

ANNA HAWKEN

# BEING GOD'S CHILD

A PARENT'S GUIDE

Ten things you can learn from your kids

Includes sessions for small groups



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## INTRODUCTION

If you have children in your life, it can feel like lots of your time and energy gets diverted into caring for them. You become known as somebody's mum, dad, step-mum or granny and can quickly find that this becomes your identity as well as your main focus. Many of us find it hard to start or deepen a relationship with God during a stage of life that can be emotionally and physically exhausting.

**But it doesn't have to be that way.**

Our kids and our relationship with them can actually help us grow to know God better. God describes himself as a parent – our parent. The Bible tells us that he is a 'father to the fatherless' (Psalm 68:5) and that he shows us compassion as a father shows compassion to his children (Psalm 103:13). So can we experience God like a child experiences him? Who better to learn from than the living, breathing examples already in our lives?

In this book, we will explore ideas to help discover what being God's child looks like for you. We'll take inspiration from the children in your life and your relationship with them. This is for all types of parents and carers, including step-parents, adoptive and foster parents, godparents, grandparents and other family members. You're not just a parent or carer; you can choose to be God's child too.

Every parent-child relationship is different. Your personal relationship with God and the way you understand him and interact with him will also be different from anyone else's. Part of being a child is the freedom to experiment and learn and grow. So this isn't a book for people who have everything figured out. It's for those of us who are open to trying and exploring ways to connect with him. It's about starting from wherever we are and working with whatever time and energy we have today. We may still have questions and struggles and lots else to juggle, but we want to see and understand more of God, our parent.

Don't worry about where you and God are at right now. Perhaps having a relationship with him is something you're considering or is new to you. Maybe

you've known him for a long time but lots has changed since you became a parent (whether that was three days ago or 30 years ago). You might be going through an especially busy, joyful or complicated season where you're not quite sure how to relate to him. Wherever you're starting from today, let's explore these ideas and see what he shows us.

We'll look at all sorts of ways that our children and our relationship with them can teach us about how we can relate to God. It's not a perfect picture, but as something that we live and see and experience every day, it can help us to understand how God feels about us and what he is offering us. As your children approach and connect to you as a parent, you can do the same with God. Each time we interact with our children it can become a prompt to help us connect with God and a reminder to choose to include him in our day-to-day life.

Some ideas will strike a chord with you more than others, and that's fine. Have fun with them, experiment and enjoy the journey. These aren't tasks to complete, but inspiration for an adventure of getting to know your heavenly dad better. We will explore ten key ideas and each has some questions to consider. You can answer them on your own or chat about them with a partner, friend or small group of people. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, they are just prompts to start you thinking. After that, there are some practical suggestions of things to help you connect to God as his child. How might your life look different if you were to really live this? Take it at your own pace. You may want to read this book slowly, exploring one idea a day, week or month, to give you time to try things out and find what might work for you.

The final sections of the book, 'Next steps' and 'Ideas to use with your children', explore how to help the children in your life connect to God and grow in their relationship as his child too. You can head there straight after reading each idea or focus first on figuring out what it looks like for you to be God's child, then come back later and explore it more with your children. Don't wait forever, though! You do not need to have it all figured out before you help your children go on this journey too: you can journey alongside each other. You will take different paths and go at different speeds, but you can help, support and guide them wherever you are. At points you may feel you're trailing behind them. That's great! Ask them questions and learn from them. When you have a breakthrough in your connection with God or your understanding of him, be willing to share that with them so they can learn from you too.

At the end of the book, there are notes for small groups to help you explore each idea more with other people.

I am on this journey with you. As a working mum of three, I am in the middle of learning to live as God's child in the busy day-to-day too. These ideas aren't just theory but come from my wrestling and experimenting with how to do that; from observing children, reading the Bible, asking God for help and talking to other parents and carers about what this looks like for them. I am so excited to see what God reveals to us as we explore these ideas. He is ready and waiting to show us new things about ourselves, about him and about our relationship with him. Let's start by exploring his offer and what that means.





## THE OFFER

In the book of John in the Bible, in chapter one it says, 'To all who did receive him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

**This is an invitation from God, to you, to become his child.**

You can choose whether you want to accept that invitation or not. It is possible because of God's goodness and how much he loves us. He wanted a close parent-child relationship with us so much that he sent his Son to become a human on earth and to die in our place. This removed everything that was stopping us from coming close to God, and him to us. If we choose to accept him and everything he is and has done for us, we can have a parent-child relationship with him, now and forever.

It's not a one-off deal. Some people think choosing to be a Christian is a bit like when you sign up for a mailing list to get a freebie. You tick the box, take what's on offer and never think about it again. God is offering us much more than that. He's offering a relationship, not a transaction. A relationship with commitment on both sides. He offers to adopt us, giving us a permanent place in his family. Here we can experience love, care, acceptance and parent-child interaction throughout every day. If we accept that offer, we choose to be part of his family forever, through all the ups and downs. We are his children not only on the days when we feel like it, but every day. It becomes part of who we are. Knowing God loves us and is with us allows us to do and experience so much more than when we try to tackle life on our own. If you haven't said yes to that, is that something you want to do? If you're still on the fence, I'd encourage you to try thinking about and connecting with God in the ways this book suggests and take it from there. If you have accepted that offer, are you living your day-to-day life as his child? Or are there more ways you could connect with him and invite him to parent you?

As a child, you are known and loved. You can approach God and interact with him being sure of those things. You don't need to do anything to earn his approval or his love. It's a given. He knows everything about you. God declares this many times in the Bible as he speaks to Moses ('I know you by name' – Exodus 33:17), Jeremiah ('Before I formed you in the womb I knew you' – Jeremiah 1:5) and all of Israel ('I have summoned you by name; you are mine' – Isaiah 43:1). He knows things about us that even we couldn't know, like the number of hairs on our head. In John chapter 10, Jesus talks about being a good shepherd who knows his sheep (us) by name and that we know him and know his voice. There is nothing about you that he doesn't know, so you're not going to surprise or shock him. He is consistent and loving and constant. He promises never to leave us nor to forget us.

There are differences between human parent-child relationships and a relationship with God, two of which are important to highlight before we dive into the ten ideas we are going to explore together.

Firstly, God isn't like people. He is always loving and doesn't get things wrong. We can rely on him to be a perfect parent. This isn't true for us! None of us are perfect parents or have had perfect parents. Even if you had or have a great experience of being parented, they won't have got everything right. Even if you are a fantastic parent, you will have your off days. With every example and idea that we explore, keep that in mind. Images and illustrations help us understand, but they won't explain or mirror everything. Our view of God is shaped by many things. Our upbringing, our family, our friends and things we've watched, heard or experienced all play a part. Not all these ideas will be a true reflection of who God is. As you read, if something feels jarring or uncomfortable, pause. Ask if you're assuming God is like you are as a parent or how your parents or carers were to you, rather than the perfect parent that he is.

Secondly, if we want to be God's child, it is something that we choose. Our children didn't get a choice about arriving into our lives and our families. We gave birth to them, adopted or fostered them. In contrast, if we choose to be God's child, it's a decision we're making to be in a relationship with him. It's not something he forces upon us. He makes it available to us and lets us decide if it's something we want. It's not that he doesn't care. He wants us to choose a relationship with him, but the decision is ours. He wants children, not robots! This means if we choose to say yes to this offer, then we're giving him permission to parent us. We are asking for his help, love, guidance,

correction and protection. In all the different ways that we're going to explore over the coming chapters, we are choosing to be in a relationship with him.

The great news about these differences is that it means we as parents don't need to compete with God. Our children need us, and they need God. God offers them things that we never could and has put us in their lives to be part of helping, loving and guiding them. We don't need to compare ourselves to God and judge our parenting based on that. He loves you and he loves them. He's here alongside you, a supportive and loving parent for you, as you parent them.

If you've read enough to take up or explore this offer, then let's look more at ten ideas of different ways that we can be like children with God...



## IDEA 1

## SPEND TIME WITH HIM

When you become a parent, you soon discover there is not a lot that you do on your own anymore! Right from when they are born, our children are programmed to seek to be near us. They cry when they want to be fed or changed or held. As they grow up, they learn to say or show this: ‘cuddle me’, ‘watch me’, ‘play with me’ can be heard over and over again. They lift their arms up, dance around in front of us or start driving a toy car up our leg. They appear by our side or in our arms multiple times throughout the day and night. They are not worried about interrupting us, or what else we have to do. It doesn’t matter if we were attempting a toilet trip in peace or trying to finish an email. They assume we are always there for them, that we are ready to respond to their needs, hear their thoughts and ideas, get excited about what they’ve done or just spend time with them. They delight in receiving our time and attention. Whether you have them full-time or not, when you are with them, their demands for attention can feel unrelenting. They always want to be with us, and they assume you want to be with them too!

There’s a point to all this together time. It helps to keep our children safe and get them what they need. It’s also essential for growing and strengthening their relationship with us. There is no shortcut or substitute. Every second, minute and hour spent together is valuable. Each one helps us understand, trust and know each other better. In his book *Outliers: The story of success* (Penguin, 2008), Malcolm Gladwell popularised ‘the 10,000 hour rule’ – that it takes 10,000 hours to master a complex skill, like playing a musical instrument. You don’t wake up and discover you’re great at something; you master something by investing time in it. Relationships are no different. It takes time to grow to understand someone. When they are first born or you first adopt or foster them, you and your child are strangers, who get to know each other better over time. We spend time with our children in all sorts of ways, including:

- \* Making memories together
- \* Having fun together
- \* Teaching them and trying new things with them
- \* Celebrating special occasions and achievements
- \* Doing routine and boring things
- \* Comforting and helping each other

Each of these experiences draws us closer together and makes our relationship stronger in different ways.

Sometimes we keep God for Christmas and crises, and we're missing out on so much if we do. When he invites us to be his children, he is offering to always be available for us to spend time with him. He wants to do all those different things with us because he loves the way that this grows and strengthens our relationship. He is never too busy. We can be sure that he is always with us, there for us to chat to and share whatever is going on in our lives. In the book of Jeremiah, God reminds his people that he is always near to them (Jeremiah 23:23–24). In Psalm 139, the writer describes how God is with us everywhere we go. He's there to have fun with and make memories with. He's alongside us as we learn or try new things. He sees and wants to join in celebrating our special occasions and achievements. He's there as we go about our usual routines and available to comfort and help us when we need it. As adults, though, we get busy. We get distracted by other things. We don't always realise or we forget that God's available and wants to be invited to do all those things with us.

Spending time with God doesn't need to be a pressure or another thing to fit in to our day. There are loads of little ways that we can spend time with him throughout our day and our week. I like to think of spending time with

God like drinking coffee (or Coke or a cuppa). There are different ways that we enjoy our favourite drink. If you already have a relationship with God, ask which of the below best describes how you most connect and spend time with him at the moment.

## Routine

For many people it's part of their routine – they have a coffee when they first wake up or in a mid-morning break. It's something they're used to doing as part of their day. It can be helpful to have touch points like this with God. When you first wake up, when you go to work, when you're folding the washing, brushing your teeth or getting ready for bed. Pick a time (or times) and decide to tell God something. This could be anything about what you're thinking, feeling or doing. It could be something that's worrying or annoying you, something that made you laugh or something you're confused about. Anything at all. He wants to hear it all. You could ask him something; good communication is rarely one way. If there's not much to say, you can invite him to be a part of whatever you're doing. You can say these things in your head, whisper or say them out loud, or write them down in the notes on your phone or with an actual pen and paper. It's something we can do on our own and with other people.

## Spontaneous

Then there's the coffee that we have to keep us going throughout the day. It's not linked to a particular routine or time of day; we just think, 'Oooh, I fancy a coffee right now,' and pause to make, buy or ask for one. We can do that with God too. When we're feeling tired, when we hit a problem or when the idea pops into our brains, let's interact with him.

## Scheduled

Finally, there are the coffees that we plan in advance, where we set a time and a date either to be on our own or to meet with someone else. It's worth doing that with God too. Whilst it's great to check in with him in the middle of other things, sometimes intentionally setting aside a bit of time is what helps us to connect. Some people do this daily, and every morning or evening they read some of the Bible and/or share with God what's on their mind. Many parents find it difficult to get a regular chunk of time to do this each day. Opting for setting some time aside less often can make this more doable. Maybe you

have some time whilst watching a child's swimming lesson, during nap time, or lying awake waiting to hear the front door so you know your teen is home. If you get the chance, you could go somewhere else for a change of scene. Experiment with what works for you in the stage of life you're in right now.

All three of these are good ways of enjoying coffee, and of connecting with God. It's not a case of one way being 'right'. God loves it when we choose to spend time with him. He's excited for however you want to choose to spend more time with him.

## Questions to explore

- 1 Which of these three ways of connecting with God do you feel most drawn to? What do you think might work well for you in this season of life? If you already do one or two, how do you feel about trying the others out?
- 2 What are things that you enjoy doing? Do you invite God into them? Could you?
- 3 What are some things that you find difficult, tiring or draining? How is God a part of that? How could you share that with him?

## Ideas of things to try

- Remind yourself to check in with God – sharing what you're thinking and feeling or asking him to be near to you. Some ways to regularly remind yourself are changing the lockscreen on your phone, or putting a sticky note by your bed or in your bag.
- Set aside time in your day, week and month to spend with God. Experiment with what works for you. Don't be disheartened if you don't find something that's a good fit for your life right now. If it's not working, try changing it.
- Practise telling God about something which others might find boring but that you really care about.

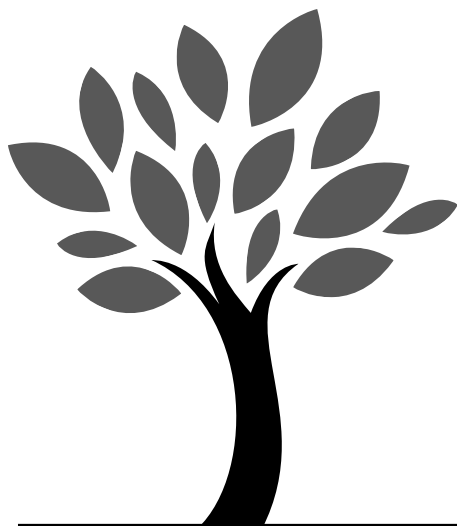
- Read a verse or short section of the Bible and ask God to make something stand out to you. You could start by reading the book of John or choose an app that sends you a verse a day or suggests a Bible reading plan. Share with God anything you especially like, don't understand or don't agree with.
- Try out one of the ways of connecting with God (connecting as part of a routine, spontaneously throughout the day or setting time aside) that you haven't tried much before.
- Next time you have a coffee (or Coke or builder's brew), tell God how you most like spending time with him. Use the smell or the process of buying or making a drink as a reminder to chat to him.







*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
Living Faith  
Messy Church  
Parenting for Faith

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**God makes us the most unbelievable offer... to be our parent. Yes, even when we're all grown up and have children of our own! But many of us don't live experiencing the connection, guidance and support that's on offer. Why? Because we've forgotten how to be a child.**

In this easy-to-read guide, Anna Hawken explores ten different ways to rediscover our 'child side'. She uses the living, breathing examples of the children in our lives to inspire and challenge us, by looking at things that we sometimes struggle with but which they are great at, like:

- asking lots of questions
- messing up without giving up
- sharing their emotions
- asking for help and for what they need

Read it on your own or with others, using the individual reflections, questions and small group notes to guide you. These simple ideas will help even the busiest parent to draw closer to God.



**Anna Hawken** is the Parenting for Faith ministry lead at BRF. She has worked in children's and family ministry since 2010 and speaks at churches and events around the UK. She hosts the Parenting for Faith podcast and presents the Parenting for Faith Babies and Toddlers course. She lives in Milton Keynes with her husband and three children.

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