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Chapter One

Building a Strong Spiritual Foundation for Your Child

*D*uring my childhood our family built a home. It was exciting driving out each day to see what had been accomplished since the day before. Construction still fascinates me. It amazes me how buildings start from just ideas and then end up as remarkable structures. I enjoy watching the planners, architects, and builders work together to accomplish their goal. Each one is important to the construction process. To me this is art in motion, from the initial design to the completed structure.

God has given us the awesome blessing and responsibility of helping Him build the lives of our children. This is the greatest construction of all. If we are going to build a strong spiritual foundation in a child's life, we will first need to know God's plan, His blueprint. Next, we begin by laying a solid foundation. We would never consider living in a house that had no foundation or a weak one. The first storm that came along would wipe it out. Neither would we knowingly buy a house from a builder who had hurried the construction or used materials of poor quality.

Have you ever taken a tour of a movie production lot? Did you see the beautifully constructed houses with perfectly manicured lawns? You probably were shown that these structures are not houses at all. They are only facades. They are built to give the appearance of houses, but in fact they are just props. They have no backs, insides, plumbing, or foundations. They are fake houses.

Do you see the lesson here? Children who are taught to act or talk like Christians without actually becoming Christians are not Christians. Children can give the appearance of being Christians because they have learned all the right information. However, that does not make them Christians. What is built on the inside is more important than what can be seen from the outside. The spiritual foundation we lay for a child's life is what the Holy Spirit will use when the child begins to become a Christian. It is the foundation on which he will build his whole Christian life.

In Jesus' day some men gave the appearance of belonging to God, but He saw right through them and called them "hypocrites." Help your child see the difference between knowing about Jesus and actually following Jesus. You not only want your child to know the definition of sin, but you also want him to truly repent of his sin. Help your child have a strong and personal faith in Christ by building a solid Christian foundation.

Good building blocks will help you build a solid spiritual foundation in your child's life. They are the greatest gifts you can give a child. Building a strong spiritual foundation for your child will prepare his heart for the Holy Spirit's conviction and leading. It will protect him from enemy arrows (fear, confusion, false teachings, temptation, pride, etc.). It will help him become a solid Christian.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A CHILD'S FAITH

A Godly Home

Whether your home has two parents, a single parent, or a blended family, you can have a Christian home, but it takes work. It takes work even when both parents are Christians. There

are no shortcuts. Why? Parenting is hard work. Furthermore, Satan attacks parents, and he attacks children. But there is good news. God wants us to have healthy family relationships, strong marriages, and obedient children, which equal happy homes. However, this is not possible unless we invite God to be in charge of our families. When the presence of God is evident in parents' lives, their children are drawn to follow Christ with their lives. Christians who live faithful, obedient, joyful, disciplined, and godly lives affect those with whom they come in contact. Our impact as Christian parents is even more powerful. God wants parents to be the most influential shapers of their children's spiritual lives.

The characteristics that we possess influence what characteristics our children will possess. Our personalities help form their personalities. Our outlook and attitude shape theirs. Whether or not parents are Christians, they influence their children's spiritual lives. If you take the approach of leaving it up to the church to develop your children's spiritual life, you are making a gigantic mistake.

However, the church can and should come alongside the family. God has used many wonderful church leaders who teach children in Sunday school, vacation Bible school, church camp, Christian school, and other settings and who influence the lives of children in a tremendous way. These people are a parent's spiritual teammates. Parents should express heartfelt appreciation to those who affect their children for Christ.

Leading childhood educators and psychologists have told us for many years that a child's adult personality is about 90 percent complete by the age of five. This is another reason we should start a child's spiritual training from the time he or she is born. Spiritual training is not just sitting down with your child each week or each night to discuss the things of God. Having scheduled times for Bible stories, devotions, and discussion is very important. But a godly home is more than that. A godly home has an atmosphere. It has an attitude. It has purpose.

What is a godly home? A godly home begins with each par-

ent being a committed Christian. The parents must also be committed to their marriage. All other family relationships are built from this most important relationship. Children watch the relationship between their parents and use it as a measuring stick for other relationships. Through their parents' example, children learn trust, patience, forgiveness, unselfishness, dependence, commitment, and love. By watching their parents' love for each other and for God, children learn about God. Marriage demonstrates to the children whether or not we really mean what we say about God.

Do not make the mistake that many couples make when they have children. They elevate the role of parent higher than that of spouse. This creates a home that is off-balance and will be greatly challenged when problems and stresses from life come along. God's Word teaches that a Christian home is made up of two godly parents involved in raising their children. The husband/father has specific duties, and so does the wife/mother. When these roles are ignored, overlooked, forgotten, or neglected, then chaos occurs.

If you are a single parent or a parent married to a nonbeliever, then you may at times feel very much alone. But you can be assured that God is with you and will use your influence in your children's lives even when you do not have anyone else supporting your efforts. It is also important, when you do not have a Christian partner at home, to build a team of Christian supporters around you and your children—church leaders, teachers, coaches, and relatives, to name a few. Ask them to be spiritual helpers, guides, advisers, and encouragers to you and your children.

The type of home a person has during childhood affects him for the rest of his life. Here is an example of how the present Sunday school attendance of parents influences the future Sunday school attendance of their children. Research shows that

- When *both parents* attend Sunday school, 72 percent of the children attend Sunday school when grown.

- When *only the father* attends Sunday school, 55 percent of the children attend when grown.
- When *only the mother* attends Sunday school, 15 percent of the children attend when grown.
- When *neither parent* attends Sunday school, only 6 percent of the children attend when grown.¹

Meaningful Relationships

Jesus taught us about relationships. Not only did He teach us that our relationship with God was supreme, but He also taught us that our relationships with others are very important. One way Christians should show the world the difference Christ makes in their lives is through their relationships with others. Christians are honest. Christians are servants. Christians forgive. Christians apologize. Christians give instead of taking. Christians speak the truth in love. Christians build others up instead of tearing them down. Christians love people.

Children are born self-centered and must be taught to share, consider others' feelings, work together, make friends, keep friends, and get along with others. How do they learn about relationships? They watch our relationships. They watch the way we treat our own parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, colleagues, employers, employees, the elderly, the wealthy, the less fortunate, and even strangers.

Families in general are so busy that they don't make time to make friends. Children too are so busy that they do not spend time developing friendships as they should. Friendships take time. And often children do not know how to make them. Give your children lessons in making friends by having people in your home. Invite relatives, neighbors, and friends from church to your home.

Not only do children learn about God by watching our Christianity through our relationships; they are also influenced by our behavior in everyday life situations. They listen to us when we get upset in traffic, they watch our actions at Little

League games and sporting events, and they see what we watch on TV. We can tell our children about Jesus, but the old saying is still true: “Actions speak louder than words.”

Good Habits

When we help children develop good habits, we shape their personality, character, and behavior. Children who are taught good habits (and who observe them) are more likely to be teachable in general. Children who are submissive to parental authority find it easier to submit to God’s authority. Children who are not raised to be submissive to parental authority will find it tougher to submit to other authorities in their lives such as teachers, pastors, employers, and even God.

Teaching children good habits is an important part of disciplining them. So we teach them to brush their teeth, do chores, do homework, exercise, read, straighten their rooms, show respect to parents and other adults through speech and actions, write thank-you notes, read the Bible, etc. Discipline teaches children to be good decision makers. Discipline teaches children to be under control instead of being out of control. Disciplined children are better time managers and better money managers. Disciplined children are stronger than other children when faced with a temptation. Children who are disciplined are stronger, happier, better adjusted, better leaders, and better achievers. Disciplined athletes win championships. Disciplined children win at life.

Deciding to raise disciplined children means that you as the adult must also be disciplined. You cannot expect to raise children who are disciplined if you are not disciplined. If you have bad habits in your life, there is a greater chance that your children will have those bad habits too.

Let your children see that you too are striving to be better disciplined. Let them see your victories and failures. Strive for excellence but allow for failure. Teach your children how to handle failure. Failure can be defeating if we do not know how to handle it. If you are too rigid, then your children will not experience

grace, and you will raise legalistic children, not disciplined children.

Raising disciplined children does not mean taking away their personalities. Neither does it mean taking away their joy. We do not want our children to become robots. Society sometimes defines a disciplined life as a life with too many restraints and not enough fun. A rigid, legalistic approach to discipline can leave that impression with our children. A disciplined home should also be a fun home with plenty of room for each child's God-given personality and talents to be appreciated, developed, and enjoyed.

However, a child raised with no discipline finds it difficult adjusting to the real adult world of responsibility. To live a disciplined life is to live a balanced life. Living a disciplined life means getting one's life in order by setting priorities and striving to reach them. Children who are disciplined are more sensitive and appreciative of values. They also tend to weigh the consequences of their actions, good and bad, therefore making better decisions.

Becoming a Christian involves choosing Christian values, decision making, living a balanced life, and striving for excellence. It also teaches us about how to deal with failure. None of us can ever be good enough to be a Christian, but once we say "yes" to God's authority in our lives, He begins to shape us and we begin to develop habits in our lives that bring ultimate joy. Becoming a Christian is about freedom, not bondage. It is about living life to the fullest, not just constant sacrifice. Give your children a head start toward being sensitive to the Holy Spirit by teaching them to be sensitive to your authority. Lead your children to be disciplined. Teach them good habits.

Paul Lewis, formerly the editor of *Dads Only* magazine, wrote that the two greatest gifts to give your children are "good habits and good memories."

A Positive Attitude About Life and God

Chuck Swindoll wrote this about attitude:

Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it.

I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress. It alone fuels my fire or assaults my hope. When my attitudes are right, there's no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me.²

Christians are not losers; they are not defeated. Therefore, they should not have defeated or negative attitudes. Christians are victorious and should have winning attitudes. Avoid worrying. Stop being critical of everything and everyone. Quit wasting your precious energy on things that are not productive. Be positive about life and what God is doing in your life. Teach your children to be positive, constructive, and victorious. Christians who whine, complain, judge, fight, and criticize are not very attractive to the world. They are not very appealing to children either. Show your children that Christians really can and do have more fun. Make sure that your children see you smile and hear you laugh every day.

Godly Role Models and Heroes

Good heroes will add character and quality to your children's lives. But good heroes can sometimes be hard to find. Where can a parent go to find positive heroes for his or her children?

God uses the lives of godly men and women to affect the lives of others, especially children. God's people should have a natural attractiveness. Because of the positive characteristics demonstrated in Christians' lives, others around them are drawn to seek God. The world is looking for good moral role models.

Who are your children's heroes? Who are your heroes? Do they point children to God, or do they point them to the world, away from God?

Children do not know the differences between a hero and an idol. An idol is an image (something or someone) that man (Hollywood, television, sports, movies, etc.) has created to worship. It is fake. A hero is someone we admire for the qualities that are evident in his life. A hero is real. Children are so easily influenced that they are often deceived. They tend to get caught up in idol worship due to the hype often associated with it. Children need us to help them select good heroes, mentors, and examples for their lives.

It is difficult for children (and adults for that matter) to resist the media hype that is pushed on them. Millions of dollars are spent in convincing children to choose certain images, toys, games, products, movie stars, and athletes in order to be considered valuable or cool by their peers. Wise parents help guide their children away from this pressure. Wise parents expose their children to good men and women who will add value to their lives. These heroes are sometimes hard to find, but they do exist. By helping your children choose the right Christian examples, you are helping them see the difference that Christ makes in people's lives. You are giving them spiritual direction.

Remember, Christians are not perfect, and neither are your children's heroes. Even heroes fail from time to time. This is disappointing to children when it happens. When it does, use it to show your children that none of us is perfect. We all need Christ as our master, no matter who we are or how famous we are.

Open Communication

Developing open communication with your children means that you will have to spend time with them. Are you too busy to talk to your children? Do they ask questions at the most inconvenient times? Do you tell them "just a minute" and then forget to check back to see what their questions were? Do they ask questions that you cannot answer? Do they ask so many questions at

once that you get tired of hearing them?

Sometimes the only time children can get their parents' *undivided* attention is when they ask their parents questions about God. Encourage your children to discuss their feelings with you and to ask questions. Talk about lots of topics. Respond to your children when they ask questions. Take advantage of times when your children are in a talking mood. Teach them the value of talking. Use the precious time you have to get to know your children and develop open lines of communication. Parents should spend at least fifteen minutes each day talking with each of their children. Teachers should periodically call their students just to talk.

How well do you know your children? The more time you spend talking with them, the better you will know your children and the better they will know you. Good communication skills help you and your children learn how to discuss problems, ask questions, correct misunderstandings, become more sensitive to others, listen, interpret body language, and express yourselves. Communication skills are such a help when you are trying to understand how (or if) God is working in your children's lives. Good communication is the first step toward building trust.

All of us, not just children, have questions about the things of God. And that is not wrong. Our questions can be His magnet for greater discoveries about Him. It is very important that you create an atmosphere with your children in which questions are invited, not avoided.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN A CHILD'S FAITH

The church should not be a substitute for the parents' role as the spiritual leaders in their children's lives. However, the Bible tells us that we are to faithfully assemble together as a body of believers. We are to participate in worship and Bible teaching.

As Christians we each have different spiritual gifts, and we each make up a part of the body of Christ. We need each other. We are taught to minister to others and encourage one another. We meet to learn, grow, pray, confess, share, give, sing, praise,

and so forth. We don't just *go* to church. We *are* the church. We need to assemble each week in order to keep our focus as a body of believers. When we do not meet regularly, we become disjointed and weak. Faithful church attendance is important to your spiritual health and that of your children.

Do you hate it when you hear your children use the “b” word? Me too. I hate it when I hear children say that their experience at church or Sunday school was “boring.” Church should be the highlight of the week for you and your children. One of the worst influences on your child is to attend a spiritually dead church. If the church you attend is spiritually dead, pray about moving. Find one that is alive in its worship and Bible study. Look for a church that has children's activities that are fun, productive, and spiritually alive.

The term “fun” is not to indicate that children will always love going to church or want to do what they are taught. The focus is on a healthy church, one that realizes the importance of a children's ministry and seeks to improve how it teaches and ministers to children. “Fun” does not mean that a church must have a carnival atmosphere. The Bible contains the most interesting, intriguing, life-changing stories of any book. If we really want to reach children with the gospel, then we should evaluate our methods and seek ways to improve our teaching. A fun Sunday school class is one that is Bible centered, uses a variety of learning styles (hands-on activities, not just lecture), chooses curriculum that is age-appropriate, and is led by enthusiastic adults who love the Lord and children. Fun classrooms use music and games for learning. Fun classrooms allow children to ask questions. Fun classrooms have teachers who smile and laugh and hug. Fun classrooms are classrooms that make children say, “I can't wait until next Sunday.”

You can help your child have a positive experience at church. Personally get involved in your children's activities at church. Just think how much more open your children will be to spiritual things when they are excited about attending and seeing you excited too. But be aware. The Enemy will do everything he can to

keep you and your children from finding and attending a good church.

I thank God for dedicated men and women who love children and teach them about Jesus. Many boys and girls would not be part of God's family if it were not for the wonderful teachers who have touched their lives. If you teach children about Jesus, I thank you. You have a special place in my heart. You probably do not receive the public recognition that you deserve, though you are not doing what you do for recognition. You are about the King's business. On behalf of every parent and pastor let me say, "You are one of the most important parts in the body of Christ." Teach others how to do what you do, and don't ever lose your passion for reaching children for Christ.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Sid Woodruff, *Drawing Men to God*, from Robert and Debra Bruce, *Becoming Spiritual Soulmates with Your Child* (Broadman & Holman, 1996), 52.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip* (Nashville: Word, 1982). All rights reserved. Used by permission of Insight for Living, Anaheim, California 92806.