

Empowering Parents

If we really want to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” we should give top priority to teaching effective parenting skills and nurturing the warm, reliable parental presence that, according to Harville Hendrix, generates confidence and happiness in children (LinkedIn message, May 21, 2011). Even the best of parents may suffer frustration and disappointment; but by empowering them to provide unconditional love coupled with firm guidance and thoughtful leadership, we can increase the likelihood that their children will develop sound character and succeed in life. The church, with its unique connection to families and influential position in the community, can make a powerful impact on the world by equipping and strengthening all who are raising children, whatever their family configuration.

Churches care for those raising children in many ways: placing a rose on the altar in recognition of a new birth or adoption; putting new parents and their children on the prayer list; providing meals and household assistance; and surrounding them with loving attention. Baptism rituals invite the congregation to share in the nurture of children by doing all in their power to “increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.” (UM Hymnal, 1989, p. 11) **Parents can best fulfill the promises they make during the baptism of their children by continuing to nurture their own faith development and by making church participation and spiritual practices an integral part of family life.** The church can help by providing quality childcare; by including children of all ages in worship, fellowship, and mission projects; by offering church school, vacation programs, choirs, sports teams, tutoring, camping trips, and other special experiences; and by encouraging intergenerational friendships to strengthen children’s sense of connection and belonging. In addition to offering parenting classes, support groups, mentors, and “foster grandparents,” churches should also speak out against negative social influences that threaten to damage the developing character and integrity of young people. Above all, the church should respect the need for family time and honor “parental leave” from church duties.

The challenges of parenting may awaken those outside the church to their need for spiritual guidance and supportive community. Some return to church when they have children, not just to provide them with religious education, but perhaps because they have discovered how difficult parenting can be. Parenting classes promoted in the community at large can serve as entry points to the church family. Programs and support groups with childcare for expectant and new parents, including daytime groups and early evening gatherings for working parents, might be an effective starting place. Parents of teens will likely welcome some guidance and encouragement when dealing with the unique challenges of that age group. While some single parents might feel more comfortable attending programs designated specifically for them, others may prefer to participate in groups open to all parents. A regular schedule of general parenting education programs, along with sessions and ongoing support groups for those in specific situations (expectant couples and singles, new parents, stepparents, parents of special needs children, parents of specific age groups, and grandparents – especially those raising their grandchildren) would greatly enhance a local church’s ministry with families and its standing in the community. Churches, often in cooperation with other congregations and social service agencies, can also offer practical assistance, such as thrift shops, food pantries, home visitations, childcare, afterschool activities, and even special childcare programs during school cancellations and teacher workshops, an essential service for families with no stay-at-home parent.

In addition to teaching techniques, effective parenting classes help parents deepen their self-understanding and self-awareness, learn to manage their emotional reactions, and

strengthen their interpersonal skills. Most couples would benefit from skills-training and guidance for maintaining a healthy relationship while coping with the stresses of child-rearing. Single parents could also benefit from relationship education and might appreciate assistance in developing a network of support. A December 2010 report published in the *Science Daily* online (www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/12/101202124242.htm) noted that "Expectant parents who completed a brief relationship-strengthening class around the time their child was born showed lasting effects on each family member's well-being and on the family's overall relationships." Indeed, when our children were young, my husband and I participated in our first marriage enrichment event, which transformed my relationship with our children, as well as our marriage. In my family of origin, I had learned to repress anger, in particular, and feelings in general. Once I learned that anger, in fact, is an important clue that something needs attention, I began to practice "I Messages" and "Active Listening" with my children as well as with my husband, frequently consulting Dr. Haim Ginott's *Between Parent and Child* for assistance in learning this strange new (to me) language. The scripts Dr. Ginott provided helped me listen empathically to my children, rather than trying to fix their problems, and admit and express without blame my own feelings and needs. Learning the "No-lose Problem Solving" method freed me from a mistaken sense of responsibility to resolve their sibling conflicts. Our continuing participation in marriage enrichment made a real difference in our family life.

Parenting brings with it a huge responsibility for the safety and protection of children: not just physical safety, but emotional and intellectual as well. In addition to the obvious dangers of smoking, pornography, alcohol, and other drugs, we need to address the seductive influence of popular media and the dangers of unsupervised internet use. The Parents Television Council (<http://www.parentstv.org/>) alerts us to the negative images and plotlines flooding the airwaves, while lobbying to curtail sponsorship and production of programs and movies that flaunt common standards of decency and glorify destructive behaviors. Parents must limit their children's exposure to such programming, as well as to advertising that cultivates greed, material obsession, and other unhealthy attitudes. At the same time, by asking good questions, parents should train their children to evaluate what they see and hear, as they will more likely own what they themselves conclude than what someone else tells them. Furthermore, I have seen children who watch little or no television play more creatively and demonstrate more positive attitudes than those who watch without limits. Parents also need to teach wise use of the internet, Facebook, and other social media. Churches can educate parents to address such concerns effectively and encourage support groups in which parents agree to common standards and guidelines. Safe Homes and Parent Peer Groups, for example, agree to forbid unsupervised parties, underage drinking, and drug use in their homes.

As children grow and change, parents need to adjust their parenting methods and style, shifting, for example, from controlling toddlers to influencing teens (Turansky and Miller, *Parenting Shifts*, p. 13). Churches can provide supportive networks and experiences to enhance the child-rearing knowledge, skills, and competence of parents at all stages and in all situations. Helping parents practice good self-care enables them to stay calm and connected during challenging times. **Ministries that equip and empower those raising children can alleviate stress, prevent isolation, remediate dysfunction, and promote personal growth, thus transforming families, communities, and, yes, even the world!**

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RESOURCES FOR EMPOWERING PARENTS

READING LIST (for individual or group study)

9 Ways to Bring Out the Best in You and Your Child, by Maggie Reigh (Kelowna, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2004, www.northstone.com). The author shows parents how to raise respectful, responsible, and resilient children, while at the same time bringing more life and laughter to their homes. This highly spiritual, easy-to-understand approach emphasizes mutual respect, bringing values to life, mutual empowerment, dealing with feelings, effective communication, encouragement, living harmoniously, loving discipline, and helping children trust their inner guidance.

Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families, by Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004). The authors describe and illustrate how churches can provide for all parents and families a strong web of support built around a research based list of the developmental assets children need to experience in order to succeed in life.

Home Improvement: The Parenting Book You Can Read to Your Kids, by Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller (Lawrenceville, NJ: National Center for Biblical Parenting, 1996). This book provides parents with clear instructions and helpful examples for “Encouraging Obedience Without Yelling,” “Making Every Discipline Time Constructive,” “Helping Children Make Lasting Changes,” “Communicating Values so Kids Will Listen,” “Dealing with Anger in Children,” “Disciplining Consistently Even When You’re Tired,” “Teaching Kids to Learn from Life,” and “Approaching Deep-rooted Problems.” www.biblicalparenting.org, 800-771-8002

Motivate Your Child: A Christian Parent’s Guide to Raising Kids Who Do What They Need to Do Without Being Told, Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller R.N. weave together sound wisdom, Biblical stories and teachings, and parenting anecdotes to teach how to help children develop a good conscience and a strong faith. By parenting with intentionality instead of reactivity, parents can give their children the tools to navigate life successfully. Involving children in making plans for showing honor to others, for managing their own anger and other feelings, and for completing tasks in a timely manner transfers the responsibility to them and helps them develop an inner compass that will guide them for the rest of their lives.

Parenting is Heart Work, by Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2006) Building a heart-based relationship with your children will be far more effective in changing behavior and attitudes than using behavior-modification (rewards and consequences) strategies. Telling children that they may have what they want if they do what they are told may sometimes seem to work, but actually only appeals to their selfishness and fails to create lasting change. You can force a child to change his or her behavior, but changing your child’s heart is a deeper work. You can help strong-willed children develop an inner sense of direction to keep them on the right path and unmotivated children find a passion to keep them moving forward. The authors show parents how to look beyond troublesome behavior to discern the underlying heart problem. Talking to your child about a pattern of selfishness, dishonesty, or irresponsibility requires a strong relationship and emotional connection built through quality time spent together.

Parents need to listen to, rather than lecture their children, in order to understand where they are struggling and what guidance they need. Firm confrontation and correction are essential now and then, but children who do not feel secure in their parents' love will likely only rebel. Ask yourself how your child seems to experience your love best – through physical touch, affirmation, being listened to, or sharing in fun activities with you. Providing an abundance of such experiences will make it easier to address the child's heart directly when you sense that there is a character trait or value you would like him or her to develop. Help your child understand the importance of that quality or value, sharing stories from your own experience. Enlist your child in making a plan to develop that trait, finding ways to practice being considerate, admitting a mistake, or contributing to the well-being of the family or community. Address symptoms of problems in the heart before they escalate into something major. Direct teach the behaviors you want to see, but always emphasize the heart qualities they reflect.

Parenting with Intimacy: Experiencing Great Commandment Love in Your Family, by David Ferguson, Teresa Ferguson, Paul Warren, and Vicki Warren (Austin, TX: Relationship Press, 1995). This Biblically-based and practical handbook shows parents how to give their children what they really need, heal hurts, respond lovingly to misbehavior, and strengthen family relationships. Each chapter includes exercises and assignments for individuals, couples, or for group study. Companion resources (videos, audios, and a detailed teaching curriculum are available at www.GreatCommandment.net.

Parenting Shifts: 50 Heart-Based Strategies to Keep You Growing in Your Parenting, by Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, (www.biblicalparenting.com, e-book 2011). The authors show parents how to adapt to the changing needs of their children.

Raising Children Compassionately: Parenting the Nonviolent Communication Way, by Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2005). The author urges parents to put compassionate connection first to build a mutually respectful and enriching family lifestyle. Learn how to motivate without threatening punishment or promising reward, listen to really understand, discover the needs underlying behavior or speech, and reduce family conflict. www.Puddledancer.com.

Say Goodbye to Whining, Complaining, and Bad Attitudes in You and Your Kids, by Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller (Colorado Springs, Waterbrook Press, 2000). The authors show parents how to practice and teach honor in their relationships with their children. Learning to treat each other as special, doing more than is expected, and maintaining a good attitude will help children get along better in the world as well as in their families. Chapters include discussion questions for individual reflection or group discussion. Eight “Family Together Time” activities reinforce these learnings. www.biblicalparenting.org, 800-771-8334.

Talking to Your Kids About Sex: Turning “the talk” into a conversation for life, by Laura Berman (Great Britain: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2009) The author encourages parents to determine the values they want to pass on to their children. She then provides guidance for initiating appropriate conversations at every age. By taking advantage of “teachable moments” from infancy through adulthood, parents can establish themselves as a credible source for information. If children will know their parents will provide honest and helpful information, they are less likely to be misled by peers and popular media.

The 5 Love Languages of Children, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2005). The author shows parents how to use with their children the five languages of love: Quality Time, Words of Affirmation, Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch. He also explains how to determine which ones communicate best to your child and how to respond to challenging behavior. See also *The 5 Love Languages of Teenagers: The Secret to Loving Teens Effectively*, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010).

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families: Building a Beautiful Family Culture in a Turbulent World, by Stephen R. Covey (Franklin Covey Co., 1997), 800-867-1492, www.franklincovey.com. The author shows how the “7 habits” provide a framework for unconditional love, mutual respect, personal responsibility, interdependence, and cooperative problem-solving. Guidelines for discussion with adults, teens, and children make this an excellent resource for a parenting class.

The Smart Stepmom, by Ron Deal and Laura Petherbridge (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2009). The authors use their personal and professional training and experiences to provide stepmothers with the information, attitudes, and skills to succeed in what is rapidly becoming the most common family form in the United States of America.

CURRIULUM KITS, PROGRAMS, ORGANIZATIONS, and WEBSITES

Active Parenting Now, by Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D. (Active Parenting Publishers, Inc., 2002) This 6-session curriculum for parents of children ages 5 to 12 provides excellent insights on “Winning Cooperation,” teaching “Responsibility and Discipline,” “Understanding and Redirecting Misbehavior,” and “Building Courage, Character, and Self-Esteem.” The program includes Family Enrichment Activities and Family Meeting suggestions. See the Biblical and Theological Guide described below [Active Parenting Publishers, Inc., 800-825-0060, www.ActiveParenting.com]

Active Parenting Now in the Faith Community: A Biblical and Theological Guide, by Freda Gardiner (Atlanta: Active Parenting Publishers, 2003). The author provides guidelines and suggestions, including handouts, for adapting the above program for faith communities.

Proactive Parenting Series, by Jim Williams (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004) Leader Guide DVDs and participant study books outline four group sessions for each of five topics: “Parenting 101,” “Communication With Your Child or Teen,” “Discipline With Children and Teens,” “Handling Anger in Your Home,” and “Your Family and Money.”
[<http://proactiveparenting.net/>]

Single and Parenting, www.singleandparenting.org. DVD based curriculum for 13 sessions for parents who are single. New in June, 2011 from Church Initiative, 919-562-2112.

Talking With Your Child: Conversations for Life, edited by Rebecca Laird (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). This six-session study for parents addresses communication, emotions, respect, success and failure, grief and loss, and sexuality. The participant’s book provides clear information about children’s developmental stages, sound strategies for effective parenting,

Biblical connections, and suggestions for family conversations and activities. Leader's guide outlines six sessions.

Talking With Your Teen: Conversations for Life, edited by Lynn Hutton (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999). Same format and focus as *Talking With Your Child*, above, but appropriate for parents of children ages thirteen and up.

The National Center for Biblical Parenting, www.biblicalparenting.org This organization features unique and powerful parenting strategies presented by Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN, through books, seminars, webinars, and other curriculum resources. Focused on "heart-based strategies to maximize growth in your child," the authors point out the shallow premise of behavior modification and show parents how to teach directly the character qualities they want to see in their children. At the website you will find a good selection of resources for tailoring your parenting to your child's unique development, harnessing the power of spiritual interaction in your family, emphasizing internal motivation through spiritual and moral development, identifying specific strategies to manage anger and other emotions, strengthening relationships by practicing honor, preparing children for healthy relationships, and strengthening the family unit. Some of their publications are reviewed in the Reading List above, and others elsewhere on this website. A new initiative launched in the fall of 2015 offers resources for turning your church into a Parent Training Center both for discipling believers and for reaching out to families in the community.

www.successfulstepfamilies.com, This organization was founded by Ron Deal, LMFT, to help stepfamilies thrive and equip churches to minister to their unique needs. Visit the website for articles, a free e-newsletter, online webinars, book reviews, curriculum materials (*Remarriage Success*, *The Smart Stepfamily*), and conference information.

www.techlationships.com, Jason and Kelly Krafosky share wisdom about use of Facebook. Click on "Our Stuff," then on "Advice" and scroll down to "14 Ground Rules for Facebooking Teens and Parents."

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