

Introduction

THERE IS A GLUT of parenting books on the market. Many give advice on how to raise children, featuring skills, values, and tips. There are others that focus on faith formation in children. So how is this book different?

This book assumes that you want your child to have a vibrant, life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. It is grounded in an understanding that, as parents, it isn't enough to drive kids to the church building and let professionals, or those trained by church professionals, do the faith nurture. Faith formation is braided into the dailiness of life together, delivered with the very best parenting skills available, and grounded in unconditional love. It's our job to pass on faith.

NURTURING FAITH AT HOME

Parenting and faith nurture are not two separate pursuits; they are most effective when practiced together as an integrated whole. The writer of Deuteronomy said it this way: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (6:6-7).

Okay, so this means that faith talk is supposed to suffuse all of life together. But is it really that important?

Parents are vitally important in passing on faith to children and youth. Factors in whether or not our children will have faith include what mom does, what dad does, what mom says, and what dad says. But if only one family in ten that attends church has faith-filled conversations outside the congregational building,* how will we begin?

This book provides simple, everyday ways to nurture faith in the home by practicing the Four Keys for Nurturing Faith.** They are:

- * caring conversations
- * family devotions
- * rituals and traditions
- * family service

The first four chapters will describe each key and give you practical ways to weave faith nurture into your life together. The Four Keys will be woven through all subsequent chapters.

The fifth chapter introduces the concept of AAA Christians.*** These are the Christian disciples that all of our children need in their lives. They are *authentic, available, and affirming*. As a parent or faith parent, you are that AAA Christian, the one who develops a personal and trusted relationship with your child. The Four Keys for Nurturing Faith and the concept of AAA Christians are part of the Vibrant Faith Frame (see page 7).

* From *Young Adolescents and Their Parents*, a 1980 study by Peter Benson.

** Rev. Dr. David Anderson identified the Four Keys in his doctoral dissertation, expanding them in the book *Frogs without Legs Can't Hear*.

*** Rev. Dr. Paul Hill, Executive Director of The Youth & Family Institute, first formulated the concept of AAA Christians, Christian disciples who make disciples. For more about AAA Christians and the Four Keys, read *Frogs without Legs Can't Hear* by Hill and Rev. Dr. David Anderson.

SOME ASSUMPTIONS

You probably have already guessed that I am madly passionate about both families and faith nurture. I am a huge advocate of families as the classroom for teaching all that is most important, the crucible for refining the best in each of us, and a safe harbor from life's storms.

The foundational assumption of this book is that *parenting is inherently a profound and transforming spiritual journey for both parent and child*. Both parent and child are beloved children of God, loved and forgiven. Additional assumptions include:

- * The sacred is woven into the fabric of the daily.
- * Parents are the first face, voice, and hands of Jesus to their children. Children trust and love God because they have first experienced trust and love with their parents.
- * In return, children enable adults to see and hear God, if they make time in their relationships with children to experience God's presence.
- * No parent feels adequate or competent in this role or is even sure what it should look like. That is absolutely normal. Parents don't need to know all of the answers or feel comfortable embarking on this journey.
- * Families come in all sizes, shapes, and descriptions.
- * Good, healthy families go through difficult, painful, and sometimes terrifying times. So it is vitally important that they tell the truth, don't try to go it alone, and get the help they need, knowing that healing and reconciliation are God's gifts and that God is present in all of life.
- * Faith is a living, breathing, changing thing. The spiritual journey and faith formation are lifelong. Faith will grow and be strengthened through your experiences with your children.

- * Growing kids faithfully will take you a lifetime and always be in process, not always showing results on your schedule or coming with the assurance that there won't be problems.
- * Growing kids faithfully does come with awe in receiving God's child (whether through birth, adoption, marriage, or foster care) and knowing that this child is entrusted to your care, to love and nurture all God created this child to be.

IDEAS FOR USING THIS BOOK

Read this book in any way you choose, but here are some suggestions to consider.

IF YOU ARE READING ALONE. Read a section and stop to reflect, wonder, plan, and apply it to your life. Make it your own. Annotate it. Push back on the elements with which you disagree. Try some of the ideas, just one at a time. It was never intended that you do them all or do them all at once. Name and claim the things that you are already doing well.

IF YOU ARE READING AS A CO-PARENT. Read this together. Discuss it. Share what you have experienced as a parent. Be open and vulnerable with one another. Like those who read it alone, try just one new thing at a time, catching yourselves already doing some things very well.

IF YOU ARE READING AS A FAMILY. Try at least one idea from the family activities at the end of each chapter. Reflect on how you might want to tailor the idea to your family. Evaluate how it went. Come up with other ideas and do them.

IF YOU ARE READING AS A SMALL GROUP OR CLASS. Read and discuss one chapter at a time. Share with one another your experiences of applying the ideas to your family. Ask for ideas.



THE VIBRANT FAITH FRAME

The foundation of this book is the Vibrant Faith Frame, the core theological framework of Vibrant Faith Ministries.

6 Six Circles of Relationships

These are the relationships in which the Holy Spirit moves to stir up faith.

CHILD. Children and youth are in the center, often experiencing faith-bearing relationships among their peers. When we nurture faithful children and youth, we send them out into their peer groups to “go . . . make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). But sometimes, it is these young disciples of Jesus who stir up faith in adults.

FAMILY. This is the circle that holds the child and is the primary locus of relationships that shape the child.

CONGREGATION. Ideally, the congregation equips the family to nurture vibrant faith at home and out into the community and larger world. Relationships in the congregation provide faith parents for all the children and youth. Those relationships also provide opportunities for all God’s children to live out their faith.

COMMUNITY. Beyond the boundaries of congregations and families, robust and surprising disciples may appear in our communities.

CULTURE. It is easy to portray our culture as anti-Christian, but our culture is rife with opportunities to serve. In addition, many newer cultures in our midst offer different ways to practice faith. How do we connect with them and emerge enriched by the experience?

CREATION. The Creator is abundantly and obviously present in the creation. Often we are blessed to have wonderful disciples join us in our experience of the creation—whether a walk in the

woods, family Bible camp, or standing under the stars together and marveling at what God has done.

5 Five Principles

These are the principles for nurturing vibrant faith.

- * Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships.
- * The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.
- * Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too.
- * Faith is caught more than it is taught.
- * If we want Christian children and youth, we must have Christian adults.

4 Four Keys

These are the faith practices that nurture faith everywhere, all of the time.

- * Caring conversations
- * Devotions
- * Rituals and traditions
- * Service

3 Three Characteristics

These are the characteristics of Christian disciples, the AAA Christians all of our children need in their lives.

- * Authentic
- * Available
- * Affirming