Giving a Strong Spiritual Legacy

Every believing parent hopes his or her child will embrace the faith and grow deep spiritual roots. But studies tell us that over half of those growing up in Christian homes will back away from Christian commitment by the time they leave the teen years. Too often, parents "outsource" the spiritual formation of their children to the church. And while a good church is very important, God designed the family to be the primary place where faith is nurtured. So parents need to understand four principles that can help them become more intentional about their child's faith.

THE LEGACY PRINCIPLE
The scriptures tell us that what we do today directly influences the multi-generational cycle of family traits, beliefs and actions – for good or bad (Exodus 20:5-6, Psalm 78:5-8). So passing a strong faith to our children begins by having a strong faith ourselves–and by modeling the gospel in our marriages and in how we relate to those closest to us. Some of us need to break negative cycles that may have started with our own upbringing in order to launch a new, improved legacy for the next generation.

THE LIKELIHOOD PRINCIPLE
The good news is this**:** in the context of healthy relationships, children tend to embrace the values of their parents. Proverbs 22:6 tells us that when children learn right from wrong at home under the nurturing, loving training of parents, they tend to adopt mom and dad's beliefs. While there are no guarantees because every child has a free will, kids are far more likely to embrace their parent's faith if they enjoy their parent's company! That's a big part of the reason parents are warned not to "provoke your children to wrath" but rather "bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). Bottom line – a strong relationship with mom and dad is key to a strong Christian faith.

THE LENSES PRINCIPLE
Jesus taught that our enemy's primary weapon is deception–getting us to believe and live according to lies rather than truth (John 8:44). And when someone is deceived, he or she doesn't know it! Our children are growing up in a culture that bombards them with lies. An hour or two per week at church is no match for the hundreds of hours spent with media, school, and friends. Nor can it compete with a child's fallen nature that often wants to rebel against what is good, true and beautiful. It is the job of parents to equip children with the corrective "lenses" of truth so they can better navigate the deceptive roads of life.

THE LEARNING PRINCIPLE
Our children can only learn what we teach them in a manner that will reach them. In other words, we need to vary our approach based upon their unique personality, learning style, and most importantly, stage of development. Children fall into one of three stages that should guide the methods we choose for discussing our faith and values at home.

The Imprint Period: (toddler to about age seven)
Small children are all ears. They will believe it because mom or dad said it, much like a baby gosling that imprints itself onto its mother and follows wherever she leads. Young children soak in what we tell them–so this is an ideal season for teaching them basic bible stories, memorization, and other building block truths of Christianity.

The Impression Period (about age eight to early teen)
During this season, children no longer accept what we say at face value. They may question us, push back, or even argue. During this season, children do need to know what we believe. But they also need help understanding the rationale behind those beliefs. While more work, this is a positive part of their faith development because it means they have grown past blind acceptance and are ready for deeper understanding.

The Coaching Period (early teen to young adult)
Our job changes when the kids enter the coaching period. We can motivate, encourage, challenge and advise. We can't force feed. We can help them clearly articulate what they believe, challenge their thinking, remind them of the "basics" learned during the "practices" of the imprint and impression years. We can provide a safe environment to wrestle with, even question, the values they've learned. Maintaining strong relationship and frequent dialogue are the key to your influence now.

In light of these realities, parents can become intentional about creating and capturing opportunities to nurture the roots of faith in their children.

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GOING FURTHER - Resources

It Starts At Home (by Kurt Bruner and Steve Stroope) helps parents understand the process of faith formation at home and a practical plan for becoming intentional.

Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children (by John Trent, Rick Osborne and Kurt Bruner) offers a road map for parents to shape the faith of children under twelve years old.

Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens (by Joe White and Jim Weidmann) helps parents coach the faith formation of older children.

Your Heritage (by Kurt Bruner & J. Otis Ledbetter) shows how to give children a strong spiritual legacy – including an assessment of the legacy parents received themselves.

Recommended Websites:

HeritageBuilders.com provides resources to help parents instill faith in their children such as the *Family Night Tool Chest* series.

MoveNightChat.com recommends films and spiritual discussion ideas for parent/teen movie nights.

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Intentional Parenting