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# FAMILY TIES

## Giving Children Roots and Wings

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

*“There are two lasting bequests we can give our children: one is roots, the other is wings.”—attr. W. Hodding Carter, Henry Ward Beecher*

“**W**hat’s gray, has a big bushy tail, has four little feet, climbs trees, and eats nuts?” Mrs. Simpson asked her class. She was surprised when not one hand went up in response. After a brief silence, she added, “In fact, it eats acorns!”

But still silence. Then, Johnny timidly raised his hand. “Johnny, what’s the answer?”

He replied, “Well, Mrs. Simpson, it sure sounds like a squirrel, but I think I’m supposed to say, Jesus.”

When I taught Kindergarten Sabbath school, so often the children answered, “Jesus,” when that wasn’t the answer to the question. I wanted them to think for themselves, not just parrot an answer back to me!

When children are very young, we can control their environment. As they get older, obviously their world becomes a larger place. More and more people and experiences influence them. We cannot always be with our children, and that’s the way it should be as they mature. But, it is our responsibility to rear our children in such a way that they can become independent from us, ready to use their abilities to think, reason and make decisions—that’s what parenthood is all about.

I believe it’s imperative that we give children, even very young ones, opportunities in the home that foster thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills. One way to foster critical thinking is to ask questions that won’t have specific answers, but which will help the child to make decisions and respond accordingly. For example:

- Greeting children with statements and questions that refer to their person: “Jeremy, you have a big smile today, has something special happened today?”
- Asking children open-ended questions that enable them to answer with more than a yes or no: “What do you want to do when you go outside to play?”
- Offering kids choices of responses when they don’t answer a question spontaneously: “If you were him, would you



go over the mountain, around it or through the forest?”

- Questions such as “What if,” “How” and “Why” help children predict: “Tell us why you think that the kitten might be afraid of the dog.”
- Let your children help evaluate a process. “How do you think our new rule of

each person putting their dishes in the dishwasher is working?” Let the kids discuss and evaluate this process. Encourage them to understand another’s point of view and encourage them to talk about their feelings.

When you provide an environment where open discussion is encouraged, be prepared to listen! I like the explanation that hearing takes place between the ears, and listening takes place through the heart. We must stop and listen long enough to really hear what our children are saying, to let them get to the heart of things.

Children deserve many opportunities to develop their roots and try their wings. They need reassurance and opportunities to question us so that they can build their own belief system and learn to resist peer pressure in healthy ways. This develops faith maturity.

What an exciting but sobering thought, *to know that as parents we are potentially the most important educators of our children.* As parents, we are the first ones to provide an environment for our children that will enhance their abilities of thought and reason, so that when all is said and done they will have made the best possible decision in life—to wholeheartedly follow Jesus!

Susan Murray is a professor emeritus of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.