# Theology  

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# "Such as these"- <br> A Framework for Understanding our Children 

## Heather FORBES

When I was pregnant with my first child, it seemed that everyone-family, friends, even complete strangers-felt compelled to give me child-rearing advice. Some of my most interesting conversations on this topic happened at the local supermarket, while picking through broccoli or beans alongside women of varying cultural backgrounds. These fellow shoppers gave me a world of advice about my upcoming baby, starting with predictions about its gender:
"Your nose is wider now than a few weeks ago, so you're having a girl!"
"Is the baby active? Then you must be having a boy!"
"Your body is shaped like a pear, not an apple, so you must be having a girl."

Naturally, advice from others became more serious and more frequent as the baby's due date drew near. Relatives talked about baby care. Church members recommended books they had read. Our doctor registered us for childbirth education classes. Four years later, here in Cambodia, the advice continues. My neighbor across the road tells
me how to dress my daughters for the heat and mosquitoes. On a recent trip to China, we were often scolded for not putting enough layers of clothing on the kids.

Why do so many of us have something to say about parenting? The volume of advice so readily given hints at the profound nature of the job. It is at once the most sobering and most joyful of undertakings. When our first child was born, I lost a lot of sleep, but not only because of a wakeful, needy baby. In those weeks, even after we had put her down to sleep, my mind continued to churn with the overwhelming wonder of this new life, and the responsibilities ahead of us. God had given us the privilege of bringing a whole person, with an eternal soul, into this world, and her tiny presence in our home left me awestruck.

Thankfully, the God who gave us this awesome responsibility has also provided guidelines for the job. Proverbs $22: 6$ says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." God would not have us underestimate the impact we have on our children. This verse tells us that the way we parent our children is bound to have long-term effects on them, whether for their good or ill.

Dr. William Sears, one of America's most renowned pediatricians and an outspoken Christian, says that the training of a child begins from the moment of her birth and involves every interaction we have with her. He refers to this task of training a child as the process of "discipline." Discipline, he says, is a process of "imparting God's Word to such a degree that it becomes part of each child's inner self, his inner controls, his base of operations ... in short ... to instill a sense of direction."

If, then, we are always in the process of instilling a sense of direction in our children, whether consciously or not, how do we make sure we are guiding them in "the way [they] should go"? Two interpretations of Proverbs 22:6 have been helpful in my efforts to discipline my own children. First, it can be read as a call to train ou: children to follow God's commandments. A second way to understand the phrase "in the way she should go" is as a reference tọ God's specific,

[^0]unique plan for each child. In other words, nurturing our children according to their own "bent," or the nature God has given them. I believe both interpretations are helpful: that as we teach our children to walk in God's ways, we should do so with recognition of their Godgiven uniqueness. However, what are some of the principles that will enable us to succeed at this awesome challenge?

## Becoming a Student of Your Child

Instilling a sense of godly direction in a child begins with getting to know him or her and establishing a secure relationship built on trust. Discipline, Dr. Sears says, is something done with-not toa child. Early in our marriage, my husband and I heard a piece of practical marriage advice that has proven to be a gold mine for promoting understanding, renewing loving feelings and enabling communication between the two of us. That statement was: study your spouse. Likewise, studying our children-finding out what really makes them "tick"-will lay a foundation of understanding that keeps our communication lines open, even as they grow and change. This will enable us to establish a climate in which loving, effective discip\#ne can thrive.

## A Child is a Whole Person

Our study of our children must begin with what God says about them. A foundational principle in understanding our children is that every child is a person created in God's image.

So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ${ }^{2}$

Like the first humans and all that have come since, children are created in and for relationships with their creator, with other humans, and with the world around them. The highest commandments, identified by Jesus, are about those relationships.

[^1]"The most important [commandment]," answered Jesus, "is this: '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 mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these. ${ }^{13}$

A child, like all humans, is a whole person-a physical, mental, emotional, social and moral being. We can see from the above verses that God created children, as whole humain beings, to live in whole relationships with God and others, involving every aspect of their personhood.

Parents of very young children might ask how we can possibly relate on all these levels to infants who seem to have constant physical needs but no words to express thoughts. Once again, the Bible is encouraging in this endeavor. To Judah's prophet Jeremiah, God confided: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." 4 Israel's King David understood that:

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be. ${ }^{5}$
Pastor Gary Chapman and physician Ross Campbell encourage parents that an infant is capable of receiving care on more than just the physical level. They say that a
great deal of research indicates that the emotional foundation of life is laid in the first eighteen months of life, particularly in the mother/ child relationship. The "food" for future emotional health is physical touch, kind words, and tender care. ${ }^{6}$
${ }^{3}$ Mark 12:30-31.
${ }^{4}$ Jer 1:5.
${ }^{5}$ Ps 139:15-16.
${ }^{6}$ Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, The Five Love Languages of Children (Chicago: Northfield, 1997), 24.

Such nurture will enable the child to have healthy trusting relationships with God and with others as he or she grows.

Linguists tell us that a young child's mind is processing verbal input even when we don't see it happening--that a child receives and understands much more than he says. Because of this, Dr. Sears says your child witl begin to have a concept of God before being able to articulate it. "Your child will understand better the concept of God if she has been saturated with hearing about God from birth. By the time she is two years old, she hears the words God and Jesus spoke in association with love and protection. By the time she is three years old, she feels God's presence." ${ }^{7}$

Seeing my own daughters' young responses to Christ has convinced me of this. Dylan, now four, has been listening to Bible stories since before she was one year old, and she now knows them backwards and forwards. Moreover, her sensitive spirit has internalized their truth and she is cultivating a real relationship with God. At times, we have seen her pause in the middle of what she is doing, and when we ask, she says that she is "listening to God." Two-year-old Zoe often initiates prayer at our dinner table and before bedtime. One night last year she woke up crying for our night guard, and we prayed for him: The next day we found out he had been injured in a car accident that same night. Seeing this type of spiritual sensitivity in our young children should encourage us to involve God-talk at the heart of our family lives. Pray, tell stories, and sing together, with the confidence that God's spirit is moving in your children. Or, in the words of Deuteronomy 6:6-9,

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon 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 doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

[^2]
## A Child is a Unique Person

While children are whole human beings and should be treated as such, each child is also unique. It is easy to interpret a child's perspective as less virtuous or important than an adult's; in a world where adults hold the power and authority, a child's opinion or needs are easily forgotten or discounted. On the other hand, God has given children special position in his kingdom, and throughout the gospels Jesus affirmed the value of the "least of these." In the gospel of Mark, we see Jesus contradicting the disciples' demeaning assumptions about children who came to see him. "Let the little children come to me," he says, "for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." 8 In the story of the miraculous feeding of the crowd, it is a child's gift, a small lunch of bread and fish, that Christ used to bless thousands of adults. ${ }^{9}$ The radical choice of God to be incarnated among us as an infant first, rather than appearing as an adult, speaks volumes about the value he ascribes to the nature of a child.

People who have good rapport with children often interact with them at the children'sown eye level. Literally getting down on a. child's level during times of play, comfort, and correction helps the adult see from the child's perspective and communicates understanding to the child. When Christian adults make the effort to get on the level of the children in our communities and incorporate some of their perspective into our community life and worship, we become more like the kingdom of God. Pastor Jim Brenneman of Pasadena Mennonite Church comments: "The church can only be a better place if, every now and again, we sit at our children's feet to listen to what they have to teach us." ${ }^{10}$

Children are unique not only as a group, but also as individuals. Psalm 139 is a beautiful testament to the intimate craftsmanship of a creator who "knit [the child] together in [his] mother's womb" and who declares each child "fearfully and wonderfully made." Our discipline should recognize the uniqueness of each child. What my

[^3]husband and I learned about parenting through our sensitive, creative older daughter has not always been helpful with her spunky, extroverted little sister.

An exciting framework for conducting "research" on our children is to discover the unique ways they receive and give love. This is an idea promoted in several Christian child-raising books. One set of these "love languages" 1 includes physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service. Each culture might have its own categories of expressing and receiving love, or at least different variations within these categories. However, for all parents, it is good to ask ourselves: Do I know what really communicates love to my child? Have I noticed how my child most consistently expresses love to others? Training up a child in the way he should go can best be done when we have made the effort to know and affirm our children, in their unique gifts and personalities, just as God knows us intimately and knows best how to train us. Only then can we help them develop their gifts and communicate our love most clearly to them.

Learning our children's specific inner workings will help us understand reasons behind common areas of conflict with them. For example. I recently came to understand that a major source of tension between my daughter and me relates to the different speeds at which we operate. I am fast-paced and decisive; she is thoughtful, needing more time between transitions. Now that I understand this, I can better distinguish between what is a moral issue and what is just a difference in personality. If it is a personality conflict, depending on the situation, I can try to accommodate Dylan, since she is the one with less understanding, and by doing so, model humility and express love to her. Or, if it is not possible to accommodate her, I can try to teach her to adjust according to the situation, but do so gently, understanding her need for transition time.

[^4]
## A Child is a Person in Need of Direction

In order to know our children as God knows them, we must recognize that just as they are designed by God as whole and unique people with potential for relationship with God and humans, so also they are also fallen people who, like the rest of us, need redemption. "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child," says Proverbs 22:15. Who of us with a two- or three-year-old doesn't know this? Sometimes the folly I see demonstrated in my kids is only an area of poor judgment, like jumping up and down while riding a cyclo in traffic, or running into the street during play. But other times the issue is a moral one. Discipline, or guidance, in times of correction is one of the most challenging aspects of our parenting role. But it is essential in order to guide the child into her God-given potential and into the blessing of walking with God.

To write about the specifics of correction is not my intention in this article. However, as in all aspects of discipline, keeping open communication lines through a continuing study of your child is essential. The sustained effort we put into knowing our children will assist in this aspect of discipline as well. For the kind of communication that springs from a relationship built on trust will help us to:

- approach correction within the context of the goal of all discipline: to impart understanding and build godly character in the child. ${ }^{12}$
- present our children with clear, consistent choices and consequences in a way they can comprehend.
- create structure and conditions in our homes that encourage desirable behavior.

This will help us to maintain the right attitude in our correction, so that we do not act out of anger, but rather with the self-control that mirrors God's own correction of his children.

[^5]
## The Power of a Parent's Influence

We have seen that God has a lot to say about who a child is: made in the image of God; a whole person with all the traits of personhood; unique in childlike nature, and created one-of-a-kind; capable of relationship but needing redemption to live in right relationship with God and neighbor. With all of these basics in place, Sears invites us to take up the challenge of studying our children, as a gardener knows the plants in his garden. This means to learn the right climate for best raising our children, and to be aware of the kinds of weeds that our children are especially susceptible to. Approaching discipline in this way, our guidance will be neither overly permissive nor abusive, because we will be viewing them with the wise and gracefilled eyes through which God sees us, and guiding them in his wisdom.




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${ }^{5}$ Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, The Five Love Languages of Children (Chicago: Northfield, 1997), 24.























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[^0]:    'William Sears, Christian Parenting \& Child Care (Nashville: Broadman \& Holman, 1997), 328.

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ Gen 1:27.

[^2]:    'Sears, Christian Parenting, 332.

[^3]:    ${ }^{8}$ Mark 10:14.
    ${ }^{9}$ John 6:9.
    ${ }^{10}$ James E. Brenneman, Sermon 346, 27 February 2000.

[^4]:    "Chapman and Campbell, Five Love Languages, 7.

[^5]:    ${ }^{1}$ 'See Heb 12:10-11.

[^6]:    ${ }^{1}$ William Sears, Christian Parenting \& Child Care (Nashville: Broadman \& Holman, 1997), 328.

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[^8]:    ${ }^{*}$ Sears, Christian Parenting, 332.

