

CHAPTER 5

Teaching Life Values

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

— Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

Part of the role of good Christian parents is undoubtedly teaching their children the values they cherish. We want our children to understand the importance of these values and, more importantly, to live a life that reflects them. Respect for others (and yourself), kindness, gentleness, self-control and other similar character qualities provide our children with a solid foundation and prepare them for the future. The question for parents, however, is how best to teach these values in ways our children can understand and make their own. Specifically, we need to ask how we can best do this for our children who come from hard places and have not had these things consistently taught, modeled or esteemed.

Teaching Your Values by Living Them First

When it comes to teaching their children values, I suspect most parents naturally think first of using words to communicate their message. Whether it is a story from a book, an everyday life experience or a passage of Scripture, many parents equate teaching with talking (and often with an air of seriousness, at that).

You've probably heard the saying that, when it comes to children, things (such as values) are better "caught" than "taught." This saying expresses the understanding that teaching is not something parents do so much as it is the sum expression of who they are in front of and with their children. As followers of Jesus Christ, Christian parents are eager to instill in their children that which they believe and hold dear. However, our children may actually learn more about our beliefs and values, and what they look like lived out, from our reaction to someone swerving in front of us on the freeway or our child spilling his drink (again), than from our talking to them about the Bible or sitting down for a "teaching moment." This truth echoes the essence of the quote often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary."

Even when we do resort to traditional teaching and instruction, parents of children from hard places often discover that their children learn quite differently. As a result, we are required to take a much different approach in order to help them understand the importance of and consistently apply what we are teaching. To do this we need to be willing to dispense with protracted lectures and ser-

mons about right and wrong and do's and don'ts as our primary means of teaching. Instead, we need to employ strategies such as short teaching scripts (i.e., role play), playful engagement and other creative approaches that can more effectively connect with our children. Our children need concrete and simple examples communicated in non-threatening ways and reinforced with lots of praise and encouragement. In addition, it is critical that these things be taught and modeled by parents who are fully present and completely attentive to their child.

Parents find that this different approach is very effective with kids from hard places. But be careful as you introduce or transition to this new way of interacting with your children because kids do say the darnedest things. One mom reminded me of this as she recounted the story of her son Grant, age five at the time, who was being mouthy and disrespectful. Choosing to engage him playfully in order to de-escalate the situation before taking advantage of the opportunity to teach him about the importance of respect, this mom lightheartedly asked him, "Where did sweet Grant go?" Without missing a beat, Grant replied, "He went on vacation and he's not coming back!" This mom certainly got her teachable moment, and then some.

Jesus Says Share!

By Dr. Karyn Purvis

There was a terrible clatter coming from the upstairs bedroom. Running swiftly up the stairs, I arrived in one of my son's bedrooms. To my great dismay, I saw my oldest son, who was generally a gentle-spirited child, with his hands around the throat of his younger brother, who was clutching a toy tightly to his chest. Shaking him angrily by the neck, my oldest son was shouting, "Jesus says share!" On the wall beside them was the Scripture I had so carefully and lovingly calligraphed for their room. Its words—"Blessed are the peacemakers ..."—seemed to mock me now. I swiftly jumped between the boys, separating them so we could resolve the conflict in a more appropriate manner. Once they settled back to play, I returned back downstairs where I reflected on what happened.

Pondering what I had witnessed, my heart grew a bit heavy. The sight of my son enlisting Jesus to his side as he choked his brother invoked more than a bit of irony and was, in a certain sense, a bit funny ... once it was all over and everyone was safe. Despite the humor I found in the situation, however, my heavy heart caused me to ask if it was possible that I had somehow "taught" my boys this attitude. Was it possible that I had succeeded in teaching them the words of God without teaching them the meaning of those words and about His very nature? In the end, I learned a lot from this single encounter—it reminded me that I must always teach my children (with my words and my actions) about how we are called to live and to love.

Key Scripture Verses

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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of

your houses and on your gates.

—Deuteronomy 6:6-9 (NIV)

You Get What You Give

When it comes to this important task of teaching values to our children, parents must face a challenging reality—we are likely to get what we give. If parents want to teach their children to treat others with respect, they must first model it and live it with their children and others. I love how *The Message* phrases Moses' words from Deuteronomy 6:6-7: "Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside of your children." If we want our children to learn and live these values, then we as parents must first write them on our hearts and get them inside of us.

Countless times I've had parents tell me with obvious frustration how their child is always yelling at home and seldom shows respect. Often I will lovingly respond by asking a simple, yet pointed question: "How much yelling do you do, and do you consistently treat others in your home with respect?" I don't ask these questions to shame or point fingers, but rather to make clear an undeniable and important point that parents must always remember: *we must give to our children what we expect from them.*

Whether it is showing respect, speaking with kindness, being gentle, maintaining self-control, using calm words instead of anger or violence or any host of other important values, we are our child's primary teacher and model. The greatest lessons we will teach are not with our words, but with our actions.

A glorious custom in the days of the Old Testament was to build altars in places where God had delivered His people and made covenants with them. As people walked by the altars, they would tell the stories of old to each other and to their children. In this way, rather than sermons and lectures, one generation would pass on its stories to the next generation. These stories became poignant teachers of the family's values and history.

Likewise, as reflected in the Gospels, Jesus also preferred stories and parables as a principal means of teaching and instructing. He commonly turned to stories and examples involving nature (e.g., the lilies of the field and the birds of the air), everyday life (e.g., a farmer sowing seed or a wise man building a house) to teach, encourage and even correct others. Although He certainly knew and quoted the Hebrew Scripture, Jesus just as often resorted to stories and practical illustrations as his primary teaching tools during his ministry on earth. Most importantly, he spent time with the disciples and embodied the truths he sought to teach. Our children are fully capable of learning and living our values, but they need us to approach them with strategies that connect and meet them where they are.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. Think back on your life and consider the life lessons and values that you have "caught"—those life lessons and values that you learned and have sunk in deep? Who "threw" those life lessons and values your way and how did they do it?**

2. What values do you most want your child to learn and to live? How do you teach those values to your child? Do you consistently model them?

3. Does your child have some bad habits, unhealthy tendencies or unacceptable behaviors that he or she may have “inherited” from you as a parent or that you’re actually modeling? What are some specific steps you can take to start to change that?

4. What are some different strategies that you can consider using to better teach the values you want your child to learn? Look back at Chapter 5 of *The Connected Child* and the Empowered To Connect website for some specific ideas.