let your husband know that he is one of a kind. Show your kids that you feel blessed to be married to your spouse.

"The evening dishes are mine, honey" has become a motto in our household. A rose on Debbi-Jo's pillow is a small token of appreciation for all that she means to me.

Eat a Meal Together Dally

Finally, each day?even just once a day, but every single day?eat a meal together at home. Open the Bible and share a daily devotion. It will cling to your kids' hearts when the crisis years arrive.

This is Faith Training the biblical way: one day at a time, week after week, month after month, year after year. If you practice it diligently, you will greatly increase the likelihood that the kids you rear will be fruitful believers in the years ahead.

The Teaching of the Trees

Over the years I have jogged a lot of miles in the Ozark hills, and I have come to the conclusion that trees are good teachers to me. I can hardly go for a jog without their teaching me about all the Tims and the Adriennes of this world.

The poplars down by Woodson Bend are a favorite of homeowners because they grow so quickly and form an excellent break against the wind. Unfortunately' due to their soft pulp, poplars are also susceptible to disease. Tim seemed to be a poplar. On the outside he appeared to have it all together. But on the inside he was a soft and sumptuous "feast" for drugs.

The persimmons along the highway make me think of Adrienne because every year those trees are the first to be attacked by worms. Sometimes I think of that worm-of-a-boyfriend of Adrienne. He has no idea how much of her self-esteem he gnawed away.

Then there are the oaks. They are massive and seemingly impenetrable at their core. My son Brady is becoming an oak. Of course, he is not perfect, and he still has a lifetime of choices ahead of him. But it seems that when I quit trying to bend his branches in a way that would glorify me, Brady's character grew sturdy and strong.

Many parents have done all these things in this article and still have watched a son

or a daughter self-destruct.

Our heavenly Father too has seen his children go wrong. Does that make God a bad parent? On the contrary, it proves again the depravity of humankind, and it highlights our need for the Holy Spirit to help us in our parenting. God's responsibility is to fill us for the task. Our responsibility is to pour ourselves out in the act of Faith Training.

Each day?even just once a day, but every single day?we need to plant seed verses in the hearts of our children; water those seeds with words of encouragement; back up those words by making time to play one-to-one; love our spouse; and gather together at the dinner table. When our children become "oaks," when the rain pours and the wind blows, they will surely stand against the storm.