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Molding Your Child's Development, Part 1: The Forces that Shape the Worldview of Your Child

KATELYN CAMPBELL AND JOSEPH KIDDER

“Parents should direct the instruction and training of their children while very young, to the end that they may be Christians. They are placed in our care to be trained, not as heirs to the throne of an earthly empire, but as kings unto God, to reign through unending ages.”¹ In this passage taken from Ellen White’s *Patriarchs and Prophets*, we can clearly see that the role of parent is of utmost significance. Mothers and fathers are tasked with caring for God’s treasured children. They are to teach them, train them, shape them, and empower them.

One of the most important things a parent can do for their child is to grow a Biblical worldview within that child’s heart. Doing so will set the young boy or girl on a positive trajectory in relationship with Jesus Christ. In this three-part article series we will discuss biblical worldview, the developmental stages of children, and what parents can do to influence them and build them up in the Lord. This is the heavenly task parents have been given.

From birth until a child’s preteen years, the mother, father, and primary care-givers tend to hold the greatest sway and impact in a child’s life. In a study conducted by Fuller Youth

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Institute, it was found that “parents continue to be the single greatest influence on their children’s faith.”² After childhood parental influence is usually reduced, with school, peers, media, and the like tending to have a greater impact on the child. However, it is in these childhood years when parental influence is greatest that worldview primarily develops. Therefore, if parents help their children create a solid Biblical foundation before their teenage years, they will be setting them up for lifelong Christian commitment.

This is why in these articles we will be focusing on the parenting of children from infancy until about the age of 12 or 13. In this installment, we will discuss just what Biblical worldview is, determine how to engage with worldview at a child’s various developmental stages, and look at a prime Biblical example of parental influence on a child’s worldview. With prayerful and intentional forethought, parents can use the early years of their children’s lives to have an eternal impact.

Biblical Worldview

For the sake of this article, we define worldview as a collection of basic assumptions about life and the world, creating vision through which the individual can see. Your child’s worldview is what is going to help orient him or her in life. Like a map which

turns meaningless terrain into distinguishable landmarks, worldview provides a means for interpreting the reality of the world. The worldview that your child develops will answer key questions for them: Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is real? What is right and wrong? All of these questions and more are answered by the worldview your child develops, shaping his or her outlook and basic assumptions. Everyone has a worldview, but there are many different philosophies that are used as the basis for these worldviews: evolution, creation, fatalism, and humanism are a few examples. The purpose of this article is to help you develop a *Biblical* worldview in your children that will orient them to live the Christian life to it's fullest.

Just what is a Biblical worldview? There are several foundational components to it. A Biblical worldview holds the Scriptures as authoritative divine revelation. God as creator, His character of righteousness and love, His plan for our lives, Jesus' saving sacrifice, redeeming grace, and the Ten Commandments are all bedrocks for a biblical worldview. Ultimately, a biblical worldview is founded upon a belief in God and commitment to following Him. As James Sire notes, "In the biblical worldview, in short, everything is first and foremost determined by the nature and character of God."³ Through this lens, Jesus is seen as our Creator, Savior, Redeemer, and Friend, and by utilizing a Biblical worldview, we are best able to think like Jesus, fulfilling Paul's words in Philippians 2:5: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (KJV).

Research conducted by George Barna has noted that most children begin developing their own worldview by the mere age of 2. The child's moral compass is fairly determined by the age of 9, and by the time a child turns 13, worldview is usually fully formed and set.⁴ All new experiences will be filtered through this worldview for interpretation and understanding. Just as physical and mental development is crucial in childhood, the formation of worldview from birth until 13 will set the trajectory for a child's future.

The assumptions and perceptions that comprise a child's worldview not only answers basic questions about the world, but they help establish the child's values and priorities, which in turn direct behavior and decision-making. No decision is made without a worldview. In order to make positive, healthy decisions, a child needs a positive, healthy worldview. A Biblical worldview can help children make intelligent decisions that will honor God and be a benefit to others as well as themselves. This is what God wants to see in the lives of his children: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).⁵ This is what a biblical worldview has to offer: an opportunity to live the life our Creator has meant for us to live.

Stages of Learning

Jean Piaget, a noted psychologist, laid substantial foundation for understanding the mental development of children. He proposed that a person's cognitive development occurs in four basic and primary stages⁶. From birth until about the age of 2 is the sensorimotor stage. During this time, the child learns from personal sensory engagement with the world around him or her. Learning occurs through touching, tasting, watching, smelling, and hearing. The world begins to be ordered for the child as he or she encounters and manipulates the objects within it. Parents can teach their children in a sensory-oriented way, through allowing them to see, hear, touch, and act in order to understand the world. Here are some examples: Visually show children pictures of animals or Bible characters; sing Bible-oriented songs with your children; guide them in folding their hands for prayer; give them leaves, rocks, or other objects from nature to touch and hold. The more you can connect your child with Jesus through his or her senses, the more the child will understand him.

From about age 2 through 7, the child is in the preoperational stage. During this time, memory and imagination begin to develop, and concepts of the past, present, and future solidify. Symbolic ideas begin to make sense

to the child, meaning that he or she is able to recognize that a word or object can stand for something else. Teaching children at this age means utilizing their natural propensity for imagination. Encourage them to draw out Bible stories, or join your children in acting the stories out. You can take them to a zoo, aquarium, or park and invite them to imagine Jesus creating all the plants, trees, and animals.

In her book, *Putting Their Hands in His*, Ruthie Jacobsen writes, “The Master Story Teller—Christ—often used objects in nature to help to embed a profound spiritual truth. He used the visible things of nature that His listeners were most familiar with—the waving fields of grain, the farmer planting his crops, a lost lamb. There are dramatic and mundane lessons to be drawn from nature. Some can be scary, even frightening to a child, but even from these realities of nature, there are powerful truths. And there are also stories and lessons of God’s majesty and power.”⁷⁷ Because children gain an understanding of time during this stage, you can explain the story of the Garden of Eden, God’s presence in our lives now, and His soon Second Coming so they can understand the timeline of the world. You can also begin teaching your children portions of Scripture to memorize, rewarding them for their efforts: at this age many kids will be eager to memorize. Your child’s imagination, concept of time, and capacity for memory are all key for helping him or her learn.

Ages 7 through 11 typically mark the concrete operational stage. A child in this stage will begin to develop logical thought processing. Thinking and problem solving becomes something the child can do internally within their own minds and without physically manipulating anything. During this time you can walk your child through the process of fact, truth, and application. First, tell Bible stories and explain the knowledge found in scripture—these are the facts. Once the facts are established, discuss what lessons can be learned from these stories and passages of the Bible—these are the truths. Finally, talk over with your child how the truths found in Scripture make a difference in his or her life and even

how these lessons and ideas can be shared with others—this is the application. This will lead to spiritual growth and maturity in the life of your child. At this age, children will be able to think through these deeper concepts thoughtfully and logically, so be sure to engage them in such thinking.

Ocurring from 11 years old and up, the formal operational stage features the refinement of a child’s ability to logically work through mental problems. Children are able to comprehend more abstract concepts, allowing them to move from simple and concrete facts to deeper, more life-changing ideas. Scripture reading can become more than informational: it can be transformational. During this time, parents can teach their children that every part of Scripture is for spiritual growth and maturity, providing them with development in wisdom and opportunities for sanctification. This age marks the time when a child’s spirituality truly starts becoming his or her own. It is important to encourage children to take the grand story of the Bible as their own personal story, which provides a means to eternal life (Philippians 2:16).

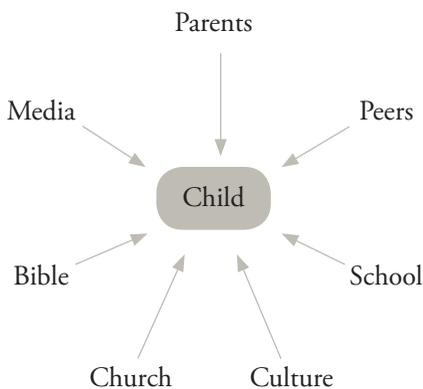
By keeping these stages of learning in mind, parents can best teach their children about God and the Bible, meeting their children where they are in their cognitive development. However, no matter exactly *how* parents teach their children, it is perhaps most important that parents simply keep in mind to teach their children about the character of God—his love, acceptance, forgiveness, goodness, and more. Ellen White describes how Jesus’ own parents did this for him: “They reminded Jesus of his identity as the Son of God. They taught him through songs and through nature. As they taught him, they themselves grew and learned more about God and his scriptures.”⁷⁸ Just as Jesus’ parents grew to know God better as they taught Him His character, parents today can also grow in their understanding of God even as they instruct their children.

The Effect of Culture

A recent survey conducted by the American Culture and Faith Institute revealed that over

half of adults in the United States (51%) believe that the nation's current pervasive culture has an overall negative effect upon children and teenagers.⁹ The survey showed that 93% of adults who claim a Biblical worldview believe that culture negatively impacts children, and even many adults (48%) who do not ascribe to a Biblical worldview still say that the country's common culture affects children in a poor way. If we as Christians wish to support the spiritual growth of our children, it may be wise to see how elements of culture impact them and what can be done to reduce negative impact and increase positive impact. No person exists in a vacuum: we are all affected by what goes on around us and to us within our environments.

The Forces that Shape the Worldview of Your Child



In the image above are some primary factors that can influence a child. When a child is young, his or her parents will have the greatest amount of influence in that child's life. In time as the child grows up, other factors will have greater influence. However, if the parents are intentional about teaching their child and setting their child down a good path at an early age, he or she will know how to navigate the other influential factors of life much better later on. During childhood it is crucial for parents to carefully consider what aspects of culture they want their children to engage with, and from which parts of culture they want to shelter them.

This question, in essence, is asking what kind of microculture you want to create. A

microculture is “a distinctive culture shared by a small group that is often based on location or within an organization.”¹⁰ While your family is set in the midst of local culture—complete with language, traditions, media, etc.—the family is itself a distinct culture. It can be influenced by surrounding cultural aspects, but it has its own established rules, customs, and ways of doing life. Within the home, parents get to set the tone and parameters for the family culture. As children grow up, they will in turn contribute to the microculture, but when the family first begins, it is the mother and father who contribute most to the development of the microculture. It is within this microculture that children will begin learning basic assumptions about the world around them as their worldviews begin to develop. According to most authorities in childhood development,¹¹ it is the mother and father (the primary caregivers) who are most influential to a child's growth. Thus, the question to parents remains: What kind of microculture do you want your family to have?

If you are seeking to raise your child with a Biblical worldview, your family's microculture needs to be intentionally crafted to promote this worldview. Ellen White writes, “Prayerfully, unitedly, the father and the mother should bear the grave responsibility of guiding their children aright.”¹² A good place to begin this thoughtful development of your microculture is to examine what Scripture suggests: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8). If you are incorporating language that is lovely, media that is pure, rules that are just, and the like, you are creating an external framework to positively influence your children.

Examine the furnishings of your microculture—the music that plays in your home, the art that hangs on the walls, the stories you read together at night. Are they

virtuous? Do they teach about God? In this age of heightened technology and media focus, we recommend limiting your family's screen time, evaluating what your children are watching, and setting positive examples for them to follow. Carefully and thoughtfully select content which will build your family up. Spend time discussing what you watch or play, pointing out lessons about morals and considering what God might have found pleasing or displeasing.¹³

But don't let your culture be one that simply sits on the couch all day long! Fill your family's time with fun and affirming activities. It may be easy to think of all the things you *don't* want in your family's microculture. But consider this parable from Jesus:

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation” (Matthew 12:43-45).

Don't just empty your house of evil. Fill it with goodness and the presence of God. Have fun with your children. Play games, read books, cook food, have adventures, and all along the way teach your children about their Heavenly Father. The Psalmist wrote of this joy of a life spent with God, saying:

“YOU WILL SHOW ME THE PATH OF LIFE;
IN YOUR PRESENCE IS FULLNESS OF JOY;
AT YOUR RIGHT HAND ARE PLEASURES
FOREVERMORE”
(PSALM 16:11)

With healthy and direct influence, parents can create such a culture for their children, and through this culture they will experience the fullness of joy of God and develop a Biblical worldview.

The Influence of Parents: Lessons from the Life of Timothy

In the New Testament, Timothy is a primary example of what it looks like for a young person to be raised with a Biblical worldview. Timothy was a pastor and evangelist right alongside Paul, but it took years of discipling for him to become such a prominent preacher of the gospel. Scripture tells us that his family was very instrumental in Timothy's spiritual development. In 1 Timothy, Paul writes to the young man, saying, “...I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also” (1 Timothy 1:5).

Both Timothy's mother and grandmother raised him in the faith of the Lord. Their influence was so instrumental that believers in the surrounding area where he lived had plenty of positive things to say about him. “Then [Paul] came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16:1,2). Before ever making contact with the great evangelist Paul, Timothy's faith in the Lord was evident, grown through his experience at home. Ellen White writes, “the piety and influence of his home life was not of a cheap order, but pure, sensible, and uncorrupted by false sentiments. The moral influence of his home was substantial, not fitful, not impulsive, not changeable. The Word of God was the rule which guided Timothy. He received his instruction line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little. Impressions of the highest possible order were kept before his mind. His home instructors cooperated with God in educating this young man to bear the burdens that were to come upon him at an early age.”¹⁴ The frontline of the cultivation of Biblical worldview starts with the child's parents and primary caregivers.

The Responsibility of the Community of Faith

Although we have been talking about the influence of parents, all believers should be involved in the spiritual development of children, youth, and young adults. Of course in the life of Timothy, after Paul decided to take the young man under his wing, a mentorship process began. In *Philippians 2:22*, Paul says of Timothy to the church of Philippi, “you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.” A strong relational bond was formed between these two. Paul was intentional about his close relationship with Timothy, teaching him and empowering him with opportunities to serve and expand the kingdom of God.

In fact, Paul had tremendous faith and trust in this young man. “For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church” (*1 Corinthians 4:17*). Paul built up his prodigy and then sent him out to do great things for God. We can clearly see here the need for young people to have additional teachers and mentors outside of their immediate family. After all, as the old African proverb goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Paul desired to build a culture of mentorship within the church, something which he himself modeled and instructed others to do as well.

In the book of *Titus*, Paul wrote to another of his mentees, penning these words: “...older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed. Likewise, exhort the young men to be sober-minded, in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having

nothing evil to say of you” (*Titus 2:2-8*). Paul was instructing the older men and women of the church to not only be responsible for their own behaviors but to be sure to train up the next generation of believers in a like manner. The church is meant to be a training ground for children and young adults to grow in Christ. As the Psalmist writes, “One generation shall praise your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (*Psalms 145:4*).

Peter wrote in *1 Peter 5:1-2*, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you...” As members of a community of faith, the entire church is called upon to mentor and compassionately instruct boys and girls, young men and women, as they grow as Christians. We all have a part to play in the cultivation of the next generation’s worldview.

We can see such mentorship all throughout the Bible: Eli ministered to the young boy Samuel within the temple, teaching him about the voice of God (*1 Samuel 2:11; 1 Samuel 3*); Naomi mentored her bereaved daughter-in-law, Ruth, and taught her all about the true God of heaven and earth (*Ruth 1:15-19*); Mordechai comforted and empowered his cousin Esther, encouraging her to fulfill the plan God had put before her (*Esther 4*); and the married couple Priscilla and Aquila took in the young preacher Apollos and taught him new truths about Christ (*Acts 18:24-26*). When you begin looking for them, you will be surprised what young people God may put into your path.

Conclusion

The development of a Biblical worldview does not happen overnight or without thought or intentionality: it takes parents committed to teaching and growing their children after God’s own heart. As *Proverbs 22:6* says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” If you truly wish to see your son or daughter grow into a mature, strong person of faith, begin that process today.

Parents always have been and will continue to be the greatest impactors upon a child's faith. The previously mentioned study conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute has debunked the common misconception in today's cultural climate that parents have less and less influence upon their children.¹⁵ This idea simply is not true. In spite of the allures of culture, parents still hold the strongest sway over the worldview of their children.

The influence of a parent can never be underestimated. Your children are always watching and listening, ready to be influenced and molded by you, the parents. By recognizing where your child is in his or her developmental growth, you can engage with him or her in ways that best teach about Christ. Here we have begun to outline ways that you can do this—reading, applying, and memorizing Scripture; singing praise songs and psalms together; and appreciating and finding God's creative power in nature, among others. In the next two articles we will discuss more practical ways and methods you can implement in your home to grow your child in God.

Notes

- ¹ Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Napa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 244.
- ² Dustin McClure, "Helping Kids Keep the Faith," Fuller Youth Institute, accessed March 28, 2019, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/helping-kids-keep-the-faith>.
- ³ James Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 55.
- ⁴ Barna Group, Ltd., "Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years," March 9, 2009 <https://www.barna.com/research/barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years/>.
- ⁵ Unless otherwise noted all Bible quotes are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV).
- ⁶ Saul McLeod, "Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development," Simply Psychology, accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html#stages>.
- ⁷ Ruthie Jacobsen, *Putting Their Hands in His* (Pittsburgh, PA: Autumn House, 2001), 63.
- ⁸ Ellen White, *Youth's Instructor* (Sept. 8, 1898).
- ⁹ George Barna, "Americans Worried About Children," June 28, 2017. <http://www.georgebarna.com/research-flow/2017/6/28/americans-worried-about-children>.
- ¹⁰ Open Education Sociology Dictionary, accessed March 28, 2019. <https://sociologydictionary.org/microculture/>
- ¹¹ See these examples: Damon Verial, "The Effects of Environment on a Child's Behavior," accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.livestrong.com/article/122830-effects-environment-children-behavior/>; and <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Effects-of-the-Environment-on-Children-FKJBTZUATJ>
- ¹² Ellen White, *Review and Herald* (Silver Spring, MD: Pacific Press, 2002).
- ¹³ Joseph Kidder and David Penno, "A Christian Perspective on Watching Secular TV Programming," Healthy Families for Eternity (Silver Spring, MD: North American Division Corporation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church), 61-62.
- ¹⁴ Ellen White, *SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 7* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 918.
- ¹⁵ Dustin McClure, "Helping Kids Keep the Faith."