



It takes
a village *church*
to raise a
child *parent*



Creating a culture where
parenting for faith can flourish

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 625 9

First published 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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Cover illustrations by Rebecca J Hall

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Introduction: transforming our approach

The clink of mugs on tables and the faint laugh of friends muffled the air as parents, grandparents and a few children's and youth leaders gathered in the small chapel. It was the start of another Parenting for Faith course at my church. As the people settled, I started the session by asking them to share why they came.

A brave dad began the conversation. His voice wavered a bit as he spoke. 'I've been a Christian for over 20 years. To be honest, I feel that I barely share any of it with my children. I pray with my kids sometimes, but not daily. I'm ashamed to say I rarely pray for them when they're not around. We read a storybook Bible occasionally, but...'

He shifted in his seat. 'I have a 15-year-old, a 12-year-old and an 8-year-old, and I want my kids to have a faith, to know God. I just don't know how to do it. Or if it's too late.'

The room fell quiet for a moment, and then another man cautiously broke the silence. 'My son just started going to the local Church of England school and he comes home with all sorts of questions. I'm not even sure there is a God, but I want to help my kid figure this stuff out.'

An older mother piped up. 'I sort of feel like I'm coming from the opposite end. I have four children, and we do lots of Christian stuff at home. We pray before meals, read the Bible at bedtime, have family devotionals sometimes, when I remember. For some of my kids, I feel like they enjoy it and engage with God. For the others, I feel they

think it's just activities to do. I want them all to own their faith, love God and want to be with him. Most of all, I want that feeling to grow and not fade when they get older.'

The woman next to her started to speak, but then she paused to choke back her tears. She began again: 'I feel like I'm ruining my kids' faith. I'm so tired. So, so tired. I'm so far from being the kind of Christian I want my children to see. I try, but I feel I'm screwing up more than helping!'

Around the room they went, one by one, sharing why they were there. Everyone was approaching the course from their own unique experiences and situations. Some had had childhoods where Christianity was forced on them or where their parents had no faith at all. Others were newly pregnant couples wanting to parent well. A few were drowning solo parents with multiple under-3-year-olds. Scattered throughout were godparents wanting to take their role seriously, parents with adult children in university navigating scary moments and grandparents who felt they failed in raising their children for faith and were looking at a second chance with their grandchildren.

Every time I run a course, I am amazed at the range of people who choose to attend. Our churches reach so many different parents and extended families, and our communities are so diverse. Yet despite these differences, the people all need the same thing: the encouragement and skills that will equip them to raise their children and teens to embrace a lifetime of relationship with God.

Olwyn Mark concluded in her compilation of 50 years of research studies that the most significant influencer of a child's faith is the child's parents, and yet only 36% of parents feel confident with that role.¹

In other words, the ones who can make the most difference in the spiritual lives of children and teens are the ones feeling the most

disempowered: the parents. This fact unfortunately coincides with the trend that we are seeing of children and young people leaving our churches at an alarming rate. If we are to see children and young people growing in faith and persevering with their relationships with God, then we as the church need to readjust our approach.

The misalignment of discipleship

If we – the church – are to restore confidence to parents, then we first need to look at how we think about discipleship.

In recent years, the trend in Christian communities seems to have been towards believing that church services and programmes were the best places for children and teens to be discipled. Many factors over the past 50 years have contributed to this trend: Sunday school being held at the same time as church services, new waves in parenting methodology, and the professionalisation of youth and children’s ministry, to name a few. The rate of growth of youth and children’s ministry over the last 30 years has been ever upwards, with churches investing more and more time, people, resources and money into programmes to successfully instil faith into the next generation and to bring back youth who have walked away from God. As a result, churches have worked harder to provide better programmes to keep children and youth walking with God.

I started in ministry as part of this church-programme focus. I was a youth and children’s pastor, passionate about children and teens loving God and knowing his love in return.

On some days, I admit, I arrogantly felt like superwoman. ‘Behold! I am the Children’s and Youth Pastor, holder of young people’s spirituality in my hands! Send your children to me, and I shall turn them into Mighty Oaks of Righteousness. Look how your children love to come to church. Watch your youth return from Friday-night group singing worship songs. That’s because of my

awesome programme! Look at how your six-year-old can describe substitutionary atonement. That's my brilliant leadership in action. Just bring them to me, and I'll make it all okay. Tell me what you think your child needs, and I will make it happen!'

I wanted children and teens in the UK to know how valuable, loved, powerful and alive they were in relationship with God. I ran outreach groups, invested in schools work and ran a thriving Sunday-morning programme, just like many others in churches around the UK.

Then alongside this wonderful effort by churches across the nation, something unintentional and not so wonderful began to emerge. Parents began to believe that for their children to develop faith, their main job was to get their teens and children to these services and programmes. After a while, they began expressing frustration that the children's and teens' provisions at church were not frequent enough, good enough, or engaging and entertaining enough to ensure their children and young people wanted to keep going.

Dissatisfaction came from some church leaders and volunteers, too. They bemoaned how parents needed to get their children to their events more often, and how frustrated they were that parents didn't seem to access the resources and services that churches put on.

It seemed that despite the church's best efforts, the programmes were not producing the results they had hoped for. Clearly something wasn't working.

It appeared that a transformation of approach to discipleship was needed.

One weekend I went on a retreat to pray, and God brought me to Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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 on 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 door-frames of your houses and on your gates.

In an instant it hit me. I wasn't in any of those places in the lives of children and young people. I didn't lounge at home with them on their couches. I wasn't the one who walked down the road with them to school or drove them to swimming lessons. I didn't put them to bed or enjoy the casual boringness of a morning routine with them. I didn't hang out while they were getting dressed or when they decorated their homes.

I realised the church could not be the centre of children and young people's discipleship, because the home was perfectly positioned to be that centre.

I began some research, and I found that parents spend on average from 2,000 to 3,000 hours a year with their children, if they live with them. These hours include the ordinary parts of life: the journeys to and from events, the mornings together and the laughing together after dinner.

The church, on the other hand, has much less time with children per year. If children and young people show up every week to everything I run, I would see them for 100 hours a year. The time difference between what the church has and what parents have is massive.

If I wanted to see every child and teenager connected to God and disciplined well, then I needed to get out of the way and focus on serving parents, because God designed discipleship to happen primarily throughout the day, every day, and especially in the mundane bits of life that only parents have access to.

As I began to develop this idea by talking with the parents in my church, I noticed something: we had all become content with a much smaller version of God's design for our children, families and church. In this smaller version of God's design, many children and teens were often growing up without the family discipling them. Many parents were missing out on some of the best parts of being a parent: helping their children know and love God, experiencing the peace and purpose of living authentically in front of them, and seeing that their own humble imperfectness would empower their children's faith. Moreover, many churches were missing out on the effectiveness and delight of having a powerful, purposeful community of all ages loving and serving God together. But we, as individuals and as a church, didn't have to settle for so little. We could help restore a fuller version of God's design, creating a culture where parenting for faith could flourish. We could bring back the joy of how God designed us, and place that joy back into the heart of our relationships and our churches.

Shortly after, I went on a journey of figuring out what Deuteronomy 6:4-9 meant for me and my ministry. I apologised to parents and began to reposition myself to serve them in their call as disciplers of their children and teens. I listened and learned what they wanted and what skills they needed, and I tried to find ways to equip them. I heard any and all of their insecurity and fears, and I figured out how to encourage them well.

On that journey, something developed that I never expected. Parents grew in their enjoyment of parenting and felt competent to help their children and teens navigate messy life with God. Both parents and children discovered new things of God and openly shared their discoveries with each other, encouraging one another.

Parents also began to support and disciple each other. People who had been parenting their children for faith began to pick up families who were new to it. Extended family and friends began to pick up and use the skills as well. Our church began to reflect these values

and skills across our services and in our practice. Our community began to change.

I learned that when I was just focused on how I personally could grow a child's faith, my impact was limited. But when I began to encourage and equip parents, then they grew and, in turn, they had a greater impact on their own child's faith. Consequently, the whole community grew more connected to God.

It takes a church

There is an old phrase: 'It takes a village to raise a child.' In several ways this saying is true. A village is committed to the flourishing of each child through the support it gives to those who are naturally a part of that child's world. The child is first surrounded by the parents, then embedded within an extended family, and ultimately embraced by the whole village community. The village doesn't *replace* parents or the extended family. The village *encircles* and *embraces* parents and the extended family in order to best support the children. The church needs to be that village if we are going to see parents flourish.

In modern society, with the fracturing of family, the increased frequency of people moving house, and the breakdown of close-knit community, the church is needed more than ever. It is needed to raise parents to embrace their role, and it is needed to restore the support surrounding a child and teenager so that parenting for faith can again flourish.

When a church does this well, something wonderful happens. I have seen it in churches up and down the UK and in communities all over the world. When a church embraces those surrounding and supporting a child and raises parents to flourish in parenting for faith, then good things begin to happen. We not only see children and teens run with God, but we also see adults filled with more encouragement and joy and extended families invested in each

other more deliberately. We see church communities flourishing in their purpose, impacting their local community in outreach, and creating more opportunities for people of different ages to interact with each other. When a church changes, the lives of all those within its influence are impacted.

If we are going to see parents truly embracing their roles as the disciplers of their children, then we need to radically rethink our role as leaders in the church community.

We need to come to parents with a different heart – to see them freed to be all God has called them to be in the life of their child and to see their extended family and friends equipped to play their part – and with a commitment to be the church who will serve them, invite them and their children to belong and participate, and create for them the best environment in which they can be equipped to flourish. We need to do this so that we all might see a generation of children, teens and young people raised to know and love the Lord.

What you will find in this book

If you are looking for ‘101 tips and activities for spiritually parenting’, then I’m afraid you will be disappointed. Since 2004 I have worked with thousands of parents and hundreds of churches, and I have found that every situation is unique. No formula will always work. No programme can be guaranteed.

What I hope to do in this book is to give you the values and skills you need in order to pioneer in your context; to help you think about the parents you serve; and to give you the foundations you need to be ready to inspire, encourage, equip and walk alongside your parents. The principles in this book have been refined through a lot of experience, tons of mistakes, gracious partnerships, and much trial and error. All stories in this book are real stories of real parents, churches and leaders.

I hope this book will embolden you to find the right path for the parents you serve, so that as we all step into our roles to disciple each other, the church can and will flourish.

This book is divided into three parts – Vision, Skills and Church Culture – but it is really a book of two halves. The first two parts, which consist of the first six chapters, set out the approaches and skills we as individuals and leaders use in order to equip and support parents. The final part, the next six chapters, looks at the structural adjustments we need to make in church to create a culture where parenting for faith can flourish. I know many of us will want to skip to the final part, but I would encourage you not to. In my experience, doing the first six chapters without the final six can still be significantly impactful, but doing the final part without Parts 1 and 2 bears little fruit. The combination of both creates a fully functioning and significantly flourishing culture of parenting for faith.

I believe that one of the reasons God has placed us as church communities on this earth is to help people who love God become confident parents who can proactively, joyfully and lightly enable their children to grow in God-connection for a lifetime. It isn't something that just happens by itself. When people who come from so many varied backgrounds of faith are faced with having to transition into parents who parent for faith, then their deepest fears, worries and insecurities emerge. We have the privilege of being in places where we can help parents transform into who God has designed them to be in the lives of their children.

As a church we can do this, and we can do it well. It is never too late for parents and carers to start parenting for faith.



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