

Contents

Foreword	6
Introduction	7
Part One: Positioning for influence.....	11
Chapter 1: Discipling proactively	13
Chapter 2: Modelling the reality of relationship.....	19
Chapter 3: Tying together truth and experience	32
Part Two: Connecting children to God's heart.....	45
Chapter 4: Unwinding wrong views of God	47
Chapter 5: Chatting with God	62
Chapter 6: Catching God's voice	75
Chapter 7: Praying with children	98
Chapter 8: Helping children who struggle to connect	112
Part Three: Implementing a plan.....	121
Chapter 9: Creating a plan for all ages.....	122
Chapter 10: Starting well with under-fives	136
Chapter 11: FAQs.....	146
Bible index.....	154



Introduction

'I just don't know what to do any more.' Sarah's face twisted in frustration and exhaustion as she shared her heart with me. Like many mums, she desperately longed for her son to enjoy church and have some sort of input about God. Lately, they had been heatedly clashing about Chris' desire to play football on a Sunday instead of attending church. 'He's eleven years old, and I still don't know if God is real to him at all.' She sighed deeply. 'I don't even know if he's really a Christian. What did I do wrong?'

Jemma had recently come into a relationship with God through an Alpha course and had been bringing her four-year-old daughter Jasmine to church ever since. She had seen that Jasmine didn't understand the changes that had been happening in their lives as a result of her decision, but she knew that her daughter had noticed a difference. Jemma was unsure how to talk about her faith with her child, much less how to help Jasmine have an experience with God herself. She longed for Jasmine to have a life with him in the way that she did and was determined to give her daughter a childhood full of faith, but had no idea where to start, or how to include her unbelieving partner on the journey.

Richard and Jill have three children. Lily, their middle child, is an eight-year-old girl with big brown eyes, a cheeky, toothy grin, and floppy brown hair. She often had to arrive early to church as her parents helped out on the PA and coffee rotas and with the children's groups. Raised in a Christian two-parent home, Lily had been part of the church world since she was born. She knew the right answers to almost every question in Sunday school, which made her feel very clever indeed. Children at school bullied her a lot, and often her afternoons featured either a crying fit or an angry outburst at her sister, followed by an extended time in her room, sulking and upset. All the right answers from church couldn't help

her work out why she felt the way she did, and how to stop the words that kept going around in her head. All the phrases played as she got ready in the morning and lay down at night: ‘stupid’, ‘ugly’, ‘why don’t you just go and die?’ and ‘useless’ echoed endlessly. She felt that she was a disappointment to God and to her parents. Richard and Jill seemed at a loss as to how to stop this slow slide in their daughter’s confidence. Every night when they put their daughter to bed, they tried to make it a habit to pray. Lily rarely prayed out loud, most of the time preferring Richard or Jill to say her prayers for her. They tried to keep it simple—asking Lily what she wanted to say ‘sorry’ and ‘thank you’ for, and what she wanted to ask for from God. They knew that Lily was a ‘Christian’ but their hearts ached, wishing their daughter was able to find the peace, vibrancy and power that they found in their own faith.



We instinctively know that there is a difference between a child who knows about God and a child whose heart and life are connected to him. When we know in our own lives the transformational power and daily sustenance of a heart in connection with God, we want our children to benefit from a similar relationship. Somehow, though, we only get as far as building God-smart children, hoping that eventually, somehow, God-smart will turn into God-connected. In most cases, this isn’t reality. Knowing about God is important but, if we work only on developing knowledge, we are robbing our children of what they were designed for—to be in relationship with God.

As a children’s minister at a church, I hear people’s stories over and over again: different stories, different circumstances, but the same uneasy, questioning look in their eyes. They feel that their children are missing something vital in their lives and are struggling with how to resolve it. It doesn’t seem to matter whether they are single parents, divorced or married couples, people who are

new to the faith or those who have been raised in it. Some people have brand new babies, some children or teenagers, and some are struggling with how to help their grown-up children. They want more for their children spiritually than what they already have. They want all that God has for them, now and in the future, but it all feels so hard.

In my work, I am continually struck by how disempowered parents feel about their role in the spiritual direction and lives of their children. No matter how many parents I speak to, in churches and communities all over the UK, a theme resonates. ‘I want my children to meet and know God—to live a vibrant life with him! But how do I get them there?’

Some people feel that the answer is the church, ‘The church must do more, do better, do something.’ Money and effort are poured into Sunday programmes, holiday clubs and midweek groups. In some cases, this effort produces fruit. Children do grow in their knowledge of God, though some love church and others don’t. The problem is that, in most cases, it doesn’t result in God-connected children, just God-smart ones. People want more for their children; church is seemingly unable to provide it, and so the frustration grows.

Some people turn to resources such as Bible reading notes to fill the spiritual void. They plan ‘family time’ nights when they read the Bible and study it together. They read Bible notes in the mornings together over breakfast, fill the house with Christian DVDs, read great Christian children’s books, and play under-fives’ worship CDs until they want to scream. In many cases, it produces fruit. Children grow in their knowledge of God and the right answers to spiritual questions. Yet, in most cases, it still doesn’t result in God-connected children, just God-smart ones. People want more for their children, and resources alone are unable to provide it.

There seem to be mountains of parenting books detailing good methods of developing Christian morals, discipline, encouragement, worldview and education. This book is not one of those. This book

is about how to help guide a child to meet and know God in a vibrant way in his or her everyday life. It is about how to parent our children into a reality of God's presence and love, to equip them to access him themselves, and to train them how to build and grow in a two-way relationship with him that will last a lifetime. It aims to equip us to empower our children to be God-connected as well as God-smart.

My goal in writing this book is to empower parents and prime carers to be filled with confidence in their ability to proactively and transparently guide their children to a life-giving relationship with God. All the stories in this book are true, either taken from my own experiences or reported to me by parents who have been involved in them—only the names have been changed. The more real stories we hear, the more encouraged we can become. Included in the book are suggested questions to consider as we go on this journey together.

God has chosen us to raise our children to meet and know him, and to live with him every day through to eternity. He has already been equipping and training us to do this job well. I pray that this book will empower each one of us to embrace our role and take the next step on our journey of parenting.



Part One

Positioning for influence

I was sitting in the back of a large seminar room on a very uncomfortable hard cushioned seat. The seminar speaker was chattering on about all-age services and I had let my mind wander. Then a question from a man in the audience brought me back into the room with a thump. ‘What about us parents? Shouldn’t the church be helping us do faith at home?’ I shifted in my seat to see what the speaker would say. With a smile, she breezily replied, ‘I just encourage the parents in my church to be Jesus to their children, so, as their children see them, they will see God.’ Wham! There you go, parents—no pressure. Be Jesus. Your child’s spiritual development depends on it. The man’s face flickered, half smiling as he sat back down. His shoulders slumped a bit. He glanced sideways at his wife holding their baby and she smiled weakly back.

I left the seminar room feeling frustrated. Of course we should all strive to be more Christ-like in our lives, but if my child’s connection to God is based on my perfect expression of Jesus, then he doesn’t have a chance. No child does. I’m a failure before I even begin. Is God’s design really that we should ‘be Jesus’, living the perfect life in front of our children, so that they see him in us and therefore know him through us? We all hope that we do radiate Christ¹ and therefore share part of his wonderful nature with our children. But is that the primary way in which our children are to meet and experience him? Is that the design? I don’t think so. I believe that God chooses us as parents and prime carers to be the primary spiritual influencers in our children’s lives, and to do three main things: to disciple and mentor our

children proactively in their relationship with God, to model the reality of what a real relationship with God looks like close up, and to help children to tie together biblical truth and their experiences of life and of God.

Note

1. 2 Corinthians 3:18



— Chapter 1 —

Discipling proactively

Marnie looked around the seminar room uncertainly as she began to describe her childhood for the other parents in my class. She grew up in a very strict Christian home. ‘My parents forced religion down our throats whether we liked it or not.’ Her parents demanded a lot of spiritual performance from her and her siblings as they grew up. ‘God seemed like an angry man who was watching our every move. It felt like he was just waiting for us to sin so he could pour out his wrath on to our little lives.’ She fumbled with a tissue in her hands as she explained her teenage rebellion against her parents and against the religion that, she felt, ruled her life. Her journey took her far away and, when she finally hit rock bottom, she discovered God for who he really is. For the first time, she built a relationship with God and saw it change her life. She now wants her children to experience the same connection that she feels with God, but she is afraid. ‘When I look at my children, I see that they are not “God connected”. To be honest, I was so afraid of repeating how my parents spiritually brought me up that I have tried to take a back seat completely. I want my children to choose a faith for themselves, not because I forced it on them but because they want it. I want them to go at their pace and have it be completely their choice.’ She sighed. ‘The problem is that their pace is non-existent. I just don’t see any desire within them to know God. I don’t know what to do.’

Passive/reactive influencing

Many of us struggle to balance our desires in this area. On the one hand, we want to get strongly involved with our children’s spiritual

development. On the other, we want our children to choose faith of their own accord, so that they don't end up pushing God away in an attempt at independence from us.

Many of us are content to get on with our own relationship with God but have a fear of 'crossing the line' too far with our children and accidentally driving them away. This can lead to a very reactive style of spiritual parenting. We wait, hanging on for magical 'teachable moments' to come along: a crisis at school, a random spiritual question from our wayward pre-teenagers, a family emergency or other large event when we see a flicker of spiritual openness in our child. When this glimmer appears, we try to cram every piece of spiritual information, theology and practical biblical application into the opportunity we get, because who knows when the chance will arise again?

It's a little like playing in a group with a skipping rope in the playground. Generally, there are some unspoken rules of the game: the skipper must do tricks, skip on one leg, take no more than 30 seconds—however the group playground rules have evolved. The person waiting has to figure out the pace and rope position, successfully jump inside the death trap of the circling rope, jump a few times over the rope as it passes beneath her feet, and manage to jump out again without damaging herself or the rope's path. If she fails, it all comes crumbling down: the rope's journey is over and everyone shakes their head in disappointment. She has to wait at the back of the queue for another turn.

Many of us feel this way about spiritually influencing our children. We need to find an opportunity presented by our child, figure out the 'rules' of that interaction, avoid all the obstacles and the swinging defensiveness of the child, get in, do our thing, get out again without messing up and causing upset to our child or rebellion against God, and emerge on the other side victorious with a successful conversation about God (and some potential action points that may or may not be followed up). Hurrah! We then walk around as if we are ten feet tall. Behold—the spiritually influencing

parent. If it goes badly, though, we feel crushed. We may feel as if we've hurt our child's view of God or Christianity, and we fear that it will be a long time until he or she gives us an opportunity like that again.

This style of reactive parenting seems to be unique to the spiritual aspects of the parent-child relationship. I can't recall many parents I've met saying, 'I don't want my child to feel like he *must* go to school. I want him to choose it out of his own desire for intellectual growth and stimulation'; or, 'Brushing teeth and washing are optional in our house. I never want my children to feel *forced* into personal hygiene. I want them to choose it for themselves'; or, 'I don't want my child to be *pushed* into having friends. Clearly, she prefers crying in a corner by herself. If I get involved, she may rebel against having friends altogether.' Certain aspects of our children's lives, we know, are important for us to care about and be involved in. We know that our influence is essential to give our children a safe, prosperous life, and so we wade in. But for some reason, our children's spiritual health and happiness often don't receive the same careful attention.

Proactive discipling

God desires us to be proactive with our children's upbringing, including their spiritual development. We are designed to influence our children's mental, emotional, physical and spiritual growth—and we need not feel intimidated or ashamed that spiritual growth is part of that list.

Passing on spiritual values doesn't happen casually. If a person has a wonderful and full faith, this doesn't mean that it will automatically trickle into his or her child. We can see this over and over again in the Bible. Many great spiritual pillars in the Bible were passive spiritual parents and reaped the consequences. Jacob, forefather of the twelve tribes of Israel, was so passive that when some of his children slaughtered all the men in a town, or sold

their brother into slavery, or committed incest, he did nothing.¹ His passivity allowed for his children to grow up virtually unaware of God's call. King David also refused to step in when his son raped his own half-sister and was then killed by her brother.² This 'man after God's own heart',³ this wonderful servant of God, struggled to pass on to his sons the way to live in relationship with God. Jacob and David had a place of influence in the lives of their children, but they squandered their time and position, and their children's spiritual lives were affected.

God makes his designs clear for our proactive discipleship of our children, very early on in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 6:4–9 we read:

Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. Memorise his laws and tell them to your children over and over again. Talk about them all the time, whether you're at home or walking along the road or going to bed at night, or getting up in the morning. Write down copies and tie them to your wrists and foreheads to help you obey them. Write these laws on the door frames of your homes and on your town gates.

This is not a passive spiritual parenting model. God wants his children to be close to him, and he wants us to make the family home the centre of our spiritual discussion and relationship with him. In both Old and New Testaments, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is the goal of this spiritual training. God is calling us actively to create a life of spiritual influence for our children that pervades their everyday world.

If we want to influence our children in the everyday, we need to ensure that we are giving ourselves the crucial time required to shape their experiences. God very cleverly designed us so that influence in each other's lives equals time spent together, so he made sure that we parents were the people who had the most time with our children. In today's world, we recognise the busyness of family life but, even so, we still do spend a lot of time with

our children. In the morning, after school, in the car, at home, at weekends, on holiday, and through the summer, our children and teenagers can't get away from us. We may not feel that we have a lot of time with them, but God has provided it.

Some of us have allowed busyness to steal away the time God designed for us to have with our children, to influence and share with them. If so, we will need to begin to place a higher value on our spiritual influence in their lives. Positioning ourselves for influence may require some schedule-changing, to carve out more time with our children. Some of us have the time already built into our schedules, but we struggle to see it. It is easy to spot the large chunks of time available: evenings off, lazy Sunday afternoons, holidays, or times when the age-old cry of 'I'm bored' drifts towards our ears. The opportunities that are harder to see are the shorter periods that God gives us: five minutes while making the lunches for school, time spent driving in the car on the way to another sporting event, queuing up at the supermarket, or sitting with one child while waiting for another to finish an activity.

All of these tiny minutes add up into a pattern of involvement in the lives of our children that can be used in powerful ways. We just have to know how to position ourselves so that when we have carved out those times and taken advantage of the moments we are given, we are ready to influence. Positioning for influence is not a question of 'one more thing' to squeeze into our already full days. It is about making the decision to disciple our children proactively and to create and utilise the time to do it well.

Questions for reflection

- What might you need to change in order to position yourself to influence your children spiritually?
- What things do you allow into your life that steal time you could be spending with your children?

Parenting Children for a Life of Faith

- What small chunks of time do you already have in your schedule that you use to disciple your child proactively?

Notes

1. Genesis 34; 37; 38
2. 2 Samuel 13
3. 1 Samuel 13:14 (NIV)