

The Four Seasons of Child Training

The Scriptures describe Christ's followers as children born into God's family, who start off as babes and grow to maturity. From the biblical pattern of Christian discipleship and growth, we can build a loose model for raising children from infancy to adulthood. This will give us an overall view of a parenting plan that will be helpful in formulating a long-range strategy for training our children. The plan incorporates four seasons: Control, Instruction, Coaching, and Friendship.

1. Control – Age 0 - 4

Jesus taught that the Christian life begins with denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him. In other words, our very first baby steps as Christians demonstrate a disregard for our own will and submission of our life to Christ's control. Just as baby Christians yield to the authority of Christ, so also our own children need to start their lives yielding to our authority.

Submission to parental control for an infant is not a natural thing, because we are all born willful, passionate beings. We come into the world determined to survive and we vehemently express ourselves to get what we need: "Waaw!" and Momma feeds us; "Waaw!" and our diaper is changed; "Waaw!" and down we go for a nap. As infants, our strong will can keep us comfortable and alive – the more outspoken we are the more our needs are met. However, as we start to grow we no longer cry for necessities – we crave pleasure, too. At nine months old, if it's Uncle Bert's watch we want, we grab on and scream when he doesn't give it to us. Uncle Bert might laugh and marvel at our strength, but he easily pulls his watch away, much to our anger. We are so furious that if we were seven feet tall and coordinated, Uncle Bert would be dead, and we would have his watch. The will-to-survive that kept us alive as a newborn is revealed to be a will-to-be-gratified the older we get. If this will-to-be-gratified is allowed to continue unhindered, we will grow up full of ourselves and lacking the self-control needed to make wise, responsible choices in life.

In the first few years of life, because our children are born willful just like us, they must be trained by correction and chastisement to accept an authority outside themselves. It is our responsibility as parents to begin preparing them for real life by teaching them that they are not the center of the universe, and that their personal gratification cannot be the driving force for all those around them. They will learn from our strong, consistent leadership that they are happiest as followers, relieved of the stress of making decisions for themselves and the family. The first several years of life are not the season for them to develop independence and decision-making skills. It is not the season for them to learn to make plans – it is the season of learning to deny "self" and cooperate with Mommy and Daddy's plans. As they submit to our outer controls they will gain inner controls.

Like the believer who bows his head and says, "Yes, Lord," is ready to learn from Jesus, our

young children prove their readiness for moral instruction by their consistent submission to us. Therefore, we must spend the first several years of their lives teaching them to say “No” to themselves and “Yes” to us. They have many more years to grow in wisdom – the first few years are chiefly for developing self-control. Learning to look to us for leadership gives them the self-discipline they will need to be leaders themselves one day.

2. Instruction – Age 4-12

After our children have spent a few years saying, “Yes, Mommy,” “Yes, Daddy,” and obeying us the first time we speak, they have the foundational ingredient of maturity, and are ready to begin learning wisdom, values, and responsibility. This means that we must be conscientious and take time to instruct them about loving God and loving their neighbors as themselves, among other things. It also means that we must no longer make all their decisions for them, but gradually begin to allow them to make personal decisions and live with the consequences of their choices. It’s all part of bringing our children to maturity.

If we are by nature procrastinators, we must fight against postponing the instruction of our children. We can put off taking out the trash or paying our taxes, and the consequences won’t impact eternity, but if we inadvertently neglect to teach and train the little ones entrusted to us, we may regret it forever. We must remember that maturity is not a natural result of aging – children need to be brought there through discipline and instruction in the Lord. They will not develop the traits of maturity through osmosis or by spending time with other untrained children – it will require a conscious effort on the part of involved parents. What they need from us is not just instruction, but discipleship.

Jesus told the apostles not just to sign up members into his Church, but to make disciples of all those who follow him. A disciple is different from a pupil. A pupil is one who is taught – a disciple is one who is trained. A pupil is instructed, but may not learn – a disciple learns and becomes like his master. We must spend our children’s preadolescent years grooming them like disciples, working to instill within them values, so that they will become wise, responsible, and selfless by adolescence. This requires diligence in instruction and modeling as well.

Instructing children is not simply lecturing them at a time of discipline. Our children certainly need correction or admonishment when they have done wrong, but most are not open to in-depth learning when they are in trouble – they are too self-preserving at that moment. The best time for learning is at a time separate from the incident. Jesus showed us that the best instruction is not reactive, but proactive. He certainly capitalized on life’s examples to teach lessons, but the gospels reveal that he spent most of the time equipping his followers during times set aside for teaching.

Instructing children also does not mean trying to make them wise by giving them multitudes of reasons each time we want them to obey. Our children must learn the wisdom behind our commands, but the moment we need obedience is not the time to do in-depth teaching. Parents who give their children lots of reasons to carry out each command should realize that they have a

weak view of their own authority and are attempting to persuade children to comply. The more a parent tries to talk a resistant child into obeying, the more a child comes to view himself as an equal to his parent. Argumentative and sassy children usually get that way because parents start the conflict by justifying their instructions. All a young child needs with a command is a simple nugget of wisdom, but this “nugget,” if it is a new concept, must be further developed in a time of instruction after they have obeyed or later during devotions.

As Jesus modeled, the most effective discipling occurs during times set aside for instruction. This requires regular times of Bible-based teaching about doctrine and kingdom living. I have never written on the subject of instruction of children, but those who have heard my series “Biblical Insights Into Child Training” know that I devote an entire session to it. I encourage all who have not heard that to get it. We must have a biblical approach to discipling children.

3. Coaching – Age 12-19

The apostle Paul loved Christ's people like his own children, and related differently to different ones, according to their behavior. To the immature, like the Corinthians, he dealt firmly, like a father dealing with small children. To the more mature, like the Thessalonians, he spoke in tender terms, encouraging them as a gentle father and nurturing mother. He was generally not harsh, but came alongside like a coach, which should not surprise us, considering he viewed Christians as athletes in a race. We can learn to parent our teens from Paul's parental coaching of the Church.

A study of the book of Proverbs reveals that Solomon also used this approach with his teenage sons. He gave them commandments, but sought to motivate them by reason and concern for natural consequence. He had authority as their father and as the king to both command and threaten them, but he knew they were young men who needed to choose to do what was right, so he chose to coach them. Browbeatings or threats of punishment may seem to keep a teenager in line, but by Solomon's example we have to conclude that they are not as effective as relating to our teens with respect as young adults.

There is much I can say about parenting teens, but let me offer here just a couple thoughts on coaching:

- 1) To coach means we must cease relating to them in a condescending, demeaning manner, as if they were still children – we must interact with them respectfully as if they were young adults. Habitual harsh scolding can easily discourage someone who already grieves over his or her failures. Scolding effectively says “shame on you,” focusing their eyes back on themselves in a demoralizing way. Look at it this way – our teens are very young adults – let's treat them like they are. Admonish them the way you would like to be admonished by those who have authority over you. Create disciplinary consequences for misdeeds, but in your tone relate with them in a way that allows them to keep their adult dignity.

2) We must help our teens identify their behavioral and spiritual goals, and like a coach who believes in an athlete, we must come along side and encourage them when they fail to achieve their goals. Coaches admonish athletes, so you will have occasion to admonish them, but be careful of always thinking the worst of their motives. Parents who coach will find less alienation and greater repentance.

4. Friendship – Age 20+

Near the end of his ministry Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." Jesus spent more than 3 years instructing his followers in what the Father had given him to share. In the beginning he viewed them as servants, but after grooming them in righteousness, he saw them as friends. The culmination of discipleship is friendship – most parents hope for the same with their children.

Our goal in training and discipling our children, is to bring them to maturity. If we are so blessed, they become self-governing and ready for adulthood long before it is time to release them from the home. They will have their own walks with Christ, and will not need us to schedule their daily Bible reading. A well-trained teen will be completely ready for friendship by age 20, although some are there much younger. When they reach that stage, we will not only have the satisfaction of a job complete, but we will discover ourselves enjoying with them a growing friendship. Not a peer level friendship characterized by familiarity and impertinence, but one marked by fondness, honor, and respect.

Information obtained from Family Ministries website, www.familyministries.com. Click on articles for more information.

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