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# Introduction

## *The Single Most Important Task for Christian Parents*

*For better or worse*, you are responsible for much more than you bargained for back when you decided to start a family. With the esteemed title “Mommy” or “Daddy” comes a tremendous responsibility. Now that you have been thrust into the most important role of your life, your everyday choices suddenly have long-term implications for your children. Like it or not, you are faced with the realization that, for good or bad, parents influence the lives of future generations in ways they can’t even imagine. No pressure—it’s all part of the job!

Throughout the progression from diapers to diplomas, there is one overarching issue that confronts every Christian parent: the spiritual growth of our children. We read in Proverbs 22:6, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,” and we realize that we’re not all that clear on what it means. We have promised ourselves that we won’t make the same mistakes our parents made with us, but beyond that we’re most likely hard-pressed to come up with a clear, coherent, biblical statement of what is involved in teaching a child to choose the right path.

At this point you may think, *What about the church? Isn’t the spiritual training of our kids the church’s responsibility? After all, that’s what pastors are trained for, right?*

It’s true that pastors across our country are effectively teaching and preaching God’s Word and lighting up many lives as a result. But they’d be the first to tell you that the spiritual training of children was never meant to be relegated to a single hour on Sunday morning. Rather, spiritual training was meant to be lived out every day before children by loving parents and grandparents.

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## PICKING UP THE TORCH

In Deuteronomy 6 we read that communicating our love for God to our children is supposed to happen in the home during the course of everyday life: “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” (vv. 5-7).

The plain truth is that it is our responsibility as parents to be the primary spiritual trainers of our own children. That task isn’t reserved for seminary graduates or those from a long line of faith. It is meant for every person wearing the label “Mommy” or “Daddy.”

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*But how am I supposed to be a spiritual trainer for my children? you ask. I've never been to seminary or taught a Bible class. How do I “train a child in the way he should go” when no one modeled how to do that for me?*

Don’t panic! To train up a child to know Jesus, to love Him, and to serve Him doesn’t take the knowledge of a professional theologian. It just requires the commitment to start the process and become intentional. Whether you’re a new believer or have been a Christian for many years, you may not know all the answers. That’s okay. Teaching your children can present a great opportunity to learn more about your faith—right alongside your kids.

You’ve got the number one advantage: you’re there! You’re the one on the spot to help your kids through all the challenges that come up at home and at school and in the neighborhood. You’re the one who’s handy to handle those “teachable moments” when your child has a question about God or faith or Christians.

Teaching spiritual truth to your children—teaching them to know, love, and serve Jesus—can be fun, exciting, and, most of all, life-changing (and one of the lives that will be changing will be your own!). The psalmist prays, “You will fill me with joy in your presence” (Psalm

16:11), and our Lord Himself tells us, “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Your challenge is to help your children fall in love with Jesus and experience His abundantly full life. So don’t wait to become intentional about passing down your faith. Spiritual training isn’t going to happen by accident. It will happen because you’ve decided to begin the process in your own home, to help your children grow up loving the Lord and eventually pass down their faith to their children, your grandchildren.

You *can* shape your children’s views of God and give them a solid foundation with Him. Through prayer, patience, and a positive plan designed for your unique family, you can take on the role of spiritual trainer in your home.

## **NOT JUST HOW, BUT WHAT**

Knowing how to teach isn’t the only thing a parent needs to know. What you teach your children can make all the difference—especially when it comes to spiritual training. That’s why you’ll find in this book the key truths of the Christian faith you’ll want to pass on to your children.

The four sections of this book can help you determine which foundational truths your children are ready to absorb, adjusted for their specific ages. It will also show how far along their own relationships with God can be and will give you a framework for understanding what kind of behavior choices you can expect from them at each stage of their spiritual growth.

As you read through this book, you may wonder how you could ever teach these many truths in a lifetime, let alone during your children’s preteen years. You may feel your children’s abilities or interests don’t fit those described for their age levels. You may believe some topics have been overemphasized—and others left out.

No problem! Rest assured that

- You can cover the topics as you like, in the order that suits you, at your own pace. It’s a good idea to read through the chapters covering your children’s ages in order to get an overview, but feel

free to start by choosing just one or two topics that especially interest you and your children now.

- The truths are meant to be communicated in your own words, reflecting your style and feelings. Your children need to understand and apply them, not memorize them.
- Every child is unique, developing at his or her own speed. Don't worry if your kids don't seem able to grasp a topic that's listed at their age level. Simply wait until they can. The important thing is for them to grow in their relationship with God, not just to learn facts.
- Your outlook, experience, denominational background—all these will influence how you choose to emphasize, de-emphasize, or add to the topics in this section.

As you read, you may discover truths you didn't know. That's great! See this as an opportunity to learn along with your children. Spiritual training isn't just for children; it's for all of us who want to better know and serve the God who loves us.

There's no more wonderful adventure than growing in Christ. If you haven't discovered that in your own spiritual journey, you will as you grow through shaping your child's spiritual experience. Look for the gift of joy in God's presence and the pleasures of living with God forever. Those who seek Him always find Him.



## CHAPTER I

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# The Firm Foundation of God's Love

*The first years* of your child's development present a wonderful opportunity for laying a spiritual foundation. Children acquire an astonishing amount of information and skills in these earliest years, and the foundation of what they will learn and experience spiritually in their lives can be well established during this open-door time.

The foundation you want to lay for your children during these first four years of spiritual training is primarily one of love. Most of all, your children need to understand that they are loved, accepted, and wanted—by you and also by a real, caring, and powerful God. These early years are the best time to build into your children the knowledge of God's reality, care, and power.

### **DEVELOPMENTAL DISTINCTIVES**

So how does that helpless, totally dependent newborn turn into a high-powered, skillful four-year-old? With incredible, rapid assimilation of skills and information about the world around him! Think how little

resemblance there is between a helpless, incommunicative baby and a talkative, eager preschooler. These are some wonderful years for learning.

### *PHYSICAL AND MENTAL DEVELOPMENT*

Newborns aren't idle layabouts. They are hard at work learning about their bodies and this strange place they're in. And they are working on a

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number of key tasks: forming an attachment bond (first with Mom), learning they are accepted, developing autonomy or independence and a sense of initiation—the ability to discover things on their own.

By age two they have a brain that is 75 percent of its adult size. They walk, run, climb, pedal a tricycle, use objects to represent other objects, play alone while interacting little with others, develop a recognizable personality, begin to talk, and are mental sponges.

By three they have a vocabulary of 500 to 1,000 words, form sentences of five and more words, add about

50 words a month to their vocabulary, and are still mental sponges.

At age four they skip awkwardly; have greater strength, endurance, and coordination; draw shapes and stick figures; paint pictures; build with blocks; play interactively; have laid the basic foundations of life; are in a growth spurt so need lots of exercise; discover friends; feed themselves; almost completely dress themselves; go to the bathroom alone; express emotions that change from minute to minute; can think of God in a personal way; and can trust Him with a simple faith.

### *SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT*

One way to think about spiritual growth is to imagine that each child has an empty photo album that needs pictures. Although God created your children as unique individuals, from the first moment you hold them you are adding to their album and forming their picture of the world. When you protect them and love them by caring for their basic needs, they learn that they are loved and the world is a safe place. They

need to know this is also true spiritually, so you need to demonstrate, with actions and words, that God is like you: He also cares for them, keeps them safe, and makes sure their needs are met. When they hear and see this repeatedly, they begin to build a worldview with a Christian foundation that sets them up for life.

Sadly, if this foundation isn't actively established at this stage, the child will build up some other idea of foundation, such as, "I have to take care of myself."

In these early years your children are dependent on you to feed and nourish them spiritually. Begin to pray for your child immediately—beginning when you are pregnant if possible. Pray short, simple prayers out loud over your baby and persistently affirm God's love and care. When you consistently pray for your children, they learn what prayer is and that God is interested in them. You can begin this even before your children know what talking is. Simply thank God for them out loud, pray that He gives them a good sleep, and thank Him for putting them in your life. In doing this you are giving them the basics of the Christian faith: God is real, He made them and loves them, He takes care of them, and prayer is talking to God.

You as parents are giving your children their first snapshots of life. It's probably a collage-quilt of impressions—love, comfort, security, smiles and frowns, happiness, care—all pieced together within a bright border that says, "Mommy, Daddy, and God love me. I'm special." What a way to start off their life's photo album!

## **KEY WAYS TO PREPARE THEIR HEARTS**

Between birth and kindergarten, children are ultimately receptive. You are doing all the work of preparing them for a lifelong relationship with God by loving, nurturing, reassuring, and caring for them. Children are all very different, but they are similar in their needs, what they can understand, how they develop, and what approaches work best.

*Be consistent.* An important element of love and nurture, both physical and spiritual, is consistency. Make a habit of telling your children of

your love and God's. Consistency is key because it's impossible to tell when any child starts to understand what you're doing. But if you're constantly modeling a positive attitude toward God and a loving relationship with Him, you will be doing that when your child starts to notice. And you will also be modeling who God is: faithful and continuously present.

*Model God's love as you show your love.* In this love and nurture stage, it's impossible to overemphasize the importance of modeling.

Growth is a continuum. It begins with you modeling who God is and what a relationship with Him is like as you demonstrate your love and God's love. You do this as you care for your children, talk with them, and show them what love is. They observe and take it in.

As they start understanding language, you verbally communicate that you love them and God loves them. Then you gently move your children to where they begin to interact with God themselves. Even before they can comprehend what you're saying, you can continually explain the basic truths to them (such as what prayer is). Your intentional modeling raises questions for them that you can answer in a nurturing, loving environment.

Finally, your children will try to imitate you. It's a natural cycle of growth especially obvious in this stage.

*Connect with your children where they are, and connect over what they're interested in.* This growth continuum happens in all areas. They learn most when your teaching connects with their current thoughts and interests. For example, when you pray over your children, explain what you're doing, and encourage questions. Then you let them join you. This might be as simple as asking them what they want to pray about and then praying their prayers for them, such as, "Dear God, thank You for loving me. Help me go potty in the potty and sleep well." This prayer connects with them because it deals with their concerns and is short and simple enough for them to grasp. Of course, their prayers

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may be longer and cover more ground than this one, but it's a good idea not to stretch prayer time and content past their limited attention span. Stay at your child's "heart level." Gradually, as you explain and answer questions, your children will want to pray their own prayers.

*Teach obedience.* At this stage, it's also important to establish the principle of obedience to parents, in the context of love and nurture. One of the ways God loves and cares for His children is by teaching them and giving them guidelines. You teach your children to be obedient to God because you know He loves them and is trustworthy. They should also obey you because, like God, you love them and want the best for them. Children live so much out of their emotions and are so intent on exploring their world, learning the limits, and becoming independent that obedience is hard for them at first. They will need help. Gently walk them through the right response again and again—and again.

*Keep learning exciting.* Spark and enliven your children's interest in God and spiritual ideas by employing different media such as simple Bible videos or music tapes. Spice things up by adding actions, playing games, or giving them a snack during their video. Try singing together in the car, or playing a game with their hands and feet reminding them that God made our bodies. As you walk them in the stroller, talk about all the things you see and communicate God's great artistry and creativity. Use variety to increase their enjoyment and keep their interest high. Use Bible stories that are suited to their level. Talk with them about the pictures and what they mean. Relate what you're talking about to their lives.

*Make their church experience appealing.* Do what you can to get clothes, offering, and breakfast ready on Saturday night to limit the rush and stress of Sunday morning. Work with your church to ensure that the nursery and early-childhood classrooms are attractive—bright and exciting. Make sure your children aren't simply being baby-sat but are learning simple songs and Bible stories. Volunteer to help in the nursery. Work to make church an enjoyable experience for your kids.

## **COMMON REFLECTIONS OF FAITH AT THIS AGE**

Nothing beats the thrill of observing your children's faith in development. Happily, you will be able to see reflections of their spiritual development.

As your children grow, they'll move toward the next stage, where they will become more actively involved in their own faith and learning. On the way there, they will enjoy the various things you're doing together with them and God, such as praying, reading Bible storybooks, and singing songs, and they will begin to want to "do it myself" rather than having you do it all for them. They will start to grasp some of the basics about God and the Christian faith: They'll understand certain things about how God wants them to be and behave, know that God loves them and made them (and everything else) on purpose, and know that they can talk to God.

## **MEMORY MARKERS**

Celebrate your children's spiritual development by building intentional remembrances of the growth that you see in faith and relationship with God. One excellent way to do this is to establish some "memory markers."

In the Old Testament, Joshua's first day on the job included a faith-stretching task. Taking over from Moses, he was to lead the people across the Jordan River at flood stage. Years earlier, God had enabled Moses to part the Red Sea so Israel could escape slavery. Now God told Joshua and the priests that He would part the waters again. Not only did almighty God provide a way of escape from Egypt, He parted the waters for the Israelites' entrance into the land that He'd promised to Abraham so long ago.

Once Joshua and the priests had everyone safely across, God commanded His new leader to set up a "Memory Marker." Twelve stones from the middle of the riverbed were to be made into a special marker to commemorate what God had done. But the stones weren't just to celebrate that day—and they weren't just for Joshua and the people who crossed the river.

[Joshua] said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.” (Joshua 4:21-24)

The “Memory Marker” Joshua was commanded to put up was a picture for the children of Israel. That pile of rocks became a testimony to what God had done and an opportunity for parents and children to focus on God’s greatness and love. It was a snapshot of God’s faithfulness that they could look at and talk about.

You can create similar “markers” or “snapshots” for the members of your family.

### **DEDICATION**

One common but powerful Memory Marker is a formal dedication. Just as Hannah, the mother of Samuel, dedicated her son to the Lord (1 Samuel 1) and Mary presented Jesus to God (Luke 2:21-38), so you can commit your children to God and commit yourself to raising them with His help. Children will, of course, decide for themselves eventually, but in dedicating them to God, you also commit yourself to doing everything you can throughout their lives to teach and train them to follow God, lead Christ-centered lives, and develop their own personal relationship with Him. By dedicating them to God, you are dedicating yourself to taking up the calling God has given you and making your own commitment to love and nurture them. By giving your children to God, you are acknowledging His partnership in the parenting process and asking for His help and wisdom.

Usually children are dedicated when they are infants or toddlers—

too early for them to remember it on their own. But with photographs or video and the memories of family members who joined in the dedication, your children will have lots of help remembering.

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## LIFELONG PROMISE

If your child is being dedicated, consider choosing a “life verse” for him or her. Here are a few ideas:

- Psalm 19:14 (“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”)
  - Psalm 139:23-24 (“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”)
  - Proverbs 3:5-6 (“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”)
  - Jeremiah 29:11 (“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”)
  - Ephesians 3:17-19 (“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”)
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Many churches incorporate the dedication of babies into their worship service, with a pastor or elder praying for the baby, for the parents, and for the whole congregation who will share in the Christian education of the baby.

Consider choosing a “life verse” for each of your children to read at their dedications—something that you can note in their memory books, on their dedication certificates, or in their first Bible storybooks. Choose Bible verses that embody your hopes and prayers for them.

When your children are old enough, tell them about the special verses you chose for them, show them the snapshots or video of their



dedication services, and explain how you promised to train them in God’s ways.

## THINGS ABOUT GOD THEY’RE READY TO LEARN

This chart points the way to the next three chapters, which will explain what your infant-to-preschool children are ready to learn.

- The “Knowing” columns contain truths about their faith, God, and what He has done;
- the “Loving” column is about developing their relationship with God;
- and the “Living” columns are about living out in their person and actions who God wants them to be.

In each of these three areas, topics and concepts are listed that your children can grasp. Amazed? Don’t be surprised! Your little sponges can absorb all of these spiritual truths, as you’ll see in the chapters ahead.

## Ages 0–4

KNOWING		LOVING	LIVING	
A. Who God Is	B. What God Has Done	C. You Can Have a Relationship with God	D. You Can Be All God Wants You to Be	E. You Can Do All God Wants You to Do
1. God exists.	5. God created everything.	9. Prayer is talking to God in Jesus’ name.	12. God wants you to be good, kind, and loving, just like Him and Jesus.	14. God wants you to go to church.
2. God loves you.	6. God created you.	10. You need to talk to God regularly.	13. God wants you to see and think good things.	15. God wants you to obey your parents.
3. Jesus loves you.	7. God gave us the Bible.	11. You need to regularly listen to stories about God and Jesus from the Bible.		16. God wants you to learn to share your things with others.
4. God wants to take care of you.	8. God’s Son, Jesus, died for your sins so you can be with God.			