

Review of *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.

“Heart Parenting” begins within your own heart. The authors describe the heart as the place where we struggle to make sense of life, make decisions and commitments, experience emotions, and deal with temptations. In the heart we also experience guilt and passion, choose our values, and connect with God, the Power beyond ourselves. It is in the heart that the strong-willed child develops an inner sense of direction to keep them on the right path and unmotivated children find a passion to keep them moving.

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 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 by 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. When a child's behavior is not what you want to see, assume that he or she needs guidance and instruction, not punishment. Direct teach the behaviors you want to see, and always emphasize the heart qualities they reflect.

These concepts underlie and are expanded upon in various other resources offered by the National Center for Biblical Parenting, which is located in Lawrenceville, NJ (609-771-8002, parent@biblicalparenting.org, www.biblicalparenting.org) In *Motivate Your Child* and *Motivate Your Child Action Plan*, the authors point out that children usually engage in “Level One Thinking,” focusing mainly on themselves and what they are doing. Intentional parents can help children advance into “Level Two Thinking,” becoming mindful of others and of the impact of their behaviors. As children mature, parents can guide them into “Level Three Thinking,” considering how God is moving in their lives and in the world. 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.

Behavior modification, as used by so many parents, appeals to the selfishness of children and depends upon the promise of a reward that is more appealing than what the child naturally wants to do. The authors show how to train children to look around and see for themselves what needs to be done and then do it, because it is the right thing to do. Such training requires

teaching, modeling, firmness, consequences, and correction, and the tone of the training is critical. Encouraging and nurturing words open the heart and build trust. By offering correction kindly – instead of irritably, for example, parents encourage children to accept redirection graciously. Of course it also helps if parents model accepting correction as a tool for growth: “Oops, I was wrong. I can learn from that.” And “Will you forgive me?” Consequences that require the child to practice doing the right thing are far more effective than punishment. For example, a child who has been mean to a sibling might be asked to plan and carry out acts of kindness toward the same sibling. “Time-outs” should not be for a set time, but until something specific is accomplished (“Come back when you are calm enough to talk about this.”)

The authors show how to use Scripture to develop convictions about the right things to do and how to structure practical applications of those values as part of everyday life. I especially like their model for correction, asking the child three questions: “What did you do wrong?” “Why was that wrong?” “What are you going to do next time?” They provide checklists to help parents assess the individual training needs of each child and a wide variety of anecdotal illustrations dealing with common parenting challenges. Parent support groups could read this book together, share experiences and challenges with each other, and use role play to practice strategies for dealing with specific situations. I think such a group would not only help parents train “Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World,” but would also strengthen the discipleship of the parents themselves.

The Christian Parenting Handbook and *The Christian Parenting Companion Guide* provide more insight and instruction for parents, as do the eight *Parenting Shift* booklets designed for each developmental stage. (Caution: one of these books, *Cultivating Responsibility*, contains the statement that “homosexuality is wrong,” which the author told me would be removed from future editions. Since I have not reviewed all the others yet, you will want to review the others before recommending them to any who would be offended by that judgment and who are committed to inclusivity.) Several other books by these authors are reviewed in the document “Empowering Parents,” which is posted under Parenting under Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources posted at www.marriagelovepower.net (or search by title or topic at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>).

Visit www.biblicalparenting.org to sign up for emails and to learn about live presentations and online webinars, video-based and other curriculum materials for families and church schools, and about a new initiative, launched in the fall of 2015, to help churches become Parent Training Centers, both for discipling members and for reaching out into the community.

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