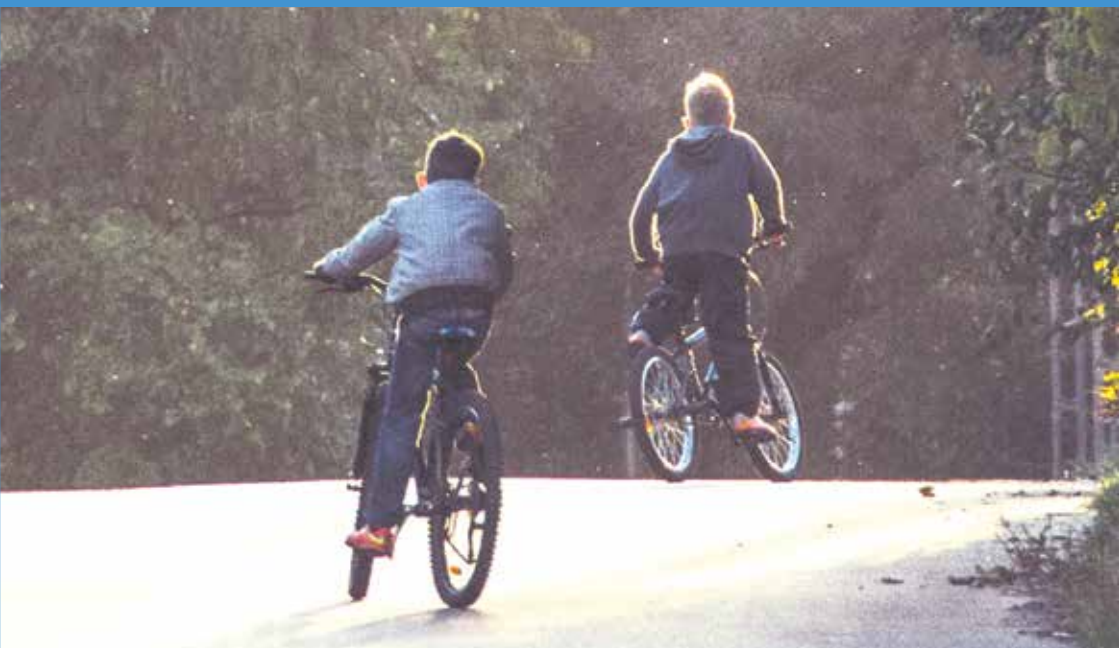


Parenting Children for a Life of Faith

Helping children meet and know God

Omnibus Edition



Rachel Turner

Parenting Children for a Life of Faith

Omnibus Edition

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Foreword

Rachel had me hooked by the third line of her book. Like many mums with sport-loving sons, I've experienced the longings she describes in her introduction. Most Christian parents long for their children to enjoy a deeper relationship with God – a relationship that is real and relevant to every aspect of their lives. We long to give our children strong spiritual foundations, which can equip them to become mature Christian adults. Sadly, we all know children who have grown up in loving families and great churches, but have never connected with God on a personal level.

Rachel's analysis of the problem is inspired: by highlighting the difference between 'God-smart' and 'God-connected' children, she points to the heart of the issue – and to some steps parents can take to make a difference. By using real stories, she helps bring theory to life, showing us how to help our children hold on to biblical truth, while experiencing a growing relationship with God.

Not all Christian parents will have the opportunity to put Rachel's suggestions into practice from the beginning of their parenting years. Not everyone will have the support of a like-minded husband or wife. Not all parents will have experienced God in the ways Rachel describes. Don't panic! As a result of reading Rachel's book, all Christian parents will be challenged and encouraged to develop a deeper relationship with God themselves, and to create windows into that experience, so that their children see how they, too, can live connected to God.

Catherine Butcher
Former Editor, *Families First* magazine

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’s 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. 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 extended time in her room, sulking and upset. Richard and Jill seemed at a loss as to how to stop this slow slide in their daughter’s confidence. 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.

From the moment our children enter our lives, our hearts begin to dream for them. We have hopes for their futures and a profound sense of wanting them to flourish in every area of their lives right now. As they grow, we agonise over their friendships,

their character, their happiness, their self-confidence. We want the best for them. As Christian parents, our dreams for our children also include their spiritual lives. We want our children to find their own journey of faith and know the significant benefit it brings.

But parenting never really turns out the way we think it will. Parenting gets taken over by just being happy that we all survived the day, are relatively clean and generally were where we were supposed to be when we were supposed to be there. Family life can be chaotic and unexpected and delightfully ordinary. It can feel like we as parents will never quite get on top of it all.

Every once in a while a thought pops up in our minds. It stirs up our hearts as we watch our children at church, or as they head out to school. This is a sincere desire for our children to know God in a way that gives them life, makes them feel loved, helps them understand who they are, and gives them a purpose on this earth. And then a small person throws up, or we have to catch a toddler from running on to the road, or we need to answer our other child's question, and we are off again.

It doesn't seem to matter whether we are single, divorced or married; whether we are new to the faith or have been raised in it; whether we have newborns, toddlers, teenagers or grown-up children – we want more for our children spiritually than what they already have. We want all that God has for them, now and in the future, but it can often feel so hard.

It's not meant to be hard. Helping our children on their journey of faith is intended to be one of the most joyful, natural, significant parts of parenting. God designed it to be light, to be easy and to work in the chaos and beautiful mess of family life.

This book won't help you conquer the entirety of parenting. I'm sorry. It would be nice if it did, but I'm not that smart. It won't teach you how to discipline four children on the school run or how to create children who are brilliant cooks. This book is about one thing: equipping us, as we are right now, to confidently enable our children to have vibrant, two-way relationships with the God who loves them.

I believe that the more real stories we hear, the more encouraged we can become, so all the stories in this book are true. Only the names have been changed. My prayer is that this book helps you find your next steps in seeing your children grow in their connection with God. May God, our Father, give you sleep, stamina and the gift of time as you go on this brilliant adventure of parenting with him.

Part I

**Parenting
children
for a life of
faith**

1

Discipling proactively

In my experience, there is a big difference between a God-smart child and a God-connected one. I'm sure you have met both kinds of children in your life.

A God-smart kid knows the right Christian answers off the top of their head. They can pop off a lovely little prayer out loud, they know their memory verses and they often know more Bible stories than we do. They know the rules for Christian living and can easily slot into the rituals at church. They are comfortable with how to do Christianity, but it all seems to stop at their head.

A God-connected child, on the other hand, seems to have something extra, something that goes beyond head knowledge. A God-connected child lives in a vibrant two-way relationship with God. They share life with him, play with him and interact with him throughout the day. They know they are loved and handle the world with the confidence that comes from having the peace and healing of the living God in their daily reality. Their head knowledge of God is just a part of discovering a lifelong heart connection with him.

Our hearts long to create God-connected kids, but we can often feel trapped into only growing God-smart ones. We pour our effort into taking our children to church and teaching them about God and the Bible, and thereby hope that one day they'll wake up and be magically God-connected. It can make us feel like powerless spectators cheering on our children in their faith journeys. But that's not God's plan for us.

God's plan

God has a plan for how to create God-connected children, and it may come as a bit of a surprise.

Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. Memorize 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.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9 (CEV)

It appears that God's plan for children to learn how to connect with him happens during the most boring parts of life. Look at the passage again. The prime time for our children to learn about God is in the most ordinary moments we have together: when we are at home in our pyjamas staring off into space while eating bran flakes; while we are wrapped up with each other on the couch all looking at our phones and tablets; during the eye-pokingly boring bus trips, or while walking to school; during the third kiss goodnight or the half-asleep cuddles in the morning; while we are getting dressed in a panic for church, or decorating our homes.

God designed children to learn how to connect with God in the mundane parts of our days because that is where he is. He is with us in every moment, loving us as we think and laugh and sleep. He is guiding us as we ponder and remember our days and consider what to do next. He is powerfully present as we shop and encounter others. If we want our children to know how to access God in everyday life, then it has to happen in everyday life – with us.

Church leaders have no access to those ordinary places with our families. Our children's church leaders don't wake up in our houses or go on the school run with us. They don't stand bored in a queue with us or watch our oldest kid at his swimming lesson while listening to our other child read. The church, it seems, isn't in places that God has designed for children's discipleship to happen.

We as parents, carers and members of extended families are perfectly positioned to help our children meet and know God. We spend on average between 2,000 and 3,000 hours a year with our children, whereas church only has 100 hours of all-together event time a year. The church isn't meant to be the centre of children's discipleship. It could never be as effective as we can be in the spiritual life of our children.

But that doesn't mean we are alone. In biblical times, when God instructed Moses on how children could find connection with him, parents were part of close-knit extended families. Those extended families were part of a wider clan, and those clans were part of a tribe of people. No parent was on their own. In modern times,

we can often feel the loss of that community. Not all of us have a Christian extended family or community that supports us.

It is important that you know that the church is behind you, is for you, is cheering you on and is the community you can rely on. Other Christian parents will have your back, and there are people of all ages in your church who are willing to surround you, love you and help you on this journey. They can't do the job for you, but they can make sure you aren't doing it alone. And they can be the extended family of love and encouragement for you and your children. We as parents were never designed to be parenting for faith alone, and if you don't have that community around you, please link yourself into a church and let some people know that you need it.

Trapped in waiting

If we are honest, the thought that we are the primary people responsible for helping our children connect with God is terrifying. It's such a precious part of our children's lives. We can feel hesitant. Some of us worry that we don't know how to do it well. Others of us worry about doing damage or pushing our children away from God accidentally if we are too proactive about it. We can end up feeling constrained, waiting for the right moment, waiting until our children open the spiritual door, waiting for the 'teachable moments' to arise.

It can feel a bit like skipping a rope.

Do you remember this game from the playground – two kids each holding the end of a skipping rope and a third kid ready to jump? Usually, there's a whole queue of children waiting for their turn, carefully observing the competition. The child at the front is in the hot seat, waiting for the rope of death to swing around until they can sense the rhythm. Once they sense the time is right, they leap in and jump as impressively as possible – up and down, with an added spin, or a double jump. Ideally, they eventually leap out of the swirling rope without ever blocking its path. In that case, they can triumphantly walk to the back of the queue while everyone gazes in admiration. More often though, the jumper inevitably messes up, and the rope hits them, ending their turn. The queue groans in sympathy (and sometimes judgement) as the jumper slumps back into the queue ready to wait for their next turn.

Sometimes we as parents feel trapped into that same skipping-rope way of spiritually influencing our children. We want to have a spiritual conversation, but

it just never seems right. So we wait and wait, watching the spiralling rope of our children's spiritual interest until we sense a conversation may come. Nanny's health isn't improving, but we have been praying for her; finally the question arrives: 'Why hasn't God made Nanny better?' We leap in:

Oh, yes! That is a very good question. God does heal people. I mean, he can, but it doesn't happen every time for lots of reasons that I don't fully understand, but God is real, and I know sometimes it doesn't feel like it but there are a lot of stories in scripture about that, and if you listen really carefully then God will speak to you, but you don't have to do it right now. Do you want to pray? Do you not want to pray? No, it's all right, we don't have to do it now unless you want to. Just know you can do it. And there are some Bible verses if you want – let me know.

And we leap out of the conversation. Phew! If we've managed to get out without our child hating us or hating God, we are triumphant. Behold – the spiritual parent! We managed to have one conversation with our child about God! Yes! Then begins the post-conversation doubt-everything-we-said debrief, as we try to remember what was said as we tried to shove every bit of spiritual information into the one opportunity that came up.

But that is not God's design. Look again.

Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. Memorize 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.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4–9 (CEV)

God's plan isn't the desperate hope that your child will casually be interested once so you can throw as much stuff as possible in there. It's a proactive choice we make in the everyday. Not to add doing church at home, but to proactively do regular home life with God in it.

God has uniquely placed us parents in our child's life for a reason. The discipleship of children happens in the midst of the mundane, because God is a God of relationship in the everyday – even the boring – bits of life. And if God designed it that way,

then it's also possible to see your child flourish in their faith, even when you are absolutely exhausted, feel like you only have half a brain, have not showered in three days and are fighting a cold.

The aim of this book is to give you, just as you are right now, the approaches, skills and confidence to help your children flourish spiritually. Your family is unique. It is different to everyone else's. You are the expert on your children and your family. You will be able to adapt everything to the way your family works best.

As a parent, you barely have time to go to the toilet by yourself, much less to sit around and think about the spiritual lives of your children in peace and quiet. So I want to leave you with a question to ponder: what are your hopes and dreams for your children's connection with God? You may want to jot them down on a piece of paper for each of your children, specifically thinking about the answer to this question: ten years from now, what do you hope each of your children's relationships with God will look like?



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