

AN INDIVIDUAL
SPIRITUAL FORMATION PLAN
FOR YOUR CHILD



FIRST PATH

"I learned more about Christianity from my mother than from all the theologians of England."

+ JOHN WESLEY



A PRAYER

ALMIGHTY GOD, HEAVENLY FATHER, YOU HAVE BLESSED
US WITH THE JOY AND CARE OF CHILDREN: GIVE US CALM
STRENGTH AND PATIENT WISDOM AS WE BRING THEM UP,
THAT WE MAY TEACH THEM TO LOVE WHATEVER IS JUST
AND TRUE AND GOOD, FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF OUR
SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.

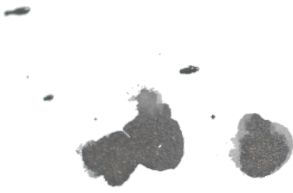
CHILD'S NAME

FAITH STAGE

“Remember that you are not called to produce successful, upwardly mobile, highly educated, athletically talented machines... giving your children great opportunities is good; it is not, however, the goal of parenting. Christlikeness is. Above all, seek to raise children who look and act a lot like Jesus.”

+ CHIP INGRAM





As Christian parents, we have been given the weighty responsibility of raising our children *“in the training and instruction of the Lord”* [Eph. 6:4]. We, along with the greater church community, are to join God in the work of forming our children into the image and likeness of Jesus.

We do this with the knowledge that the world around us will form our children in countless ways, both obvious and subtle. The directional influence of our world and often our own hearts is not pointed toward Jesus. It is our responsibility then to model and lead our families in the journey of counter-formation - by setting habit-forming shared rhythms that help guide our children into their God-given path and calling.

Our hope is that this workbook would provide the space to think intentionally (versus reactively) about your child’s discipleship. It will give you the chance to ask questions like, “What is God saying to me about my child and His dreams for their life?” / “What do I long for my child’s relationship with God to be like?” / “What fruit does God want to grow in my child’s life this year?” / “What decisions or actions are within my sphere of influence to help cultivate this fruit?” We hope this will be a gift to you, and to your child.

There are two primary frameworks used in this workbook:

JOURNEYING DIRECTIONS

Sanctuary Church in Providence, RI describes and orients the spiritual journey around four journeying directions: Up, In, Out, and With. These directions are a helpful frame for anyone thinking about holistic discipleship. This workbook will help you think about leading your children in each of these four directions.

JOHN WESTERHOFF'S MODEL OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Westerhoff identifies four stages of faith in a child's spiritual development. "As a tree trunk develops new rings through the years, so too does faith develop a variety of stages over time as a person matures. Each stage passes and builds upon the previous stage. Christian faith, like the human body, has an expected pattern of growth and development. The different stages are usually addressed at certain ages, and can (like physical growth) be delayed, with faith development ended before the final stage is reached." These stages, illustrated here, are outlined in more detail on the following pages.



An important note:

Before using this workbook, we also suggest familiarizing yourself with one additional concept. Stephen Covey talks about recognizing the difference between your Sphere of Concern and your Sphere of Influence. As parents, our Sphere of Concern for our children, particularly as it relates to their spiritual development, is gigantic. We worry about so many things. We hope for positive outcomes, and fear so many negative ones. As we sit down to craft a spiritual development plan for our child, it's important to recognize that our Sphere of Influence is actually much smaller than our Sphere of Concern - and will only decrease as the child matures. As you craft your plans, please only commit to actions that lie within your Sphere of Influence. It may encourage you, however, to remember that praying for the concerns, hopes, and dreams you carry for your child is always within your Circle of Influence.





EXPERIENTIAL AGE 0-6

The primary mode of spiritual engagement is experience, rather than a cognitive understanding of faith. "This is what we do. I can do that! This is how we act. I can do that! This is what following Jesus is like. This is what I've observed and experienced, so this is what God is like."

In this stage, the parent is the primary model for what God is like. For example, the idea that "Jesus loves you" is only understood via the child's reference point for "love." At this age, this reference point is not some abstract theory of love, but the experience of being loved by their parent[s].

Children in this stage learn by doing, and they discover what to do by imitating those closest to them. Rituals [bedtime prayers], behaviors [forgiveness extended after disobedience], stories, songs, memorized verses or prayers, familiar rhythms [church attendance], etc - these experiences help the child to engage spiritually and learn what following Jesus is like.

AFFILIATIVE AGE 7-11+

The primary mode of spiritual engagement is belonging to a community. "This is what we believe and do. This is our church. I follow Jesus because you follow Jesus. We are following Jesus together."

In this stage, the child begins to personally identify with the spiritual community [family, church, etc.] and finds great meaning and joy in belonging to the group. The child continues to imitate the parents' spiritual behavior, but no longer out of pure instinct. There is a growing desire to be like mom and dad, and to be part of the group.

Communal religious experiences [social, spiritual, and service-oriented], especially alongside parents and other adults, are extremely beneficial during this stage. Discussing and interpreting both what we are doing and why we are doing it maximize the learning. As the child grows and matures, their primary sense of belonging will shift from family to peers, so helping the child foster meaningful friendships within the faith community is also important.

SEARCHING AGE 12-18+

The primary mode of spiritual engagement is questioning, which is an essential prerequisite for independent discovery, internalized belief, and mature decision-making. In this stage, the child moves from a communal understanding of faith to a personal understanding. “You believe this. You are a Jesus-follower. But do I believe this? Do I want to be a Jesus-follower too?”

This is often a highly troubling stage for parents. While questioning can result in a loss of faith, it is also an essential step in the journey to a mature, adult, owned faith and should not be stifled. The child cannot follow Jesus as an adult without making an informed, independent decision. Parents will need to guard themselves against fear during this stage, choosing instead to empower and equip their children with the tools they need to evaluate inherited values and beliefs in order to make mature faith decisions.

Helping the child bond with other adult mentors and Christian role models is often beneficial during this phase, as well as encouraging peer-based experiences [youth group, trips, conferences]. Additionally, rites of passage and other rituals [baptism, confirmation, etc.] can help engage the child’s volition in their spiritual coming-of-age.

OWNED ADULT

This stage involves the development, either gradually or dramatically, of a mature, independent, adult expression of faith. “Yes! This is what I believe! I want to follow Jesus for myself.”

It is during this stage that the child’s faith has the opportunity to become central to a sense of adult identity and to all aspects of life. It is no longer merely faith that was inherited from childhood, or the faith of the community, but it is faith that is personally owned and embraced independent of the family and faith community.

According to Westerhoff, the faith development of most individuals is arrested at some point during the affiliative stage [believing by belonging]. This explains why so many children “lose their faith” when they go away to college, when proximity to family and the primary faith community decreases. Criticizing or shutting down the child’s growing questions and doubts is one way that parents can prevent the healthy, natural progression from the affiliative stage to the searching stage. To help our children have the opportunity to reach the owned stage as adults, we need to courageously embrace the searching stage as a natural and necessary step on the spiritual journey.

