

# PARENTS, TAKE NOTE OF THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES COMMON TO KIDS WHO FLOURISH AS ADULTS

by Trevin Wax, *The Gospel Coalition*

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Parents, don't take the biblical proverb "train up a child" and treat it like a promise, assuming that if you do everything right in your parenting, your children will turn out right. Proverbs are general truths, not specific promises. Besides, when we consider the overall context of the Bible, we see how counterproductive it is<sup>1</sup> to try to train our kids to trust in God if what we model for them is that we trust in our training.

But even though we place our hope for our children in God, not in our training, we recognize how this proverb teaches us to take our training of children seriously—both where we guide them and also how we shepherd their hearts. And part of that shepherding and guidance includes the effect of a family's culture.

A new LifeWay Research study<sup>2</sup> commissioned by LifeWay Kids<sup>3</sup> surveyed 2,000 Protestant and non-denominational churchgoers who attend church at least once a month and have adult children ages 18 to 30. The goal of the project was to discover what parenting practices were common in the families where young adults remained in the faith. What affected their moral and spiritual development? What factors stood out?

You might expect that family worship services would play a major part, or the simple habit of eating meals together around the table. Perhaps you'd expect

a Christian school kid to be more likely to follow Jesus than a public school kid. Everyone has ideas about what practices are formative on children.

The research (compiled now in the new book *Nothing Less*<sup>4</sup>) indicated that children who remained faithful as young adults (identifying as a Christian, sharing their faith, remaining in church, reading the Bible, and so on) grew up in homes where certain practices were present.

## BIBLE READING

The biggest factor was Bible reading. Children who regularly read the Bible while they were growing up were more likely to have a vibrant spiritual life once they became adults. This statistic doesn't surprise me. God's Word is powerful. The Bible lays out the great story of our world and helps us interpret our lives and make decisions within the framework of a biblical worldview. Bible reading is a constant reminder that we live as followers of God. Our King has spoken. He reigns over us. We want to walk in his ways.

## PRAYER AND SERVICE

Two more factors follow close behind: prayer and

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service in church. The practice of prayer did not specify whether it was private or corporate, before meals or before bedtime, or in the morning. But prayer was present.

Note that the church-related factor is about *service*, not just attendance. It wasn't just that parents took their kids to church (where "professional clergy" could feed them spiritually), but that the children were included and integrated into the church through the avenue of service. The habit of serving others in the church and community likely formed these young adults in a way that kept them from identifying merely as a churchgoing "consumer," but instead as a contributor to the building up of God's people. Down the list a little, church mission trips show up, another indicator of the power of active service.

## SINGING CHRISTIAN SONGS

What may surprise you is how high up on the list was this factor: listening primarily to Christian music. Christian contemporary music gets a bad rap these days,

usually for being more inspirational than theological (although I believe this stereotype is not true<sup>5</sup> across the board). Still, we shouldn't dismiss the truth behind Augustine's ancient observation that *we sing the truth into our hearts*. When we sing together as congregations and when we praise God on our own or sing songs that fortify our faith, we reinforce the beauty of our faith. (Also noteworthy was the finding lower on the list, that listening primarily to secular music was an indicator that negatively affected one's spiritual life.)

## CULTURE, NOT PROGRAMS

For decades now, many Christians have assumed that certain church programs are the key factors in a child's spiritual development: Vacation Bible school, youth group activities, Sunday school, and so on. But the research study shows that these programs make an impact when they are connected to consistent habits of prayer, Bible reading, praise, and service. It's the culture of the family and church, and *that* they integrate children and young people into spiritual disciplines, not the *how*

that matters most.

Also notable is the impact of the parents' example of reading Scripture, taking part in service projects, sharing their faith, and asking forgiveness after sinning. In other words, the more the repentant, joyful Christian life was modeled, the more likely children were to remain in the faith.

## THE POWER OF IMITATION AND ENVIRONMENT

Research shouldn't be misused in a way that transforms children into blank slates. There is no perfect parenting formula, and as I mentioned above, no one should assume there's a surefire formula or method to bring about the result of a faithful kid. Don't overestimate your power. The Holy Spirit saves, not you.

But don't underestimate the Spirit's power to work through the environment you create for your home either. *Nothing Less*<sup>6</sup> shows that there's power in faithful, Christian imitation.<sup>7</sup> Children are more likely to repent and ask forgiveness when they've seen parents do so, and when they've experienced grace in human relationships. Children are more likely to aspire to faithful Christianity when they see joyful service as a virtue modeled in the home.

1. What kind of culture do we want in our homes and churches?
2. What space are we creating for our children to flourish?
3. How are we rooting our families in God's Word?
4. How are we modeling prayer and repentance?
5. What does faithfulness look like in our home?
6. What are the songs that are in our hearts and on our lips?
7. How are we fulfilling the Great Commission?

Let's ask these questions and beg God to work in us and through us, for his glory and our families' good.

## ENDNOTES:

1. [https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/train-up-a-parent/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/train-up-a-parent/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_)
2. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/10/17/young-bible-readers-more-likely-to-be-faithful-adults-study-finds/>
3. <https://www.lifeway.com/en/ministries/kids>
4. <https://www.lifeway.com/en/product/nothing-less-P005799608>
5. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/christian-radio-is-more-theological-than-you-think/>
6. <https://www.lifeway.com/en/product/nothing-less-P005799608>
7. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-missing-strand-in-much-of-our-discipleship/>