

PITFALLS OF PARENTHOOD

Repeated studies point to the same conclusion: of all children raised “in the church”, an alarmingly high percentage leave the church after they leave home. This situation has resulted in countless heartbroken parents, left wondering, “What did we do wrong?”

I am convinced that there is no such thing as “child-raising experts”, but only wounded practitioners. Certainly, I do not offer advice as any sort of expert, but rather as one who has been around for a long time, done a lot of observing, and reached some firmly-held conclusions.

I must confess that I was much more of an expert in raising children before I had the experience of raising my own three children (with the help of my wife, of course). Many of my convictions were formed through making my own share of mistakes.

Clearly my perspective is that of one who believes in God and that raising children to be godly people should be parents’ number one priority. The principles listed are very basic. While there is no iron-clad guarantee that children will grow up to be solid Christians if these principles are followed, I am convinced that they can greatly increase the likelihood of positive results.

The approach here is to list a number of pitfalls which are common in parenting relationships. Hopefully someone will read this and be motivated to avoid one or more of the listed pitfalls. (There is no particular order to the items listed.)

PITFALL # 1: Failure to Start Early.

Parents often have goals for what they want their children to learn and to become, but have in mind to teach various things as students become older, perhaps beginning in the kindergarten period. The fact is that children begin learning extremely early. By the time they reach school age, much of their character formation is well-advanced.

Wise parents use a wide variety of methods to begin early training. They talk to children, read to them, and even sing to them. They are very careful what their children hear from their (the parents’) mouths. They make sure that the children understand what is important in their family. (And children WILL learn what is important to their parents, simply by observation!)

PITFALL # 2: Failure to Set Firm Boundaries

As a teacher I learned a good deal about discipline before I had any children of my own. In every classroom, the students will begin the year by probing to see how much they can get by with. Whatever boundaries set by the teacher will be tested by the students. They will push to see if the boundaries can be expanded, or if they remain consistent every day. If the boundaries are expanded, they will be tested again. A wise teacher will save himself a great deal of anguish if he establishes well-thought-out and well-defined boundaries at the beginning and consistently resists student efforts to stretch them. I learned that once students become convinced that the boundaries are firm, they will adjust to them.

The very same principle applies in families. It is very important for children to know what their boundaries are - what they MUST do and what they CANNOT do. Furthermore, it is critically important

that the boundaries are consistent; that is, they must not change from day to day. If a certain action receives disciplinary action one day but is ignored the next day, the child receives a very confusing message. Was it wrong, or did it just irritate the parent on a certain day when the parent was in a bad mood? Parents should carefully think through their disciplinary actions.

PITFALL # 3: Lack of Disciplinary Firmness

Parents commonly lie to their children in disciplinary matters. It drives me crazy when I hear a parent say to his child, "If you do that again I am going to...do whatever". In a few minutes the child does the same thing. The parent says, "Did you hear me, STOP that!" A little later it happens again. "I'm not going to tell you again!" the parent yells. This is a great teaching experience for the child: he learns that he can get away with misbehavior for some time. It also helps the child to develop the skill of detecting what the REAL deadline is for enforcement (if there is one).

The following is a common scenario: a parent tells the child to do something, or perhaps to stop doing something. The child decides to test his powers of defiance. He ignores the order. The parent (having earlier trained the child to play this game) begins counting: one.....two.....three... The child perceives obedience as part of a game, not a serious responsibility. This costs the parent some of his credibility.

A child should learn early that obedience to parents is ALWAYS necessary, without hesitation, and that failure to obey consistently has consequences promptly. No must mean NO, not maybe.

One by-product of a lack of disciplinary firmness is nagging on the part of children - and this continues into the teenage years. Typically, a child will ask to do something or to receive something. The parent says, "No". But the child keeps asking, perhaps pleading and begging. After a few more "No's", in exasperation, the parent finally says, "Oh, ALL RIGHT!" There is one reason why children nag: it works! Again, the parent who gives in to nagging can be sure that he will be plagued by it repeatedly.

PITFALL # 4: Failure to Instill Spiritual Principles

Some parents seem to think that their children will acquire spirituality through osmosis. If they just live in the home of church-going people and are regularly sent to Sunday School, they will become well-stocked with spiritual values. Then, when they turn out to be non-spiritual teenagers, and later non-spiritual adults, the parents have no idea what went wrong.

This is another example of the need to start early in training children to embrace spiritual values. It has always been that way. It does not happen accidentally or casually. The following words from Deuteronomy 11:18-21 should be sober reminders to parents that it should be an all-consuming passion of theirs to train their children in the ways of the Lord:

"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands, and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land...."

As a school teacher, I have often been asked to teach Sunday School classes, especially junior high and high school classes. It has been a common experience to be dismayed by the lack of basic Bible

knowledge on the part of children of parents who have been churchgoers for all the children's lives. What were the parents thinking??? Why was it not a higher priority to teach the Bible to their children? My three children are grown and have families of their own. But they have always been well-versed in the Scriptures. When they were young, my wife and I provided an abundance of Bible teaching. We consistently read to our children from Bible story books. For years the family played Bible-related games involving knowledge of Bible characters and Bible events. It was not a drudgery or a chore. It was not forced. Parents, if they are so inclined, can find ways to instill in their children a respect for God and a knowledge of the Bible.

PITFALL # 5: Misplaced Priorities

Parents want their children to do well in school, to be popular, to excel in sports, to enjoy friendships, and a variety of other things. None of these are wrong. The key issue, however, is the matter of priority.

It is a matter of balance. It is very easy to allow all these pursuits to squeeze out the development of the child's spiritual condition. There are inevitably situations when a choice must be made between secular interests and spiritual matters. How firm will parents be when conflicts occur? Will they have solid values and resist popular trends, including their children's preference, to insist on what they believe is right - even when children object?

Marvin Phillips has told a story about his teenage daughter (I believe she was a junior in high school at the time). She was standing by her locker at school when a classmate invited her to a party which was going to last until quite late. The daughter said that she could not go as her parents did not allow her to stay out past eleven o'clock. The friend replied, "Oh, I can stay out as late as I want to". There was a pause, and the friend quietly started to cry. "I wish my parents cared about how late I stay out," she said.

This illustrates a significant point: although children may push to get what they want, down deep they have a need for strong guidance, even restraints. Certainly, I can think of a number of occasions when my wife and I placed some very unpopular restraints on our children. In some cases, it probably took years for the children to finally concede that our decisions were correct. (Hopefully they did finally come around!)

PITFALL # 6: Parental Disunity

It is common for parents to disagree concerning how, when, or whether to discipline a child. They often frequently disagree on what ground rules should be set. These situations are recipes for much grief. Children can be excellent psychologists. They learn very early how to play one parent off against the other. They learn which parent is more likely to agree to what they want. In the process, they develop only murky ideas of what really IS the right thing to do.

This problem is much greater when parents are not both Christians (an excellent reason why a Christian should marry another Christian!). The idea of avoiding teaching biblical principles to a child - so as to let him make up on his mind when he is old - is absurd!

There is another common problem situation. Sometimes one parent (usually the father) is overly harsh in his disciplinary measures. The other parent, trying to compensate, becomes too lax. This is always to the detriment of the children, in a variety of ways. Not only does the child not know what really is the

right thing to do, but he is troubled by the unhealthy relationship between the parents. And he is certainly not getting a good lesson for how to become a parent himself.

Wise parents will take whatever time is necessary to work out between themselves a plan for teaching their children so that there is a united front in dealing with their children.

PITFALL # 7 - Failure to Seek Advice

Whether it is pride, embarrassment, fear, or whatever, many young parents fail to take advantage of the opportunities to seek advice from older, more experienced, successful parents. These opportunities are easily available in a healthy church setting. For fear of being seen as meddling, many friends will not offer advice unless they are asked to do so. Young parents would be very wise to seek out successful parents and ask for their advice on problem areas - but do NOT wait until matters have gotten entirely out of hand. The old adage is very appropriate: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure".

PITFALL # 8: Careless Talk

In any church there will inevitably be situations (or people) which are not what they should be. If one wants something to complain about, he will have no problem finding it. Many times through the years, I have heard church members openly criticize things about the church, oblivious to the fact that their kids were hearing it. (And if they did this in my presence, how much more likely were they to do it at home?) I have watched through the years as these children (and I could plug in names of actual people here) left the church soon after leaving home.

As young people move through teenage years into adulthood, there are powerful competing forces tugging at them. On one hand, there is the innate urge to indulge in the worldly pleasures beckoning on every hand. On the other hand (assuming they have had guidance in spiritual matters), there is the inner conscience calling them to remain loyal to the Lord, confident that He will provide blessings far more rewarding than the pleasures offered by the world.

It is easy to underestimate the enormity of this struggle within young people. The tendency to give in to the ways of the world instead of remaining loyal to God and the church can be strengthened by memories of how the parents were critical of the church through careless talk.

Parents who want their children to remain in the Lord's church must do their best to hold up the church as God's holy family, regardless of the flawed people who are in it.

PITFALL # 9: Failure to Provide Substitutes

Children are going to do something. They are going to associate with someone. They are going to do something for entertainment. They are going to go somewhere. Diligent parents try to protect their children from harmful activities and associations. They try to see that their children avoid a wide variety of harmful recreational activities common among the children's peers.

It is impossible to shield children entirely from evil influences. Public schools, of course, are hotbeds of harmful influences. Parents must be especially diligent in monitoring the ways in which their children are being influenced, and especially the associations and friendships which are forming.

It is easy for parents to follow the “course of least resistance”, just letting things happen, hoping for the best. Wise parents, however, will take the time and make the effort to provide for activities and arrange associations which will benefit their children. Parents can host parties in their homes and invite friends of known wholesome character. The point is that parents, recognizing the social and entertainment needs of their children, should see to it that these needs are met in a wholesome way rather than leaving it to be done by those who do not share their spiritual values.

PITFALL # 10: Lack of Praise

Sometimes parents find themselves scolding their children so often that they may not be in the mood to offer much praise. The truth is that children crave approval from their parents. One of the best ways of teaching values is through praise. Children conclude that what their parents praise must be something good. Over a period of years patterns of praise have a definite impact. There is no end to the list of things which may be praised: being courteous or generous, being kind or forgiving, doing homework or other chores without being prodded, being patient, volunteering to help in some way, being sympathetic; in short, reinforcing any quality which the parent wants to see the child develop.

The need for praise continues through the teenage years - and indeed through life! It has been pointed out that a great deal of praise is needed to overcome the negative effects of a single criticism. Wise parents build both character and a healthy self-image by generously commending admirable qualities and actions on the part of their children.

PITFALL # 11: Materialistic Pursuits

One of the most important gifts parents can give their children is their time. Child-raising is time-consuming. Far too often parents find themselves so busy that they cannot give their children the time which they need. Why?

Too many parents allow themselves to be caught up in the “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” mentality which is so pervasive in our society. We see the pattern repeatedly: in an age of easy credit, couples get themselves in debt so deeply that both parents have to work long hours to try to keep up with the payments. Not only does this limit time spent with children, but the preoccupation with financial problems can limit their ability to provide the emotional support needed by the children. Certainly children need to feel that they are being enjoyed by their parents, not a dutiful burden to them, an impression easily conveyed by tired preoccupied parents.

The three chief culprits are houses, cars, and credit card debt. As someone has observed, we tend to “spend money we do not have, for things we do not need, to impress people we do not like”.

Surely there are situations in which there is a need for the mother to get a job outside the home in order to meet the basic needs of the family. But that is NOT the same thing as having to get a job in order to pay debts built up by extravagant and unwise spending.

As one absorbs the spirit of Bible teaching, he understands that there are admonitions to live a simple life, one that is content with having basic needs met. Certainly, the Lord expects his people to place more emphasis on spiritual matters than on material things. Sadly, we see this admonition go largely unheeded.

There are no statistics to show how many couples have spent super-busy lives, finally managing to pay off the expensive houses and cars plus the credit card debts - only to see their children end up spiritually bankrupt. If only young couples would heed the advice to live modestly, within their means, getting by with less expensive houses and driving older cars! Even better - tear up the credit cards! They would then be in a much better position to nurture their children in the ways of the Lord.

PITFALL # 12: Failure to “Practice What You Preach”

The values of parents are, to a large extent, passed on to their children. If parents want to instill strong moral and spiritual values in their children, they will need to convince those children that they have embraced those values themselves. The idea of “do as I say and not as I do” is not likely to have a positive effect.

Children are adept at detecting hypocrisy. Parents who portray a certain set of values at church and around church people, but act in a less admirable fashion when only the family is present, make it clear to their families what their values really are.

Everyone has moments of weakness when things are said or actions taken which he later regrets. There is a difference between a moment of weakness and a consistent pattern of unspiritual behavior. Parents do a great service to their children when, after a moment of weakness, they admit their mistake and make apology to the family. Difficult as this may be, to children this comes across as a sign of strength - not weakness. It re-enforces the perception that the parent is basically committed to doing right. I have not checked the accuracy of the report, but it has been said that Mark Twain was once asked what he thought about Christianity, to which he replied, “I don’t know. I’ve never seen it tried”.

Well, Christianity has been tried, but too often not whole-heartedly. And children can tell pretty well how seriously their parents take their walk with the Lord. Wise parents understand the need to be the right kind of role models.

This list does not include all of the potential pitfalls of parenthood. However, it provides a good starting point, and hopefully offers helpful ideas for parents intent upon providing the kind of parental guidance the Lord would have them exercise.

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Lancaster, CA (2014)