

Parent Update

Examining Education from
a Christian Perspective



The **Seven Laws of Teaching**

Developing Children with Godly Character

By implementing several important principles in their teaching, parents can be guided by God's Word while avoiding character formation that is negative.

Every Christian parent wants his children to grow up to be, not just responsible citizens, but godly Christian parents themselves. Someone once told me that the true test of good parenting is not if your children are godly, but if your grandchildren raise godly children. If you quickly did the math in your head just then, you probably figured out that you and I, dear reader, will not be alive to see whether we succeeded. That may grate on you. It does me. I am a product of the management culture of the 20th century and like to see results.

It is easy to look at your own children when they are small and jump the gun on your self-evaluation. When they demonstrate wisdom, we congratulate ourselves. When they act foolishly, we either assign blame (“It’s the teacher’s fault!”) or condemn ourselves (“I am a bad parent”). As parents of three married children and grandparents of eight grandchildren so far, my wife and I are beginning to see the long-term effects of our parenting. Some of it is good and some reminds us of ways we fell short with our children, and how our grandchildren are affected two generations downstream. This is the reality of every Christian parent.

How do we cultivate character in our children that will bless them, their children, and even us? Reading Proverbs reminds us that generally, wisdom and righteousness bring blessing, and folly and sin bring negative consequences. A helpful practice that I often recommend is to go through the entire book and underline in red every consequence of sin and foolishness. Then underline every blessing that comes from wisdom and righteousness in green. Next, flip through the entire book noting the blessing you desire to experience and the actions that bring that blessing. Your eye will pick up on all the green and remind you that to obtain these blessings, you have to choose the actions that lead to them. Flip through the book again and let your eye catch all the red underlines. Note the awful consequences and the actions that must be avoided to prevent the consequences. This exercise will help you in your own life to practice the wisdom and character you desire to see in your own children. Character in children starts with character in parents.

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Where do we start in cultivating character? Since character is such a vast topic, let me suggest three disciplines to start. First, teach your children the principle of delayed gratification. In other words, instruct them on the value and blessing of delaying a fleeting and momentary pleasure for a later, lasting and more satisfying joy. We could summarize this with the phrase, “Pay before you play.” While going outside to play before you finish your chores provides immediate pleasure, at some point later you will have to do your chores, and you may dread the chores the entire time you play. By completing the chores first, you delay your happiness for a more lasting joy of playing with nothing hanging over your head. This principle extends to eating healthy and passing up junk food for the lasting pleasure of having a healthy and fit body, and refusing to waste money on small, throwaway items so you can save up for something that will last.

Second, teach your children the principle of delighting in excellence. While avoiding a perfectionist mindset, encourage your children to take the time and effort to do something completely and at a high standard. When my twelve-year-old son began mowing lawns for profit, I would make him go back and mow the places he had missed, instructing him on the virtue of having pride in his work. At first, he didn’t appreciate the effort it took to go the extra mile, but eventually the praise and recommendations by his customers formed in him a desire to go above and beyond expectations. This important principle includes modeling and instructing on the satisfaction that comes from doing one’s duty to be the best they can be for the glory of God.

Third, model and teach your children the blessing that comes from submitting to proper authority. With the widespread revelations of abuse by authorities, even Christian authorities, this virtue can be viewed skeptically. However, God calls us to obey proper authorities and promises blessing when we demonstrate submission (Colossians 3:20, 22). By obeying even when we don’t want to, we teach our children to say no to themselves in obedience to a higher authority. This is important for when they leave the nest and will need to obey God without parental oversight.

Three important qualifications keep character formation from becoming oppressive or coercive. First, remember that the goal is not just to form children who obey out of fear or duty, but to reach their hearts. Parents need to express the joy they themselves experience when they choose the good and wise way because they know it pleases God. They also need to admit when they are wrong and express the sorrow they feel for displeasing God. Always set character development in the context of the personal relationship you have with God. It is a subset of sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ. This is the work of a lifetime, not of a few months or years. You will not know the finished product of character development until your child is an adult.

Second, we should think of character formation through a gospel lens. The goal is the praise of God, not you as the parent. The psalmist reminds us, “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory” (Psalm 115:1). The reality is that they will fail many times in the formation of their character. Rather than make a big deal when they fail, parents can use failure as an opportunity for instruction. We should also remind our children that God promises to forgive us and that we should accept His forgiveness and grow from our experiences (1 John 1:9).

Finally, an encouraging reminder is found in the promise of glorification. What is not changed in this life will be transformed when we see Christ. Every believer struggles with some sin that will not be conquered in this life. The promise that someday God will do what we cannot do can encourage us now to strive for godliness in the power of God.

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