

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

Excellent Parenting is Remarkably Ordinary

by Brad Hambrick

As a new parent, when you hold your first child in your arms, there is a swell of emotions. You are humbled by the responsibility to care for this child. You feel a surge of love and an intense instinct to protect. You feel compelled to get everything as right as possible as you raise this precious child. These emotions can stir together and create a sense of fear that we will mess up as parents.

Then we begin to hear stories from other parents: various opinions on discipline techniques or overarching parenting strategies, how hard the “terrible twos” are, horror stories about teenagers, and sad stories about how quickly this precious child will be leaving our home as an adult. It is easy to get overwhelmed and think parenting is complicated.

Yet, when you talk with an adult who is fond of their parents and grateful for their upbringing, their stories don’t sound exceptional. Their parents of these well-adjusted young adults don’t come across as Jedi masters who daily dispensed profound life-changing proverbs. Their weekends were not filled with epic family vacations. The “moments” we want to create as parents are not usually the focal point of what these young adults appreciate most.

In this article, I want to offer you three “ordinary” encouragements that will allow you to be an excellent parent.

Be Present

Be in the room. When your child is little, get on the floor to play, have an enjoyable bedtime routine, and say “I love you” frequently. As your child grows, be at their games or recitals, resist the distractions that tempt parents to be mindless on the drive to or from events, sit at a table for a meal together at least once a day, and say “I love you” frequently. As your child gets even older, show interest in their hobbies, catch them doing things right, commemorate significant achievements or milestones, and say “I love you” frequently.

These kinds of engagements aren’t awe-inspiring or complicated. They are ordinary. These kinds of interactions communicate, “My parents knew me, enjoyed me, and were there when important things happened.” Simple presence creates a sense of stability that forges a bond of trust.

Think of these engagements like the daily assignments in an academic class. If you complete these basic assignments, they ensure you will get a decent grade, even if you perform poorly on a test. If you neglect these assignments, you feel the pressure to ace the final exam. Parents who rely on big moments, like students who rely on acing final exams, tend to be overwhelmed easily and disappointed in their outcomes.

Respond Proportionally

When Paul spoke about parenting, one of his base instructions was, “Do not provoke your children to anger” (Eph. 6:4). That begs the question, “How do we commonly exasperate our children?” One of the most frequent ways is disproportionate responses, or more simply put, overreacting.

Here again, we notice how ordinary good parenting is. Proportional responses don’t attract much attention. If you watch good parents navigate conflict and discipline, you probably won’t be awestruck. Good parenting is pleasantly boring. The scene is even-keeled so the focus can be on the content of the conversation, not the decibel level of their voice, the sharpness of their words, or the theatrics of their actions.

Later in life, the child would be able to say, “I learned how to respond to hard times and manage my emotions because of how my parents handled conflict and discipline. I learned that problems didn’t have to be ignored, that it was safe to have differences of opinion, and that having moral standards didn’t have to result in condemnation.” These seem like profound life lessons. In many ways, they are. But these lessons are learned through proportional responses to common life challenges.

Be Redemptive

Being redemptive is the middle ground between being harsh and being permissive. Children of harsh parents know there is a standard, but the standard is feared. Children of permissive parents learn they get to do whatever they want, even when it disrupts their life. By contrast, here are three ways to hit the redemptive middle as parents.

First, explain the “why” behind the “what.” Rules should have reason. In Ephesians 6, Paul encouraged children to obey their parents, “That it may go well with you” (verse 3). Paul is giving the why beyond the what. As a mundane example, in the perpetual bedtime battles, echo the explanation, “How do you feel when you don’t get enough sleep? You need a bedtime today so that you can enjoy tomorrow.” Yes, we want our children to obey. But obedience that is not rooted in understanding produces compliance rather than maturity and wisdom. By emphasizing the “why” behind the “what,” consequences feel less arbitrary. Consequences become a way to reinforce the wisdom principles behind the family rules. When a child faces irritability resulting from inadequate sleep, we can talk about how today’s consequences are the fruit of yesterday’s choices.

Second, root correction and discipline in love. Discipline should always end in a hug. When our oldest son was four years old, we were planting a garden together. Our family dog, Levi, thought this was a wonderful activity. Digging holes was the kind of game he had long wished we would play. The problem was that Levi kept digging up the seeds we had just planted. After correcting Levi several times, I finally swatted him and scolded, “Stop it!” with a scowl. Without missing a beat, my oldest looked at me and said, “Now, give Levi a hug and tell him you love him.” We had never told our son that our discipline rhythm was correction-hug-“I love you.” That was the only rhythm he knew, so he just expected it to come next.

Third, be honest about the shared frustration with our own repeated failures. Children need correction for the same things over and over again. As parents, we do too. It is easy for children to feel defeated when they violate the same rules multiple times. We can (and should) relate. This is what Paul did in Romans 7:15-20. Our children will learn more from our modeling than lecturing. When we see our child display a tender heart, we need to steward that moment well. For instance, if they were being rude to a sibling, we might say something like this:

“I can tell you’re really sorry for being harsh with your brother. Acknowledging what we did wrong, takes humility. I admire you’re being humble even when we’re talking about what you did wrong. But it can be frustrating when we do the same wrong thing over and over again, can’t it? I know that feeling too. Remember, yesterday, when we were running late, and I fussed at you more than I needed to? I struggle being nice when we’re late like you struggle with sharing with your brother. The Bible tells us why it’s so easy to do the things we know we shouldn’t. It is because we have a sin nature. It is easy to be bad. We have to actively rely on God to be good. I don’t want you to get discouraged and give up because we’re talking about the same thing again. I can see you responding to correction with humility and that’s awesome. Your struggle with sin looks like learning to share. My struggle looks like patience when we’re running late. Let’s both commit to relying on God in those moments. I love you. Can I have a hug?”

I hope that vignette seems ordinary. We can imagine this conversation without the parent being surrounded in a saintly glow. The child will probably never say, “I remember when I was three and my mom had an amazing conversation with me about sharing.” But the child will likely recall, “My mom talk about my mischief in a way that helped me see my need for Jesus, but didn’t make me feel condemned. It was like she could relate and it felt safe to approach God because of it.”

As for the guidance most of us want when we read an article on parenting, different families will choose different consequences for infractions like being mean to your brother. Different children will need different consequences to best reinforce what it looks like to honor God and their sibling when you both want the same toy. The consequence isn’t the most important part. That your response is proportional and redemptive is what matters. Even the wording will vary; your vignette will sound like you. The example above sounds like me.

From these pieces of ordinary advice, I think we, as parents, learn an important (but uncomfortable) lesson: *parenting requires focusing on maturing ourselves as much as maturing our children.* Children are better at mirroring and mimicking than memorizing. Most of what our children learn from us will be through our example, our tone, and the rhythms of how we interact, rather than the words we say. Simple, proportional, redemptive responses repeated consistently (meaning we’re present) are what make an exceptional parent. I hope it is simpler than you feared it might be.