

Alive and Well

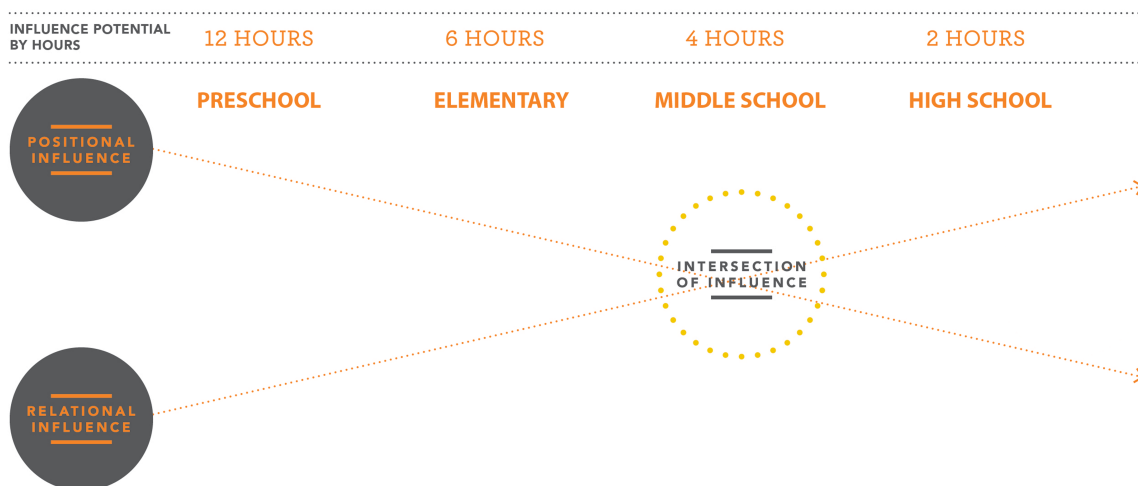
Parenting as Apprenticeship

There is a Public Service Announcement on the radio that you might have heard. It's put out by the March of Dimes and it's about the importance of prenatal care. A pregnant woman is talking about how she sings to her baby every day.

"Every time I feel a kick, I sing. I never sang before. I'm not good at singing. I was actually booed off a karaoke stage once. That's all it took. But today, I'm a singer. It's a lullaby mostly. Just came out one day. I didn't even know I knew any lullabies. But there I am. Singing. In the store. . . in the laundry room. . . in the car. I don't even realize I'm doing it mostly. . . I have a captive audience of one. And every day she gets a concert that comes from someplace that can only be my heart. She doesn't boo me. She never will. . ."

I love the thought being expressed in this spot. But every time I hear it, I think, "Actually your baby may boo you one day. Even if you are voted Mom of the Year, your baby may boo you." You really cannot predict what your relationship with your kids will be like once they're older (and once you're older). The graphic Chris introduced last week shows how our influence as parents changes over time - from positional to relational.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE



When our kids are young, our position as mom or dad means that we have great influence over what our kids do, where they go, what they eat and drink, etc. As our kids get older, our relational influence is more important. Increasingly we stop unilaterally telling our kids what to do; in the context of our relationship with them we try to influence them to make wise decisions and to adopt a lifestyle that is God-honoring/healthy.

Last week Chris made the statement, “How you parent when you have positional influence has a direct correlation with how much relational influence you will have when your children are older.” That statement really reflects my experience as a dad with grown children; Brenda and I have two married daughters (age 29 and 26) and a son who is 23.

It seems to me that a key question we need to ask is: ***How do I become the type of person who will have relational influence in every stage of my kids’ lives?*** In other words, ***how do I become the type of person with whom my children will likely want to have a relationship?*** This question acknowledges that when our kids get older, they have the choice whether or not they want to spend time with us, share their joys and sorrows with us, let us be involved in the lives of their kids, etc.

So how do I become the type of person who will have relational influence in the lives of my kids in the future? I think that the most foundational answer to that question is ***walk with Jesus Christ. Really walk with Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament.*** I know that this is the “church answer”; this is the “pastor answer.” But I am convinced from Scripture and from observation that the best thing you can do for your kids is walk with Jesus. As you walk with Jesus you will be the type of person who is genuinely helpful to your kids (and everybody else in your life).

Many different Scriptures support the idea that walking with Jesus will make us the type of people with relational influence (in the lives of our kids, our grandkids, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors, etc.). One such Scripture is Galatians 5. In this passage Paul contrasts living by the flesh and living by the Spirit. The two are incompatible with each other and are opposed to each other. Beginning in Galatians 5:16 we read this:

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

In Galatians, those who live under the Law are enslaved to the flesh; those who live by the Spirit are free to love God and to love others. In verses 19 through 21 Paul gives a catalog of the types of actions and outcomes that characterize those who are dominated by the flesh. As I read this list, think of the fallout in the lives of kids when their parents display these habits:

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

When parents are dominated by the flesh, their kids experience turmoil and chaos instead of stability and peace. Now consider the blessing in the lives of kids when their

parents walk by the Spirit. These qualities are evident in the lives of parents who keep in step with the Spirit of Christ:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Some of you have heard me say this dozens of times in various contexts. . . But this is profile of a healthy mom or dad. This is the profile of a person whose kids will likely want to be in relationship with them as adults - whether they are following Christ or not. Seriously, joy and patience are in such short supply in this world that it's striking when our kids see these qualities in our lives.

If you walk with Christ your life will be winsome and inviting to your kids; you will be a safe person for your kids. As well, if you are led by the Spirit, your life will be dynamic enough to face the challenges that will come your way. Every stage of our kids' lives is another opportunity for us to grow and mature. If our lives are static and if we're living off of past spiritual experiences, we aren't in a position to be good parents as our kids grow and mature.

My observation is that parents who **really** walk with Jesus tend to stay in relationship with their kids and grandkids. I'm not talking about maintaining outward appearances of attending church or doing Bible studies. I'm talking about parents who abide in Christ and let Christ's words abide in them. I'm talking about parents who have patience and self-control even when their kids misbehave and who have joy even when life is tough.

In our time remaining I want to talk about three core perspectives and habits that will help you walk with Jesus in the context of parenting.

Continue growing through every stage of your kids' lives. (1 Timothy 4:14-16) We never get to the place where we have mastered "parenting" and can quit growing. We need different skills and aptitudes at different stages of our kids' lives. Therefore, we need to remain teachable through every stage of our kids' lives - from infancy to adulthood.

Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 is very relevant to parents. Timothy was a shepherd and teacher in Ephesus; parents shepherd and teach their kids. Paul stressed that Timothy needed to remain teachable and needed to continue to grow as a pastor.

14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all.

Timothy should mature in ways that were observable; people should be able to notice progress in Timothy's maturity, especially as it related to his spiritual gifting (which was primarily teaching). As the years went by, Timothy was supposed to become more skillful and more effective as someone who influenced others for Christ. Notice that Timothy was to be very intentional about this maturity. Paul said to "take pains with

these things” (or “practice these things”) and “be absorbed in them” (lit. “be in them”). If Timothy became passive or complacent, he **wouldn’t** make this progress. The same is true in parenting.

16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

As a teacher Timothy needed to pay close attention to himself **and** his teaching. In my experience it’s much easier to pay attention to your teaching than to yourself. There’s built-in accountability for your teaching; those who hear you know whether or not you’ve worked hard. I will almost always pay attention to my teaching (what I’m going to say); but I sometimes neglect myself (my excuse being that I don’t have the time or energy to seek God related to the issues of my own heart). Of course the two cannot ultimately be separated; **what** we teach and **how** we teach flows from who we are.

These same dynamics are in play when it comes to parenting. Our progress in parenting should “be evident to all.” As Paul urged Timothy, we need to “take pains with these things” and “be absorbed in them.” As parents we need to pay attention to ourselves and to our teaching.

What we teach our kids really, really matters. The book of Proverbs is largely a father’s advice to his son who is leaving home. Over and over he challenges his son to remember what his mother and father had taught him - about friendships, sexuality, money, food and drink, speech, marriage, justice, the poor, honesty, contentment, etc. As parents, we are called to teach our kids in a very comprehensive sense. What we teach our kids matters.

Most Christian parents pay attention to what they teach their kids; the basic morality of the Christian life isn’t that complex. **But not all Christian parents pay close attention to themselves.** Consequently, their lives nullify their teachings. As you know, our lives speak more loudly than our words. Abiding in Christ and letting His words abide in us is essential (not optional) for Christian parents. We need to continue growing through every phase of our kids’ lives.

When our kids were young I don’t think I appreciated how much effort and how much progress would be required at every stage of parenting. I don’t think I realized that parenting infants and toddlers would require such round-the-clock selflessness. I’m still amazed at how Brenda poured out her life for our kids.

When our girls got married I didn’t anticipate how much I would need to grow and change in my parenting. I have learned the hard way that my role in my daughters’ lives changed quite a bit once they had husbands. On one occasion I crossed some lines I shouldn’t have; it required repentance and humility and time to restore what was lost. I can tell you that my relationship with my daughter and her husband is stronger now as a result. As parents we always need to pay close attention to ourselves and to our teaching.

Approach parenting more like an apprenticeship than a lecture (1 Corinthians 11:1, etc.)

I stole this concept from Eugene Peterson in his book *Like Dew Your Youth*. The title of the book is taken from Psalm 110:3 which likens youthfulness to the “dew of the grass.” Peterson takes it to mean that youth (or adolescence) is temporary like dew on the grass. Just like dew, if you wait long enough your kids will no longer be young. Youth isn’t a problem to be solved; it’s not a phase to “wait out” until it’s over. Youth is another opportunity for parents to grow personally and in their parenting.

Peterson’s observation was that many Christian parents have stopped growing. Instead they settle for presiding over their children’s growth. Parenting basically becomes one long lecture in which parents tell their children how they are supposed to live their lives. Much more effective is parenting as an apprenticeship in which you let your kids look over your shoulder and see how you are living your life. This is the pattern we see in the apostle Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul was able to write this to the church at Corinth.

1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Because Paul imitated Christ, he had a life worth imitating. And because he lived a transparent life, people were **able** to imitate him; they had a tangible example to follow. He showed them how to handle insults and opposition; he showed them how to work hard; he demonstrated how the grace of God could be evident in the midst of his weakness.

Consider what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3. He was able to point back to things Timothy had heard AND seen in his life. It wasn’t merely a lecture; it was an apprenticeship where Timothy saw firsthand how Paul lived his life.

10 Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, 11 persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me!

When Paul wrote Timothy to “suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus,” Timothy knew exactly what he was talking about. He could recall how Paul had endured hardship. He had been an apprentice to Paul in the ways of Christ. Real life is always always interesting and insightful.

Here are some ideas for parents.

- The next time you have a financial need, gather the kids around and let them see how you trust God for wisdom. Let them pray for you and with you for God’s wisdom or provision.

- Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The next time you identify an enemy (or even someone who annoys you) - in the workplace, in the church, in your neighborhood - give your kids an insider’s view of how to love and pray for that person. Let them see you wrestle with the desire to retaliate. Let them hear you pray, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”
- Do your kids know the dominant issues in your life? Do they see how you are handling those issues as a follower of Christ? I’ve found greater freedom to share with my adult kids than I did when they were younger; perhaps they’re listening more than before also.

I am strongly in favor of family devotions. . . but honestly, our kids glazed over most of the time when I tried to teach them the Bible. They were unimpressed with my pastor teacher skills. But when I told them about something happening in my own life or in the church they were “locked in.”

This last point is an encouragement not to be paralyzed by past failures in parenting. We all have regrets about the past. At one time or another we all second-guess ourselves and speculate about how our children would be different if we had parented differently. My encouragement is to treat your parenting the way you treat every other area of your walk with God (your prayer life, your relationships in the church, etc.):

Learn from the past, practice repentance, and continue investing in your children (and grandchildren, and others’ children).

Learn from the past. Don’t waste your mistakes and sins; learn from them. If you’ve been passive in your parenting, learn to be more intentional; ask somebody whose parenting you respect to mentor you and give you ideas about how to engage your kids. If you’ve been harsh and demanding as a mom/dad, go to the Scriptures and learn how to speak in ways that are gracious and inviting.

Practice repentance. Apologize to God and to your children. I know several parents here at Faith who have apologized to their adult children for different things that happened in their childhood. If there’s anywhere we need to clothe ourselves in humility it’s in our homes. If you are estranged from your kids, one of the most inviting things you can do is to humble yourself by apologizing and by treating them differently.

Continue investing in your children (and others). My encouragement here is to persevere in your parenting. Don’t give up. Give your kids as much as they will receive from you.

My 87-year-old mom prays for me every single day; only God knows the effect of her prayers. She emails me often. Yesterday she gave me some parenting advice. . . She said that two of the best gifts you can give your kids are “roots” and “wings.” It means the world to me that she thinks we’ve done a good job with that. My mom is still investing in my life.

If you don't have kids or if you're not close to your kids right now, invest in somebody else's kids. I've often thought that ***we practice on our own kids and give somebody else's kids our best stuff***. Other people's kids can hear things from me that my own kids couldn't when they were in high school or college. If you are walking with Jesus, God can use you in profound ways in the lives of others' kids in our community.