

Spiritual Training 101

Beginning with Nothing

Jim thought he was a great spiritual leader. He took his kids to Sunday school every week and planned to send them to a Christian school when he could afford it. But then one Sunday as he was getting ready to go to church, he found three of his young children at the bottom of the stairs, crying.

“What’s wrong?” he asked them.

“We don’t want to go to church, Daddy,” his daughter, Janae, said.

“It’s *boring*,” Jake said, wiping his tears with a fist.

“We’ve heard the Noah story so many times we don’t want to go anymore,” the eldest, Josh, added.

Jim looked at his children and realized he had no idea what they were being taught in church. He had no idea how the Bible was being presented.

“Not that I knew so much,” Jim says. “I was raised in a church where I was told that I couldn’t understand calculus without algebra, and therefore I could not understand scripture without years of theological training. But as I looked at my kids that day, I realized that I needed to assume the responsibility of teaching them biblical truth.”

He didn’t know where to begin. He didn’t know what to do. At first he thought he should know everything about God and scripture before he began. But he quickly knew that wouldn’t happen.

Just Me and My Kid

“Dad, can we go to IHOP? Please? Please?”

“Yes, Kyle, we can go to IHOP,” I say, smiling as I tousle his hair.

Kyle is excited about the chance to be alone with Dad. He looks forward to our Saturday breakfasts at the place of his choosing. Next week will be his brother Shaun’s turn. For less than \$10 and an hour a week, I get one of my boys all to myself. We talk about anything and everything. Sometimes it’s nothing. Sometimes it’s as important as the difference between religions. But it’s always good for our relationship – building our casual times together so that when there’s something important to convey, the boys are more willing to listen and absorb the faith lesson.

K.B.

“So I just dived right in. Whatever I learned, that’s what I taught the kids. I’d start with a problem or what I learned in Bible study and pass that concept on to them. For understanding the scriptures, I found resources to help me like the *Life Application Bible*. When I wanted to dig deeper, I bought a *Nave’s Topical Bible* and *Strong’s Concordance*.”

Jim also knew the typical reading from a family devotional wouldn’t inspire him or the kids. “I wanted it to be *fun*,” Jim said. “So I thought of having Family Nights.” These would be times of fun for the family with a spiritual message blended in with the fun. “I could define a biblical principle and impress it upon my children as Deuteronomy says.” He quickly discovered that Family Night, although formal, set up the informal.

So whether the family is huddling in the bug-infested crawl space to discuss persecution, the children are climbing on Dad’s back to experience how we cannot get to God without Him coming to help us, or they’re using a dummy electrical situation to evoke worry, the family is having a great time while lessons are being taught.

For many, like Jim, the notion of becoming intentional about spiritual training at home creates a knot of tension in the stomach due to past failure or intimidation. Let’s start with a clean sheet of paper. Erase all your preconceived notions about training your children in the Christian faith. For a moment forget all the guilt-driven, unpleasant attempts you’ve made in the past or any ideas you may have about this being boring and ineffective. There are a few principles that comprise the core of our “Spiritual Training 101” course. Remembering four simple phrases, you can keep the process simple and your priorities clear: Relationship is your priority. The Bible is your handbook. Life is your classroom. Your methods should target your child.

Principle 1: Relationship Is Your Priority

Kathleen grew up in a Christian home. She attended church regularly with Mom, Dad, and her siblings. The family Bible was prominently displayed on the den coffee table. There was prayer before every meal, even in restaurants. From all appearances, you would describe Kathleen as living in the ideal Christian family. And in many ways, you would be right. But there was one problem – Kathleen and her father didn't get along.

During childhood, Kathleen barely got to know her dad. As a successful professional, long hours and business travel kept him away from home during the week. As an adult Sunday school teacher, study and church activities consumed his weekends. His heart was right, but his schedule was full. Consequently, little relationship was fostered between him and his daughter during Kathleen's critical childhood years.

During adolescence, Kathleen struggled with low self-worth. But since no foundation of trust had been built between them she never shared these feelings with her father. Between acne, roller-coaster emotions, and boys, Kathleen could have used a daddy's hug. And he would have given it had she invited him into her world. But she didn't.

By the time Kathleen was a junior in high school, the tension between her and her father was thick. Whenever he led the family in prayer or tried to read a short devotion, her body stiffened. As the family marched dutifully into church behind her father, the deacon, Kathleen felt sick to her stomach. In those moments every fault in his life was magnified and profound disrespect burned in her heart. *What a hypocrite!* Kathleen thought behind her wooden stare. *If 'Mr. Holier-Than-Thou' thinks he can cram this religious garbage down my throat, he's got another think coming.*

When Kathleen left home as a young adult, she left the faith of her family as well. Despite her father's best intentions and diligent efforts to instill Christian values, they didn't take. She rejected the values – not because they were bad, but because they were his. You see, Kathleen needed more than mere knowledge of her father's faith - she needed a relationship with her father's heart. Without the latter, she wasn't interested in the former.

There are countless Kathleens in the world. Raised in Christian homes, they were given a solid spiritual legacy but rejected the values taught. Why? People reject the faith for many reasons. Quite often, it is because the relationship with Mom, Dad, or both was weak. Don't misunderstand: Kathleen is responsible for her own decision to reject the faith. Her father is not to blame for the choices she made. But one can't help wondering how things might have been different if he had been as intentional about spending time playing with and getting to know Kathleen as he was about praying over meals and getting to family to church on time.

The old adage is true – people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Our children need more than a list of precepts and principles to embrace. If we want the values we teach them to stick, we must apply heavy amounts of the glue called love. We cannot have one without the other. Children perceive parental instruction through emotional lenses. Those lenses are framed by the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Real-Life Tip 1: Hold yourself accountable.

Bruce is the father of two. He has been spending time each week conducting activities designed to teach the faith to his children. He has also been busy at work and various other commitments. Concerned that he might not be

Always Take a Kid Along

"Hey, Jake, Put your shoes on. Let's get going."

"Okay, Dad."

It's Saturday: errand day for Dad. The van needs an oil change. A trip to the hardware store for screws and pipes and gadgets for the latest home improvement project: The perfect time for a one-on-one with one of the kids.

My dad taught me that. "Never go anywhere without a child," he told me. And he's right. By taking a kid away from the siblings, I get his or her full attention, and the child gets mine. I'm building the relationship while setting up the impromptu times. These are the moments when life presents the questions either from me or from the child, and the answers come from our faith view. The principle is that I must develop the relationship, for the relationship gives me the ability to share spiritual truth.

J.W.

The Watch

One night I tucked our youngest daughter Laura into bed. She wiggled herself under the covers as I removed my multifunction watch. “Here, Laura,” I said, placing it into her little hands. I showed her how some of the buttons worked, then let her push the ones that made it into a stopwatch or made the dial light up with a beautiful blue glow. She marveled at all the things the watch could do.

As the watch cast a blue glow onto her eager face, I asked, “Do you think this watch just happened to become a watch, or do you think someone made it?”

“Someone made it,” she answered.

I opened our Bible to Psalm 139 and read the passage that says we didn’t just happen to have the hair or nose or toes God gave us – we were “fearfully and wonderfully” made by Divine design.

J.T.

spending the time necessary to maintain a strong relationship with the kids, he decided to take a risk. Bruce sat the kids down one evening and asked them to grade the job he was doing as a dad.

“Tonight, I want you to fill out a ‘Report Card for Dad’ to grade me on how I’m doing,” Bruce explained. “There are several things the Lord expects me to do as your father, and I want your opinion on how well I’m doing.”

The kids were surprised but more than willing to go along. So they spent the next few minutes grading Dad by

completing the report card he had developed. Once it was completed, Bruce has an opportunity to discuss his grades with the kids. As expected, he received a different rating depending upon the child. His daughter, for example, graded him down on fair discipline but high on showing love. His son, on the other hand, thought the discipline was okay, but Dad didn’t spend enough time with him. As promised, Bruce resisted the urge to defend himself. The goal was to discover how the kids perceived his efforts, regardless of what Bruce himself thought of them.

Bruce shared later that the exercise, though painful, was extremely helpful as he assessed the relationship with his kids. It created an opportunity to clarify expectations and to discover areas he might improve in as a father. The risk was more than worth it.

Bruce understands the power of relationship in the spiritual training process. He realizes that it is not enough to merely instruct his children; he must also foster a strong relationship with them in order to create a context for success. As must we all.

Principle 2: The Bible Is Your Handbook

God gave us an instruction manual for life – the Bible. It’s funny how we sometimes take this awesome gift for granted and struggle along in life or in the teaching of our kids without consulting the handbook. It’s like the do-it-yourselfer who refuses to read the instruction manual when assembling his child’s gift, stays up until two in the morning trying to figure it out, and then blames the manufacturer for making it wrong.

Asking, “Should I be teaching my children the Bible or should I wait until they’re old enough to decide for themselves?” is like asking, “Should I make my children eat fruits and vegetables and have a proper diet now, or should I let them eat what they want until they’re old enough to decide for themselves?”

The Bible is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Teaching the Bible to our children is not an exercise in teaching religious ideas and ceremonies; it is teaching them how to live and have a good life. The Bible is their guidebook, their lifeline, their textbook, their help menu, their answer, their emergency first aid kit and, most importantly, their key to knowing God. If we believe the Bible is God’s Word, we will not only teach our children that its contents should guide their lives, but we will also demonstrate our belief by using it as a guide for our own lives.

Real-Life Tip 2: *Use the Bible and what it says as the foundations for your own life first.*

Where do we parents go when we need guidance and help? We need to live our own lives by the Bible’s principles. We need to apply ourselves not only to learning the Bible but also to learning how to better learn from the

Bible. There are lots of great books available on how to use and study the Bible. We need to allow our children to see our own commitment to learning God's Word and to allowing Him to speak to us and change us through it.

To help you increase your own knowledge of the Bible, the following may be useful: *How to Study the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993) is a good place to start. *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995) has lots of useful study notes, a commentary, and some study tools in the back (such as a concordance and maps).

Also Lawrence O. Richards' *Zondervan Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991) is a very useful tool. It explores the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words behind the English words and gives the reader an understanding of the different shades of meaning and nuances that are important for a dynamic interpretation of the Word of God. You might also like to try one of the popular Bible-based daily devotionals that have proven their worth over decades, such as *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery).

Principle 3: Life Is Your Classroom

When someone is learning how to fix a transmission, his practical training would probably take place in a garage. If the topic were football, the practical training would take place on the football field. In our case, the topic is the foundational principles and concepts that are to govern who we are, our behavior, our lives, and our relationships with God and others. Therefore, the practical training needs to take place in relevant venue: moment by moment, day by day, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

The Bible has not been taught once a principle has been explained and a verse memorized. No one becomes a great quarterback through classroom instruction alone. Would you care how many books the surgeon who is about to take out your gall bladder has read if you knew that was the sum total of his training? On the other hand, you'd be equally scared of a surgeon who had never read any books about the human body or the techniques of surgery but was on his second operation and doing much better.

God has designed the world and us so that learning about the things of God and applying them in everyday life happen together. That's the idea behind Deuteronomy 6:6-9. We're to impress God's commands on our children daily. We're to talk about them when we sit at home, when we're on the road, when we lie down at night, and when we get up in the morning. This can't be accomplished merely by taking our children to church and reading them Bible stories. We need to demonstrate to our children – through our growth, by our example, and by when and what we teach – that our faith is about who we are, how we act, and what we do as well as about what we believe. When we teach our children about their faith in this way, connecting our teaching with our life, our teaching method matches our message and becomes instantly more effective.

The Directions

One evening we turned a trip to McDonald's into a faith lesson. We piled into the van and I handed a simple map that I had created to seven-year-old Kyle.

"Okay, Kyle. It's up to you to make sure we get to McDonald's." I started the car and proceeded down our street. At the corner, I stopped and looked over my shoulder at him. "Where do I go now?"

Kyle looked at his map. "You turn left."

"Naw," I told him. "I think I know what I'm doing; I don't think I need to turn left." I turned right instead.

Kyle burst out in frustration, "It says you're supposed to turn left."

At the next point of decision, I did the same thing. Soon Kyle was really mad.

When we ended up at a dead end, I said, "I guess I didn't know where I was going, did I?"

"That's right, Dad, because you were supposed to follow the directions," Kyle shouted.

"Well, now what are we going to do?" I asked.

"Go back to the beginning and we'll follow the directions."

So that's what we did. We went back to the beginning. This time I followed the directions. During this second attempt at reaching McDonald's, we discussed what had occurred on our first trip.

"That's what happens when we don't obey the Bible," I told the children. "When we think we know what we're doing and we don't follow the directions, we lose our way. The scriptures are our directions for life."

An extra five minutes out of an already planned trip became a powerful faith lesson.

K.B.

It's in the Music

Our family loves music, so we often have some playing as we go about our chores and errands. One day I finally paid attention to the words of a song on our favorite tape. My daughter, Kelsie, came into the room.

"Hey, Kelsie, have you ever paid attention to this song?"

She paused and shook her head.

"Listen to it."

So we cuddled on the couch as she listened to the words. When it was over, she looked up at me. "That's a cool song, Dad."

"But do you know what it means?"

From there we launched into a discussion about storing up treasures in heaven, and how the song spoke of what we do on earth. Are we being selfish with our resources, ourselves, our time? Or are we doing things that have eternal value?

Even music afforded opportunities to pass along spiritual truths to my daughter – and we had fun doing it!

J.M.

Two important points need to be made in this context. First, our life is a major example to our kids. Practice-what-you-preach parenting is the only kind that works. However, *parenting by example does not demand that we be perfect.*

There is a right and a wrong way to deal with our own imperfections and shortcomings as people and as parents. The wrong way is denial. We simply refuse to accept that we are imperfect and pretend that we have no failings. This is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing when He said, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:1b-3).

A hypocrite is Jesus' day was a professional stage actor, someone who put on a mask and pretended to be someone he wasn't. Thus a hypocrite is a person who pretends to be a certain thing by presenting one thing while living another. If we attempt to show our kids we are perfect when we aren't, we're acting and are hypocrites. But if we live out our growth in Christ, we're

parenting by example. If we demand performance and perfection, our faults will appear as signs of hypocrisy. But if we encourage growth by grace, our faults will become signs of authenticity as we grow.

A second key point is that we are all fellow learners. Our children and we are both learning about God. This means discussing our growth in Christ in practical, everyday terms with them. It includes letting them see us apply our faith to our lives. Then they will get excited about joining in the process. It's easier to get kids in the water when you're swimming than when you're sitting warm and dry in the beach.

Real-Life Tip 3: Have fun with your kids.

When Dad spends time wrestling with the kids in the basement, he has done more to create a context for passing on the faith than when he reads them a Bible passage. Both are important, but the former makes the latter more meaningful.

When Mom plays a round of Go Fish with her six-year-old son, he learns to enjoy her as a person, not merely obey her as a parent. Again, both are important, but the former makes the latter easier to swallow.

When the family takes a "backward" walk and everyone wears their clothes backwards, it builds relationships and shows that Mom and Dad are not always serious. They know how to have fun.

Everyone has the right to speak; we must earn the right to be listened to. As parents, we must realize that when we enjoy our kids today, we are earning the right to shape their values tomorrow. People are far more likely to embrace the values of someone they enjoy being with than those of someone they don't. So let's remember to have fun with our kids.

Principle 4: Your Methods Should Target Your Child

"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am

not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)

Paul adapted his approach for each audience. The message remained the same, but Paul would get in step with his audience, understanding their needs and viewpoints. Then he would alter his presentations accordingly.

This is a very, very important principle when it comes to teaching our children: We can't expect children to rise to our level; we need to go to theirs. When Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me" (Mark 10:14), He stopped doing what He was doing to communicate truth to adults and adapted His approach for a new audience. Mark 10:16 says, "And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them," Jesus changed what He was doing in order to be effective with the children.

We need to be able to understand what the important issues are for our children – in their eyes, not ours – and communicate on their level. When we can at least imagine walking in their shoes, our teaching will be more effective and, certainly, more relevant.

Like Jim at the beginning of our chapter, many parents have questions, hesitations, and fears about training their children. But also like Jim, parents can become intentional about passing on their faith and values to their children – and have a great time doing it.

"But wait!" some of you are saying. "You don't understand. My situation is special. What if . . .?"

Our next chapter addresses many of these frequently asked questions. No matter what your situation is, you *can* do it! And we'll show you how.

Real Life Tip 4: Make it fun.

The fact that our children are growing up in an entertainment-drenched culture with new media technologies and high production values constitutes the need for us to learn to speak a different language and form a different approach. One of our children's primary interests at their stage of life and in our culture, is fun and play. We as parents should endeavor to work with this need in their lives while trying to teach them, seeking to achieve a balance between fun and serious intent.

Say you enjoy roughhousing with your kids. They enjoy it when you give them rides, flipping them over and onto a bed or gently onto the floor. Is there some lesson that could be taught in the context of roughhousing, for example, by telling the story Jacob wrestling the angel?

A Child's First Understanding of Prayer

When Ryan was just old enough to put a few words together, I really wanted him to understand the importance of prayer. I sat with him nightly, gently rocking him as he lay in my arms listening to me pray – or that was what I thought would happen. Actually, I tried my best to hang onto his squirming body while I prayed wonderfully spiritual prayers. It was difficult, but I was determined to stick with it!

One night, during an extra furious round of hold-and-squirm, I asked God for help and wisdom. Suddenly the lights came on. I stopped praying *my* prayers over him and prayed *his*.

"Dear God, thank You for making Ryan and please help him use the potty. Amen." His eyes widened and he seemed to understand prayer for the first time – and the war of grasp and escape was over.

Anonymous

But What If . . . ?

By now, you no doubt have some questions. We tried to anticipate some of them, so read through this list and check the ones that apply to you:

What if . . .

- I have no time?
- I feel inadequate – or fail?
- I'm doing it alone?
- our children are all different ages and stages?
- we're a blended family? (It just seems more difficult for us.)
- I'm still hurting from a difficult past? Don't I need to get healed before I try and pass something down to my kids?
- my own spiritual life is shaky?
- I'm not a theologian? How can I make sure I teach them well and cover it all?
- my child has a learning disability or other special need?
- my spouse and I are from different church backgrounds?
- I don't see the need for all the facts and doctrine? I just want my children to love God.
- we've already tried something like this and it didn't work?

So how many did you check? If you're like most of the people we interact with, you checked at least five. Be encouraged; you aren't alone? We're here to help. Please feel free to skip ahead directly to your questions.

What If I Have No Time?

If you're struggling to find time to spiritually train your children, you're not alone. The modern equivalent of Israel fruitlessly marching in circles for 40 years has to be the way today's culture plays catch-up with the clock. This "lack" of time isn't a twenty-first century phenomenon. Plautus, a Roman playwright some 2,000 years ago, moaned about the stress the sundial brought: "The gods confound the man who first found out how to distinguish hours? Confound him who has cut and hacked my days so wretchedly into small pieces. Confound him who in this place set up . . . a sundial."¹

Life is full of "progressive" changes aimed at helping you "save time": shoes (buttons to shoelaces to Velcro); writing (pens to typewriters to word processors); cooking (wood burning stoves to microwaves); banking (personal tellers to drive-up ATMs); mail (letters to e-mail).

Everything is faster and more "convenient" today – but there are costs. The greatest cost is that people work longer and harder to afford the conveniences. Across all professions in the United States, people are not on the job 163 hours more than they were in 1970. That's a month more of work per person per year! The increased hours and competitive acquisition of "things" (not to mention other pressures) have played havoc

Only 20 Minutes per Week!

If you spend 20 minutes per week intentionally teaching your children from the time they are 4 until they are 15, they will have received over 190 hours of biblical training.

with families and family time. So first, let us say that if you don't have time to fulfill one of your greatest responsibilities, you may be letting the clock and other less important pursuits drive you around in wilderness circles.

But even with a good balance of priorities, we still have a lot on our plates. Don't despair, however. Spiritual training takes a lot less time than you think. In fact, effective spiritual training can be done in as little as one hour a week with the whole family and a few minutes of one-on-one time with each child five days a week. Some of this time can be taken from things you are already doing. The family plan that we will help you develop will take into consideration your family's pace and show you how you can fit effective spiritual training into the busiest schedule.

Do you drive your kids to the gym or school? You'll see how you can teach lessons of faith in the car.

Do (could) you put your kids to bed with a story? That precious time can become a slam-dunk opportunity to teach them about God's love.

Do you eat meals – even one a week – with the family? You can use that time.

Does your family like to do active, fun-oriented things? Family Night activities show how blowing up balloons can help children understand why God is real even though He's "invisible," or squirting a tube of toothpaste in a family contest can teach why the Bible says not to slander others.

All of these and others can be easy-to-use times of spiritual training.

What If I Feel Inadequate – or Fail?

That's the best place to be. When you're weak, Christ can be your strength (Philippians 4:13). Only inadequate parents need apply – or need His adequacy.

To bolster your confidence, consider these things: First, you're not alone in making the decision to spend time passing your faith down to your children. You may *feel* like the only one serious about becoming a spiritual trainer, but there are thousands with no more experience or any fewer doubts than you already doing it, and thousands more are stepping up to this challenge right now.

Second, remember the concept of "grace parenting." The greatest gift we can receive as we raise our children is the profound sense of our own lack of abilities and an even more profound awareness of God's grace and God's willingness to help us learn and grow, and to cover our shortcomings in the process. It is God's grace that makes us strong when we are weak (2 Corinthians 12:10). It is God's grace that gives us wisdom when we need it (James 1:5). And God's grace is enough (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God's grace is available to help us accomplish anything and everything He gives us to do, including spiritual training. So the first part of grace parenting is going to God and trusting Him for His aid and wisdom, trusting that He will change us, teach us, give us His wisdom, and help us be effective spiritual trainers.

The second part is that we need to trust Him to work in the hearts, minds, and lives of our children in the same way He worked in us. We need to trust God (and sometimes that means asking God to help us trust Him) that He's working with them and in them and that He will fulfill His promise in the life of each of them.

God has given us significant responsibilities in the process, but grace takes the pressure off and allows us to simply work at the task to the best of our ability, trusting Him for strength, wisdom, and results. God knows your limitations and strengths, He knows everything about you, and He knows how to work together with you from where you are.

In fact, the best place for you to be right now is asking the question “Can I do this?” This shows that you know your limitations and are ready to rely on God’s grace to accomplish the task. Continually tell God your fears and doubts, then ask Him, by His grace, to teach you and give you wisdom and all you need to get the job done. Keep reading, prepare your plan as we’ll show you, choose resources – looking to God every step of the way for help.

Third, remember the little picture: One snapshot at a time is all you need to focus on. As you provide positive snapshots day by day, you fill your children’s lives with memorable moments of life, God, truth, and hope.

Every parent needs help and support. That’s what this book is all about – equipping you for the task and making spiritual training accessible and easy for parents of all kinds. You’re going to love the step-by-step system and the practical tools that support it.

What If I’m Doing It Alone?

You’re not completely alone. God is working alongside you and the many others facing the same challenge.

Single and “spiritually single” parents face a daunting task with little support. You can feel like the suitors for Ulysses’ wife in the ancient legend. Ulysses fought in the Trojan Wars and was gone so long that he was declared legally dead. Anxious suitors soon showed up to court his beautiful wife. She agreed to marry one of them when she finished her tapestry. They waited patiently for the work to be complete. But unfortunately for them, she wove all day and unraveled all night. It can sometimes seem like you work hard to set a godly example, making sure that the fabric of faith is being woven into your children’s lives, only to see your spouse’s indifference of the negative influence of the world unravel your work. But don’t despair! God provides a spiritual safety stitch (a stitch running horizontally that stops threads from unraveling too far). “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6). God is working in you and your children.

Everyone who decides to spiritually train their children will face obstacles of one kind or another. And

Going It Alone

I started out as a spiritually single mom and ended up a completely single mom. Throughout those years I thought there was little I could do to train my kids. After all, I had no emotional support from anyone. I certainly couldn’t do after-dinner devotions. Nor could I take evenings for family activities with a spiritual emphasis. But there are more ways to impart faith lessons than just devotions, and more opportunities for activities than just the evening.

Each night I prayed with the children as they lay in their beds. I had printed a verse on a 3” x 5” card and read the same verse every night for a week. After the verse, I sang hymns to them. These times were precious as we discussed all sorts of things there in the darkness of their rooms. We talked about how God viewed friendships and how to pray for our enemies. We talked about hurts and God’s presence with us at all times – even in the hard times.

Trips around town in the car afforded many opportunities to talk about how God views us, loves us, and wants us to act and care for others.

Our poverty provided faith lessons as we prayed for our needs and watched God miraculously answer those needs some of the time, and at others how He simply sustained us as we struggled.

Yes, such lessons took two of us – me and God.

L.H.J.

all of those hurdles can be cleared only one way: by trusting God to help you. When God calls you to do something, He wants to see you respond with obedience and faithfulness. When you do, He is faithful to multiply your efforts. The bigger your obstacles are, the more help you can count on. So keep on turning the pages, fill out your plan, get started, and let God show you how He can help as you trust Him – and how He can reward your obedience.

What If Our Children Are All Different Ages and Stages?

The spiritual training plan that we've laid out in the following pages involves both a do-it-all-together family plan and a spend-some-time-with-each-child plan. You will find that we talk about many different methods to spiritually train your children, and we encourage you to match the method to your family.

The methods and tools we recommend come with suggestions on how to make them work effectively for each different stage of growth and for a group of differing ages. Even with these helps, some families who, say, have preteens and very young children, may have difficulty making some of the methods work. If

For Teens

Here are some resources that you can turn to for help with your teenagers.

Reality 101 by Wayne Rice and Dave Veerman (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale).

This book for teenagers answers 101 questions on a variety of topics like faith, friendships, family, finances, and the future. The questions came from today's teens and the answers are straightforward and honest. It includes humorous cartoon illustrations and scriptural help.

Life Training by Joe White (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1998).

This book is a unique devotional, written for parents to share with their teens. With 260 devotions based upon the books of Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, James, and Revelation, *Life Training* is filled with practical tools to create and strengthen the faith of families.

Life Training 2 by Joe White (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2000).

Like the first book, *Life Training 2* is filled with unique devotionals for parents to share with their teens. These devotionals cover the books of Mark, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, Peter (1, 2, 3), John (1, 2, 3), and Jude.

this is your situation, your older children can take more of a supportive mentoring role in the family activities, and then you can spend a little more time focusing on them in the individual time.

For those of you with teenagers, include them in the process of training the younger children, but also recognize that they have different needs. By the time your children reach the teen years, you are pretty much done forming their values. Now

your role shifts to that of a mentor. There are many resources available to help you in this role.

What If We're a Blended Family? (It just seems more difficult for us.)

With a blended family (and any family) there are many "unwritten rules." Like invisible cables laying on the floor, it takes time to know where they are to stop tripping over them. Yet if a mom and dad will sit down as a team, these obstacles can become opportunities for growth. Blended families have more to draw on – different heritages, different backgrounds that, rather than being problems, can provide additional resources and wisdom. It's a matter of bringing your past, all your "little pictures" and those of your children, to God and asking for His wisdom, then sitting down together, going through this book, and talking with each other and your children to discover that wisdom.

Dr. Robert Barnes, one of the United States' leading experts on blended families, recommends that blended families do exactly what you'll be doing in this book: Get a clear, prayed over, talked through, written out parenting plan! Check out his book *You're Not My Daddy!* (Dallas: Word, 1992). By

completing the exercises and tools that follow, you'll highlight where each person is in their growth, understand their strengths, and clarify goals and expectations for each one – wonderful tool for “blending” a family. And there is absolutely nothing more unifying than having everyone fall in love with God. The love that begins vertically, spreads horizontally.

What If I'm Still Hurting from a Difficult Past? (Don't I need to get healed before I try and pass something down to my kids?)

In short, no. None of us are completely healed until heaven. God can turn the ashes of broken dreams into beautiful pictures and replace negative snapshots with positive ones. It takes time, grace, and hard work – and you may need help from a pastor or Christian counselor. One book that talks about overcoming this hurt is John Trent's *Pictures the Heart Remembers*, (Colorado Spring, Co: Waterbrook Press, 2000) based upon Deuteronomy 30:19 which says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.”

Life involves choices. Choosing life often means choosing to forgive and turn away from the hurt, leaving it in God's hands. We realize this is not easy, nor is it necessarily the full solution, but your children need you. And in large measure, this method works. So choose to pursue your healing by getting busy loving and serving others – starting with your own children. Knowing God more and pouring positive times into your children can help you heal.

What If My Own Spiritual Life Is Shaky?

You don't have to have unshakable faith to train your children. Even giants of the faith like Moses, Elisha, Peter, and Paul had times of questioning, doubt, or disappointment. King David, that man of God, did too: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent” (Psalm 22:1-2). A strong faith doesn't mean you never question or feel far from God.

David was secure enough to share his feelings, doubts, and hurts, but he always came back to reality. He followed those words of hurt and abandonment with what he knew to be true: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One: . . . In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them” (vv. 3-4).

In the middle of long-term doubts, serious questions about God, or times you just can't face things, the fact remains: God is, and He revealed Himself in the Bible saying He is love. Sometimes you just have to hold on to what the Bible says as if it were the only unshakable thing in the world. Feelings are not arbiters of truth; God is. Hang on to the basics: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Healing Together

When I was six years old, my father died under tragic circumstances. Mom remarried a man who turned out to be an alcoholic.

For several years my family went through a period of turmoil that I could not understand since I was so young.

Sometime after becoming a single mother the second time, Mom met Christ. It was then that the healing process in our family began, starting with my mother.

As a new, first-generation Christian, overwhelmed with emotional and spiritual grief, she was ill-prepared to spiritually train us. She was also only just beginning to become acquainted with God herself. Much of her malady was reflected in my siblings and me. However, as God began working in Mom's life, we kids observed how God enveloped her in love and gave her strength and the will to go on. Watching this changed us. We listened as she shared what she learned. We followed in her steps and found healing and spiritual growth for ourselves. Mom didn't need to be emotionally healthy to teach us; she just needed to follow God and lead us to Him. It was a journey we took as a family.

Anonymous

Rollerblade? I've Never Done It

"Kelsie, look what I bought!"
"Rollerblades! Thanks, Daddy!" Kelsie threw her arms around me and gave me a big hug. Then she looked closer. "Two pairs? Who are those for?"
"Me," I told her.
She looked at me quizzically. "But you don't know how to rollerblade."
"Nope," I said. "I thought we'd learn together."
Together we laced up those skates. We padded our elbows and knees. And then we wobbled and fell together. We laughed at Daddy's inadequacies. We laughed that Daddy didn't know everything or do everything well.
Kelsie say firsthand that learning is not always easy, that all people learn and grow in new things. We can be shaky at first, but with practice and persistence, the shakiness becomes confidence.
It's the same when we learn new spiritual concepts. It doesn't matter if I'm wobbly or shaky on a spiritual truth. With prayer and practice and taking small steps at a time, my child and I can learn together.
J.M.

If your doubts go even deeper and you're not sure you've ever received Jesus' gift of eternal life, it could be decision time. You *can* know for sure where you'll spend eternity. God is knocking at the door of your heart right now. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God

raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10:9-10). If you're ready to open that door, pray this simple prayer: "Dear God, I confess that You are Lord. Thank You so much for sending Jesus to die for me and pay the penalty for my sins. Please forgive me. Thank You for raising Him from the dead and defeating Satan. Thank You so much for saving me. Teach me to follow You. In Jesus' name, amen."

If you prayed that prayer for the first time, tell a loved one (or several) about it. And don't worry about being a new Christian when it comes to passing down your faith. Growing together with your children can be the most effective way to spiritually train them. (For information on salvations and Jesus' ministry and death, see Topic No. 22 in chapter 30.)

Look It Up

"Dad," Jake said in the kitchen one day after I came home from work, "they asked us this really weird question at school today."
"What was that?"
"The teacher asked all of us what we feared the most."
"What were the answers?" I asked. By now, Jake and I had the attention of his three siblings.
"Most of the kids said they fear their dad and they fear God."
"Fear God," I said. "Isn't that interesting? You hear that all the time in church, don't you?"
All the kids were caught up and I saw four heads nodding.
"What do you think that means?"
"I don't know," Janae said. "What does it mean, Dad?"
"I'll tell you what," I said, looking at each of them. "You have Bibles. I want you to go get your Bibles and look in the back for the phrase 'Fear God'." (We use the *Life Application Bible* which contains a concordance in the back.)
Within moments the kids had all snagged their Bibles and returned to the kitchen. The table soon had open Bibles spread out on it and eager eyes searching for the answer. Together we all went to the verse and discussed "fear" – meaning to have an incredible awe and reverence for. Our discussion continued for some time.
The important point I wanted to make to my kids wasn't so much to answer the question as to teach them to go get the Bible and open it up to find answers for life questions.
J.W.

What If I'm Not a Theologian? (How can I make sure I teach them will and cover it all?)

Remember, your goal is to create positive snapshots, memorable moments, one picture at a time. To do that you don't need to be a theologian, have great fountains of knowledge, or have years of Christianity under your belt. You do need to be learning yourself and working on your own relationship with God so that you stay in step with your children, or perhaps one or two steps ahead. You'll be surprised how much you learn as you teach your children. If they ask questions you don't know the answer to, tell them you don't know for sure and look them up together. Growing together can be a great bonding time.

Someone Special

When my daughter Emily was little, I had no idea how much she would ever know or grasp. She was born with Down's syndrome and was a masterpiece of God's hand. Daily I would talk to her about everything. "Emily, this is a can," would say to her as I took a can of green beans from the grocery store shelf. "This is a pencil. It's made from wood. Wood comes from a tree that God made."

And I would look directly into her eyes and tell her, "Emily, you have Down's syndrome. That means God gave you something extra – an extra chromosome. And He made you exactly as He wanted you to be. You are special, made in His image."

When her brother was born three and a half years later, we named him Abraham and spent many hours praying for him. Emily heard all these prayers for her and for her brother.

One day when Abraham was two, he crawled into bed with me. "Where's Emily?" I asked.

"In my bed," Abraham replied.

I sent Daddy to look, and sure enough, Emily was there. "What are you doing in Abraham's bed?"

"I sing and prayed."

"What?"

"Prayer, Jesus," she said.

And then we realized she was singing and praying for her brother.

B.F.

As for theology and covering it all, we've done most of the work for you. We've broken the job down into snapshot-sized pieces, providing the basics of what your children need to learn, with supporting scriptures and tips on how to teach it (see parts III and IV). Additional scriptures are also included if you want to do further study. These cover what children up to age 12 can understand about the Bible, God, and the Christian life, and are fairly comprehensive.

What If My Child Has a Learning Disability or Other Special Need?

If you are the parent of a severely handicapped child, you may tend to shy away from trying to give him or her an awareness of God and heaven. With little or no way of gauging your child's response, you may find yourself asking, "Am I really getting through?"

Although your child might not grasp the message of salvation, he or she *can* grasp the love of God. He or she can learn a great deal about God's love without needing to understand every aspect of doctrine. Soak your child in love.

Make the most of any and every opportunity to share spiritual truth with your child. Scripture clearly tells us that we are of incredible worth in God's sight. Physical infirmities don't change that. God's love for your child is no different than it was for David, who wrote:

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of

the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:13-16)

Regardless of whether or not your child is able to understand, pray over him or her, read from the Bible, sing hymns or other Christian songs to him or her. King David's young baby became ill and David spent seven days fasting and praying for him. The baby died, but David gave him to the grace of God and said only, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23b). Even though his child was

clearly comforted because he knew he would one day be with his baby in God's presence. You can have this same confidence as you try to give your child an awareness of God's love.

What If My Spouse and I Are from Different Church Backgrounds?

The key might be to change your focus from where you've come from to where you're going. What do you want for your children? Every tradition has positive things to offer. Take the best parts of both of your backgrounds and move forward with those elements.

This question often comes up with regard to choosing a church to attend. In that context one of the most important issues to consider is community and how the church can benefit your children. The goal is to give them a positive experience where they can grow and participate. The main thing is to discover what works for your family. If there is a Christian church close by that has a good children's program and you or your children already know people who go there, it may not line up with either of your backgrounds, but it may be the best place for your family.

It is the same with spiritual training at home. Carefully consider each of your backgrounds and what they offer. For example, if one person's background includes a traditional, liturgical church with its rich use of ceremony to convey the teaching, then bring that forward and teach your children the wonderful depth and richness of that tradition. If the other spouse comes from a more casual, relaxed faith background, have him or her bring that more relational "everydayness" into the mix.

The key is to find what works for your children and to give them the solid foundation they will need to live for God and have a wonderful, fulfilling life.

What If I Don't See the Need for All the Facts and Doctrine? (I just want my children to love God.)

Knowledge deepens and informs love. The more your children know about God and the more they know how amazing and wonderful He is, the more reason they will have to love Him. "Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge" (2 Peter 1:5). "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

If doctrine and biblical facts were all there was to it, Christianity would be boring indeed. But if emotion based on experience were all there was, your children would have trouble when "experience" said God wasn't worth loving. Your children need a solid foundation upon which to build

Knowing What We Believe

Knowing what and why we believe is critical in order for our children to have a solid spiritual foundation. Putting these beliefs into contexts our children can understand is not always easy. It takes creativity.

My nine-year-old son Kyle is encountering different religions and faiths. In fact, we're right around the corner from a huge Mormon church.

One day Kyle told me that a friend had pointed to the church and said, "My mommy says that's the church where the bad people are."

I realized the need to explain other religions and beliefs in a way that did not portray the believers as "bad people." I took my son to breakfast to explain different views of God in a way he could understand. For example, I said that many people believe in the "Up There God" – the God who loves us and cares for us, but never came down to die for us on the cross. These are not "bad people" but people who do not know or believe in Jesus. I explained the "Man God" – the belief that God was once a man and is now a god, and that everyone can also become a god. This view, held by the people who attend the Mormon church near our house, doesn't make the members "bad people" but "confused" or "misguided" people. I contrasted these and other views with "Our God" – the belief in the one and true God who created us and came down to earth to die for our sins.

K.B.

their relationship with God, their understanding of His Word and principles, and their lives on. Everything that God has shown us about Himself, His plan, or the way He created things to work has practical applications to your lives and relationship with Him.

This book and plan will help you cover the three major areas or types of spiritual training your children need in order to grow a solid Christian life:

Knowing: Children need to know what they believe and why, and to understand their faith so that they're solidly grounded and can answer the objections they'll face. (They will face them.) They need to know who God is and what He's done, primarily as shown in the Bible, but also in your family history and the lives of others.

Loving: Children need to love God, grow in relationship with Him, and know how to develop that relationship, increasing their personal knowledge of our loving heavenly Father.

Living: Children need to learn how to live out their faith and apply what they know and experience of God and His principles. The Bible isn't just a lofty book of knowledge – it's life's instruction manual.

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the Bible says that we are to bring our children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. In other words, the foundation of their upbringing should be learning and applying God's truth in every area of life.

What If We've Already Tried Something Like This and It Didn't Work?

It's a good thing Edison didn't quit trying to get his lightbulb to work! Over 70 publishers rejected Dr. Seuss before his first book was accepted. And really, if you haven't failed, you haven't tried. The issue in spiritual training isn't perfection; it's God-honoring persistence. It's starting again after situations or struggles have turned off the switch. Most attempts at training kids fail because parents *don't* have a plan, or they didn't have a plan that worked for their family. If you have no goals and the going gets tough, or when you're trying to push something at your family instead of pulling together, it's easy to turn on the TV or "wait until a better day." Even with the plan that specifically matches your family that you're about to develop and embark on, you'll have days when it just doesn't work.

Don't use a slip or even many slips as an excuse to quit. Reward whoever says, "Hey, we should do our family time!" with a "Great idea!" not a groan brought on by guilt. Thank God for the reminder of the importance of what you're doing, and get back in the battle.

Now that you know the priority and common obstacles to spiritual training, you're almost ready to put together your unique family portrait and your Spiritual Growth Plan. But first, every effective plan is preceded by a conscious commitment.

NOTES

1. Ralph Keyes, *Timelock* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 20.