

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *HOW DIFFERENT TEAM MEMBERS LEARN*

When I was ten years old I was a catcher on our Little League baseball team. From the time I first put on the mask, shin guards, and chest protector, I enjoyed getting behind the plate. I was pretty good for a young player. But I was not very good at pitching. During a game in which we were playing one of our arch rivals we ran low on pitchers and guess whom the coach decided to put on the mound? You figured it out--me! I took off all my gear and, for the first time, ascended the mound. How did I do? I walked the first four batters I faced, hitting two of them. I went back behind home plate for the rest of the game. I was a good receiver, but I was not ready to try my hand at being a hurler.

The experience that many children have with learning and developing spiritually is similar to my sole pitching attempt. Sometimes parents and teachers try to push children to learn certain facts or to move them with certain ethical motivations for which they are not ready. The results can be disastrous when both children and the parents or teacher become frustrated or discouraged. What we want to do in this chapter is help avoid such frustration by understanding how children learn. We want to give some general guidelines about how to disciple our sons and daughters at different ages so that we see the most fruit.

What you will find in these next few pages are the results of research and years of observation on the part of many who have studied children's patterns of development.<sup>1</sup> The findings are what happens on average. For example, we might say that the average child is ready to learn how to

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to the following resources for the information in this chapter: Perry G. Downs, Teaching For Spiritual Growth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Robert Clark, Joanne Brubaker, Roy Zuck, eds., Childhood Education In The Church (Chicago: Moody, 1986)--several articles; Howard Grimes, "Teaching The Bible To Children," Review And Expositor, 80, 2 (1983): 221-230; Ron Habermas, "Does Peter Pan Corrupt Our Children?" Christianity Today, 37, 3 (1993): 30-33; Ted Ward, Values Begin At Home, (Wheaton: Victor, 1989); Ted Ward and Rodney McKean, "Six Models Of Teaching For Moral Development," Christian Education Journal, 3, 2 (1989): 14-29.

read around age six. Yet, you may have a child who was not ready until seven and another that was ready at age five. That's how it truly works. Children are not machines which we can predict precisely. What we want to do is give some general guidelines which will serve as a starting point for understanding how to approach the training of your child. You must also know each child well enough to see where he is at and what he is ready to learn and do. If you read this chapter and gain an awareness that you need to be sensitive to your child's abilities and the need for different training methods at different stages of development, you will have gained what you needed. I hope that you can apply these principles to the discipling of your children and also to the choice of good training materials for them.

#### Ages 0-2

During this period children learn and demonstrate their intelligence through sensory input and motor activity. For example, many infants and toddlers put everything in their mouth. It is by this touching and tasting that they learn about the textures of objects. It is also during this time that they become acquainted with different colors, sounds, and language patterns.<sup>2</sup>

There are several important characteristics of these children which can help with spiritual training. Children are very self-centered and mostly aware of themselves. As they progress through this stage their self-centeredness decreases and they realize that others exist and must be taken into consideration. They learn most things through their five senses. Their concept of time is now. They don't think about what happened a few minutes ago or what will happen tomorrow. Their primary need seems to be a safe environment and the sensory input of being touched and held. They are more feeling oriented than thinking-oriented. They also begin to learn that specific actions can produce specific results and that they can influence their environment.

What implications do these characteristics have for training children? To begin with, moms

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<sup>2</sup>It is now believed by some researchers that babies develop an ability to listen to the language patterns and inflections native to their family during the first year. Sharon Begley, "Your Child's Brain," Newsweek (February 19, 1996): 56-57.

and dads, we will want to provide an enriched environment with freedom and safety present. Let your children explore and act out on their curiosity. However, we must also protect them from dangerous objects such as hot stoves, curling irons, and electrical outlets. Don't keep a lot of expensive knickknacks around the house at their level and then prohibit them from exploring. As the child in this stage approaches two years you can begin putting some of these things back out and teaching them what they can and cannot touch. Also provide things for them to be pushed, pulled, banged, nested, and stacked. These actions are developing the building blocks for all learning activity they will do in the future. Remember that care for a child this age is especially important. Children learn a sense of trust or mistrust in the first eighteen months. Before she learns to trust in God who is faithfully there, it is helpful that she learn mom and dad are present to provide for and love her.

Keep in mind that learning in these years is as much a matter of the heart and affections (if not more) than it is content and the mind. Most children will not learn many Bible verses or much biblical content during this time. But they can learn that church is a good place, mom and dad take care of them and can be trusted, and that the home is a happy environment.

Finally, in keeping with our discussion about discipline in the last chapter, moms and dads need to begin to correct and discipline sons and daughters toward the last half of this period. Since infants and toddlers are very self-centered, they need to begin learning that some things are dangerous, that mommy and daddy are in charge, they are supposed to obey them, they must submit to others in authority, and thus loving, controlled corporal discipline can be administered at this time.

#### Ages 2-7

Most children in this stage are not able to take data about the real world into the mind and organize it and use it to solve problems. As they approach the end of this developmental level they may begin to classify or categorize, yet it usually will be only one attribute of a thing or person at a time. For example, a kindergarten student may be surprised to see his pastor in the

bowling alley, thinking that he is only a preacher and not a bowler. The first and second grader is more able to reconcile these two aspects of their pastor.

These children begin to use symbols of thought to replace the actual objects. Language begins to replace motor activity (for example, touching and tasting) as their means of getting what they want. They also can think about things without them being present. When our son, Jeff, was only a year and a half old he learned that our cat was "kitty". He would say "kitty" when he saw her. When he was over two years old, if we were away from home and we would talk about "kitty" he knew what we are saying and he would become very happy.

A child in this stage thinks in specifics and finds it hard to generalize. It is much easier for her to understand that God made cats, corn, and tomatoes than it is that he made the world. These kids also have a hard time grasping size and volume. In other words, they do not know that a clay ball does not change in volume when it is rolled out and they struggle to understand what it means that Goliath was 9 feet tall.

They often focus on only one aspect of an event, idea, or object and ignore the rest. An example may be that you ask your son what he did at Vacation Bible School and he says, "We had brownies and punch." "Yes," you might respond, "but what did you learn?" To which he replies, "the brownies and punch were good!" These kids also have a hard time distinguishing between the world of reality and the world of make-believe. Similarly, they are very literal-minded and have a hard time with symbolism. This is especially true of those who are in the earlier part of this period. Children are also very imaginative during these years.

Focusing on older children in this stage (ages 6-7), they learn best from what they experience in a concrete, physical way. They have a hard time with sequential awareness and time and spatial differences (Bible chronology and the Old vs. the New Testaments); they naturally trust adults; they are eager for approval; and they have a high standard of performance. They also are very cautious, tend to worry a lot, and they are not as competitive as older children.

Let's look at some implications for training these children. We must remember that make-believe play is very important in these years. For most, though, this is limited to actual objects

or materials which are present or ones that can be easily imagined. When teaching these young ones we should move from specific to general. Teach them first that God made potatoes, peas, and dogs. Then you can get across that he made all the world. If you are teaching a child in this age group about an event involving size or volume, help them understand this in a very hands-on way. If you are talking about 9 ft. tall Goliath, it will help to show them that his head would poke through the ceiling of your house. Something that is very important is to foster their imagination and not downplay it. This will help their thinking abilities, as well as help them deal with things they cannot see. In other words, it will enhance their ability to believe in and trust in very real unseen things or persons such as God.

There are additional implications we need to keep in mind. These kids learn best by hands-on experiences and methods of learning. Use crafts, hands-on-objects, visuals, music, role playing, and dramatization. These children love stories, but remember that they struggle with non-literal concepts. You can use a few object lessons or symbolic stories, but don't make these the steady or only diet of training. They will learn the most by stories which have the least amount of symbolism and call for the fewest difficult parallels to be made. Stories about children in real life situations are most helpful.<sup>3</sup> Finally, you may not want to major on competition in the earliest years of this stage as it is not a great motivator for them yet.

Children seem specially wired at this age to memorize. Many parents have made the mistake of not having children memorize Bible verses or passages since they cannot fully understand them. Yet, this is an optimal time for them to treasure the Word away in their hearts (Ps. 119:11). Later, as they can begin to think about and learn what these verses mean, they will have them stored away and they will help develop a godly mind. This is also a wonderful age to help get the overall content and message of the Bible imbedding in little minds. Utilize Bible story books and other age appropriate books and media which will help establish the basics.

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<sup>3</sup>This doesn't mean that you cannot use any books which major on symbolism. Kids especially love stories about talking animals. These can be used because they capture their attention, but understand that they may not be as effective for learning and understanding information.

When it comes to correction in this age group, children will not respond to reasoning as much as they will respond to clear boundaries set and then kept in very concrete ways. If mommy said not to hit his sister or he would be spanked, a boy in this age group needs to learn that he will be spanked and that is not pleasant at all. The point is that he learns mommy is in charge and he must obey her. This not only helps drive from the child the inordinate self-centeredness of the time in life, it also teaches how to submit to those who are in authority. This becomes a great lesson for obeying God.

### Ages 7-11

Children in this period overcome some of their former limitations of focusing on only one aspect of an object or event, being overly self-centered, and the inability to reason backwards from effect to cause (for example, the plastic bowl melted, therefore it was too close to the stove). They can take what is before them or what they have experienced and define, compare, and contrast. Even though they can manipulate (organize and work with) data mentally, they still think concretely because they must build on previous experiences. For example, children in this period may have learned how to use the different programs on your computer. Yet, when they go to their grandparents house and try to use their ISP, which is different than what you have, they struggle to draw inferences that help them do something so different and new. They do, however, acquire more of an ability to use logical thought processes and to deal with more data which is not literal and concrete.

Another characteristic of these children is something called "conservation". In other words, she now knows that just because the shape of a ball of clay is changed, it does not mean that there is more or less clay.

Classification also becomes possible. If eighteen brown wooden beads and two white wooden beads, for instance, are set before a child in this period and then he is asked, "Are there more wooden beads or brown beads?" he is able to include the two white wooden beads with the brown and respond with the right answer. Most children prior to this period would focus upon

the eighteen brown beads and answer that there are more of them. Classification allows children to number and place objects, events, and ideas in logical order.

Some other attributes include their desire to use new skills, such as writing, a typically positive attitude toward adult authority, and a desire to be like leaders and teachers. Most children begin sports during this period because of muscle development. Boys see the greatest gains in the large muscle movements. Girls see the greatest gains in small muscle movements (which aid in activities like cursive writing, piano, and violin).

An implication for training children is that a little more symbolism can be used in stories. We can utilize writing and reading projects with children. We can help them begin to have a quiet time. We also may want to focus on good models for them. For example our older daughter, Melissa, looked up to her camp counselors she had during these years. She and her sister, Meagan, also were greatly impacted by Christian singers at this age. We sought to utilize some of these persons to provide role models. Finally, as we direct these children to worship God it is good to help them do it in the here and now. For example, thank and praise God for his goodness and love shown in helping someone in the family get over an illness.

More and more during the last couple years of this period things other than corporal discipline will have greater impact. A bicycle taken away for a few days or a couple days without the privilege of playing with friends will tend to get their attention and let them know that what they have done is wrong. Additionally, during this time, parents should begin focusing more and more on shepherding their children from the heart. In other words, moms and dads should not simply spank or take away privileges. They should begin teaching and helping children learn why they shouldn't do certain things. More and more they should work to shape their motivations and desires to follow Jesus and to do what is godly.

#### *Ages 11-Adult*

In this period the teenager and adult can break the barrier of literalism and begin to think in abstract, theoretical terms. Their thinking is no longer restricted to time and space; they are

able to reflect, hypothesize, and theorize. A problem such as if a tree is bigger than a barn, and a barn is bigger than a warehouse, which is bigger, the tree or the warehouse? need not be solved by the constraints of reality but can be solved on the basis of the information given.

Because teenagers are able to imagine other possibilities than those which actually exist gives rise to the imagination of perfect situations and the idealism so often characteristic of this age group. This ability, coupled with the greater ability to think abstractly, results in the frequent questioning of adolescence. Your son or daughter may even begin to question the Faith which has been taught them in previous years. They may look in a fresh way at the questions: "Does God exist?" "Are the scriptures trustworthy and true?" or "How can Christianity be the only way to God?" These questions do not necessarily indicate a crisis in Faith but rather are indicative of the fact that young people are using their new cognitive capacities to think about their beliefs and relationship to God. In the long run, some questioning is better than not questioning at all because questioning means thinking, and thinking is necessary for spiritual growth.<sup>4</sup> Be patient with such questions and do not think they are the end of the world. It is far better for them to ask them under your roof than later on when you may not be there for guidance.

God calls all Christians to be thinking persons. Prov. 14:15: "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps." Along this line, the believer is to "be prepared always to give a defense" to those who ask for the reason behind the hope within us (2 Peter 3:15). This implies not only the need to communicate the gospel in a clear and understandable way to others, it also implies the need to think through the Christian Faith very carefully and to know why we believe what we believe. It is the marvelous privilege of parents to help their teenage children do this. The late Francis Schaeffer set forth this task very clearly when he wrote:

*It is unreasonable to expect people of the next generation in any age to continue*

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<sup>4</sup>Downs, Teaching, 88.

*in the historic Christian position, unless they are helped to see where arguments and connotations directed against Christianity and against them as Christians, by their generation, are fallacious. We must prepare Christian young people to face[ their] culture by teaching them what the particular attack in our generation is, in contrast to the attacks of previous generations.<sup>5</sup>*

Our teenagers, particularly as they move into the second half of their teen years, are able to deal with some of the most difficult questions and issues facing all people. This is particularly true of those who are believers and sensitive to God and the world around them. What we want to do in the years prior to this is lay a foundation upon which they can now build to answer those questions solidly. We also want to develop the kind of relationship between them and us where we are able to discuss God, the world, and the scriptures. And, once these sons and daughters are in those years where one foot is in childhood and the other is in adulthood we can read some books together or get them to read some by such authors as John Blanchard, J. I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, Francis Schaeffer, C. S. Lewis, Ravi Zacharias, and Lee Strobel which will help them mature and guard against being blown about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:12-16). If we don't take a proactive approach to preparing our sons and daughters for early adulthood and university education, we may set them up for making a wreck of their Faith.

*For years Campus Crusade For Christ has reported that five of ten Christian college freshmen in the United States will walk away from their faith before the end of their first year, and seven of ten will abandon their faith before they graduate. Recent studies have confirmed the freshman figures. Alarmed by these tragic statistics, the Center for Youth and Family Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary is conducting a three-year study of this national trend. In their first year of this research, two of the factors that have been identified are the attacks against Christian faith by faculty and fellow students, and loneliness.<sup>6</sup>*

As sons and daughters become teenagers we will want to choose materials for family

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<sup>5</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who Is There, 152, vol. 1 in The Complete Works Of Francis A. Schaeffer (Westchester, Il.: Crossway Books, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Rick Howe, Executive Director For the Dayspring Center For Christian Studies, in the Fall, 2006 newsletter: 1.

devotions which will stimulate them where they are at. The above authors would be very good, along with some other resources mentioned in the Appendix.

### The Goal Of Less Dependence

As we close out this chapter on the development of our children and a focus upon their gradual maturity, there is one last lesson of which we need to be reminded before we move on to Part 2. It has to do with the reality that our sons and daughters should become less and less dependent upon us as they age. It is a goal which is easy to see in the realm of physical and mental development. After all, children come into the world needing to be fed, to have diapers changed, clothes put on them by someone else, and put down to bed. They become children who can dress and feed themselves, and eventually will become, Lord willing, fully functioning adults who are able to care for their own family and to live outside of your home and control.

A similar progression should take place when it comes to spiritual maturity and their decision-making abilities and opportunities. We must offer this reminder because well-meaning parents who take parenting very seriously, who agree with most of this book and the need to disciple children, can forget that the goal is to produce mature followers of Christ who can love God, serve him, and disciple others without being told by their parents on every account what they need to do. If our goal is merely to protect children or guarantee that they do the right thing under our control, most likely they will never learn what it means to follow Christ as an adult when you are not around. Most likely, we will not have reached their heart.

This does not mean that we will cease being their parents (although what that means certainly does change for an adult child in relation to a teen [or younger] child) or having influence upon them. It does mean that our discipling of them as they become teens and adults will look similar to our discipling of other adults. When we work with adults who are not our children, we certainly don't mind if they seek our advice often. Yet, we want them to learn the mind of Christ such that they can make good solid, God-honoring choices in the many decisions each day they

will face when no mentor or parent is there to ask.

Practically-speaking this demands that as sons and daughters mature into the teen years more and more we should be helping them make choices in dependence upon Christ with less and less guidance by us.

Let me illustrate what this looks like. Recently, our seventeen year old daughter, Meagan, came to me and said, "My friends and I are going to a movie." She then gave me the title and asked, "Is that o.k.?" I wasn't familiar with the movie. I know I had a choice. I could say, "I need to check out the movie on-line first and then I will let you know." I could have said, "No problem, do whatever you want." In the first case I would have been fulfilling my commitment to care for Meagan, to love her, and to exercise a certain amount of discipline for her good. However, I would have made the decision. In the latter choice I would have taken a passive (and perhaps permissive) approach which would have fallen short of my commitment, love, and desire to train her.

What I did instead was to reply, "Meagan, you are almost eighteen years old and given the fact that we have walked you through such decisions in the past, I trust you to make this decision in a way that will be pleasing to the Lord. This does not mean that I believe I can never tell you 'No' anymore or that I am no longer your parent. It does mean that I think more and more these decisions must be ones you make in prayer and according to biblical standards."

What happened? In a few minutes she announced that they were going to a different movie because she had checked that movie out on *Plugged In* (part of the Focus On The Family web site) and it was not fit for them to attend. As I thought about this afterward I realized that what had just happened was significant. Not only had we communicated to her that we trusted the way the Holy Spirit was shaping her heart and judgment, we also demonstrated that more and more she must be making these decisions in dependence upon the Lord as one who is becoming an adult. Should this not be the goal of the discipleship of our sons and daughters?



