



A Faith That Sticks

BY DR. KARA POWELL

The packing list from the childbirth preparation class might have scared off other soon-to-be moms, but not me. I intended to follow every recommendation. ChapStick. Massage oil. Baby wipes. Movies to pass the time. And . . . tennis balls? Apparently, a tennis ball in a clean tube sock was a good massage tool during labor.

I guess I needed a clean tube sock, too.

Most of us start the parenting journey with anticipation and preparation. We're more proactive early on, planning for those first days and years of our kids' lives. But as the days fill with soccer practices and science tests, it's easy to become more reactive. Instead of planning ahead, we consider ourselves lucky if we survive the next few hours or days of our frenetic schedule.

Yes, we still look to the future—helping our kids plan for

their education and teaching them the life skills every adult needs. But these are often the only areas where we have any long-term goals. For many families, faith is more of an afterthought.

You've probably seen the headlines: Too many young people raised in church are leaving their faith after college. The team I work with at the Fuller Youth Institute has tried to determine why some kids seem better prepared to persist in the faith.

The Gospel is grace



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How come some parents are more successful at nurturing a long-term faith in their kids? Our research has shown that one of the key variables is how kids are raised to understand the Gospel.

Too many young people today live by what philosopher Dallas Willard calls the “gospel of sin management.” This truncates the Gospel to the belief that we have to adhere to a bunch of good behaviors in order to have a relationship with Jesus. When young people don’t live up to these behaviors, guilt causes them to think that the relationship itself is over. They end up running from God and the church just when they need both the most.

But grace is the heart of Christianity, and it needs to be the primary understanding of faith in our homes. Through the Incarnation, *God pursues us*, offering a gift of salvation that isn’t dependent upon our actions or our ability to clean ourselves up. It’s a gift we simply receive. And continue to receive every day.

Kids make mistakes. They’ll choose to sin. I frequently tell my children that Jesus is bigger than any mistake we can make. He can handle it all—all our little accidental mistakes, all our big intentional sins.

Grace doesn’t mean we live without boundaries. Kids need parents to clearly establish behavioral guidelines and then discipline them when they step across those lines. But we must strive for a way to sprinkle grace even into our discipline—perhaps especially in our discipline. Sometimes it’s the tone of voice we use when taking away privileges. Other times it’s how we empathize with a child’s frustration—the frustration he feels over a poor choice or (more likely) the frustration he feels with his parents for imposing discipline.

Kids also need to see their parents relying on the same grace that we want them to experience. If we want our homes to shine with a complete picture of grace, we as parents need to be quick to apologize. Confessing our mistakes to our kids not only builds closer family relationships, but it also helps our kids recognize everyone’s need for God’s tender mercies. Indeed, you’re more likely to have children repent if you have made “I’m sorry” a regular part of your vocabulary.

Grace vs. obedience

If the Gospel is grace, what is the role of obedience? Obedience is important, but it needs to be understood in context.

My favorite way to explain the full Gospel is through five words that start with the letter G. I have adopted this version (rooted in the teachings of the apostle Paul) because it’s a simple and memorable way to explain the heart of Christianity to kids:

Good—Humankind was created in God’s image, and God was pleased with His creation.

Guilt—Our sin, or our guilt, has separated us from God.

Grace—God couldn’t stand that separation, so God sent Jesus that we might have real life in the present and eternal life with God.

God’s people—We live in community, experiencing and advancing the Kingdom with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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Gratitude—We serve and obey not to make God like us more or love us more, but because we’re grateful for all God has done for us.

Helping faith stick

While grace represents the core of our theology, our research identified a number of other factors that are common among parents who raise kids with a lasting faith. Although there are no guarantees, the following principles can take some of the guesswork out of instilling faith in children:

“Sticky faith” parents . . .

. . . discuss their own faith journeys. They frequently share organically about their own faith journey, how it continues to impact and influence their life.

. . . give their kids space to wrestle with tough faith questions—and help them find resources that can provide answers. Doubt by itself isn’t toxic. Doubt becomes toxic when it goes unexpressed. Giving permission for independent thought leads to a stronger faith.

. . . connect their children to caring adults. Kids need to develop a strong personal identity for faith to stick, and community helps accomplish this. When kids know adults who are “on their team,” they have a web of support to catch them when they fall. What’s more, these adults are often able to speak to them in ways parents can’t.

. . . involve their kids in service. Kids must see that faith inspires action. Our research found that family service was a key builder of lasting faith. Sometimes the local church was the catalyst for this service. Other times, parents took the lead in making family service a priority.

. . . prepare teens for a future that includes faith. As part of practical discussions on issues such as managing money and time, wise parents help young people plan their schedule and life to include church.

Like any parenting priority, our children’s long-term spiritual growth stands a better chance of success if we think in advance about what is important—and how we can make time for those priorities. But while families that adopt certain practices tend to raise kids who have a lasting faith, there is no magic formula. Every child has a free will. Still, spiritual roots don’t grow deep by accident. God is the ultimate gardener, and He often works through parents to prepare the soil, remove creeping weeds and make sure kids have the spiritual nutrients they need to flourish.

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