

“Parents and Kids: Same Planet, Different Worlds, Part 3—Hearts and Souls”

[VIDEO: Q and A with Tim and Mike. 2 min]. We live in an age of specialists. We want our kids to be healthy, so we make sure they have a regular doctor. We expect our teachers to develop our kids’ minds and intellect. We want them to grow up and be athletes, so we put them on teams with coaches to develop them. We get music teachers to give them culture.

We’re kind of into specialists in all the areas of our kids’ lives where we want them to be developed. Which leads to this question: If I’m a parent, who is responsible for making sure my kids know about God? What specialist is in charge of their souls and their spiritual development?

The Bible talks about this directly. This is written by Moses for the people of Israel. **[SLIDE...]** **“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one. Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).** These words are the central affirmation of the Old Testament faith. This phrase was recited by every Israelite first thing when they got up in the morning and last thing before they would go to bed at night. This was to be the first sentence that a Jewish child would say. When a martyr went to his death, these would be the final words that a Jewish martyr would say before dying. This central truth of the faith marked the beginning of their life and the end of their life, the beginning of every day and the end of every day. This is the core of what it meant to be a follower of God.

But let’s notice carefully what comes directly after these words in Scripture. It’s the next thing that Moses says to the people. **[SLIDE...]** **“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” (Deut 6:6-9, NIV).** In other words, he says to all the adults, “This is so important. Do whatever you have to do. Tie a string around your finger. Put magnets up on your refrigerator. Use Post-it notes if that will help you. But, talk to your children about God.”

So if you were to ask Moses, “Whose job is it to make sure that kids grow up hearing about, thinking about, being preoccupied with God?” the answer would be real clear: “It’s up to their parents.” Paul says the same thing in the New Testament. He says that parents are to bring their children up in the instruction and training of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

So let’s talk about this, because **[SLIDE...]** **the person that God is going to hold primarily responsible for the spiritual training and development of your kids is you.** Not primarily the church, not their Sunday School teacher or Crosstraining leader, not a pastor. The church is a very important partner in the spiritual development of kids, but the primary responsibility belongs to moms and dads.

Now, this will take time, work, prayer, sweat, learning, and sometimes awkward, conversations that require growth. But nobody can do this for you. Everything else we have talked about in this series pales in comparison to this. Because this is the foundation for everything else in a kid’s life. This is about not just preparing my daughter for college, or marriage, or a job, or any number of things, it’s preparing her for the most significant thing that any human being ever faces—the fact that we all face an eternal destiny someday.

So, if you have kids, how do you help get them ready for that? How do you build faith? One expert on this happens to be one of my former teachers at Duke. He’s a theologian and writer by the name of John Westerhof. He says that our ultimate goal as parents ought to be to **[SLIDE: “Ultimate goal: Help kids own their faith”]** help kids own their faith. What does it mean for them to own their faith? It means that I want my child, as she grows up, to love God and know God and serve God and worship God and give to God. Not because I do it, not because she grew up in a church that does it, not because somebody expects her to, but because that is what she freely embraces from the core of her being. I want my daughter to be able to own her faith down to the tips of her toes.

To get there, Westerhof talks about three stages that kids generally go through in the process of faith development. Let’s look at these stages and how we handle them. If you’re a parent, I invite you to take some notes on your outline. If you have kids see what stage you think they’re in right now and how their development is going.

The first stage that Westerhof talks about, [SLIDE: “Stages in Faith Development: 1. Experience”] is the experience stage. This is the faith of early childhood. At this point, children are not able to understand fine points of a lot of theology, but they often have a sense of openness and sensitivity to experiencing God. It can really be pretty amazing. One of the biggest mistakes that adults make is underestimating a little child’s capacity for experiencing God.

Sophia Cavaletti is a researcher who has pioneered the study of spirituality in young children. She talks about how, just as children are born with an innate capacity to develop language, children are also born with an innate capacity to relate to God. They’re born with a capacity to have experiences with God. We’re just wired up that way. So at this age, you want to provide an environment that is filled with opportunities for a child to experience the presence of God. Make sure the Bible is available to them. There are great resources for kids of illustrated books that tell stories from the Bible, we’ve got a good selection of these in our bookstore.

One of the things that Janet and I do is read to Zoe often. We have a great kids’ devotional and a couple of children’s Bibles that we use so that she grows up just knowing the stories of the Bible, hearing stories about God and how God worked through biblical characters. She loves to hear me tell the stories of Jonah and the whale, and David and Goliath and others. Let those stories become a part of the fabric of their lives.

Another thing you can do to help kids experience God is cultivate the habit of praying with them when they’re little. This isn’t that hard because prayer often comes more naturally to little children. There’s a simplicity of faith to them and a lack of inhibition when it comes to talking to God. Teaching kids to pray is mostly just teaching your child to talk to God in an uncensored way about whatever is on their mind, whatever they’re concerned about, whatever they’re hoping for, whatever they’re afraid of. Just teach them to talk to God about that. You want to gauge the amount of praying you do to their receptivity. Different kids will approach prayers in different ways so you want to be watching them all the time. But, pray with your kids. Help them to have experiences in prayer. Sometimes Zoe will come into my study while I’m praying and I just take her on my lap and include her in that prayer time.

Model prayer for your kids. When you see beauty in nature, pause for a moment and say, “God, thank you so much for this.” My cell phone has an alarm feature on it and I set that alarm to go off three times a day, at 11:00a.m., 3p.m. and 5 p.m. It goes off to remind me to pause at whatever I’m doing and spend a few moments in prayer talking to God. Well, last Friday Zoe and I were taking a hike where those new trails are by Shoal Creek near Reddings Mill. We were hiking along and decided to stop and have a snack. We sat on a bench and were nibbling away and my alarm went off to pray. So that’s what we did, right there, together. Nothing elaborate, nothing real deep, just a thank you prayer for time to be together, for the trees, for the river, for all God’s creatures. I want praying to become second nature to her. Praying in a way where she can just talk to the God who made her.

Express gratitude at mealtime. That’s one of the best times to give thanks for all kinds of different things, not just the meal. And one of the best questions you can ask your kids is, “How can I pray for you?” Let the Holy Spirit guide you in this. God really will partner with you in the parenting deal.

I’ll give you another challenge at this point. Make a formal commitment to not only pray with your kids, but also to pray for them. Make that commitment today. You can’t control your kids lives, as much as you might want to control everything, you can’t. They will make their own way in life, but you can pray for them. Pray that they will be surrounded by godly people, that they will make good decisions, that they’ll be teachable, and yet stand their ground. Pray for your kids. I just want to encourage you right now if you’ve never made a formal commitment, make it. Say, “I’ll pray for my kids every day.” If it would help you to do that, write it down right now. Write down their name. “I will pray for Zoe, Jimmy, Audrey” whatever your kid’s names are. “I will pray for you each day for as long as I’m alive.” Prayer is a very important part of children’s learning to experience God. Look for chances to talk to God with your kids and commit to pray for them.

Here’s something else about providing an environment that’s rich in experiences for our kids. When your kids are elementary school age, be real firm in your commitment to having them experience Sunday School and Crosstraining on a regular basis. When I was growing up, kids would rather have a tooth filled than

go to Sunday School, but I hear all the time how so many kids love coming to Sunday School and they love coming to Crosstraining on Wednesday nights. Some parents have told me how they weren't going to church on a particular Sunday for one reason or another, but their kids begged them so bad they just had to go, because of Sunday School or Kid Mo or Crosstraining.

I'll just tell you this without apology: Do whatever you need to do to keep your kids involved in church. Blow off soccer leagues, reschedule your bowling team, reset the alarm clock. Getting your kids into a consistent pattern of Sunday School and Crosstraining attendance and engagement and involvement is maybe the greatest help that you'll get in their young years with the most important parenting assignment that you'll ever face. Don't let your own busyness, disorganization or just plain old laziness as a parent keep your kids from experiencing God and the family of faith. Please, just get real clear on this one, for your kid's sake. It's important in the experience stage of faith development.

The second stage in faith development in the lives of human beings is what Westerhof calls **[SLIDE: "Stages in Faith Development: 2. Affiliation"]** affiliation. This is the stage where relationships begin to become real important in the life of a kid. At a certain age, your kids no longer believe that you are the smartest most powerful being in the universe. That's a sad day when it comes, but it comes. As kids get older, generally they'll hit an age sometime maybe 10, 11, 12 that involves this affiliation stage.

This is when there comes a strong desire for a sense of belonging and connection. This is when a kid wants to be a part of something, a group of community that is bigger than himself or herself. Of course, part of that relational connection becomes a more direct, more mature connection with God and with a community. But this is when kids are susceptible to cults and gangs and groups that offer a pseudo-sense of belonging. They need to belong somewhere and if good connections aren't available, destructive ones will be.

If you're a parent and you want to help spiritually form your kids, get to know your kids' friends. Make your home as available as you can as a meeting place for your kids and their friends. I know this can be a big hassle. You may not want to have a sleepover at your house. Because you know the one thing kids never do at a sleepover... sleep! It's a very ironically named event. There parents that don't want the noise, or the cleanup, or the thought of somebody spilling on the furniture so they never want any of their kids' friends over at their house. That's a bad idea. Listen, furniture is not going to last forever. Noise comes and goes, but the soul of your child is an eternal thing.

In the surveys we sent out to you, many of you shared this same bit of wisdom. One of you said become a friend to your kids' friends, particularly a boyfriend or girlfriend. And open up your home as a gathering place. Very important. At this age, that little group that he or she is running around with becomes a huge influence. So get to know them and ask questions about them. Help your kids think wisely about their relational choices.

It's also very important at this age that your child has some contact, some affiliations, with people who are different than him or her. For example they need to have contact with the poor, they need to be part of a serving community. You see, our culture will try to turn kids this age into mall rats, into people that are just obsessed with their own desires. Don't let that happen, because kids often have a willingness and a desire to give that can put adults to shame. One of our youth is up here on Thursday nights helping wash dishes in the kitchen. Just because he likes to help out. That's awesome. I was so proud of my 10 year old niece, Samantha, a few weeks ago. They were having a special day at her school where all the kids were supposed to dress up real fancy. A girl in her class couldn't do it because she didn't have any other shoes than her everyday shoes. Samantha found out, went home and asked her mom if she could give this girl a pair of her own shoes. So they found some good shoes and she gave them away. Then later on they were shopping and Samantha asked if she could spend some of her own money to buy a few things for this girl. Wow! I'm proud of her. Find ways that your kids can get involved in meaningful service with a little serving community.

Again, as parents this is where we can partner together with our church through our youth ministries. We have a youth S.W.I.M team. It has nothing to do with swimming. SWIM stands for students working in mission. They're constantly on the go finding ways to serve people in need. Your kids need that. We have one of the best youth ministries in the city and your kids will be exposed to God-honoring servant ministries all the time as they take part. That will build their character.

One other aspect of this era: Because kids are growing older, they need to hear you speak directly about your spiritual life, about your experience with God. Don't wait until you know all the answers. Don't wait until you have your spiritual life in perfect order. Parents, talk to your kids about your life with God. Tell them how you came to faith. Tell them when something makes you grateful to God for how good he is. Tell them sometimes when you've blown it, when God shows you mercy. Tell them sometimes when you think God has prompted you to do something and you did it. Tell them when you doubt because they doubt sometimes, and tell them how you handle it.

Moses says, "Talk about God when you rise up and when you lie down, when you're at home and when you're on the road." Tie a string around your finger, put a Post-it note on the refrigerator. Talk to your kids about God.

People take different approaches to how they do this. Some families have found that having a set time to meet together as a family to read from Scripture or pray together or sometimes sing together if it's a musical kind of family, that that works really well. You might want to experiment with that, but it doesn't have to be that formal. Our family devotional time is in the evening before Zoe goes to bed. Then it just happens throughout the day as questions and talk about God just flow from everyday conversations. The bottom line here is to experiment and find out what works best for your own family—but do something. That's the affiliation stage.

The third stage that Westerhof talks about is what he calls the **[SLIDE: "Stages in Faith Development: 3. Searching"]** searching stage, and this is the scariest one for parents. This is the stage when kids start to question things. They begin to say to themselves, "I grew up in a Christian home, but I could have been born in some other part of the world. I might have grown up Hindu or Muslim. How do I know that our faith is the right one?"

Youth begin to see that there's so much suffering in the world. When kids become aware of that they may ask, "If there's a God and God's loving and powerful, how come people suffer so much? How do I really know there is a God out there?" These questions do not have easy answers, so you don't have to pretend like they do. They are questions that thoughtful people of faith have wrestled with for a long time now.

A lot of what kids need is simply a safe place where it is OK to talk about these questions. You don't have to have perfect answers for them. Just tell them how you've come to believe about these questions. Tell them that even though you wrestle with these questions too, you have chosen to put your faith in God. If a resource would be helpful to you, Lee Strobel, has written a book called *The Case For Christ* that addresses many of these questions. We've got in our bookstore right now. It's also available in a student version. This book has helped millions of people.

Now, sometimes a child gets turned off or even hostile to faith. This leads to an agonizing question for many parents: "What do I do when my child says that he doesn't want to go to church? Doesn't want to go to Sunday School or Crosstraining or the Crossing for youth." When they're small, parents should make that decision for them. Attendance is a non-optional deal in their early years. But as they get older, say in the high school years, this issue gets more complex.

Sometimes a kid will say, "I don't want to go to church," and the parents will just say, "OK," and let them drop out. I don't think that's a good idea, because they need more direction from you than that. At the same time, don't just tell them that they have to go because you said so. You see, there is almost always some reason for their resistance that lies beneath the surface. It's a parent's job to figure that out.

I need to patiently explore with my child. What's going on? Maybe they have big doubts, and they need a safe place to talk about them. Maybe their resistance is that they've done something they know is wrong and they're torn up with guilt. But more often than anything the single most common reason underneath that kind of resistance is, "I don't know anybody. I go there, but I don't have friends. I feel left out. They don't include me." Let's talk about this one because it is so common. Developing group friendships is one of the toughest and most important challenges in life. Anytime there's a group of young people together, there will always be a certain level of cliques and barriers and challenges that any given kid may have to fight through. That's true at any place, any school, any church. It goes on at ours.

Nancy Hampton, the Director of Student ministries, and leaders of our student ministries know about this, teach about it. They try to work with kids to make the youth groups inclusive. They pray about this.

They're working hard all the time on this, and it may be that I'll need to coach my daughter on this. That may require growth on my part. I may not be real good at this kind of thing, but I might need to tell her for right now, "You've got to keep going. Keep working at developing relationships because that's going to be a part of life. I want you to keep working on it, even though it's a struggle."

Sometimes kids may need to connect with a smaller youth ministry because that's in their character. Or kids may need to go where a friend is already connected. If that's what your kids need, then let them do it. It may be just for a season, it may be longer, but the important part is that they are connected and growing in their faith lives.

This leads to the last thing I want to say in this series, and it's the most important thing. Our daughter is going off to kindergarten this Fall. Somehow she's figured out how long a day is in kindergarten. She keeps say, "Mom, Dad, it's seven hours long!" Going off to kindergarten is a big deal. In the blink of an eye she'll be going off to high school. Then she'll be going off to college. I'm so excited for the adventure of life that's going to begin and so glad that it is. But those aren't the most important places she'll be going off to. In the eternal scheme of things, the day is coming when all who entered this world at one point will face eternity. That day is coming when my 5-year-old daughter, and your kids too, will be going off to their eternity. They will move from this life into the next and stand before a just and holy, loving God and face an eternal destiny. And the thought of missing my child in eternity is just unbearable for me.

If you're a parent, I'm telling you, do whatever you need to do. If you need to get your own life with God squared away, get your own life with God squared away. Because those little eyes are watching us all the time. If there are any patterns in your life that need to get squared away, do whatever you need to do to make them right. There's just too much at stake. Always be working on your own faith life and talk to your kids about their faith and about their futures and about God. If it's awkward or hard or embarrassing or you feel like you don't have all the answers, talk to them anyway. You're the parent.

We live in a world where parents work so hard to give so many gifts to their kids that are going to fade. There's only one gift we can give to our kids that will never fade, and that will last for all eternity, so give it. Give it the best you can. Parents, God is counting on you, and God is ready to help, so let's give all that we've got. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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