

How Do I Parent a Strong-Willed Child?

Linda Evenson Reed

I've had it! I can't take any more. Amber pushes my buttons. My husband is frustrated with the fighting. Our other children say we're too easy on her. I'm at my wits end! We need peace!" The distraught mother collapses onto the sofa in my office. I point out the stack of parenting books on my coffee table. Clearly she is not alone if so many books are being written on the subject of parenting strong-willed children!

Strong-willed children are often labeled as "stubborn." I remind Amber's mom that we can reframe that to be "perseverant." God says that he has plans for us (Jeremiah 29:11) and that there are "works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). God uses determined, persevering personalities for very important roles. But it can be a challenge for parents to guide determined, persevering children to learn to apply their "strengths" in ways that serve and honor God and benefit others. To that end, parents wish God would provide an "Owner's Manual" for each child. In a sense, he did. It's called the *Holy Bible*. Though the Bible isn't simply a guidebook ("ten easy steps to become a better parent"), it does help us understand the dynamic that is taking place in our relationship with our strong-willed child—the sinful nature that stubbornly expresses its own will. It clarifies our understanding of what is good and God-pleasing. It leads to repentance. It rejuvenates our souls with the promise of forgiveness.

It strengthens our determination to be a gospel-guide for our children. In short, it offers just exactly what we need. Unfortunately, the parent of a strong-willed child is often too exhausted to search, too angry and frustrated to focus, or too ashamed of his or her own response to a child's manipulative outbursts to find rest there. But let's consider some important insights as we see how God "parents" us:

Clear expectations. God gave us the "Law" or the Ten Commandments to guide us, not to frustrate us. We don't need to guess as to what is proper behavior nor do we have to apologize for expecting it.

Free will. God does not control our behavior. He doesn't force us to follow his will. And every one of us has a sinful nature that wants to follow our will, not God's.

Grace. God promises that nothing can separate us from his love. He responds to us with grace—undeserved love and mercy. He forgives us. Every day. Over and over. He also has compassion on us when we suffer pain from the consequences of our own willfulness.

In Micah 6:8, God commands us to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Good advice for parenting! We will be best equipped to address the struggle our strong-willed child faces if we first contemplate our own sin and the



marvel of God's forgiveness. Then we will be able to parent with love and empathy, powerful tools when parenting any child, but especially one who is strong-willed.

Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, author of *Love and Respect in the Family*, talks about the "Crazy Cycle" that develops when children view their parents as "unfriendly" toward them. When children disobey, parents feel hurt

(Continued on page 2.)

(How Do I Parent a Strong-Willed Child? . . . cont.)

and disrespected. The instinct is to lash out at the child. Children want to feel respected as much as we do. A strong-willed child will often demand respect from others, even if it is undeserved. If parents can disengage and communicate empathy, it can be a powerful tool in helping children feel loved and motivating them to respond with respect.

Amber's parents told her she could only use her new tablet at the desk. She disobeyed and someone stepped on it. Instead of accepting this mishap as the consequence of her disobedience, she had a tantrum and blamed her brother.

Empathy does not mean giving in. Amber's parents did not buy her a new tablet. They told her they were sorry that her tablet broke and that they understood it was difficult for her to be without it. It may not have made Amber feel better, but it shortened the tantrum and avoided the drama that would have ensued if they had lectured her.

Natural consequences. When we sin, God often allows us to experience painful consequences. He uses natural consequences to teach us. For example, we betray a confidence and we lose a friend or we overeat and we suffer health problems.

Parenting a strong-willed child takes time and patience. As parents we make a mistake if we give in to our children's pleas to shield them from the consequences of their actions.

Like so many of us, Amber will need a few more "life lessons."

About a week after the mishap, Amber did acknowledge that she had made a mistake. Her parents then worked with her on a plan to earn money to replace her tablet.

Personal responsibility. Avoid power struggles. Shift the burden of responsibility to the child. You cannot make him or her do anything, but you can control the consequences. Calmly show your child that the consequences are the result of his or her choices and actions.

Amber's parents were tired of fighting with her about picking up her things. They told her that anything left

in common living areas at the end of the day would "disappear" until the following week. Amber complained for the first few weeks. Her parents consistently empathized and told her they knew she was a smart girl and would eventually begin to make good choices. In time, she became more responsible, especially when her favorite boots were gone for a week!

Understanding. In Psalm 139 the psalmist wrote, "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me" (v. 1). Unlike God, we are not omniscient. However, understanding your child's temperament will be a big help in knowing how to parent. Some of

YOU CANNOT MAKE HIM OR HER DO ANYTHING, BUT YOU CAN CONTROL THE CONSEQUENCES.

us are born more persistent or less flexible or more sensitive to external stimuli. Each of us is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (v. 14). Remember that. Some children develop emotional and mental capabilities earlier or later than others. Be sure your expectations are realistic for your child. What motivates your child? Some children may be motivated by approval, by attention, or power. Your job is to bring your child to the Savior, not to try to change your child's temperament so he or she will be more like your "ideal."

Talk less and listen more.

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:19,20). Too much

"talking" sometimes exasperates both parent and child. When the heart rate goes up, your child gets "flooded." At other times, your child will have a short attention span and tune you out.

In his book, *The Explosive Child*, Dr. Ross Greene suggests trying to define the problem from the child's perspective first, then present your perspective, and finally issue an invitation to find a solution that works for both. Older children sometimes come up with workable compromises. They feel respected and enjoy the challenge of using newly formulated problem-solving abilities.

Do not be anxious. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7). Rejoice in God's promises. Receive his peace. Look forward to seeing how he uses your child's strong will for his kingdom!

(The situations presented in this article are real; the name of the client is not.)

Suggested Reading:

Cline, Foster, and Jim Fay. *Parenting With Love and Logic*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006.

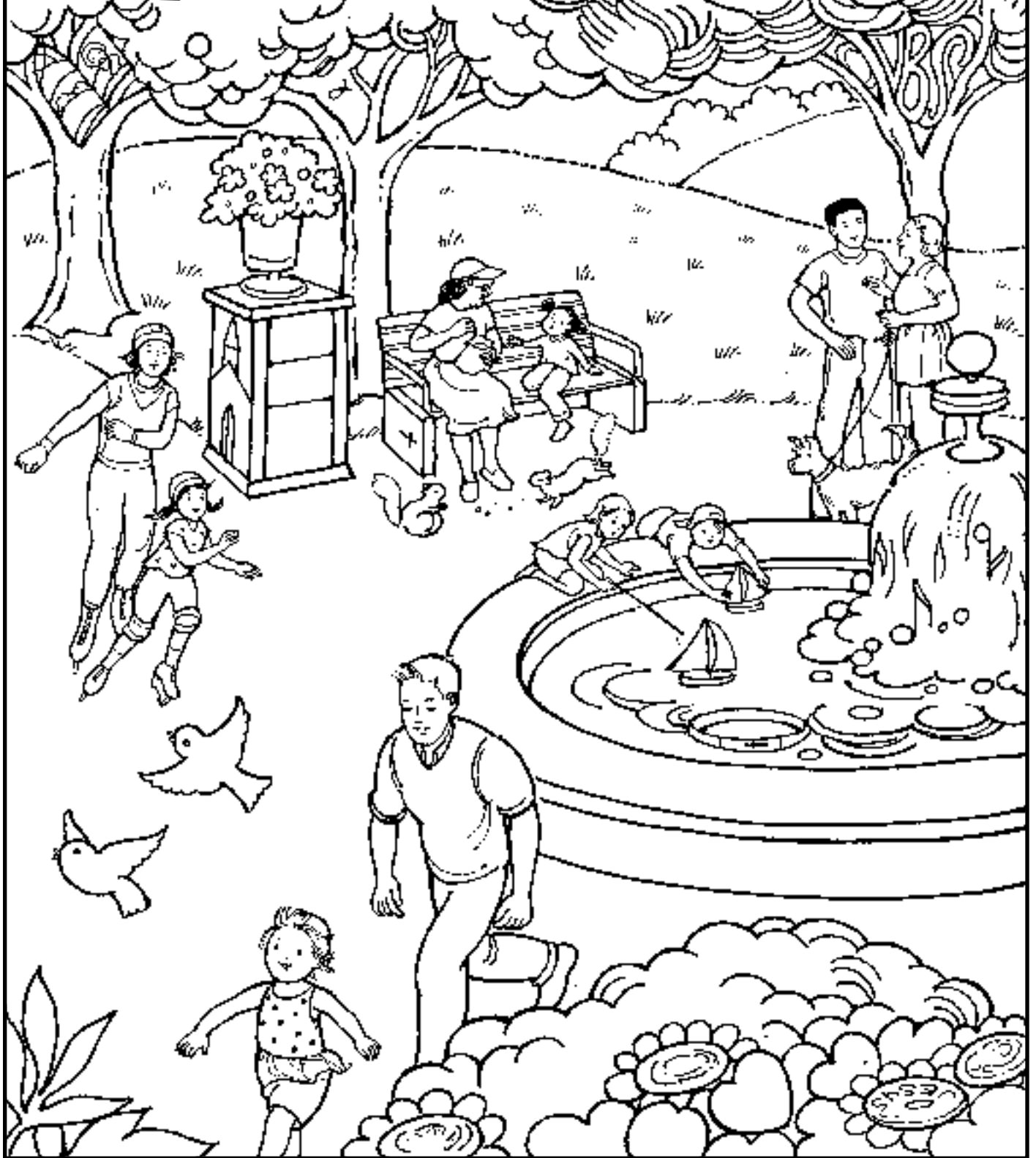
Eggerichs, Dr. Emerson. *Love and Respect in the Family*. Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2013.

Greene, Dr. Ross W. *The Explosive Child*. New York: Harper Press, 2010.

MacKenzie, Robert J. *Setting Limits With Your Strong-Willed Child*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013.

Linda Evenson Reed has practiced as a psychotherapist in the Milwaukee area for 30 years. She specializes in Christian counseling and marriage and family therapy, working with individuals, couples, and families. She currently practices at Cornerstone Counseling in Brookfield, WI. Linda lives in New Berlin, WI, with her husband, Dr. Donald Reed, and is a member of St. James Lutheran Church in Milwaukee.

Keep Jesus in Summer



Find the 10 hidden objects in the picture. When you're finished, you can color the picture. The answer key is on the back page.

- | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Bible | 3. church | 5. musical notes | 7. religious story book | 9. T-shirt with the "fish" symbol |
| 2. praying hands | 4. CD with the word Jesus on it | 6. bracelet with a cross | 8. heart | 10. The letters VBS |

It's called the *social dimension of intelligence*. It is what God wired into the human brain that makes us want to connect with other human beings. In Eden, God had Adam conduct the animal-naming experiment so Adam would understand that a conversation with a crocodile or a repartee with a rhino could only go so far. Adam was not complete until he found a helper, a mate, a friend like Eve. When sin entered Eden, however, the perfect-friend factor was toxically infected, just like everything else. Now, "friends," especially the ones hanging out with our children, can sometimes be a real cause for concern.

For most parents, the real fears about their children's friends kicks in when the children reach adolescence and the peer group becomes more important. It's normal for our adolescent children to want to break away. The "journey to independence" requires that adolescents find out who they are as individuals. At some point in the development of these divinely designed social beings—our children—something triggers a switch.

They begin to think, "I have to start breaking away from my family of origin. I have to start becoming my own person. I need to find out who I am and learn better what my purpose in life is."

The journey to independence, however, is confusing and scary for our children. They want to boldly blast into the adult world, but at times still need to retreat to the security blanket of childhood. Adolescents do not recognize the dynamics at work, but they definitely grasp the fact that the surest way to halt the journey to independence is to grow up to be exactly like their parents.

Fortunately for our children, plenty of their peers are going through the same thing. The peer group and the individual friends our children chum, or slum, with become—for a while—a second family within which our children find support and with whom they can test the values they have learned at home and church. Eventually, and thankfully, our children grow out of adolescence, and the power of the peer group weakens. Our children then tighten the link with their family of

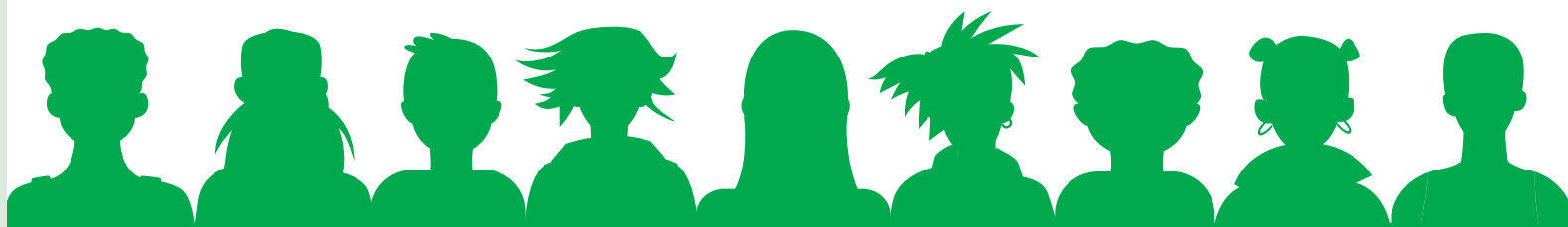
origin with a much better sense of who they are and what's really important.

But how do you hold yourself together while it is playing out? What are your options if some of the peers your independence-craving kid hangs out with are freaking you out? The following bits of advice—while not exhaustive by any means—should be helpful.

LIGHTEN UP A LITTLE.

If you have an overall positive relationship with your child, and have nurtured Christian values in your home, the peers will not irreparably damage your darling. Trust your child a little. Give him or her some credit for having learned some good things from you. You absolutely want to stay actively engaged in your child's life, and you need to continue to pray, but you must also trust that God will help your child successfully navigate these new waters. Express this confidence to your child often.

If you have not instilled Christian values in your child, you will be in for a bumpier ride and will need to do some



Don't Be Freaked Out By Your Child's Friends

Joel A. Nelson

major catching up. What makes parent-adolescent relationships so tough sometimes is the all-of-a-sudden interest a parent starts taking, when up to that point, there was marginal moral modeling. In adolescence, youthful antennae go on high alert to detect inconsistency or hypocrisy in adults. If you find yourself in this boat, seek some spiritual and practical advice from a trusted source who understands this life phase.

FACILITATE MORE FAMILIARITY.

Before you pass judgment on your child's choices in friends, get to know them, especially on the inside. Piercings, tattoos, Gothic garb, designer dress, Goodwill bargains, a flair for the artistic or athletic, brash or shy behavior, spell-binding elocution, or monosyllabic grunting—all are externals that can irritate and annoy but usually do not define what the friends are really like. Immediately second-guessing your child's relational choices sends the message that he or she can't handle growing up. It may also produce the opposite response—it may drive your child to these friends even more. If you are really struggling, think of the people Jesus hung around with in order to win them for the kingdom—certainly not the “beautiful people” of Palestine.

Also, remember that adolescence is the “try on” years. Almost all adolescents will experiment with different speech, dress, diet, and relationships to find out who they really are. Expressing a sincere, Christ-like interest in your child's choices for friends will enhance the developmental partnership you have with your child. Invite the friends over to your house and ask your child to introduce them to you at school events or church. Your child may push back on this a bit, thinking that you are a loser who will totally destroy his or her standing in the social network. The reality, though, is that your child's friends will think you are really cool compared to their “loser” parents.

It is also wise to get to know your child's friends' loser parents as well. The more partners you have as you help your child successfully navigate

the journey to independence, the better. Here again, if you have treated your child with Christ-like love and respect before the “try on” years, your child will show love and respect for you and to you when the peer meet-and-greets happen.

RECALIBRATE YOUR ROLE.

Did you know that parents are frequently the ones causing the problems during the adolescent life stage? Many parents do not grasp that their role must transition from being “Loving Law-Givers” to becoming “Approachable Advisors.”

When our children are smaller and in what's called the concrete operational stage, we can tell them to do things and they do not push back much. They believe we are the experts who know what we are doing. When kids hit adolescence and are able to think abstractly, continuing to dictate what they should think, feel, or do—or who their companions should

be—is not easy, but it does model and witness for them a Christlike, adult way to deal with life.

TALK, TALK, TALK ABOUT TRUST.

Adolescents want independence. We parents will want to keep giving them more “leash” as long as they can prove worthy and maintain our trust. Emphasize in loving ways, over and over and over, that the trust that exists between you and your child is sacred. You have to be able to trust your child with his or her choice of friends because, more and more, they are going to be out of your sight and experiencing more of the adult world. Maintaining a high level of trust (something you want) will result in increased freedom (something your child wants). Trampled trust is very, very hard to repair, but honest, godly obedience will bring great blessings.

Adolescence along with the opportunities and challenges it brings to you and your child relative to peers, friends,

The JOURNEY to independence, however, is CONFUSING and SCARY for our children.

be—sends a message that you have no confidence in their ability to correctly figure it out themselves.

We also have to understand that the God-designed, human brain is incomplete until people reach their mid 20s. The adolescent brain, especially the part that controls decision-making and emotion—big factors when finding friends—is not fully wired. So, parents need to listen more and talk less, patiently counsel through dicey issues, dispassionately advise, and help their children to weigh the options and outcomes relative to social connections. This

and relationships is really one of the most wonderful life experiences there is. Embrace it. Remain positive. Remember that you were this way once. Stay grounded in God's Word, and use this period to teach your child about God's wonderful design for Christian adults.

Finally, don't freak out. The greatest thing about this life phase is that your kid grows out of it!

Dr. Joel Nelson has served as a teacher, school principal, staff minister, and director of the synod's Youth Discipleship division. He has recently started a consulting firm called Creating Youthful Churches.

The Crown CONNECTION

Heather Bode

“Far away in northwestern Montana, hidden from view by clustering mountain peaks, lies an unmapped corner—the Crown of the Continent.”
—George Bird Grinnell

These words, written in 1901, describe the land we know as Glacier National Park. Because my family lives in Montana, we frequently see newspaper headlines about the disappearing glaciers in Glacier National Park. The big question is will Glacier National Park continue to be the “Crown of the Continent” if the namesake glaciers are gone?

Our Lord made man the crown of his creation. Are we worthy of such a title? How are we doing? As God’s family of believers, is our faith shrinking like the glaciers? Will we retain our title of “Crown of God’s Creation” even though we constantly do things against God’s will?

A children’s book called *Princess Pigsty* tells the story of a little princess who is so spoiled that she rebels against being a princess. She throws her crown into the fishpond and refuses to retrieve it. She wants to do things by herself. It’s “her way or the highway” as the expression goes. How often aren’t we like that spoiled princess? We are so richly blessed, and yet we grumble against God. We complain. We worry.

We act like the crown he has honored us with means nothing.

The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they struck him in the face. (John 19:2,3)

Isn’t it amazing that our Savior, Jesus Christ, gave up his heavenly crown for a crown of thorns? To us, that seems like a terrible trade. It was. But Jesus did this willingly and out of absolute love for the crown of his creation—you and me. We are the spoiled princesses who trounce on the crowns given to us. Thankfully, we have a loving Savior who came to restore our crowns. Not only did he die, but he also conquered death so we might have the crown of life. How humbling it is to realize we have this crown of everlasting life offered to us when we are so undeserving.

But we see Jesus, . . . now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9)

Do you have summer travel plans? Are you visiting a national park? Maybe making the drive out to see the Crown of the Continent: Glacier National Park?

As you visit these places, it is easy to be reminded of the majesty of God’s creation. But use your visit also as an opportunity to remind your family of the crown of thorns placed on the head of Jesus, who suffered and died for the crown of his creation—you and me.

The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 51:11)

Heather Bode lives in Helena, MT, where her husband serves as pastor for Valley View Lutheran Church. They have been blessed with five children.

Tips for Visiting National Parks

- Be prepared. The informational signs will mention how each park was formed. This will include evolutionary teachings. Take the opportunity to discuss what God has told us about the creation of the world.
- Point out incredible aspects of the park. Why might God have created such things?
- Visiting mountain ranges can make us feel small. Discuss how God cares for all of his creation, from the tallest mountains to the tiniest plant.
- Take time for family devotions. End each day with a prayer of thankfulness.
- Create an “Evidence Journal.” Older children can keep a journal. Encourage them to look for evidence of God’s power and evidence of man’s sinfulness.

We act like the crown he has honored us with means nothing.



Teaching Children to Pray



Heather Bode

Author Catherine M. Wallace wrote, “If you don’t listen eagerly to the little stuff when [your children] are little, they won’t tell you the big stuff when they are big, because to them, all of it has always been big stuff.”

Over and over again, we fail to take time to truly listen to what our children are trying to tell us. And, yes, what is “big” to them might be “small” to us.

One of the most comforting truths Christian parents can give their children is the knowledge that prayer gives us open communication with our Lord.

Prayer is that simple—talking to God. And he is never too busy to listen.

How do we teach our children to pray?

From Infancy

Parents are used to late nights and lullabies. Sing your favorite hymn as you rock baby to sleep. This is also the time to begin bedtime prayers. Make it part of the bedtime routine. As babies learn to sit in highchairs, draw their attention to mealtime prayers. Having the same mealtime prayer helps babies and toddlers become familiar with the words and routine of prayer. It’s okay if they don’t fold their hands and bow their heads. Your job is to model. As a friend of mine says, “If they don’t see you pray, how will they know what to do?” The children will follow . . . eventually! Another idea which reinforces the concept that prayer is “talking to God” is to use play phones. Use a phone to “call” Jesus to tell him your troubles or to thank him for a particular blessing.

School Years

By the time children enter school, talk to them about different types of prayers. Here are some examples:

- Repetitive prayers—These are bedtime and mealtime prayers. They also include hymn stanzas, the Lord’s Prayer, or even liturgical responses.
- Asking Prayers—When you have a question, need guidance, or have a specific request.
- Praise Prayer—For the times you stand in awe of God’s power and glory.

- Thanks Prayer—This is not just for Thanksgiving! Use this type of prayer to thank God for our many blessings any day of the year.

Once children begin to understand the different kinds of prayers, they will enjoy opportunities to vary their prayers. Write the prayer types on pieces of paper. Place the pieces in a jar and let children take turns choosing one to pray at bedtime or mealtime.

Tweens and Teens

At this point, a parent’s prayer is that our children have developed a regular prayer habit. These emotional years are a great time to stress how personal prayer can be. Remind your children that God has always been “wireless.” Kids may not easily open up to you, but encourage them to open up to God.

Some children will enjoy journaling their prayers. You might even suggest that they write their prayers in code . . . God will get it. Or you might suggest that they write prayers on tiny pieces of paper and put them in a “worry box” or secret place. After a few months, they can go back and reread the prayers and consider how God chose to answer them. This is a powerful reminder that demonstrates how God works in their lives.

Yes, prayer is powerful. Just after Paul instructed the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, he said, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18).

What a joy it is to be able to teach our children to pray! Through prayer our children learn to talk to God and know that he *always listens*—to the big stuff and the little stuff. Teach children now, so when they become adults, they will turn to God in any and all situations.

Heather Bode lives in Helena, MT, where her husband serves as pastor for Valley View Lutheran Church. They have been blessed with five children.

Prayer is that simple—talking to God. And he is never too busy to listen.

Christian discipline is . . .

John Juern

thanking God for your child;
teaching your child to pray;
teaching Jesus songs;
telling your child about Jesus' love;
teaching your child how to be thankful for Jesus' love;
telling your child you love him or her;
expecting your child to show God-pleasing behavior;
teaching your child to obey and honor those in authority;
setting and enforcing limits;
being a good role model for your child;
"catching your child being good" and letting your child know you are pleased;

teaching your child to be kind to others;
giving of your time to your child;
expecting your child to do chores;
talking with your child in a loving way;
setting and following through on consequences for wrong behavior;
being consistent and firm, but not inflexible, with rules;
listening to memory work;
asking God to protect and bless your child;
talking about Jesus in daily conversation;
telling your child what you expect of him or her;
continuing to pray for your child, even when your child no longer lives at home.

The key to and the promise of Christian discipline is found in the words of Proverbs 22:6, which says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

Dr. John Juern, a former teacher and principal, now serves as a clinical psychologist.

Illustration: Shutterstock



"And a mediam rawhide cone."

Cartoon: Ed Koehler

Parents Crosslink

Parents Crosslink is published by Northwestern Publishing House four times annually in partnership with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's Commissions on Youth Discipleship, Adult Discipleship, and Lutheran Schools. All comments should be directed in writing to **Ray Schumacher**, Editor, 1250 North 113th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53226 or schumacherr@nph.wels.net.

For subscription rates or other questions regarding subscriptions, call NPH Subscription Services at 1-800-662-6093.

Copy Editor – **Eric Kuenn**
 Art Director – **Karen Knutson**
 Designer – **Sarah Messner**

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. All materials contained in **Parents Crosslink** are protected under U.S. copyright law.

Key for Keep Jesus in Summer puzzle (p. 3)

1. Bible
2. praying hands
3. church
4. CD with the word
5. musical notes
6. bracelet with a cross
7. religious story book
8. heart
9. T-shirt with the "fish" symbol
10. The letters VBS

