

## FAITH THAT WORKS: COACHING YOUR KIDS

By Andrew Wilson  
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Psalms 103: 1-5, 13-18  
Hebrews 12: 5-13

I saw a cartoon recently that I cut out and sent to my daughter Hannah, who's training to be a marriage and family therapist. A big, hairy dog is visiting a psychiatrist. He's on the couch and he's saying to the doctor: "... being totally honest, yeah, the leash complicates our relationship."

You parents have to keep your kids on a metaphorical leash to do your job. And it definitely complicates your relationship. Dogs can be unruly, but kids can be impossible. We do what we can to discipline, guide, and protect them, and how do they thank us? They tug at the leash and try to pull us off course. They tell us we're abusing their rights. They point out in excruciatingly minute detail all of our faults and weaknesses. They whip out their cell phones and show us they're ten times smarter, faster and cooler than we ever were. And some of you find it all so exasperating at times that you're ready to cut the leash and just let the little monsters figure things out for themselves.

But of course you can't do that. God has appointed you, and only you, to be the mom or the dad – the grandmother or the grandfather. And after all, you actually do *love* them. You love them even when they're metaphorically biting the hand that feeds them.

I can tell that some of you are already composing emails in your head. *"How dare you compare my precious kid to the family dog!"* I get that – the metaphor *is* a little over-the-top. So if it will make you feel better, you can send those complaints to: [lee@lcpc.net](mailto:lee@lcpc.net).

In the meantime, can we all at least agree on one point? Can we all admit that kids aren't quite perfect? Can we acknowledge that kids have many alarming faults and weaknesses, and that even the best of them – even the ones in your wonderful family – are desperately in need of good coaching? Yes, they can be utterly adorable. Yes, they melt our hearts when they snuggle in our arms, or they tell us they want to go out with the LCPC team to feed the homeless, or they give us a Father's Day card that tells us, without a hint of irony or sarcasm, that we're the best dad in the whole wide world.

But kids can also be selfish. They can be rude. They have meltdowns. They break things. They're subject to irrational phobias. They court disaster. Worst of all, they often reject the things that we know are good for them. They literally and metaphorically spit them out. And it's up to us – it's up to their parents and grandparents as well as their teachers, mentors and friends – to help them. Because we're the ones God has appointed to discipline them, guide them, protect them, and show them what it means to live a good life.

We don't have much time and I don't want you to misunderstand, so before we dive in I want to reveal to you my biases. I want to tell you two things.

First, as a parent I'm a traditionalist. In the language of my kids, I'm kind of old school. That means that, when it comes to parenting, I channel the voices of those who have gone before us. I think it's a mistake to reject their wisdom under the assumption that it's archaic and outdated.

Old school parents are sometimes accused of being stuck in the past. I know some who are like that. Many of them are grandparents, but some of them are the parents of toddlers. They think that if moms and dads would just discipline their kids the way parents did back in the 40s or 50s, most of our kids' problems would go away.

People who think that way aren't traditionalists, they're reactionaries. They're people who want to return to a nirvana that never existed. And in our culture, their hardline approach to child-rearing almost always backfires.

I may be old school, but I recognize that the world our kids are growing up in presents unique challenges. Some of the parenting techniques that worked even 15 years ago have become outdated. That's certainly true, for example, when it comes to questions about the use of cell phones and laptops. We parents are a bit like the software in our computers. We need frequent updates.

Here's the key point – here's the main reason I identify myself as a traditionalist: I learned long ago that what is true of parenting *techniques* is not true of parenting *principles*. And when it comes to the core principles – the principles that tell us what kids need, and what mom and dad's job is all about – the ancient wisdom still applies. Indeed, when you think of all the stress and uncertainty that's produced in our lives by change, the wisdom of our ancestors seems increasingly relevant and more desperately needed. That wisdom is what helps us see the forest through the trees. For example, it's what helps us to see why we sometimes need to let our kids suffer the consequences of their own bad choices. Or why we shouldn't allow our desire for friendship to keep us from disciplining our kids.

So again, when it comes to parenting, I'm old school.

But above all, I'm a child of God whose approach to parenting is grounded in Jesus Christ. The faith that I profess has been the most important factor shaping my understanding of parenting. That faith is radically counter-cultural. It undercuts the cynical idea that, when it comes to being a parent, it's up to us to invent our own truth. That faith is also wonderfully encouraging. It shows us why there's hope for our kids and hope for the world. It teaches us that God is our Father, and the foundation of all that beautiful and right and true. He's the invisible one who reveals himself in Jesus, his Son – the rock that can never be shaken. It promises us and our kids that if we build our lives on that rock – on Jesus, and his teachings, and his church – we'll enjoy abundant life that will never end.

That's what I mean when I say that my approach to parenting is grounded in Jesus.

Now that you know where I'm coming from, I want to zero in on some areas where we're struggling as parents, and where our culture is failing us. We're going to focus on just a few issues, but we're going to

ask big questions: What do our kids need from us? What are the ancient voices telling us? How can we help our kids to find Christ and become grounded in him?

One obvious problem area has to do with our chronic busyness. Kids don't respond well when the chaos of our lives spills over into their lives. Kids are at their best when their days are structured. They need schedules that are familiar and unhurried. They need comfortable routines. So it's our job as parents to establish predictable routines. I'm talking about eating breakfast, going to school, doing homework, attending church, watching TV, spending time with friends, going to baseball practice, eating dinner with the whole family, reading books and praying at bedtime, and all the rest. All the things we love about our kids are enhanced when we provide those comfortable rituals. They help them to be more spontaneous, more curious, more affectionate and more wonderfully goofy.

Most important of all, when cycles and rhythms of our kids' lives are well-balanced, they can relax and stop worrying about what's coming next. They can live in the moment and experience times of abundant, overwhelming joy. So we shouldn't be concerned that the schedules we impose on our kids might squelch their creativity and make them dull. Kids *need* routine.

Many parents are unaware of the importance of this issue. They underestimate the damage that's done to kids when their home life is unstable. This issue is at the root of so many of the problems that plague our kids, from childhood obesity and video game addictions, to poor school performance and depression.

Good parenting begins with good discipline. And good discipline begins with us. We have to bring order to our personal lives so we can bring order to our kids' lives.

At this point some of you moms and dads may feel frustrated. You agree: it would be great for your kids if your family's life was more structured and regulated. Everything would go better. But to you, right now, that kind of life seems out of reach. Maybe you and your spouse are working overtime to establish your careers. Maybe you're still trying to figure out what it means to be a good wife or husband. Or maybe you're divorced and trying to make it on your own. Meanwhile, you're debts and your living expenses are mounting. On top of all that, you're dealing with all the things associated with parenthood: the meetings and rehearsals, the tutorials and medical appointments, the parties and sleep-overs, the neglected homework and unmade beds. And with all that going on, you're asking, quite reasonably, how you're supposed to create a calm, ordered home life for your kids?

I don't have a simple solution for you. But I know it's possible, however, even for uber-busy people to master their schedules and establish calm and order in their homes. I'm confident that it's possible because I've seen lots of busy people pull it off. How do they do it? First, they decide what's most important in life. They take a wide look at their lives and settle on the few things that matter the most. Then they organize everything around those things. They commit to putting first things first, and to keeping peripheral things on the periphery.

Parents are also struggling these days with knowing how much is too much. Millions of parents think it's their job to make their kids as comfy and cozy as possible. They think they're being selfish and uncaring if they don't provide their kids with an iPhone, a laptop, a closet stuffed with designer clothes, a lavish allowance and an annual pass to Disneyland. They worry that if they don't provide those things their kids won't like them. Many of those parents are spending more money than they make and slipping farther and farther into debt. At the same time, what they're teaching their kids is that happiness comes from things, and things come free of charge.

How can we keep from spoiling our kids? We can start by teaching them the discipline of delayed gratification. We do that by creating an environment for them where they're rewarded for hard work, and where they see us investing for the future. We can talk to them all day long about the importance of self-discipline, but our words will be wasted if we communicate with our actions that our most important priority is their personal comfort.

We need to have the courage to say no to our kids. We need to keep a lid on the kind of lifestyle we provide for them. More than that, we need to set limits for their behavior, and stick to those limits.

A related issue is our tendency to protect our kids and rescue them from trouble. Sometimes of course it's necessary to protect kids from physical harm. But sometimes when we rescue our kids we keep them from learning some of life's most important lessons. We teach them that daddy and mommy don't really care what I do as long as I'm safe and happy.

I don't know any parents who want their kids to experience heartache, or grief, or disappointment. But when they've been lazy or foolish and when we protect them from the consequences, we stunt their growth. We prevent them from gaining maturity and self-confidence. We spoil them.

One way to combat all of this is to assign your kids simple, age-appropriate chores – chores that help your family in obvious ways. Kids need to be taught to work so they can discover that work can be enjoyable. It's also helpful to give kids the opportunity to help someone else.

Health and fitness are also top level concerns these days. There's just no gentle way to put this: Millions and millions of children and youth are desperately out of shape. And it isn't because we don't value looking and feeling good. Our culture is utterly obsessed with looking and feeling good. One key problem, again, is that we parents are afraid to say no to our kids. Too many of us try to buy our kids' love by providing them with everything they crave, including mountains of processed foods that are full of sugar and fat, and countless hours devoted to Netflix and video games.

I know this sounds negative and even judgmental. But we have to take a large measure of responsibility for our kids' health problems. Kids won't like it when we replace their Fritos with carrots and celery. They'll scream bloody murder when we cancel cable and make them play outside. But they'll eventually adjust, and become healthier, happier people.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. And I'm only half-joking.

The last issue I want to address, you won't be surprised to hear, is spirituality.

All kids are hungry for God. He created them to know him and to love him. Many of them are ready to give their hearts to Christ. But few of them will ever do that without the help of the church.

Kids desperately need worship and fellowship in the context of Christ's church. Many of them will resist going to church, at least for a time. But over the years they benefit enormously from being in church. There's great value in making church attendance a habit.

Some kids need other kids to help them find Jesus. They need to experience his grace and love in the context of a peer group where faith is a way of life. One of our top priorities in this church is to nurture an environment where students feel accepted and supported, and where their doubts and concerns are taken seriously.

Most of all, kids need to see a passion for God and a genuine love for others modeled in our lives. They need to be led by us in prayer. They need to hear our thoughts about the great stories of the Bible. They need to see that our love for others is genuine, and that what motivates our service is not our desire to impress our neighbors but our gratitude to God for his grace and mercy.

Parents, grandparents, you have a tough job. But I believe God will equip us to be excellent in any work he calls us to do. If we'll allow him to work through us, the Holy Spirit *will* make us effective parents. He'll bless our children with virtue and faith. And he'll fill our homes with a joy that the world can never take away.

*Father God, you have blessed many of us with beautiful children in whose faces we see your light. Help us to love our children as you love them. As we bring them up, give us calm strength and patient wisdom. Bring them safely through the dangers of childhood so they may live the promises you give. Teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Lord Jesus. Amen.*