

Sheltering Our Children and Other Parenting Issues

edited from an article entitled Solving the Crisis in Homeschooling by Reb Bradley, husband of Beverly, father of six, pastor of Hope Chapel, Sheridan, CA www.familyministries.com

In the last couple of years, I have heard from multitudes of troubled homeschool parents around the country, a good many of whom were leaders. These parents have graduated their first batch of kids, only to discover that their children didn't turn out the way they thought they would. Many of these children were model homeschoolers while growing up, but sometime after their 18th birthday they began to reveal that they didn't hold to their parents' values.

Some of these young people grew up and left home in defiance of their parents. Others got married against their parents' wishes, and still others got involved with drugs, alcohol, and immorality. I have even heard of several exemplary young men who no longer even believe in God. My own adult children have gone through struggles I never guessed they would have faced.

Most of these parents remain stunned by their children's choices, because they were fully confident their approach to parenting was going to prevent any such rebellion. Some were especially confident, because as teens these kids were only obedient. Needless to say, the dreams of these homeschool parents have crashed, and many other parents want to know what they can do to prevent their own children from following the same course. When my three married children were young, *I was overly-confident in my approach to parenting*. I was convinced that my children would grow up godly, and that they would avoid significant struggles with sin because of my parenting. I was absolutely certain that since I was training them *"in the way they should go,"* and I was doing most everything I had written in my book, I would be a success as a parent. However, I had yet to discover it wasn't all about ME and MY success. In fact, I had yet to learn that the parent who thinks it's all about THEIR success is often contributing to their children's struggles.

As each of my three oldest children reached adulthood I was shocked to discover that they did not conform exactly to the values I had sought to give them. They had retained much of what I had given, but not everything. Instead of being perfect

reflections of my training, they each turned out to be individuals who had their own values and opinions. I had wrongly thought them to be exactly like wet clay, me being the potter with total control over what they would become. I was not prepared for their individuality, nor was I ready to see them as fleshly beings. As I watched them each face off with the Lord and have their own struggles with the flesh, like I had when I was their age, my homeschool dreams crashed royally.

After several years of examining what went wrong in our own home and in the homes of so many conscientious parents, ***God has opened our eyes to a number of critical blind spots common to homeschoolers and other family-minded people.***

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

1. Self-centered dreams

I have observed that it is easy for conscientious parents to become "dream" oriented. The reason that our dreams for our children are so vulnerable to crashing is because they are our dreams, but they involve our children. *Our dreams*, when you think about it, are not just for them, but also for us. As homeschool parents we make great sacrifices and invest a great deal to influence how our children turn out. The problem is that love for children can be lost in love for personal success as a parent. *Our concern for ourselves ends up overshadowing our love for our children.*

2. Family as an idol

We dream for results, but preoccupation with results can turn the family into a measurement of success. For those who feel successful, family becomes a badge of honor or trophy to be admired by others or God. When we allow the success of our family to determine our security or sense of wellbeing we are seeking from it something God intends us to receive from Him. I am describing idolatry. If parents are not careful, family can easily become an idol.

3. Emphasis on outward form

Preoccupation with results often leads to emphasis on outward form. When we are preoccupied with achieving results it is natural to admire the results others seem to have achieved with their children. Parents are destined for disappointment when they admire fruit in others and seek to emulate merely that expression of fruit in their own children. *Fruit is born from the inside—not applied to the outside.*

In the homeschool community I have observed that there can be a great emphasis on outward appearance, whether it is dressing for excellence, modesty, grooming, respectful manners, music style, or an attitude of sober reverence in worship. Some even take their children down a country path of humble fashions, raising food, and making bread. Nothing is wrong with any of these things, but we must be careful—we can model for our children outward changes and easily fall into molding their behavior and/or appearance, *while missing their hearts*. In some circles emphasis on the outward is epidemic.

4. Tendency to judge

One of the side effects of focusing on keeping the outside of the cup clean is that it becomes easy to judge others by our personal standards. You see, in setting standards for our family, each of us must work through a process of evaluation and analysis to decide what is safe, wise, or permissible. Once we become convinced of our personal standards, not uncommonly, it follows that we believe they should apply to others as well.

5. Over-dependence on authority and control

When we are preoccupied with outward form our focus tends to become shallow and behavior oriented. We look upon our children as if they are roses that can be trained to grow a certain direction by constant pruning and binding. Subsequently, we rely heavily upon our authority in an attempt to bring our children under our total control. We assume if we give them the Word of God, shelter them from harmful influences, discipline them consistently, and maintain high standards for their outside, that their inside will inevitably be shaped.

No amount of parental control or restriction will guarantee that a child will turn out exactly as directed. Obviously, our training increases the likelihood our children will cling to the faith when they reach maturity, or turn back to Christ if they do enter a season of rebellion, but our training does not guarantee the desired outcome.

Proverbs 22:6 simply says that diligent training will bear lasting fruit in our children's lives. They may follow Christ unwaveringly from childhood into old age, or they may reach adulthood like the prodigal son and make wrong choices for a season before repenting. It is also possible that they may stay at home submissively like the prodigal's older brother, yet inside be a prodigal with a heart full of self-righteousness and bitterness. (This particular scenario is less embarrassing for a parent, but still

reveals the potential for sinful choices in an adult child.) In all honesty, it is also a remote possibility that a prodigal may stay in rebellion and never return to Christ.

6. Over-reliance upon sheltering

An over-dependence on control in a family is often accompanied by an over-reliance on sheltering of children. It is not uncommon for parents to feel that since they filter whatever their children see and hear, they will control the results in their lives. That was me for many years. I remember saying to people, "I am controlling the influences in my children's lives, so I am going to control the outcome." I was absolutely certain that my children would be exempted from significant temptation and from developing particular bad habits because I was controlling what touched their lives.

My children could not play with most children in the neighborhood and were even kept away from some children in "like-minded" families. They were sheltered from secular publications, let alone any Christian books or magazines that promoted values that didn't match our own. Youth groups or Scouting were unheard of. Santa Claus, Halloween, and Harvest parties, as well as Superheroes and Barbies, were anathema. I hardly wanted them to go into Wal-Mart or grocery stores lest they be exposed to images of immodestly dressed women. I wanted to be absolutely certain my children were protected from any corrupting influences. Little did I know that it would take a lot more than my great emphasis on sheltering to achieve the results I desired.

Protecting from temptations and corrupting influences is part of raising children. Every parent shelters to one degree or another. We all set standards for diet, for relationships, for reading and entertainment. All parents shelter—they just draw their lines in different places. Protecting our children is not only a natural response of paternal love, but fulfills the commands of God. Just as our Father in heaven will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor 10:13), we rightly keep our children out of situations they will lack the moral strength to handle. Young children are weak and we are to protect the weak (1 Thes 5:12).

1. We are imbalanced when sheltering from harm is the predominant expression of our parenting.

Are we more concerned with protecting our kids from that which is bad or *with putting into them that which is good*? I want to ask that again: Are we

more concerned with protecting our kids from that which is bad or *with putting into them that which is good*? Consider that rearing children is like creating a family menu. If we keep them away from all junk food and feed them only prunes, their bodies will respond negatively. Protection from too much junk food is obviously a good idea, but their bodies need balanced nutrition. Physical health is achieved by both avoiding what is harmful and taking in a balance of what is good. To raise spiritually and morally healthy children we need to do the same. We must certainly protect them from harmful influences, but more than that, we must give them that which strengthens them spiritually and morally.

Please note that the operative word in my assessment is *passion*. Our children learn what's important to us not by what we verbally emphasize, but by what they see us passionate about. It is the intensity of our reaction to potential corruption that elevates to our children our priorities. If they see a greater intensity in us for their sheltering than they do for their equipping, we shouldn't be surprised if they come to view Christianity negatively as a "religion of avoidance." (In fact, our intensity may actually create a mystique and raise curiosity toward that which is forbidden.)

After watching multitudes of highly sheltered children grow up and chase after the very things from which their parents sought to keep them, and seeing less-sheltered children grow up and walk strong, I am more selective about which hill I want to die on. I now pick my battles more carefully. I have concluded that fruitful parenting is more about what we *put into* our children than what we protect them from.

2. Sheltering is a critical part of parenting, but if parents keep it their primary focus, the children will grow up ill equipped to handle the temptations in the world.

When we enter the world as infants we arrive with immune systems still in development. Because we have had no contact with germs or disease while in the womb, our bodies need to come in contact with them, so that we can develop immunities. Babies who are isolated and kept in germfree environments fail to develop sufficient resistance, so succumb more easily to diseases when they grow older and encounter them. Medical inoculations only succeed because God has designed the body with the capacity to develop antibodies against disease. A child isolated from disease may appear to be of the greatest health to

his parents, but the health of the human body is only proven by how it withstands an attack. A weak constitution succumbs to every germ and virus—a strong one fights them off. Our spiritual and moral health is developed and proved in the same way. If we isolate our kids from the world until they are adults they may appear to us to be spiritually minded and strong in character. However, it is how they ultimately engage the world that proves their spiritual resilience. This is because *sheltering does not transform the human heart*—it merely preserves it, temporarily. Sheltering is nothing more than keeping something flammable away from a fire.

Many sincere Christians return from retreats and church camps the same way. Over several days they are isolated from the world, surrounded with fellowship, and saturated with the Word of God. They come home feeling deeply spiritual. However, within a few days after returning they discover their "mountain top high" has faded away. So also, the spirituality our sheltered children achieve may only be spiritual fluff. If we want to prepare them to thrive in the world *we must take them into it and teach them how to engage it*. As part of that preparation I have several recommendations:

A. Take time to teach them about God and living in His kingdom. I emphasize this particularly for dads who are careful to shelter, but rarely get around to actually instructing their children in the faith. Too many fathers are quick to forbid all TV and youth groups, but never take the time to sit down and acquaint their children with the Word and how it points us to God. Preparing children to face the world requires more than keeping them away from its corruption—*parents must put into them Truth that will draw them to God*. It is those children who have found God irresistible who will be faithful to Him.

It is important at this point to emphasize that true Christianity is not merely a system of religious beliefs that can be embraced or forsaken—it is a relationship between individuals and a holy God. Therefore, Christians are not strengthened simply by massive doses of indoctrination. Our faith is strengthened as we discover God in the Word, and as we walk with Him we find Him to be trustworthy. If we want our children to remain faithful to God we must do all we can *to lead them to Him*, not just to a "system of faith."

Keep in mind that Bible instruction by itself is not some magic ingredient in a "parenting formula." Many homeschool prodigals were heavily groomed

in the Scriptures. We do best when we faithfully use the Scriptures to reveal to children the Lord himself. Remember Jesus' words in *John 5:39*, "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.*" It is faith in Christ that carries us—not faith merely in Christianity or a formula.

B. Pass on a pure faith. It has been said that faith is caught and not taught, and I would agree. As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, I have seen young married people *who grew up in the public schools*, but who walked in purity and close to Christ through their teen years, and are still close to their parents. What their parents gave them was not the gift of extreme sheltering, but the gift of a sincere faith in Christ. Homeschool parents must give the same gift to their children (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 1:5). The problem is that we cannot give what we do not have. If we want to give our children a lasting and sincere faith in Christ, then we must first have it ourselves.

C. Expose them to the world a little at a time, so that they will not be overwhelmed by its attraction when they finally face it. Just as babies raised in germfree environments more easily contract diseases, so also do Christians who have not encountered the world.

D. Take them into the world on the offense, not defense. A major reason many parents choose to homeschool their children is that they are concerned about negative socialization in the classroom setting. They want control over when and how their children are faced with outside influences. When the children are confronted by the world the parents want to be there as guides. I understand this perspective, but such a view is inadequate. I want to be with my children when they encounter the world, but not merely so that they will survive it. Survival has to do with self-preservation, and is concerned with self, not others. Like a good captain I want to be with my children, so that I can lead them offensively into battle. We and our children are warriors in God's kingdom, and we must take them into the world for the purpose of advancing that kingdom. Jesus modeled this when he first called his disciples—"*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*"

A major problem for us may be that we do not have what we need to give. We lack a kingdom view, so cannot give it to our kids. The sheltering mindset

common to homeschoolers sometimes creates inward-focused families. We get so used to cutting ourselves off from everything that might threaten us that we end up separating ourselves not just from the world, but even from most Christians. God's goal for us is not that we raise strong family-minded children who grow up and meet other strong family-minded children, who then marry and raise more strong family-minded children, who grow up and do the same. That line of thinking is totally self-centered and renders God's people impotent as warriors for His kingdom. God's goal for all His warriors is to continually reach out to the lost in the world. That is why we are here.

I cannot spiritually impart a "kingdom view" to you, but God can. I therefore admonish all readers to beseech God that the eyes of their hearts be opened, that they would see the world through kingdom eyes.

E. Cultivate a loving relationship with them, which will allow you to speak Truth into their lives and influence their values. It has been my observation that in "control-oriented" homes, relationships between parents and teens are often weakest. For us to have influence over our teen's hearts, especially when they are engaging the world, our love relationships with them must be strong.

In the Bible we see that people obeyed God for two reasons—fear and love. King David sang of his love for God (Ps 18:1; 116:1; 119:159) and he also sang of the fear of God (Ps 2:11; 22:25; 33:8). God wants His followers to be drawn to Him out of love (Jer 31:3), and that's why *it is His kindness that leads us to repentance* (Rom 2:4). But He also wants us to be kept on the path by fear of His authority (Luke 12:5; 1 Pet 2:17). That's why He told the Israelites **He wanted both their fear and their love**; "*And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul*" (Deut 10:12). With our children, it should be the same.

If our children grow up motivated only by fear of consequence, they will eventually get away with what they can whenever we are not around (Eph 6:6). If we have their hearts they will seek to honor us whether we are present or not, and their hearts will remain open to our influence. I refer you to the apostle Paul who modeled this approach to leadership perfectly, "*Therefore, although in Christ I*

could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love..." (Phile 1:8-9a).

As intensely sheltered children grow into adolescence, and become aware of the different standards between families, some are attracted to others' standards. They do not understand why the clothes you forbid them to wear, are worn by other Christians. They may not be able to grasp why you do not allow movies that many of their friends are permitted to see. If your relationship with your children is strong and based in love, they will honor your standards, and try to grasp your reasoning. But if their heart connection to you is weak, they will care little of your reasoning and look more to their friends for relationship and identity.

F. Help them find security in their relationship with you. I believe that a primary reason we can over-rely on sheltering is because it is the easiest part of parenting to do. It requires no planning, little preparation, or expenditure of energy. It takes minimal immediate brainpower. We simply assess something might be harmful and say to our children, "NO." It's an aspect of parenting that is effortless to do, yet seems to promise an extreme impact. I don't know if I would go so far as to call it lazy parenting, but I will say that investing into our children does take a lot more work and much more time.

Before we leave this topic, we must consider the possibility that we are drawn to an over-dependence on sheltering because it appeals to the Pharisee in us. Maintaining a righteous appearance and avoiding uncleanness characterized the most religious people of Christ's day, and he didn't tolerate it (Luke 7:39-47; 15:2; Mark 7:15; Mat 15:17-20). Avoiding anything that seemed to defile made them feel "holy" and it does the same for us. The more we fixate on keeping our families away from corruption the prouder we can become of our higher standards. It may even get to the place that we can't wait for opportunities to boast or "share" with others the standards we hold. Pride is a dangerous sin because it blinds us to itself—it is the filter through which we see. Spiritual pride is even more dangerous because it involves what we think is righteousness (Luke 18:11-12). May God open our eyes that we might see why we are so prone to imbalance in this area.

Lest this article be taken wrong, and some readers misinterpret my intentions, I want to emphasize that I am still a strong proponent of sheltering our

children. My goal has been to alert parents to the problem of *over-reliance* on sheltering.

G. Formulaic parenting breaks down relationship.

An over-dependence on authority and control, along with an over-reliance upon sheltering are often part of a "formulaic" approach to parenting. We, as homeschool parents, are committed to achieving results with our children so we look for and rely upon formulas and self-working principles to insure our success. One of the reasons we go to homeschooling conventions and read numerous books is to learn the guaranteed "*how to's*" and *steps from the successful veterans*. Our desire for results with our family compels us to discover all the ingredients in the ultimate "family-life recipe."

Formulas for success after all, have become the American way—impatience and love of expedience characterize our outlook on life. The process doesn't need to be quick or simple, but it must be reliable, and it certainly must be biblical. To our delight, we know the Bible is full of the wisdom and promises of God. We therefore look to it for its self-working principles and promised methods.

Yes, it seems that everyone in the church these days wants to find the biblical formulas for success, but there's a problem with trusting in formulas—we are directed, no, *commanded to trust in God—not in formulas* (John 14:1; Ps 37:5; 62:8). There is a monumental difference.

I have seen parents who take great pride in how their adult children turned out, and they are more than willing to tell others the steps they took to get them that way: no TV, no videos, no video games, no dating, no bad music, no youth group, no institutional church, no neighborhood friends; they homeschooled, dressed modestly, groomed conservatively, memorized the Scriptures, and baked their own bread. Hmmm...

Anyone who really understands the grace of the gospel knows that we cannot take personal credit for any spiritual accomplishments. We are totally God's workmanship (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13; 1:6) and everything good in our lives is a gift from Him (James 1:17). We can do absolutely nothing by ourselves for which we can take credit (Eph 2:8-9; Gal 6:14; Rom 4:2; 1 Cor 1:28-31; 2 Cor 11:30). So many of us lean toward a formulaic mentality, because our fallen natures are drawn toward self-reliance. We want to feel that by our own efforts (works) we have achieved something that will make

us acceptable to God—by nature we are legalistic. (The reason that “human effort” forms the basis for all false religions of the world is, because our fallen natures strive toward “high self-esteem” through self-effort. *In contrast, grace gives credit to God for all that is good.*)

In the church is it possible that we are trying to gain spiritual results by fleshly means? Yes, biblical principles of discipline, when used by believers or unbelievers, will help develop good behavior in children, but good behavior is only skin-deep. Fruitful parenting is about affecting our children’s hearts, not just their behavior. To influence their hearts, it won’t be by our control—the heart belongs to the individual and *must be touched by God.*

I have observed that the best and most lasting fruit is born in families in which the gospel is genuinely believed and lived. Parents who daily depend upon God, and not their methods and self-working principles, are most likely to pass on their faith. I am convinced that the most contagious parenting is living a heartfelt faith before our children and staying on our knees in prayer for their souls, that God will convict them of their sin and they will see the beauty of Christ and receive Him, and follow Him alone.

Seeing Jesus

Jesus was the greatest preacher of holiness the world has ever known, yet he attracted to himself common sinners and the dregs of society. Jesus had high standards—he was the epitome of righteousness and purity, but somehow he was incredibly attractive. He exposed sin, but he accepted sinners. He hated evil, but evildoers saw in him a wealth of mercy. Jewish society was intimidated by the standards of the Pharisees, but few were drawn to their religion of avoidance, control, and form. Is it possible that when our children look at us they see more of the Pharisees in us than Jesus? Might it be that the Jesus we represent to our children is not the real Jesus at all?

The best thing we can do to break away from a formulaic mentality and become a person of influence is to really grasp *the grace of the gospel and live it out in our homes.* For our children to see the beauty of the Savior in us we will need to find His beauty first. If we are not yet smitten with Him, why do we think our children will be?

Loving Him isn’t about our children—it is about HIM! God intends that the side effect of loving Jesus,

and enjoying the grace of the gospel, will be that all people, including our children, will be touched by the Savior in us. I pray in Jesus name that as you read these words you will experience the grace of God in a fresh and new way. *Cry out for it!* And may it rain down upon you with power from on high! May today be the day that you grasp the love of God and find in Him what you’ve been searching for all along.

AMEN!

PULL QUOTES

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