

QUICK ANSWERS
TO YOUR MOST
URGENT QUESTIONS



FIRST
AID
FOR FAMILIES

PARENTING

BABIES TO PRETEENS
VOL.1

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TO YOUR MOST
URGENT QUESTIONS



FIRST
≡ AID ≡
FOR FAMILIES
BY FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

PARENTING

BABIES TO PRETEENS
— VOL. 1 —



First Aid for Families: Parenting Babies to Preteens, Volume 1

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Published by Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Dr., Colorado Springs, CO 80920

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The information contained in this book provides a general overview of many health-related topics. It is not intended to substitute for advice that you might receive from your child's physician, whether by telephone or during a direct medical evaluation. Furthermore, health-care practices are continually updated as a result of medical research and advances in technology. You should therefore check with your child's doctor if there is any question about current recommendations for a specific problem. No book can substitute for a direct assessment of your child by a qualified health-care professional.

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ISBN: 978-1-624-05601-7

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 21 20 19 18 17 16 15

**The
First Aid for Families
Series**

Parenting Babies to Preteens

Volume 1

Quick Answers to Your Most Urgent Questions

From Focus on the Family

Foreword by Dr. Greg Smalley

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NOTES

How to Reach Us

Many issues discussed in this book are difficult ones. You and your family may need to address them in greater depth. The answers in this guide are intended as general advice only, and not to replace clinical counseling, medical treatment, legal counsel, financial direction, or pastoral guidance.

If you'd like to discuss your situation further, or need help putting these ideas into action, we invite you to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department and speak with a member of our staff. Our licensed Christian counselors are available to take your call Monday through Friday between 6:00 A.M. and 8:00 P.M. Mountain time at 1-855-771-HELP (1-855-771-4357) or 1-800-A-FAMILY (1-800-232-6459). They'd be pleased to assist you in any way they can.

If you'd like to get in touch with a counselor in your area, Focus on the Family also maintains a referral network of Christian therapists. For information, just call the Counseling Department at one of the numbers above.

To reach a pastoral counselor at Focus on the Family, you can call 1-855-771-HELP (1-855-771-4357) or 1-800-A-FAMILY (1-800-232-6459) Monday through Friday between 6:00 A.M. and 8:00 P.M. Mountain time.

And for more advice and encouragement, please visit us at www.focusonthefamily.com.

Foreword

Dr. Greg Smalley

I'll never forget the day my four-year-old son, Garrison, walked into my office. My wife, Erin, was gone, and I had some work to get done. Garrison said, "Daddy, I need your help!"

I said, "Honey, I've got to finish this. I'll help you in just a little bit."

"No, no," he said. "I need your help now! Please? Gotta come help me now."

Garrison usually didn't ask for help. Now, though, he grabbed my arm, pulled me out of my chair, and led me toward our kitchen.

"Garrison, what's wrong?" I asked.

"I'll show you," he replied.

As we rounded the corner, I saw it. Stunned, I stared at our microwave oven—which was on fire!

Thick, dark smoke poured out of the appliance. "It's—it's on fire!" I stammered, once again demonstrating how perceptive I am.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Garrison said impatiently. "But, Daddy, can you reach in and grab my popcorn? I can't get it."

"Your *what*?"

"I made some popcorn," he explained.

I thought, *Popcorn? Where did he get that?*

It turned out that he'd climbed all the way up in the pantry, snatched the bag, climbed down, stood on a chair, and (with a sharp scissors, no doubt) cut the bag open, put it in the microwave, and set the timer ... on 99 minutes.

By the time I saw the result, it looked like a smoldering lump of coal. I grabbed it, ran outside, and threw it on the ground.

Garrison's response was to throw *himself* on the ground and yell, "*I was gonna eat that!*"

Engulfed by the horrible smell of burnt popcorn, I realized I had to get rid of the stench before Erin returned. She'd want to know what the odor was, and how our son had managed to do this when I was supposedly watching him so vigilantly in her absence.

To purge the smell, I put out cups of coffee grounds. They absorbed the odor—most of it, anyway. I cleaned up the mess and hoped for the best.

That might have been the end of the story. But this was my family, remember—and in families, one crisis is never enough.

After I'd gone back to working in my office, Garrison showed up again. "Daddy, I need your help," he declared.

I frowned. "Did you cook any more popcorn?"

"No," he answered. "I was listening to my music, and I'm done."

"Good."

"But I don't know how to turn the car off."

I was baffled. "What?"

"I was listening to my music, and I don't know how to turn the car off."

Suddenly an awful realization dawned. "Garrison, please tell me you haven't been in the car."

"Oh, yeah," he said.

I groaned as he dragged me into the garage. This time, instead of gagging at smoke from scorched popcorn, I was choking from toxic exhaust fumes. He'd been sitting in the car with the garage door closed and the motor running, listening to his music.

I shut down the engine.

Fortunately, the garage door began to open at that moment. Unfortunately, it was opening because Erin had just arrived.

She pulled in and shut off her car. Quickly the poisonous fumes (and what was left of the popcorn smell) reached her nostrils.

She gave me a suspicious look. "Do you want to tell me anything?" she asked.

I decided to take the optimistic route. "I think you're gonna like this," I said. "It's really funny."

I told her the whole story. She was not amused.

On the other hand, she did not restart her car and run over me. I was lucky that day.

Perhaps she'd come to expect that sort of thing from our son—and from me. Maybe experience had taught her that families are always getting into some kind of trouble. That's what happens when you put very different people in close quarters in a fallen world. You end up needing help with fires, carbon monoxide, curious kids, and irate spouses.

You end up with a lot of pressing problems, and needing a lot of first aid.

As someone whose occupation and passion involve helping families, I wish I could say that my fellow advice-givers and I have always done a great job of providing first aid for urgent problems. But sometimes we seem to spend most of our time trying to prevent them.

In a way, that makes sense. You've probably heard the old saying: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

It's usually true. After all, which would you rather do:

- Circle the date of your wedding anniversary on a calendar or spend the next six months apologizing because you forgot it?
- Change the oil in your car or buy a new engine?
- Put childproof caps on your prescription bottles or rush your toddler to the emergency room once a week?

But prevention has limits. Most of us keep finding ourselves in sticky family situations that weren't prevented. When that happens—when your baby won't sleep, or your teenage daughter announces that she's pregnant, or your mate's gambling addiction has you teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, or your frail and aging mom refuses to consider a nursing home—an ounce of cure looks a lot more valuable than a *ton* of prevention. Urgent problems need urgent care, not a list of tips that might have helped if only you'd known about them yesterday, last year, or a decade ago.

Don't get me wrong: Prevention is good. But when you've already stepped in the quicksand, a rope is better.

At Focus on the Family, we try to prevent family problems every day—helping parents and spouses build thriving families who can avoid and withstand today's and tomorrow's challenges. But we also offer right-now help through our Counseling Department, broadcasts, online resources, print and film and audio tools, and other channels. You might call it “first aid for families.” And in this book, that's *exactly* what we call it.

This series is the place to go when you need our latest, most carefully considered advice on your most pressing, most vexing family problems. Parenting, marriage, and family crisis—you'll find these addressed quickly and practically. Though many of the issues are complex, we're aiming to give you what you need to know *now* to take your next step.

The advice is vetted by trained, professional Christian counselors; most of it comes from our experience in helping the thousands of family members who ask us for guidance every year. And if you need more insight, our Counseling Department is available to talk further with you personally (see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book).

In addition to the questions and answers, you'll find encouraging, informative sidebars and lists of books, articles, websites, organizations, and other resources to help you go deeper.

If you're facing parenting challenges with children ages 0-12, you've come to the right place. *First Aid for Families: Parenting Babies to Preteens, Vol. 1* tackles topics ranging from newborns to siblings to discipline, and from child care to parental roles to troubling habits.

Not every pressing problem is a major crisis, of course. Sometimes it's about burnt popcorn, overly adventurous kids, or clueless caregivers. But every question deserves an answer—one that's consistent with God's Word, practical, and easy to understand.

I hope you find that the answers in this book fit that description. May God bless you and your family as you seek His wisdom—and, as a result, thrive.

—Dr. Greg Smalley

Dr. Greg Smalley is vice president of Family Ministries at Focus on the Family. Before joining Focus, he worked for the Center for Relationship Enrichment at John Brown University and as president of the National Institute of Marriage. He is the author of twelve books.

After receiving his doctorate at the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in Southern California and a counseling degree from Denver Seminary, Greg and his wife, Erin, led intensive marriage seminars around the world and trained pastors, professionals, and lay leaders on how to effectively work with married and engaged couples.

Married since 1992, Greg and Erin have one son and three daughters. Greg is the son of Dr. Gary Smalley, the popular family counselor and author of forty books on marriage.

Part 1: Babies

1

New Parents Need a Break

Question

During the early days of our marriage my spouse and I used to enjoy long, quiet evenings together at home—candlelight dinners, movie nights, etc. Since our children were born we can't even find two minutes to sit down and have an intelligible conversation. How can we get a break from the kids once in a while?

Answer

Many couples realize that making time for each other and getting away from the kids is important, but for one reason or another they never seem to get around to it. This is a more serious problem than you may realize: As the second and third children come along, it's easy to let your couple relationship slide if you don't take the time to keep it vibrant and healthy. That requires intentionality and creativity.

It's easy, for instance, to conclude that since you can't go out often, you may as well not go out at all. But this is far from true. Once a month is better than never. Perhaps you can't afford a babysitter or dinner at a restaurant once a week. If that's the case, you should start looking for innovative ways to get around your tight budget. You might choose one night a week to get the kids in bed early, put a pizza in the oven, and enjoy an after-dinner bath together. Another option is to pick up some fast food and head for the park. Time together doesn't have to be expensive.

We realize, of course, that finding and compensating good babysitters can be a challenge for the average young couple. Gone are the days when most of us could rely on extended family for free child care; many new moms and dads don't live anywhere near their relatives. If this is your situation, you might ask trusted friends at work or church to babysit your kids once in a while or trade child care services with other parents. You could also ask the church youth director to organize a free babysitting service project for students. If faraway relations ask what you'd like

for your birthday, Christmas, or anniversary, request babysitting money. Save money by canceling cable TV or taking your lunch to work or by selling unused items on eBay.

If you're afraid to leave your baby with anyone else—a common concern for many first-time mothers—you might try to head off unnecessary worries by inviting a potential sitter to come over and watch your child in another room while the two of you make dinner and watch a DVD. It also helps to take a cell phone with you while you go out to dinner; this can go a long way in providing assurance for new parents. You may also feel more comfortable asking an older, experienced mother to watch your baby than you would a teenager.

If you're wondering whether it's worth the hassle, think back to the time you had with your spouse before your first baby arrived. How many hours per week did you spend alone together? Did you enjoy those experiences? Did they help you grow closer? Wouldn't you like to recapture that closeness and see it increase in the future? If you responded "yes" to any of these questions (and we're assuming you did), we'd suggest that you need to do everything in your power to achieve a similar amount of "together time" in your new schedule. If you can't get anywhere close to that goal, take what you can get. The main thing is to keep a conscious, regular lookout for any and all opportunities to be a couple again.

If you need help putting these ideas into action, we'd like to invite you to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department and speak with a member of our staff. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book. We'd be pleased to assist you in any way we can.¹

In Other Words ...

"Some people might suggest that giving everything—all your time, energy, attention, and resources—to your children demonstrates ultimate unselfishness. But the truth is, that mentality can result in an emotionally and physically unhealthy parent. And remember, in your process of balance, you are modeling and teaching your children how to be balanced."²

—Linda Weber

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Parenting Isn't for Cowards* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1987)

- *Your Time-Starved Marriage: How to Stay Connected at the Speed of Life* by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2006)
- *Alone in Marriage: Encouragement for the Times When It's All Up to You* by Susie Larson (Moody Publishers, 2007)

Conflicting Views on Child-rearing

Question

We're about to become parents for the first time, and we're doing everything we can to prepare ourselves *before* the fact. But what if we disagree about how to raise a child? How will these conflicts affect our marital relationship?

Answer

You're wise to start talking about this issue now. Parenting differences can become a major source of tension and division in marriage. Like variations in theology or belief, they must be carefully and properly managed and resolved if you as a couple are to move forward successfully into your new role as parents. If not, they can form an emotional wedge between the two of you.

The first thing you need to understand is that most parents don't agree on every aspect of parenting. This is especially true of new moms and dads. They arrive on the parenting scene with different opinions, diverse childhood and home-life experiences, and very little practical know-how. The results can be disastrous if you don't take the time to discuss your contrasting ideas openly and honestly. It can also be extremely helpful to get the counsel and advice of an older, more experienced couple or a licensed Christian family therapist.

What are some of the most common issues that arise when mates approach parenting differently? How can you prepare for these challenges and handle them most effectively? Here's a basic list of potential problems and suggested solutions.

1. "*I'm pretty strict, but she's a total pushover.*" This isn't unusual, but it can be major. The answer is to find common ground, a balance between extremes. This is easier said than done, of course. Couples who have different views on spanking, for instance, should take time to discuss what a balanced approach would look like. Determine beforehand which behaviors should be punished with spanking and which shouldn't. Experiment with other disciplinary tactics, such as time-outs, extra chores, or removing privileges. Some children respond better to spanking than to other methods, and vice versa. Decide together that you will be open-minded about trying a variety of methods until you find what works best for your family.

2. *“He’s overly protective, but I think kids need to experience failure once in a while.”* Once again, the secret to success here is balance. It’s not healthy to be overprotective—or its opposite. God’s parenting style exemplifies this principle perfectly. Sometimes He allows us to fall and struggle and learn on our own, but He’s always there to pick us up and show us mercy and compassion. You and your spouse will have to discover when to rescue your child and when to stand at a distance. This balance is achieved through practice and good communication.

3. *“The kids play us against each other.”* As great as children are, they’re selfish by nature. So be prepared: If they can see a way to do it, they’ll take advantage of perceived contrasts in your parenting styles and weak spots in your marital relationship. The key to conquering your child’s ability to play you and your spouse against each other is consistent communication between the two of you. When possible, consult your mate before making decisions about what your child can or can’t do. Don’t assume that you know each other’s minds. Take time to check with each other before moving ahead.

4. *“Is it okay to disagree in front of the kids?”* The answer to this question is *yes*. How else will children learn how to discuss and solve problems? Kids raised in homes where spouses never differ often develop the perception that there’s something wrong with disagreement. Some issues, of course, should be discussed only behind closed doors—adult problems such as sex in marriage, financial troubles, etc. Decide in advance with your spouse which subjects should be kept private.

5. *“Who has the final say on this?”* Ideally, parents should be able to reach agreement on issues related to their children. But this isn’t always possible. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. In such cases you need to know where the buck stops, preferably by referencing a previous discussion of this very subject. This doesn’t mean that anyone has to give up his or her position. It’s simply a matter of realizing that a decision has to be made, and that one of you is willing to defer to the other. Whatever you do, avoid undermining or overriding each other once an issue is supposedly settled. This will only confuse your child.

If you need help working through these concepts, feel free to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.³

In Other Words ...

“You and your mate have such diverse experiences and strong opinions that you may always see the topic differently. The deadlock can be broken when one of you is willing to say something like, ‘I know we disagree on this issue. But you’ve had a little more experience with this than I have, because of your upbringing. Why don’t you make the decision and I’ll back you up?’”⁴

—Mitch Temple

Need More Help?

Online

- The [National Center for Fathering](#) offers resources, an e-mail newsletter, and a free quarterly magazine to assist men in their role as dads.
- The [National Fatherhood Initiative](#) is an organization that seeks to improve children's well-being by increasing the number of children growing up with involved and committed fathers.
- ["Defining 'Successful Parenting'"](#) by Tim Sanford
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Parenting from Your Strengths: Understanding Strengths and Valuing Differences in Your Home* by John Trent, Ph.D, Rodney Cox, and Eric Tooker (B&H Books, 2006)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti: Understanding and Delighting in Your Differences* by Bill and Pam Farrel (Harvest House, 2007)

3

Family Bed

Question

A friend of mine believes it's best for mom, dad, and baby to sleep together. She even claims it can prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). I want my baby to be safe. What's your opinion of the "Family Bed"?

Answer

We don't recommend it. Though advocates of co-sleeping are enthusiastic about the supposed benefits of the practice—for example, they claim it gives infants a greater sense of security and comfort and eliminates the need for parents to get out of bed for midnight feedings—most reputable family counselors and child development experts advise against it. They have a number of sound reasons for taking this position.

While some claim that the "Family Bed" prevents Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, the best research indicates the exact opposite is true. Recent studies suggest that the risk of SIDS may actually be higher in these situations because adult bedding materials are not safe for sleeping newborns. In addition, an article published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* asserted that the risk of suffocation (which is not the same as SIDS) increases twenty-fold when babies are placed in adult beds rather than in their own cribs. Critics have also raised concerns about the possibility of parents rolling over and crushing or smothering their baby.

The "Family Bed" poses other problems, too. Babies have a different sleep cycle from those of older children and adults, and for this reason the presence of a newborn child in the bed can be disruptive to parents' sleep. As they pass through different phases of sleep, infants tend to move around and make noises. It's easy to assume that they're waking up when they really aren't. That's not to mention that some individuals simply don't sleep soundly when they have "visitors." If Mom and Dad can't get the rest they need, their mood, concentration levels, frustration threshold, and ability to parent effectively will be negatively affected the following day. There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence to support the theory that, once established, the habit of co-sleeping can be hard to break. It can actually become a commitment of many years if children are reluctant to transition out of their parents' bed.

Then, of course, there's the issue of marital intimacy. Many new parents aren't prepared for the demands that a new baby can place on them. This is especially true in the case of a mother who has little energy left for relations with her husband at the end of an exhausting day. One of the best things you can do for your child is to maintain a close, healthy marriage. Couples looking to resume sexual activity after a pregnancy won't find the "Family Bed" particularly conducive to their design. It's not easy to be romantic with a kid or two in bed beside you.

We agree with those pediatricians and child development experts who maintain that children need to learn to fall asleep by themselves in their own crib or bed. But that doesn't mean we're opposed to closeness between parent and child. Far from it. In some cases it can be helpful to keep a baby in a bassinet next to the parents' bed for the first few months of his or her life. And you can always get the benefits of the "Family Bed" experience by snuggling with your child in bed after everyone is awake in the morning.

Feel free to contact our Counseling Department if you think a brief phone conference might be helpful. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book. We're here to help in any way we can.

In Other Words ...

"Mother and Father should be in complete agreement about this situation or seek to resolve any difference of opinion if they are not—even if counseling is needed. Serious and damaging rifts in a marital relationship can develop if one spouse feels displaced physically and emotionally by a child who is taking over an increasing area of bed space. In general, if either Mom or Dad feels that it's time for the baby to sleep elsewhere, the other parent should oblige—not only out of respect for the other's feelings but in recognition that the marital relationship needs to be nurtured and preserved."³

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Getting Toddlers to Sleep](#)" by Lynne Thompson
- "[Bedtime Routines and Fears](#)" from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Baby Fights Sleep

Question

For some reason our baby fights sleep, especially in the crib or bassinet. The only place that doesn't happen is the cradle swing, and the only time things go smoothly is after a late-night feeding. How should we handle this?

Answer

Getting a newborn to sleep can be a real challenge. That's because a baby's sleep cycle is very different from that of an older child or an adult. As you're discovering, the crazy hours and constant crying can wreak havoc in the lives of new parents.

You mention that your child has trouble sleeping in the crib or bassinet. You didn't describe your bedtime routine in detail, but depending on her age, you may want to avoid putting her down while she's still awake. That may be a useful strategy in the case of older babies and toddlers, but it isn't going to be effective with a newborn. There is nothing wrong with rocking or nursing your baby to sleep and then gently placing her in the crib. As a matter of fact, most infants *need* to be soothed to sleep, and you and your husband have been given the job of serving as your child's "soothing mechanism" for the next few months. By the way, you should be thankful that she is able to fall asleep in the cradle swing. That gives you an advantage some moms and dads don't have.

Many new parents want to know how long they should let an infant cry. Some worry that the child will develop bad habits if they pick her up too soon or too often. Again, we're not sure of the exact age of your child, but as a general rule you can't possibly hold, cuddle, or soothe a newborn too much. As your baby grows older you'll want to let her cry a bit more and learn to fall asleep on her own, but depending on your situation that time may still be several months away. Soon you'll be able to recognize that she has different cries to let you know when she's hungry, tired, wet, or just plain cranky.

In Other Words ...

“We hope you will find it encouraging that our relationship did survive the phenomenon of sleep deprivation, and that eventually when we turned the corner and rediscovered the joys of sleep, a healthy relationship began to materialize once again. We learned that open, honest, and forgiving communication was the key to moving beyond these challenges. A lot of prayer also helped us over the line!”⁴

—Glenn and Natalie Williams

Need More Help?

Online

- [“How to Survive Baby Boot Camp”](#) by Rebecca Ingram Powell
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Your Marriage Can Survive a Newborn* by Glenn and Natalie Williams (B&H Books, 2005)
- *Sleep, It Does a Family Good* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)

Establishing Baby's Sleep Patterns

Question

We're exhausted from lack of sleep. How can we encourage our baby to sleep through the night? At what point should we start trying to establish a more regular and predictable sleeping routine?

Answer

Between the fourth and sixth months, your baby probably will have settled into a sleeping routine that's more predictable and easier on everyone. Two naps during the day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, are a good habit to encourage and maintain. These may last from one to three hours, and at this age you need not awaken your baby from a long nap unless it seems to be interfering with his sleep at night. By six months, he should be able to handle an eight-hour stretch without being fed unless he was premature or exceptionally small. Whether this translates into uninterrupted sleep will depend both on your baby and your sleeping arrangements.

If your child is down for the night by 8 P.M., he may be genuinely hungry by 4 A.M. But at that hour, unless he's crying with no sign of letting up, you may want to wait a few minutes to see if he'll go back to sleep. Delaying his bedtime may help extend sleep time in the morning.

Ideally, before a child is put to bed there should be some time to wind down with quiet activities—a feeding, some cuddling, perhaps a bath. With repetition of a routine, he will begin to associate these particular activities with bedtime and a surrender to sleep.

Now is a good time to let him learn to fall asleep on his own if he hasn't been doing so already. When he is drowsy but not yet asleep, lay him down, pat him gently, turn on a night-light, and leave the room. If he fusses for more than a few minutes, you can come back for a brief reassurance, but not a full-blown recap of the nighttime routine. If the crying continues, do whatever it takes to bring on sleep, and then try again at a later date.

If your baby isn't able to fall asleep by himself by six months of age, the window of opportunity for learning this skill may not be open again for a while. Within the next few months he is likely to begin demonstrating a normal behavior known as separation anxiety, in which a mighty howl may erupt when you or his closest caregivers are out of sight, especially at bedtime.

As a result, if after six months he's still used to being nursed, held, and rocked until he's sound asleep, you can probably plan on repeating this ritual for months on end unless you're prepared to endure a vigorous and prolonged protest.

Remember that your baby's nighttime routine may include one or more awakenings that do not necessarily need your attention. If you rush into the room to feed, cuddle, and rock him with every sound he produces, he'll become accustomed to this service. Obviously, if he sounds truly miserable and is keeping everyone awake, do whatever is necessary to comfort him and calm things down. At this age it is still better to err on the side of too much attention than too little. After a few more months pass, however, you can become more hard-nosed if he seems intent on having a social hour several times a night.²

In Other Words ...

“Understand each other's need for sleep and space, and agree on how you can schedule caring responsibilities to give each other a break. As much as possible, try swapping the tasks you are responsible for on weekends.... Learn how to reach a compromise to prevent your situation from becoming more desperate and your reactions to each other more defensive.”³

—Glenn and Natalie Williams

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Debunking First-Time Parenting Myths”](#) by Carol Heffernan
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sleep, It Does a Family Good* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

6

Crying Baby—Colic?

Question

My baby cries inconsolably for at least three hours straight every night, and nothing I do seems to help. Is this colic? If so, how do I deal with it?

Answer

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between a genuinely “colicky” baby and a child who is simply unusually fussy or prone to crying. According to a long-standing definition, a baby who cries three hours a day, three days a week, for three weeks in a row has *colic*. A simpler definition is “a whole lot of crying that doesn’t have any obvious medical cause and that can’t be stopped by any normal measures.”

True colicky episodes tend to occur around the same time each day, usually in the late afternoon or evening. They are marked by intense activity on the baby’s part, such as flailing about or pulling his knees to his chest. From all appearances, the child seems to be in a great deal of discomfort—and he probably is.

Classic theories about the cause of colic have assumed that the baby’s intestinal tract is at fault—that it goes into uncontrollable spasms due to immaturity. Other explanations assume that mother is tense or high-strung, and that her nervous stress is somehow communicated to the child. But treatments based on these conjectures tend to be hit or miss in their effectiveness. In actuality, a universal cause for colic has yet to be determined.

What should you do if your child displays the symptoms of colic? There are two basic questions you need to address. First, does your baby have a verifiable medical problem? And second, how are mother, child, and the rest of the family going to get through this ordeal?

The first issue should be dealt with relatively quickly. See your pediatrician if any of the follow apply:

- A fever over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit taken with a rectal thermometer.
- Poor sucking at breast or bottle.
- Change in color from normal pink to pale or bluish during feeding or crying (cyanosis).
- Overt vomiting (as opposed to spitting up).

- A marked increase in the amount and looseness of bowel movements.
- Unusual jerking movements of the head, eyes, or other muscles.

Even if your baby does not display any of these symptoms, you may still want to have him medically evaluated if he is crying up a storm for no apparent reason. Try to give your physician as much specific information as possible. For example, when did the crying start? How long does it last? Does anything in particular seem to set it off?

If your baby is doing well medically, you can move on to the second question: How can you survive these crying marathons?

Your primary task at this point is to *be there* for your child. You may not be able to stop the crying, but you can do a great deal to comfort and soothe your baby. Hold him and rock him gently. Stroke his head, back, and stomach. Provide soothing sounds, such as humming or soft singing. Eliminate bright lights and loud sounds. Try nursing your baby or take him for a ride in the car or a stroller. Make sure that Mom and Dad take turns dealing with a colicky child. Single moms shouldn't be embarrassed to seek help from an experienced relative or friend. You'll need regular breaks if you're to get through this phase of child-rearing successfully.

Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to feel like a failure. Remind yourself frequently that "this, too, will surely pass." Each crying episode *will* eventually come to an end, and the entire phase will probably be over by the third or fourth month. In the meantime, persist in your efforts to soothe your baby even when they don't produce the desired results.

If you find yourself reaching the end of your rope, get help quickly before you're tempted to take out your anger on the child. In the event that you feel a need to talk with someone about your frustration, feel free to call us here at Focus on the Family. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book. We'll be happy to listen to you and assist you in any way we can.⁹

In Other Words ...

"If you're having a hard time coping with a chronically crying baby, work out how to give each other a break. If you're on your own for a time, put on some music and earphones, or ring a friend to come around and help alleviate the pressure. A baby who cries for long periods will wear anybody's patience down."¹⁰

—Glenn and Natalie Williams

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

- [“How to Survive Baby Boot Camp”](#) by Rebecca Ingram Powell

Other Resources

- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Pros and Cons of Breastfeeding

Question

What are the advantages and disadvantages of breastfeeding? As a first-time mother of a newborn infant, I'm anxious to do what's best for my baby, but I'm also worried about becoming "tied down" by nursing. What would you recommend?

Answer

There are many positive aspects to breastfeeding, especially from your infant's perspective. Over the past few decades a mountain of scientific evidence has validated a very straightforward observation: Human mothers are beautifully designed to feed their own babies. Breast milk, with extremely rare exceptions, is the best source of nutrition for a child during the first months of life. Not only is it nutritionally complete and properly balanced, but it is also constantly changing to meet the needs of a growing baby.

Vitamins and minerals are adequately supplied in mother's milk. What's more, they're present in a form that is easier for the baby to absorb than that found in any other type of milk. As a result, no supplements are needed for the normal breastfed infant, with one exception: Breast milk alone does not contain enough vitamin D to ensure proper bone development. This vitamin is manufactured in the skin in response to sunlight. But since direct exposure to sunlight (without sunscreen) can pose potential hazards to an infant's delicate skin, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that a baby fed only on breast milk also receive 400 international units (IU) of vitamin D every day by dropper, starting in the first few days after birth.

Breast milk contains antibodies that help protect babies from infections. What's more, it's not only clean, fresh, warm, and ready at any time, but it's absolutely free! Indeed, a nursing mother is in many ways less "tied down" than her bottle-feeding counterpart, because she won't have to deal with the routines and costs of purchasing and preparing formula. Breastfeeding can also reduce the risk of a wide variety of serious health problems, some in infancy (such as SIDS) and others in later life (such as diabetes, obesity, and elevated cholesterol levels). It offers several health benefits for Mom as well—for instance, the stimulation of the nipples releases a hormone

called oxytocin, which helps the uterus contract and postpones the onset of the menstrual cycle, thus providing a natural—though not foolproof—method of spacing children. Nursing mothers also tend to reach their pre-pregnancy weight more quickly, and there is some research to indicate that breastfeeding may reduce a woman's chances of developing breast and ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, and hip fractures later in life.

Last but not least, breastfeeding promotes a sense of closeness, intimacy, and mutual satisfaction between mother and child. The skin-to-skin contact, the increased sensory input for the baby, and the mother's satisfaction in being able to provide her child's most basic needs can help establish strong bonds between them.

A listing of so many advantages raises the obvious question: Are there any reasons *not* to breastfeed? The answer, of course, is that it depends on your personal situation. There are a few, but for the most part they tend to be rare and related directly to special circumstances.

In the first place, there are a few medical situations in which breastfeeding poses a risk for the baby. HIV, the virus responsible for AIDS, can be transmitted through nursing. Similarly, a mother with active, untreated tuberculosis should not nurse her baby. Hepatitis C is not transmitted through breast milk, but it is spread through infected blood. A nursing mother with hepatitis C should temporarily stop nursing if her nipples or the area surrounding them become cracked or bleed.

Obviously, breastfeeding may be difficult or unsafe for both mother and child if the mother has any kind of serious illness. Furthermore, virtually all medications show up to some degree in breast milk. Careful consultation with a physician is in order in situations of this nature.

Previous breast surgery may affect a woman's ability to nurse. A biopsy or local lump removal normally will not cause difficulty. Even after a mastectomy it is possible to feed a baby adequately using the remaining breast. Previous breast-enhancement/implant surgery should not cause a problem unless milk ducts were cut during the procedure. Breast-reduction surgery, however, may result in an inadequate milk supply if the majority of milk-producing tissue has been removed.

Infants born with phenylketonuria (PKU) or galactosemia, rare metabolic conditions detected by routine screening tests after birth, must be fed special formulas. Congenital problems such as cleft lip or palate, heart disease, and Down syndrome can create special challenges for nursing, but the benefits of mother's milk for these infants are usually well worth the extra effort.

Other reasons that might cause a woman to consider forgoing breastfeeding could include a bad experience with nursing in the past; physical problems, such as the shape of the mother's nipples (though this can usually be corrected fairly easily) or an insufficient production of milk; lifestyle issues; and a mother's need to return to work. However, in many cases working need not present an insurmountable obstacle to nursing.

In conclusion, although there are reasons a mother might think about bottle-feeding, there is clear medical consensus that breastfeeding is the preferred source of fuel for a newborn; we would encourage you to give this option serious consideration. If you have more questions and

concerns about feeding your newborn, you can find more information in the resources below. You should also go over any specific concerns with your baby’s physician.^u

In Other Words ...

“If you didn’t breastfeed your baby, this isn’t a time for guilt or self-condemnation. But understanding the research may encourage you to nurse your next child—or to be a gracious advocate for breastfeeding in your circle of influence.... I believe breastfeeding should be encouraged for all moms, and supported strongly in those who want to nurse their babies. Breast milk will always be the ideal food for infants; nothing humans make will ever match what God designed.”^u

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Mom’s Guide to Your Body after Baby* by Susan Besze Wallace and Monica Reed, M.D. (Revell, 2008)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Breastfeeding: Pain and Infections

Question

I made a decision to breastfeed my baby even before he was born, but at this point I'm so discouraged that I'm ready to give up. It hurts when I nurse! As a matter of fact, I've developed a painful infection in one breast over the past couple of days. Am I doing something wrong? Should I stop nursing until the inflammation clears up?

Answer

No one wants to spend a good portion of the day in misery, and a strong dose of pain with every feeding can demoralize even the most dedicated breastfeeding mother. Discomfort can have several causes. Many mothers, for instance, feel an ache during the let-down reflex. For some women, the engorgement of the breast prior to each feeding can be very painful. Becoming comfortable with nursing may, in fact, take a few days or even a few weeks as your baby learns and your body adjusts to this new function. You can reduce engorgement-related discomfort by nursing frequently, pumping your milk when necessary, taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen, or applying cool packs.

Intense discomfort can arise from traumatized, cracked, or inflamed nipples, which of course are sensitive areas to begin with. If the nipple is irritated at the tip, it is probably entering your baby's mouth at an upward angle and rubbing on her palate. In that case, try holding your breast so the nipple points downward. If the nipple is tender at the base, help your baby latch on to the whole areola (and not just the nipple) by waiting for her to open her mouth wide and then pulling her gently to the breast.

Other causes of painful irritation, or even full-blown inflammation known as dermatitis, include such things as overzealous use of soap and water in washing; continuous moisture on the surface of the skin; reactions to breast creams or oils; infection with the yeast organism known as *Candida albicans*, a condition that can be treated with an antifungal cream; and, rarely, an ongoing eczema problem that has appeared on other parts of your body will erupt on the breast during nursing, in which case you should consult with your physician about appropriate treatment.

A potentially more serious cause of pain is *mastitis*, inflammation of breast tissue that arises from a plugged milk duct or represents a potentially serious infection involving bacteria that gain entry into breast tissue, usually through a cracked nipple. Symptoms include pain, swelling, heat, redness, and tenderness in a localized area of one breast, accompanied by generalized aching and fever. If you feel like you have the flu, you should consider the possibility that you have mastitis, even if the redness and tenderness have not yet developed. If there is no fever, you probably have a plugged duct that does not require antibiotics.

With or without a fever, however, it's important to contact your doctor if these symptoms develop. Antibiotics that are safe for both mother and child will normally be prescribed, and acetaminophen may be used to reduce both pain and temperature. Alternating application of warm and cold compresses can assist in the treatment. Gently massaging the inflamed area may also help empty the plugged duct. In addition, it is important to continue nursing, although you may be more comfortable with shorter, more frequent sessions. Your baby will not become ill by nursing from an infected breast, and emptying the breast of milk helps clear the infection.¹³

In Other Words ...

“Remember that a temporary time-out from breastfeeding to allow for healing or for any other reason (for example, an illness affecting either mother or baby) does not mean that you cannot resume nursing when things calm down. Pumping your breasts at feeding time will help you maintain your supply. Furthermore, even if your baby has spent a fair amount of time with a bottle, she can learn (or relearn) to obtain nourishment successfully from your breast.”¹⁴

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Mom's Guide to Your Body after Baby* by Susan Besze Wallace and Monica Reed, M.D. (Revell, 2008)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Infants and Pacifiers

Question

My baby wants to go on sucking even after a feeding, and he screams if I don't give him what he wants. I've thought about resorting to a pacifier, but I get conflicting opinions on this subject from family and friends. One breastfeeding mom I know says that pacifiers are an abomination. What do you think?

Answer

As you'd expect, opinions on this subject are mixed. Some parents say they could not have survived their baby's infancy without pacifiers, while others (including some breastfeeding advisers) have nothing good to say about them. In general, we think it's wise to limit their use with a very young infant who has not yet established stable and efficient nursing patterns. The feel, texture, taste, and smell of a pacifier are clearly different from those of Mom's nipples, and sucking a pacifier too soon may interfere with a baby's ability to get used to the real thing.

After two weeks or more of steady nursing, assuming everything is going well, a pacifier can be helpful. Among other things, it can be useful in calming a baby who is already fed but still wants to suck—one who doesn't have anything else, such as a wet diaper, bothering him and will suck on the pacifier with apparent satisfaction. It goes without saying that inserting a pacifier in an infant's mouth must not become a substitute for normal feeding, parental nurturing, or checking to see if something is wrong.

A number of research studies suggest that pacifier use during sleep is associated with a significant reduction in the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). There are a number of possible explanations for this finding, and the effect seems to be greater among infants who sleep in more hazardous environments, such as soft bedding.

If you decide to use a pacifier, make sure you get a one-piece model with a soft nipple—either the straight bottle shape or the angled “orthodontic” type. Never use the nipple assembly from a feeding bottle as a pacifier because the nipple can come loose and choke your baby. Make sure the pacifier you get is the right size for babies younger than six months and that it is

designed to survive boiling or trips through the dishwasher. For the first six months you will need to clean pacifiers frequently in this way to reduce the risk of infection.

If you find a pacifier that your baby likes, buy several. They have a knack for disappearing into the sofa, under the car seat, or into the bottom of the diaper bag, so it's a good idea to have lots of backups. Remember that babies are unable to replace pacifiers that fall out of their mouths and that you'll have to do this for them. Because of the danger of strangulation, never tie a pacifier to a string or ribbon around a baby's neck to keep it in place.¹⁵

In Other Words ...

“Doctors say that by the age of three, pacifiers need to be a thing of the past.... The best approach is to phase out the pacifier slowly. Start by telling your child that he can use a pacifier at bedtime or naptime, but that he has to put it away during the day. When you leave the house, bring along a favorite toy or stuffed animal instead. Then try giving him a reward for each night that he sleeps without his ‘binkie.’ When he’s ready, wean him altogether by letting him trade his pacifier for a ‘big boy’ toy.”¹⁶

—Dr. Bill Maier

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Weaning a Breastfeeding Child

Question

When should I wean my toddler from breastfeeding? I'm afraid I'm going to do it the wrong way—and maybe even affect my child for life. How can I make the transition from breast to bottle as smooth as possible for my baby and me?

Answer

Let's start with the question of "when." As you're probably aware, the answer you'll receive depends to a great extent on who you ask. Some authorities discourage nursing as a frequent daily activity after a toddler reaches twelve to fifteen months of age. Others, especially members of breastfeeding advocacy groups, encourage a completely open-ended approach, noting that in some cultures mothers may nurse a newborn on one breast and a child as old as five on the other.

To put it simply, only *you* can decide exactly when to wean your child. In grappling with this question, however, you should bear in mind there are both behavioral and nutritional aspects to consider.

On the one hand, prolonged nursing can play an important social and emotional role in the life of mother and child. It can be a source of ongoing nurturing, closeness, and even relaxation. If all else is going well, you may feel there is no compelling reason to stop it in the immediate future.

On the other hand, if frequent trips to the breast are substituting for solid foods, a toddler may become anemic or undernourished. And that's not to mention some of the other problems that might be aggravated by nursing an older toddler for an extended period. For example, it might make a child overly "clingy" and discourage independent activity. Moms, too, need to be careful about slipping into a frame of mind in which their personal identity and sense of worth are too closely linked with nursing. Then there's the issue of modesty; a small child burrowing under Mom's blouse may elicit some double takes at the mall or in a neighbor's living room. Marital problems can arise, too, if your husband begins to feel that physical intimacy with you is hampered by the continual presence of one or more children at your breast. These are just some of the considerations you'll want to bear in mind in reaching a decision.

Once you've decided to make the break, *how* should you go about it? Fortunately, this is a much easier question to answer. Depending on how soon you'd like to make the change, you may choose to switch to formula feedings rather than simply moving from breast to cup. Many mothers have reasons of their own for weaning a baby from nursing to formula feedings somewhere between six and twelve months. They may feel that they need to devote more time and energy to other people and activities, whether at home or in the outside world. They may also come to the realization that an inevitable passage is arriving—that the totally helpless newborn who derived all her sustenance from mother is beginning to take the very first steps toward independence. Whatever the timing, and whatever your reasons may be, here are some simple steps you can follow when you're ready to make the transition from breastfeeding to a bottle or cup:

- Start by substituting the bottle or cup for a feeding when your child usually tends to be most distracted or uninterested. Usually this is the one in the middle of the day.
- Each week, add a bottle or cup substitution for a different feeding. Bedtime nursing is usually the last to go.
- Eliminate nursing for reasons other than nourishment. If you need to comfort your baby, caress and rock her rather than using the breast as a pacifier.
- Cut down the duration of nursing sessions. If your baby wants a hit-and-run session, don't try to keep her at the breast longer than she seems interested.
- If your breasts are becoming engorged and uncomfortable as your baby nurses less often, express just enough milk to stay comfortable. If you empty them fully, they will produce larger quantities of milk.

A final note: if you have second thoughts during this transitional phase and decide to maintain your nursing relationship for a few more months, you can always reverse the process by having your baby nurse longer and more often. Your milk supply will increase accordingly.¹⁷

In Other Words ...

“Based on current data, I'd recommend exclusive nursing for at least four to six months. Whether or not nursing for longer periods will offer increased protection against obesity, the other benefits of breastfeeding are so numerous that you'd be wise to nurse for at least a year.... If at the one-year point you and your baby are enjoying the interaction and he or she is thriving, continue to nurse. There's no set time to wean. Most of the time it will be apparent when you and your child are ready.”¹⁸

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

11

Starting Baby on Solid Food

Question

When will our baby be ready to start eating solid food? What foods are best to feed a child at this stage? I don't want to hurt him by rushing or waiting too long.

Answer

There are no hard-and-fast rules here, but most babies are given their first taste of foods other than breast milk or formula somewhere between four and six months of age. Before you decide to let your baby try something solid, make sure that he is developmentally ready for the transition. Here are some signs to watch for:

- While sucking at the breast or bottle, a newborn first protrudes his tongue, pushing it against the nipple as he sucks and swallows. This tongue-thrusting reflex, which gradually subsides over the first six months, interferes with the process of taking food from a spoon and moving it into the throat. A baby who repeatedly pushes his tongue against the spoon probably isn't ready for solids.
- Accepting food from a spoon is much easier for a baby who can control his head position, a skill which will be far better developed after six months than at three or four. A young baby whose head flops everywhere if not supported should be given more time with just breast or bottle feedings.
- By six months of age, your baby will be happily grabbing everything in sight and putting it into his mouth. This suggests that he will find a spoon worth exploring as well.
- If a couple of teeth erupt before six months of age (the usual time of the first appearance of teeth), this in itself is not necessarily a sign that your baby is ready for something like pizza. He won't use his teeth to chew food yet for some months. On the other hand, even if he still doesn't have teeth at the six-month mark, he will be quite able to swallow the mushy solids you'll be feeding him.

If all these signs are present, you should take a few moments to consider the timing and setting of your child's first experience with solids. Pick a time when you aren't going to be

rushed or hassled. Turn off the phone for good measure. Your baby shouldn't be tired, cranky, ravenously hungry, or completely full. Provide a partial feeding of breast milk or formula before trying the new stuff. Remember that when you begin solids, they will only *supplement* milk feedings, not replace them.

What should you start with? The general consensus is that rice cereal specifically formulated for babies is best. It is easily absorbed, contains iron, and rarely causes allergic reactions. Whether premixed in a jar or prepared by you with water or formula, it can be adjusted to whatever thickness your baby prefers. You can obtain many foods in a prepackaged form at the store, or you can prepare them yourself. Foods do not need to be hot; room temperature or slightly warm is just fine for most babies.

To begin with, offer your child about half of a small baby spoonful (about a quarter teaspoon or one ml). He may not know what to do with it, and may even appear to reject it with a grimace. Talk to him in soothing tones throughout the process. When he gets the hang of swallowing this amount, he'll start opening his mouth in anticipation of more. Aim for a total of about one tablespoon (15 ml) once a day, gradually increasing to two or three tablespoons (30 to 45 ml) per feeding once or twice a day. If he simply refuses or repeatedly thrusts out his tongue, don't force the issue. Simply wait and try again in a week or two. Refrigerate whatever remains in the jar; it will be good for a day (or a month if left in the freezer). Whatever he leaves on his plate should be thrown away.

When you've been successful with the rice, you can try other cereals. Oats and barley are good for the next round, but check with your child's pediatrician before trying corn or wheat cereals, which may provoke digestive problems in some infants. After that you can think about moving on to vegetables and fruits. Meats should be introduced last. Let your baby try each new food (one to three tablespoons or 15 to 45 ml) for a few days before introducing another. Watch for signs of a reaction: diarrhea, irritability, runny nose, coughing or wheezing, or a rash. If any feeding is followed by a more severe reaction, such as an immediate rash or difficulty breathing, contact the doctor right away. Fortunately, sudden and intense reactions to foods are very uncommon at this age.

Here are a few additional cautions about foods and feeding:

- Do not feed honey to your baby. Infants younger than twelve months who eat honey may develop infant botulism, a form of food poisoning that can cause serious damage to the nervous system and, in rare cases, death.
- Keep your baby on breast milk or infant formula rather than milk from the dairy case.
- Steer clear of fruit juices, punch, or other sweetened drinks. Some babies may become so enamored of sweet liquids that they will favor them over more nutritious sources of calories.
- Don't feed your baby foods with added salt or sugar or spicy flavors.
- Avoid feeding your baby certain vegetables that you have prepared yourself. Commercial baby food preparations of these vegetables are made from produce that has been screened for nitrates, which can be toxic to young infants.

- To avoid excessive weight gain, don't let your baby become a grazer. Instead, keep him on a regular feeding schedule.¹⁹

In Other Words ...

“When you introduce stage 1 foods—about one or two months after starting cereal—begin with vegetables. Work your way through those before starting fruits. Buy a brand with no added sugar. I like my patients to learn to enjoy vegetables before having their palates tantalized with sweeter things like fruit.”²⁰

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Baby Suddenly Afraid of Strangers

Question

My baby has always had a ready smile for strangers, but when my great-aunt dropped by last weekend and wanted to hold her, the baby started screaming uncontrollably. What do you think has happened to cause this change?

Answer

It sounds like you're dealing with a normal case of *stranger anxiety*. As early as six months of age, a new phase develops in which a child who formerly seemed comfortable around everyone will begin showing anxiety among unfamiliar people. The approach of someone new or someone she hasn't seen for a while will provoke a wide-eyed stare, usually followed by wailing and clinging to you for protection.

Since fear of strangers is virtually universal as the first birthday approaches and usually continues well into the second year, you and your great-aunt should relax about it. In fact, a simple strategy may help her and your baby get acquainted.

First, your great-aunt (or any other strange visitor, for that matter) shouldn't try to touch, kiss, or hold the baby right away. In fact, even a direct return of your baby's stare may set off a healthy cry. Instead, you and your great-aunt should chat as if nothing else is going on. Let the baby see that this is someone *you* are comfortable with. Give her time to get used to the sight of this new person in your home. After a while, some simple exchanges of looks, touches, and eventually play will begin naturally as your great-aunt becomes one of the gang.

The flip side of *stranger anxiety* is *separation anxiety*—an increased unwillingness to be separated from the main caregiver (usually, but not always, Mom). Your baby may begin to cry when you simply step into another room for a moment or put her into her crib for a nap. If and when she's about to be left with a relative or a sitter, the crying may escalate into a wailing and clinging session of spectacular proportions.

You can deal with this situation by avoiding extremes. Some parents will do anything to prevent even one minute of crying or unhappiness in their child's life. Others—generally those who have an extremely controlling parenting style—may be determined to ignore separation

anxiety altogether. Both approaches stake out a path of least resistance that may seem to work for now but may also exact a terrible price in the future.

Separation anxiety, like *stranger anxiety*, is a normal phase of child development. It's virtually inevitable, but you can buffer its impact by adopting a strategy similar to the one described above for introducing your child to your great-aunt. For example, if a sitter is coming to your home, have her arrive half an hour early so she can get acquainted with the baby in an unhurried manner. If, on the other hand, you're dropping your child off at a place that is new to her, plan to stick around for a while and allow your baby time to explore and get accustomed to the new environment. When it's time for you to depart, don't stoke the emotional fires with a dramatic farewell. Let your baby get involved in an activity with the caregiver, say a short and sweet good-bye, and leave.

The separation process will be much more unpleasant if your baby is tired or hungry. If you can schedule your departure after a nap or a meal, it may go more smoothly. There is no harm in finding a so-called "transitional object" to serve as a comforting reminder of things that are familiar to her—a small toy, for instance, or a "security" blanket.

If you need help implementing any of these ideas, don't hesitate to give Focus on the Family's Counseling Department a call. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.²¹

In Other Words ...

"Know the fine line between being a protective parent and being overprotective. Your child should feel safe but shouldn't be so insecure as to never want to be alone. Shielding unpleasant situations is part of a parent's responsibility, but children also must have the freedom to learn from their experiences and their mistakes."²²

—Colleen Shemeley

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Part 2: Toddlers

13

Toddler Is Negative and Contrary

Question

I've just about reached the point of exasperation with my toddler. If I offer him a cracker or a cup of water, he says, "No!" If I set the cup aside, he cries and begs for it. He acts the same way with other children at the church nursery. Why is he so negative and contrary?

Answer

This is completely normal. Up until this point, your child's explorations of the world have been fact-finding missions. He's been discovering what happens when, for example, he pulls the cat's tail, eats the mashed banana, or presses buttons on the TV. Now he's ready to take things a step further. Now he wants to know how much *power* he wields. In effect, he's asking, "What will happen if I push the limits? Who's *really* in charge here?" This phase generally begins at some point during the second year of life, usually between 14 and 16 months. It's what many parents popularly refer to as "the terrible twos."

During the coming months, most, if not all, of the limits you've established will be challenged. At times these challenges will take the form of a spectacular full-frontal assault. To call a child at this stage "oppositional"—a developmental term applied to this period—may be an understatement. "Openly defiant" is probably a far more accurate description. By 18 months, his favorite word may well be *no* followed by three exclamation points. The premise underlying the behavior you've described is very simple: if it wasn't *his* idea, he doesn't want anything to do with it!

The duration and severity of this oppositional stage will vary, but you can count on seeing manifestations of it for at least six months. Some children who are particularly agreeable and compliant won't give you too much trouble (there aren't too many of these), but others who are especially strong-willed may seem to push the boundaries on a daily basis.

To a certain degree, this behavior represents an important developmental milestone for your toddler. He is developing a budding sense of identity, an awareness that it is possible to make things happen and a compelling need to find out how far his newfound capabilities can take him. In some ways these characteristics are strikingly similar to those observed in another age group—teenagers. But there are important differences. During the teen years, your goal will be to let go and escort your son to the threshold of responsible adulthood. With a toddler, on the other hand, it's critical that he understand without any doubt that you are in charge. If you don't establish your authority by 24 to 30 months of age, your child may be very unpleasant to live with for months—or even years—thereafter.

How do you do this? By balancing love with limits and applying appropriate *consequences* for negative behaviors. Here are a few thoughts to bear in mind as you prepare yourself for the inevitable conflicts that lie ahead:

1. When your child doesn't do what you've asked, take action and explain why. You don't have to get angry or raise your voice. You don't have to complain or make threats. Just take appropriate action, making sure that what you do will be meaningful but not harsh and that you will follow through with the action. If he's doing something he shouldn't be doing or something that harms others or places himself in danger, remove him from the situation. Arrange for him to take a "time-out" in an isolated and boring location. Make it clear that similar results will follow every time he engages in this kind of activity.

2. Make certain that your response to your child's misbehavior is timely. A toddler will not remember what you were upset about an hour ago, so act decisively and act *now*.

3. Be sure to enforce your rules and limits *consistently*. Not only should your child know that you'll back up your words with action every time, but he should also understand that your response won't waver to any great degree. On-again, off-again discipline is confusing, and it generates disobedience and unhealthy fear.

If you need help implementing any of these ideas, don't hesitate to give Focus on the Family's Counseling Department a call. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.²³

In Other Words ...

"“Mommy, can I have some candy?!” ... You know your child has reached code red, the highest tantrum level.... Leave the line [with your child,] telling the checker you'll be right back. Ask the courtesy clerk to temporarily place your cart in the back in cold storage. Leave the store and then return after your child calms down.”²⁴

—Lynne Thompson

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Toddler Misbehavior”](#) by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Temper Your Child’s Tantrums* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1986)

Toddler Won't Share

Question

I've been shocked to see how selfish my toddler can be in social situations with other children. How can I teach him to share his things and be more generous and kind in his interactions with others?

Answer

No matter how flawlessly your child has been reared, the virtue of sharing with peers—or anyone else—probably won't become part of his social repertoire until sometime around the third birthday. Sharing is not an easy concept to grasp at this age for a number of reasons: The inborn, primitive self-centeredness of infancy and toddlerhood doesn't wane easily; patience is in short supply at age two; and it takes awhile to grasp the idea that something given up now can be retrieved later.

While you shouldn't let your toddler act like a playroom tyrant, you shouldn't expect to see any lightbulbs go on while you give an inspirational message about the importance of being unselfish or invoke the famous admonition, "How would *you* feel if someone did that to you?"

The best strategy for dealing with selfish behavior usually involves a *distraction* of some kind. For instance, you might deal with a squabble over a toy or book by diverting the combatants' attention to something else. You can also demonstrate the concept of taking short turns (five minutes or less) by using a kitchen timer: "Jared can have the book until the buzzer goes off, and then Samantha gets to look at it." This second option is especially useful because it gives your child an opportunity to experience sharing (however reluctantly), and even to begin making a habit of it, under your immediate supervision. Save your oration about the virtues of sharing for next year, when he can better understand what you're talking about and retain the basic idea.

Many parents look to nursery schools and play groups to provide training in this area. We have mixed feelings about this. A great deal depends on a child's developmental readiness for group interaction, and this is something parents and teachers aren't in a position to "force" no matter how hard they try. Child development experts generally agree that most children don't get

much out of structured “socializing” until they’re at least two-and-a-half years old. Under normal circumstances, the foundations for healthy, productive interactions with others will be laid at home and in low-key, informal play with friends under your direction. Children at this age tend to play one-on-one rather than in true group activities. We suspect that, given time, your son will learn how to get along with others quite nicely without attending any structured program for toddlers.

If you have further questions or would like to discuss your concerns at greater length, don’t hesitate to give our staff a call. Focus on the Family’s counselors would be happy to speak with you and offer some practical suggestions over the phone. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.²³

In Other Words ...

“If you turn more than one toddler loose in the same room, keep a close watch and plan to serve as referee. Having plenty of toys available will help, of course, but you will need to be ready to intervene at the first sign of combat. This is important not only as a means of keeping the flow of tears to a minimum but also to prevent physical consequences. All too often if a desired item can’t be pulled easily out of the grip of another child, pushing and hitting will follow.”²⁴

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Toddler Misbehavior](#)” by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Temper Your Child’s Tantrums* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1986)
- *Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*, John Trent, Ph.D., Rick Osborne, and Kurt Bruner, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2000)

Toddler Upset over New Baby

Question

Our toddler is having a difficult time adjusting to his new baby brother. He whines and cries for Mommy all the time, and lately he's been misbehaving as a way of getting our attention. How can we help him feel loved and secure?

Answer

The first thing you need to know is that this is perfectly normal. Since the day he came into the world your older child has been the center of attention in your home. Now a screaming, crying little stranger has suddenly appeared on the scene and usurped his role, demanding huge amounts of your time and attention. It's only natural that he feels a bit put out.

There are several strategies you can adopt to help him through this difficult period of adjustment. In the first place, it's going to be important for Dad to assume a more active, involved role with both toddler and baby. When Mom is nursing or tending the infant, her husband should engage the older child in some kind of fun one-on-one activity, giving the boy his full attention and resisting the urge to throw in the towel if he starts whimpering or calling for Mommy. On the other side of the coin, Father should give Mother frequent breaks in the business of changing, rocking, burping, and generally caring for the baby. That will enable her to spend some special time with her toddler each day.

It's worth mentioning that many parents notice some regressive behavior on the part of their toddler after a new baby arrives. For example, the child may try to climb into the infant's crib or suddenly forget his potty training skills. One way to nip this in the bud is to affirm your toddler for his "grown-up" capabilities and point out some of the advantages of being older. You might say something like, "You're such a big boy now! You can go to the park and ride on the swings. The baby is too little to do that." As you're aware, your older child needs to be reassured that he's special and unique. So let him know that you love him and praise him generously when he's helpful or kind toward the baby.

In Other Words ...

“Once [your toddler] is assured of her place in your affection ... she probably will pay little attention to the baby—until he becomes mobile. Once this happens, the insatiable curiosity of the new explorer will inevitably lead to an invasion of big sister’s possessions. If your older child isn’t yet two and a half, don’t expect her to embrace any high-minded ideals about sharing. Try to keep your older child’s prized possessions out of harm’s way, and in return, make it clear that any hitting or other physical action taken against the younger sibling will have unpleasant consequences.”²⁷

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Toddler Misbehavior](#)” by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Toddler up at Night

Question

Bedtime is a miserable struggle at our house. Our toddler fights it with every ounce of determination he can muster. When he does finally get to sleep, it's not unusual for him to be up several times during the night, requesting water or a snack or begging to be allowed to sleep in our bed. We're at our wits' end! Any suggestions?

Answer

Sleep problems in young children—that is, children of toddler age and older—should be handled with care. They may be due to any of a number of different causes, some serious, others not. (Keep in mind that our comments here do not apply to infants, since the sleep patterns of babies are a very different matter.) At this stage of a child's development, restlessness or an inability or unwillingness to fall asleep may in some cases be a sign of emotional distress. But this is not always true. Sleeplessness is sometimes traceable to physical causes, such as allergies or nutritional deficiencies. For this reason, we suggest you begin by discussing the situation with a qualified nutritionist or your child's physician.

If your pediatrician or family doctor is satisfied that you are dealing with a mere behavioral problem, we recommend that you initiate action to break the pattern as soon as possible. The longer it continues, the harder it will be to change.

Due to their innately more active temperament, boys tend to have a harder time calming themselves down and getting to sleep than girls. For this reason, it's wise to steer them away from boisterous or rowdy games (like "wrestling with Daddy") for at least an hour before bedtime. The same observation applies to television, which has a highly stimulating effect on young brains.

An appropriate bedtime *routine* is extremely important for both boys and girls. To achieve the level of physiological calm most conducive to sleep and rest, they should be allowed a period of "winding down" before hitting the sack. This means intentionally adopting measures to make evenings a quiet and restful time in your home. It might involve reading a book together, praying, or singing lullabies or kids' worship songs. Sometimes it's helpful to buy an

inexpensive CD player for the bedroom and let your son or daughter listen to some soothing music before falling asleep. You can also make use of a night-light (be sure that it doesn't cast any scary shadows on the wall) and have your child pick out a stuffed animal to be his or her special "bedtime buddy," providing comfort and security when you're not there.

If your child is getting up several times during the night, take steps to encourage him to return to his bed and stay there. Instead of scolding, ask questions like, "What do you *need* in order to go to sleep?" This will endow the child with a sense of empowerment. Once the request has been made (a night light, a stuffed toy, or a goodnight kiss) grant it immediately and escort him back to his room. A few words of comfort and reassurance from Mom or Dad are appropriate, but don't overdo it. Above all, make it clear that he will *not* be staying with you for the night; it is definitely *not* a good idea for you to sleep in your child's room or to let him sleep in your bed. That will only reinforce the behavior you're trying to extinguish, encouraging him to act helpless and dependent.

Once you've set your boundaries, stand by them, even if it means allowing your child to cry it out for one or two nights. This isn't easy, but once a child realizes that you aren't going to give in, the first of many battles of the will has been won, and the necessary adjustments will soon be made. If, on the other hand, you let him have his own way, you will establish a pattern of manipulation that will make parenting a much harder task in the days ahead.

If you have further questions, or if you'd like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call and speak with one of our counselors. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"One important factor in helping your children, especially young children, sleep well is by creating pleasant, memorable experiences at bedtime.... The actual ritual may vary depending on the child's age. For young children, you could start by reading a short story or Bible verse and explaining what it means, or tell them stories from your own childhood, as my father did when I was a child. Near the end, say something encouraging to each of your children. A great game you can create is to try and come up with something special each of your children did that day, and tell them how proud you are of them."²⁸

—Dr. Archibald D. Hart

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Sleep, It Does a Family Good* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- *Parent's Answer Book* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)

Toddler Throws Uncontrollable Tantrums

Question

Our toddler has always been strong-willed and prone to tantrums, but just recently there have been occasions when she gets so frustrated that it's almost impossible to calm her down. She will randomly and uncontrollably hit everything and everyone within reach, including herself. How do we handle this?

Answer

You can begin by asking some basic questions about the *causes* of her behavior. Generally, it's helpful to evaluate childish outbursts in terms of three different dimensions: the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual.

First, there may be physical or medical reasons for your child's feelings of frustration and her subsequent meltdowns. Is there any particular time of day when she is more likely to fly into a tantrum? If so, it's possible that her behavior is connected with a significant drop in her blood sugar. When a child is hypoglycemic, she is often prone to become irritable and to act out in the manner you've described. We'd suggest that you consult with your pediatrician to determine whether or not your daughter's tantrums are rooted in some kind of chemical imbalance in the body.

If you've followed this line of investigation without results, you'll want to give some serious attention to the second dimension of behavioral motivation—that of the emotions. Very young children sometimes need help controlling their emotional reactions. Your job as a parent is to set definite boundaries for the expression of childish anger and frustration and to enforce those boundaries with clear and consistent consequences. Time-outs are especially effective with toddlers. When your daughter begins to lose control, take her to a boring, neutral location—perhaps her bedroom or some other designated area where she can't hurt herself or do any damage to the furniture—and leave her alone for a predetermined period of time. We usually suggest one minute of time out for each year of a child's age—in other words, three minutes for a three-year-old.

It's important to keep your response to her unacceptable behavior as calm, as unimpassioned, and as "mechanical" and "automatic" as possible. Don't shout and scream and wring your hands. Just remove her from the scene, take her to her room, and walk away. In his book *Have a New Kid by Friday*, Dr. Kevin Leman suggests that the most effective strategy for extinguishing tantrums is simply to ignore them. That's because in many instances—and particularly in the case of kids who are highly intelligent—the uncontrolled behavior can quickly become a means of manipulation. Whether you realize it or not, when you react with distress, you're actually rewarding your child for acting out. In effect, you're telling her that she's "in charge." You're letting her know that she has the power to overwhelm you and back you into a corner. It's natural to feel that way, but if you do, don't let on. Instead, make a conscious attempt to shift into your "nonchalant" mode.

The third dimension you need to keep in mind in dealing with your daughter's tantrums is the spiritual. Though most secular psychologists tend to ignore this part of the question, it represents a very real and very important aspect of human behavior; in almost every case, outward actions flow out of deep sources of inward need. In your child's case, it's possible that her anger is simply the tip of the iceberg. You might visualize it as the point of a pyramid that can be divided into three layers: rage at the top, fear in the middle, and at the bottom, underlying everything else, a hidden sense of shame. If you believe this to be the case, you will want to supplement any physical, psychological, or disciplinary measures you apply to the problem with a great deal of prayer. You can engage in spiritual warfare on your child's behalf by praying over her at night when she is asleep, asking the Lord to remove the fear and shame that may be behind her outbursts of anger. For more insight into this approach, we suggest you procure a copy of the book *Praying the Bible for Your Children*, by David and Heather Kopp. This resource can be ordered through online booksellers and most Christian bookstores.

If you feel a need to discuss your child's tantrums at greater length with a member of our staff, don't hesitate to contact our Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Is she just going through a phase? For instance, you might wonder if your child's tantrums are age appropriate. If he's a toddler or approaching adolescence, you probably can neatly file that annoying—yet probably temporary—behavior under the label 'Terrible Twos' or 'Temperamental Teens.' This doesn't make tantrums much easier to endure, but at least you know relief will come. Tips from other [parents] can help defuse your anger and frustration. Also, understanding your child's personality type can help you determine his emotional limits."²⁰

—Laurie Winslow Sargent

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Toddler Misbehavior”](#) by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Temper Your Child's Tantrums* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1986)
- *Praying the Bible for Your Children* by David and Heather Kopp (Kingsway Publications, 2002)

Readiness for Toilet Training

Question

I've heard too many horror stories about potty training. How do we know when our child is ready? When the time is right, what should we do to encourage him and make the process easier?

Answer

We're of the opinion that it's unwise to get too heavy-handed with a toddler over the issue of potty training. This is one area where a positive and casual approach will yield the best results.

Some children begin to master toilet skills between eighteen and twenty-four months, but it's uncommon for children to be diaper-free during the day by age two. The majority can be trained by thirty-six months, but for some kids daytime control may not be accomplished until the fourth birthday. Most children will learn to control bladder and bowel at the same time, but this can vary from individual to individual.

Be on the lookout for the following indications that your child is ready to begin toilet training:

- He demonstrates some awareness that elimination (especially of stool) is going on.
- The time between wet diapers is increasing. This indicates that a specific spinal-cord reflex, which automatically empties an infant's bladder, is now being inhibited by signals from the brain.
- He is able to understand and carry out two or three simple commands in sequence.
- He tries to imitate some of the things you do every day.
- He is not embroiled in negativism. If your child's favorite word is still *no* and you're still neck-deep in a daily struggle for control, this is not the best time to start potty training.

In addition to your two-year-old being ready to learn, you must be ready to teach. We suggest you begin by talking about the subject in such a way as to spark your child's interest. Direct his mind to the excitement of the future when his toilet habits will prove to everyone how "grown up" he is. Let him know how happy you will be for him whenever he succeeds. Then sit him on the potty chair and begin to exercise some patience.

Be prepared for mistakes, and don't let them upset you. Praise and reward successes. Above all, try to maintain a casual attitude throughout, and avoid the use of punishment. As we've

already indicated, a few children are not ready for potty training until they are three or four years of age, though most will make the grade much sooner. Above all, don't worry when all the other children you know are trained and your child is not. Unless a major disability is involved, everyone eventually learns to use the toilet.

If you have further questions, don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Focus on the Family's counselors would be happy to listen to your concerns and help you with some practical suggestions. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.³⁰

In Other Words ...

"Is [12 to 24 months] time to start potty training? Probably not. Some children may show signs that they are ready to learn this skill before the second birthday, and you may begin the process of training them if you desire. But most toddlers are still in the throes of discovering their place in the world and dealing with their emotions during this eventful year, and adding any pressure to get rid of diapers and use the toilet may create even more turmoil. Take your time."³¹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Potty Training](#)" by Lynne Thompson
- "[Behaviors and Strategies for 0-3-Year-Olds](#)" by Shana Schutte
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Potty Training Problems

Question

We've been trying to potty-train our son since he turned two years old, so far without success. We've been at it for several months now, but we're not making any progress. Is this normal?

Answer

Potty training is a touchy subject. It's the source of a great deal of unnecessary stress and anxiety for moms and dads, especially those who are experiencing parenthood for the first time. Our advice to you at this point is simple: *Relax*. There's no reason to be concerned about a two-and-a-half-year-old who isn't toilet trained yet. The average age for potty training is three, and that's just an average. In other words, it suggests that while some kids are trained closer to two, others don't reach that milestone until they're four.

We'd be willing to guess that one of the biggest reasons for the stress you're experiencing is the amount of pressure you're receiving from family and friends. Maybe grandma is telling you that in *her* day babies were toilet trained by the time they were eighteen months old. If that's the case, grandma needs to give your kid a break. If she thinks children nowadays are potty training later than they did when she was a young mom (and it's always possible that her memory on this point isn't as accurate as she supposes), there may actually be a reasonable explanation for this. Grandma probably used cloth diapers, whereas most parents today use disposables. Since disposables are far more absorbent than cloth, kids don't feel the same degree of discomfort when they're wet. As a result they're not in such a hurry to toilet train as they were in the past.

Here's a key principle to bear in mind: the toddler who succeeds in potty training is the one who is developmentally ready and *wants* to be trained. If kids are forced into toilet training before both of these factors emerge, they may develop a negative attitude that will only prolong the process.

Does your child have predictable bowel movements? Regularity can help you figure out the times of day when training attempts are most likely to succeed.

Can he pull his pants down and pull them back up by himself? For obvious reasons, this skill is vital to his success.

Does he want to wear “big boy” underwear? This symbol of independence can be a tremendous asset. Underwear can actually be used to reward a child for his or her interest in toilet training.

For more information on this and other issues related to the early childhood years, we’d recommend *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*. It’s available through our ministry and can be ordered by way of our website’s Online Store.

In Other Words ...

“While you undoubtedly would have been thrilled to see the last diaper disappear yesterday, be prepared to offer some patient, persistent, but relaxed attention to this project for as long as three to six months. This means that you should *not* be working under time pressure. All too often potty training turns into a do-or-die crash course because one or both parents want their toddler in a preschool or day-care setting where diapers are off-limits. If you feel that somehow time is of the essence and find yourself impatient over your toddler’s bathroom progress and exasperated when he has an accident, you may need to take a deep breath and reconsider your priorities.”³²

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Potty Training”](#) by Lynne Thompson
- [“Potty Training Tips”](#) by Dr. Juli Slattery
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

How Can I Stop My Toddler from Hitting?

Question

We have two small children and a huge hitting problem. About the time her ten-month-old brother began crawling, my two-year-old daughter decided to start “beating up” on him—kicking, punching, biting, screaming, whacking him with toys. This kind of thing goes on every day, several times a day. We’ve done everything we can think of to extinguish the behavior. We’ve tried calming her, soothing her, and giving her more attention. We’ve taken away privileges. We’ve sent her to her room for time-outs. We’ve yelled and lectured and spanked. Why doesn’t anything work?

Answer

You may find it reassuring to know that you’re not alone. Sibling rivalry is a perennial problem, and in the case of toddlers it frequently manifests itself in physical terms. So don’t lose heart. Many moms and dads have walked this path before you, and most of them will testify that there *is* a light at the end of the tunnel. The behavior shouldn’t be tolerated, but it has to be handled with care and discernment.

What should a parent do when one kid starts pounding on another? The response will vary depending on the age and maturity level of the child. At this stage, when the aggressor is only two years old, a good rule of thumb is “the less attention and drama, the better.” Your daughter needs to understand that her behavior is a problem, and that, in one way or another, it will be stopped. But take care that you don’t unwittingly reinforce her actions by turning these incidents into major events. Negative attention is still attention, and some kids crave the spotlight so much that they’ll do anything to get a rise out of their parents. That’s an itch you want to avoid scratching if at all possible.

You’ve admitted that the tactics you’ve employed thus far—shouting, screaming, spanking, time-outs, removal of privileges—haven’t worked. If you keep doing things the way you’ve always done them, you’ll probably keep getting the same results. Why not try a different tack? For example, there’s the “cool as a cucumber” approach. As soon as you see your daughter hitting your son, go directly to her, calmly pick her up, say something simple, like “uh oh!”, and

then quietly remove her from the scene. Place her in a safe, secluded location away from everybody else—in her room, perhaps, or a playpen. Don't allow her to come back until she's calmed down. When it's age appropriate, require that she apologize to her brother before returning to play. Throughout this process, use as few words as possible. The point is to downplay your response while expressing disapproval of the behavior. In this way, you won't be inadvertently feeding her craving for attention.

Meanwhile, make an effort to notice and reinforce any positive interactions you observe between your children. Sit down and play with them; when your daughter helps your son or treats him kindly, offer her lots of gentle praise. When you do this, get down on her level and make eye contact. Describe exactly what you saw (“Thank you for helping Johnny find the right piece for the puzzle!”) so that she'll know why you're praising her. Talk about having respect for others and their bodies, and help your daughter see that she and her brother are “on the same team.” Challenge her to become his guide and teacher, since he's little and doesn't yet understand the things that “big girls” know. And be sure to model appropriate behavior when *you* get angry.

We're not suggesting that this strategy is a “magic solution” or that it always has immediate results. We believe, however, that if you persevere in this path, you'll begin to see a change in your daughter's behavior over time. Remember, a controlled approach is crucial if our children are to learn what we want them to learn—namely, how to stay calm in the face of all kinds of problems and challenges.

If you need to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our team, feel free to give us a call. Our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. You can contact them for a free consultation. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Even with very basic ground rules ... some combat is inevitable. Furthermore, when it erupts, you may not always be able to figure out who did what to whom or who was at fault. This problem often gives parents considerable grief, and you will need plenty of wisdom, prayer, and patience to deal with it.... With very young children, separation from one another and whatever they were fighting over will be your most common tactic. Remember that this age-group is not terribly responsive to logic and reason. Later on, more sophisticated ground rules, “rules of evidence” when stories contradict, and consequences that fit the crime will need to be carried out.”³³

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Sibling Rivalry,”](#) a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *No Hitting: A Lift-the-Flap Book* by Karen Katz (Grosset & Dunlap, 2004)
- *Hands Are Not for Hitting* by Martine Agassi (Free Spirit Publishing, 2012)
- *ScreamFree Parenting* by Hal Edward Runkel (WaterBrook Press, 2008)
- *Keep the Siblings, Lose the Rivalry* by Dr. Todd Cartmell (Zondervan, 2003)

Part 3: Preschoolers

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Preschooler Fears Sleeping in the Dark

Question

Our preschooler is afraid to go to sleep in the dark. We've tried everything—an established bedtime, a night-light in the bedroom, books, prayers, songs—but nothing seems to help. How can we address these nighttime fears?

Answer

It's fairly common for small children to experience bedtime fears. Their little imaginations are developing like wildfire and they don't have the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Your child is probably going through a phase and will outgrow it in time.

If the problem persists, ask yourself if your child might be reacting to some kind of environmental stress. Have there been any recent changes at home or preschool that could have precipitated this bedtime behavior—the loss of a friend, the death of a pet, a move, the arrival of a new baby, or even marital conflict between Mom and Dad? It might be worthwhile to confront this question head-on. Sit down with your son or daughter and say, “Have you been feeling worried or scared about anything lately?” Encourage him or her to draw some pictures in response to your question. If nothing has changed and the child is simply going through a “scared of the dark” phase, here are a few other ideas you might try.

You mentioned that there is a night-light in the room. Make sure that it doesn't cast any scary shadows on the wall. Have your child pick out a stuffed animal to be his or her special “bedtime buddy,” providing comfort and security when you're not there. Sometimes it's helpful to buy an inexpensive CD player for the bedroom and let your son or daughter listen to some soothing lullabies or kids' worship songs just before falling asleep.

Most importantly, remind your child that God loves him or her and that He's always with us to protect us and take care of our needs. Continue your tradition of praying at bedtime, and teach

your son or daughter simple prayers to repeat if he or she wakes up in the night. Almost every book in the Bible has a verse that encourages us to “fear not.” This is a great opportunity to begin teaching your child this valuable scriptural lesson.

If you’ve tried all these suggestions and your child’s fears persist, we recommend that you call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department for a free over-the-phone consultation. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Monsters in the closet, under the bed, or outside the window may need to be banished.... Very often the beast in question doesn’t exist except in someone’s imagination. In this case it can be tempting to give a lighthearted, direct inspection (‘I don’t see any monsters in your closet—just a lot of junk!’), but you may leave the impression that there are monsters or aliens running around somewhere—they just don’t happen to be here at the moment. For these fears, more decisive reality checks are important (‘Bigfoot isn’t under your bed or anywhere else’).”²⁴

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Bedtime Routines and Fears”](#) from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Precocious Preschooler, Limited Budget

Question

My preschooler is very precocious. She already knows how to read and she's curious about everything. We don't have the money for preschool, and I'm uncertain about home schooling. What do you suggest we do?

Answer

It's a blessing to have a child who possesses such a love for learning. As you probably know, there are many parents who would love to have your problem. It's likely that your child will be ready for kindergarten very soon. We'd suggest that it's not too soon to begin planning and thinking about her educational future. Since private school isn't an option for you, you'll need to make some decisions about public school vs. charter school vs. home school.

On the Parenting page of Focus on the Family's website you'll discover a number of articles designed to help you explore various educational options. You can also find out more about your child's unique learning style by visiting the Performance Learning Systems website and taking the complimentary Learning Styles Assessment. For additional guidance and information, feel free to contact our Counseling Department for a brief over-the-phone consultation. Please see the ["How to Reach Us"](#) page in the front of this book.

In the meantime, while she's still waiting to enter the world of the formal classroom, you'll want to make your child's home environment and daily life experiences as challenging, stimulating, and enriching as possible. Since she loves to read, we'd encourage you to make weekly visits to your local library's children's section. Let her check out several books each week on different topics that interest her. You should also take advantage of the special children's programs that most public libraries offer. These programs, which usually come with no cost attached, can introduce kids to a wide variety of interesting subjects.

If you live in or near a major city, avail yourself of the many children's activities sponsored by parks, museums, theaters, and zoos. Many of these are free or minimal in cost. Look in your newspaper's Sunday calendar section each weekend to find out what special events for kids are coming up during the following week. You'll be amazed at the number of things there are to see

and do. If you live in a rural area this may involve a special weekend trip once in a while, but it's well worth the time and effort.

With a little thought and ingenuity, you can also come up with some fun, educational activities that your child can do around the house. The Internet is a great source of ideas. You can also get suggestions by visiting a local teacher's or educational store. Whatever you do, make it a special point to affirm your daughter for her creativity, imagination, and love of learning. Answer her questions to the best of your ability. Help her when she has trouble understanding something new. Encourage her to look at the world with enthusiasm. You'd be surprised what your assistance and partnership will mean to her as she sets out on this new adventure of learning and discovery.

In Other Words ...

“Too many families think only of \$100 extravaganzas to an amusement park, which few can afford more than once a year. Meanwhile, they miss the fun of a trip to an ice cream shop, a band concert in the park, a toboggan slide, a swimming pool, the public library, a hike around a lake. Nearly every area has places the average family hasn't gotten around to seeing yet, and most of them are free. We just have to take notice.”²⁵

—Dean and Grace Merrill

Need More Help?

Online

- JellyTelly.com is “a safe place for kids to learn and play,” featuring Bible-based videos and games.
- Focus on the Family offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.
- “[Cultivating a Love for Learning in Your Children](#)” by Jody Capeheart

Other Resources

- *Handbook on Choosing Your Child's Education*, Maria Hernandez Ferrier, Ed.D., general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Precocious Preschooler Talks About “Boyfriends”

Question

Lately our preschool-age daughter has been talking a lot about having a “boyfriend.” Recently, while playing with some neighborhood kids, she and a boy of the same age kept going off into a corner of the yard “to be alone.” Is this dangerous behavior?

Answer

Can you guess what our first piece of advice is going to be? *Turn off the television!* In the absence of more detailed information about your family situation and the background of your little girl’s behavior, we can only surmise that she’s picking up her notions about “boyfriends” and “being alone together” from popular entertainment. As far as we can see, there’s only one other way she may have been exposed to ideas of this kind: through observing the behavior of an older sibling or friend.

Assuming that TV *is* the problem, we’d encourage you to do some careful thinking about the types of programs you’ve been allowing your daughter to watch. When you do, chances are you’ll discover ample confirmation of our theory. At that point it will be time to set up some strict new viewing guidelines for your family. It should be obvious that some shows are appropriate for preschoolers while others definitely are not (and that includes a lot of teen-oriented programming).

That said, we should hasten to add that there’s no reason to be overly concerned about this behavior. What you’re seeing is primarily childish make-believe. Nevertheless, the fact that your daughter wants to get alone with a boy suggests that she’s imitating attitudes and actions she’s seen modeled elsewhere. Kids her age don’t come up with ideas like this on their own.

What can you do about it? If she engages in this kind of activity again, or if she seems perennially obsessed with the concept of “having a boyfriend,” we suggest that you gently take her aside and ask her where she learned about such things. Tell her how glad you are that her group of friends includes both boys *and* girls. Then explain that girls don’t have to have “boyfriends” until they’re much older. It’s as simple as that.

If you feel a need to discuss your concerns at greater length, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“[A G-rated movie] had a family’s kindergartner acting like a ‘hormonal teenager’—not uncommon, since even youngsters unaware of their own sexuality may start dressing and talking in sexual ways as they receive cues from entertainment, dolls, or toys.... Your kids ... need to hear that they’ll gain far more than they’ll lose when your family takes a smart, God-honoring approach to screens, songs, and sites. When they understand that, they’ll be less likely to react as if you’ve clamped electronic monitoring bracelets on their ankles.”²⁶

—Bob Waliszewski

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Prevent the Sexualization of Your Daughter](#)” by Vicki Courtney
- “[Teaching Children Healthy Sexuality](#)” by Rob Jackson
- [PluggedIn.com](#), a ministry of Focus on the Family, reviews movies, TV shows, music, and video games—and provides “Movie Nights” discussion guides to use with your kids.
- [The Parents Television Council](#), a “non-partisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment,” features a family guide to TV programs, movie reviews, and more.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *God’s Design for Sex* by Stan and Brenna Jones (NavPress, 2007). This series of four books helps you teach your children about sexuality and male-female relationships in an age-appropriate way.
- *Why Boys and Girls Are Different* by Carol Greene (Concordia Publishing House, 2008). For girls ages 4-6.
- *Plugged-In Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Shy Preschooler

Question

My preschooler is terribly shy. He's soft-spoken, retiring, and afraid of walking into a room full of people. He used to cry when we'd take him to the church nursery, and now he resists being left at his day care center. How can I help him become more confident?

Answer

Under certain circumstances, shyness can be a formidable social handicap for kids. It may also become a source of tremendous frustration for parents. Every individual is different, and there *are* some situations in which a child's bashful behavior may turn into a cause for serious concern. But most of the time it's simply a question of temperament. In such cases, there's no need to regard it as an insurmountable problem.

It's important to realize that some kids are born with a genetic predisposition to be less outgoing than others. Shy children tend to be cautious, anxious, and reticent about tackling things that are new or unfamiliar. Parents need to be careful not to reinforce this avoidant behavior, either by giving in to their child's fears or by criticizing his shyness and harming his self-esteem. Raising bashful boys and girls is a delicate art that requires discernment, sensitivity, and balance. If you have a more assertive, confident personality than your son, it may be particularly difficult for you to understand him. In that case, your first assignment is to get inside his head and try to see the world through his eyes.

One of the best ways to help a shy child is to show him that you love him unconditionally. Let him know that he doesn't have to perform in certain ways to be acceptable to you. At those moments when he seems paralyzed by his bashfulness, respond with encouragement; a disapproving comment or look will only make him feel even more self-conscious. At the same time, resist the temptation to make life easier for him by shielding him from new people or situations. Coddling and reinforcing self-defeating behavior in the present will only create additional problems in the future.

With specific reference to the situation you're facing at the day care center, we suggest that you make up your mind to establish firm rules and set definite limits. Express your expectations

clearly and stick to your guns even when your son cries or throws a tantrum. Your goal should be to take him into the day care center, say good-bye, and leave. You may want to enlist the help of the nursery worker or day care supervisor to make the transition easier. Your child isn't going to like this plan, and chances are that he will raise a huge fuss. As a matter of fact, things will probably get worse before they get better. If this happens, don't give in to your son's protests. If you do, you'll be rewarding him for acting out, and he'll only ramp up his negative behavior the next time.

There is always a chance that your child's problems may be serious enough to warrant professional help. Some kids—like some adults—have a condition known as “social phobia.” Fortunately, this problem can be effectively treated through therapy. To find out more, we suggest you call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Extroverted people are more easily understood and accepted by our society. This is especially true for males; introverted teen boys are often seen as timid at best and ‘dangerous loners’ at worst. The pressure for introverts to act like extroverts is enormous. If God has wired your [child] to be an introvert, are you willing to accept that? Or are you tempted to push your young person toward the other end of the scale, fearing he'll never be a success if he doesn't ‘come out of his shell’?”³⁷

—Joe White

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Delight in Your Child's Design* by Laurie Winslow Sargent (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Building Confidence in Your Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Revell, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Preschooler Is a Picky Eater

Question

Our preschooler is an aggravatingly picky eater. We never allow between-meal snacks, yet dinnertime has become a major pain. I see this refusal to eat as disobedience, but my spouse is afraid that making an issue of it will lead to eating disorders down the road. What should we do?

Answer

The most important issue facing you right now is the need to achieve some kind of solidarity with your spouse. If you're going to be effective parents, the two of you need to get on the same page. Before doing anything else, find a time and place when you can get alone and talk about this problem in a rational, adult way. Whatever it takes, work your way through to the point where you can agree about the best way to deal with it. As part of that discussion, let your spouse know that there's one point on which you can both rest easy: Responding to your child's mealtime willfulness with appropriate consequences will *not* cause an eating disorder later in life.

Once you're on the same team, you can map out a plan of action. Begin by setting firm guidelines for your child with regard to what she eats, how she eats it, and how long it takes her to finish a meal. Make it clear that you expect her to eat what you put in front of her. There is nothing wrong with giving her a choice between two equally nutritious options. For example, you can let her select either broccoli or beans as the vegetable component of her dinner. But don't allow her to pick between beans and crackers.

Most importantly, don't turn meals into power struggles. Just give your child clear, simple instructions regarding what is expected of her and then move forward according to your normal mealtime routine. If you provide a wholesome selection of foods at a meal and she isn't interested, don't fight over it, make it the main subject of conversation, or force her to sit for hours at the table until she eats it. Just give her a reasonable amount of time to finish her meal. Then, if she hasn't finished her food by the time dinner is over, put it in the refrigerator and take it out again when she's hungry. Don't be badgered into preparing something specifically for her

at every meal, and don't allow her to become stuck in a rut of three or four foods that are "the only things she ever eats." She won't starve if you hold your ground.

Remember, it's critical that Mom and Dad agree on how to respond to this issue and that each of you is willing to stick with the program and follow through on the plan. If you don't, the problem will persist and your frustration level will only increase. If you'd like to discuss your situation with a member of the Focus team, one of our staff counselors will be happy to give you a brief, one-time consultation over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"It's typical for toddlers and preschoolers to eat a good breakfast and lunch, only to refuse dinner. This may be because breakfast and lunch foods are naturally more appealing to many young children. Whatever the reason, offer a good variety of foods at all meals if you can. If your child has a poor appetite for dinner, don't let him snack during the three hours before the meal—and offer nothing to eat afterward."³⁸

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Mealtimes: How to manage nutrition, manners, and picky eaters](#)" from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Food Fights: Winning the Nutritional Challenges of Parenthood Armed with Insight, Humor, and a Bottle of Ketchup* by Laura A. Jana, M.D. and Jennifer Shu, M.D. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Preschooler Terrified of Bugs

Question

My preschooler has developed an aggravating problem. He's always been a little scared of bugs, but recently he was bitten by something at school during snack time, and now he flies into complete hysterics every time the class is supposed to go outside. What's the solution?

Answer

It sounds like your child has developed his own version of *entomophobia*, which is a fear of insects. As you're finding out, it's tough to be four or five years old and bugged by bugs; a phobia like this can really put a cramp in your style if you're a kid who has always enjoyed playing outdoors. Here's what we would suggest.

If your son was already afraid of bugs and then actually suffered an insect bite, it's only natural that his fears would escalate. That part is understandable. At the same time, his reaction seems pretty extreme, so we're guessing that he may be naturally anxious or high-strung. This could be a matter of inborn temperament, in which case he is probably always going to be the kind of child who needs a lot of extra reassurance and comfort from you. You don't need to feel hesitant about supplying this need in appropriate measure, but neither should you baby him unnecessarily. Instead, look for ways to help him conquer his fears.

As you tackle this challenge, remember that your child's panicked reaction stems from two causes: his young age *and* his lack of understanding. Adults who suffer from phobias are usually aware that their fear is irrational, but continue to struggle with anxiety and avoidant behavior in spite of what they know to be true. Children's fears, on the other hand, can often be attributed to simple inexperience; they become paranoid because they don't have complete or accurate knowledge of the thing that scares them.

A very practical strategy you can adopt would be to make a fun project out of helping your son overcome his fear. Go to the library together and check out some books on bugs. Help your child identify the different species of insects. Learn their names and talk about how they live. Start with harmless-looking bugs such as ladybugs and caterpillars. Get out the crayons and draw pictures of insects together. Giggle and laugh as you draw. You might even buy some toy plastic

bugs for him to play with. The point of all this, of course, is to take the thing that causes him to panic and make it familiar and fun.

If you follow this course of action, our guess is that this phase will pass and your child will eventually learn that most bugs are harmless. If this doesn't happen—if the problem persists beyond a few months or seems to get worse—you may want to consult with a child psychologist. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can supply you with a list of referrals to qualified Christian therapists practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your son's situation with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"The first and most important thing is to believe your child's fear. Talking about and affirming the existence of her fear will help your child. But be careful not to overtalk the fear or express your own fears. If your child doesn't want to discuss it, encourage her to [tell] a fictional story about another person with the same fears or draw a picture of what could happen."³⁹

—Colleen Shemeley

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Childhood Fears](#)" by Colleen Shemeley
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Where's God When I'm S-Scared? A Lesson in Handling Fear*, a VeggieTales video (DVD, Big Idea Productions, 2008)

Preschooler Walked In on Parents Having Sex

Question

Embarrassing as it is to admit, our preschooler recently walked in on us while we were having sex. I panicked and tried to cover up as best I could, but I could tell he was upset. I can't stop feeling guilty about this. Will this experience have a long-term negative effect on our son?

Answer

We don't think you need to be overly concerned about what your son witnessed. You can be pretty sure that he isn't the first child ever to have walked in on his parents during an "intimate moment." It's safe to assume that this kind of thing has happened many times during the course of human history. It's only natural that he should have been a bit confused by what he saw, but if he hasn't brought it up since, we doubt that the incident has caused any long-term damage.

We should add that there's no reason for you to feel guilty about this. You can't avoid the fact that sex is an important element of marriage and a normal part of family life. When you're a parent, things like this can happen from time to time. If they do, don't beat yourself up over it. Just do your best to take it in stride and move on.

As a side note, it's worth mentioning here that sex education, in our view, is primarily the responsibility of parents. We believe it should be approached as a lifelong learning process, not a one-time "birds and bees" discussion that takes place sometime during the middle school years. As a preschooler, your child is already old enough to be able to understand some basic concepts about human sexuality, provided they're presented to him by way of age-appropriate language. At the most basic level, he needs to know that sexuality is not something scary and shameful, but a wonderful gift from God, designed to be expressed between a man and a woman within the context of a marital relationship.

We'd encourage you to use this incident as a place to begin the discussion of sex and sexuality with your son. Among other things, this may help you resolve your feelings of guilt. It will also go a long way toward enabling him to clear up any remaining confusion over what he witnessed.

To help you get started, we'd like to recommend a series of books entitled *God's Design for Sex*, by Dr. Stan and Brenna Jones. Each book in the set is written with a specific age-range in mind, and will guide you as you begin to talk to your son about this very important part of life. You can order this resource by calling Focus on the Family headquarters or visiting our Online Store.

If you have additional questions or would simply like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

One last piece of advice for you and your husband: Buy a lock for your bedroom door!

In Other Words ...

"Children's curiosity is best addressed with a confident response, in mutually agreed upon terminology like this: 'After all these years, we still love each other and sometimes get excited to spend time together.' If your kids have seen the two of you holding hands, kissing, and going out on dates, they're probably comfortable with the idea of parental closeness."⁴⁰

—James Vigorito

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Talking about Sex](#)," a collection of articles on topics ranging from healthy childhood sexual development to what to do when your child views pornography
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- "How Can We Have Sex When Kids Are in the House?" by James Vigorito, in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids About Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *God's Design for Sex* by Stan and Brenna Jones (NavPress, 2007). This series of four books helps you teach your children about sexuality and male-female relationships in an age-appropriate way.

- *How to Talk Confidently with Your Child About Sex* by Lenore Buth (Concordia Publishing House, 2008)

Explaining Birth Process to Preschooler

Question

I am in the late stages of pregnancy and would like to know the best way to explain the birthing process—honestly but tastefully—to our preschool-age child. Any suggestions?

Answer

When discussing human sexuality with children, the best approach is to give them just enough information to provide satisfactory answers to their questions. Avoid going into so much detail that their little minds are overwhelmed. The challenge here is to be frank, straightforward, and genuinely helpful while keeping the discussion well within the parameters of age-appropriate language and concepts. You know your own child best, and as a result you will understand most clearly how to accomplish this in your particular family setting.

When talking about the birthing process with preschoolers, a major issue of concern is likely to be, “How is that baby going to get out of mommy’s tummy?” One four-year-old boy of our acquaintance was extremely worried that the new baby was going to leave a “big hole” in his mother’s abdomen. If you’re faced with a question of this kind, you can simply say that there is a part of mommy’s body between her legs that God made very special. He designed her body so that when the baby is ready to be born, that special part opens up real wide—wide enough for the baby to come out. Then, after the baby is born, that part of the body goes back to the way it was before. Most children at this age will have no trouble accepting this explanation at face value.

While we believe in keeping your language simple when discussing subjects like sex and birth with small children, we are also firm advocates of using medically accurate names for body parts, including the sexual organs. Many pediatricians agree with this approach. You will have to determine for yourself at what precise point you want to introduce these terms to your child. But we would strongly caution you *against* using slang words or “cute” names for private parts. That can cause kids unnecessary confusion and may even become a cause of embarrassment later in life.

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Some will want to know more: ... Does it hurt to have a baby? Does Daddy help the baby come out? Matter-of-fact answers can alleviate a lot of concern: Yes, it can be uncomfortable when the baby is born, but a doctor helps the baby come out and can give medicine to help the mother feel better. Moms who are going to have babies go to special classes, usually with the dads, so they’ll be ready when the time comes.”⁴¹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Sexual Curiosity](#)” from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids About Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *God’s Design for Sex* by Stan and Brenna Jones (NavPress, 2007). This series of four books helps you teach your children about sexuality and male-female relationships in an age-appropriate way.
- *How to Talk Confidently with Your Child About Sex* by Lenore Buth (Concordia Publishing House, 2008)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- “What’s Childbirth Really Like?” by Sheryl DeWitt, in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Preschoolers: Managing a Vivid Imagination

Question

Our preschooler has an unusually vivid imagination. This is especially evident in the way he plays with other children. On one level we see this as a good thing, but we're also concerned to help him avoid extremes. How can we encourage him to develop his imaginative gift in a positive direction?

Answer

This is a critical issue. Imagination is a wonderful thing, and by enabling it to grow and develop unhindered in the right direction you'll be providing one of the most important services you can render to your child at this stage in life. A healthy imagination will motivate him to launch out into the world and learn about it with curiosity and confidence rather than with fear and trembling. You can help stimulate this kind of exploration by encouraging your child to ask questions, take part in family conversations, and engage with good books.

You can also help to foster a positive imagination by paying attention to the ways in which your child participates in role-playing and games of fantasy with other children. This staple activity of childhood usually gets into full swing during the preschool years. For kids at this age make-believe is not only normal but healthy. Pretending to be Moses or Cinderella, setting up a store or a ranch on the back patio, and devising their own adventures will exercise language and imagination far more than staring at a TV screen. You can generally allow these sessions to proceed with a minimum of parental intrusion, but keep your eyes and ears open for a few situations that may require some revision of the script:

1. *Inappropriate characters.* While someone may want to play Captain Hook or Goliath to round out the characters in a make-believe story, role-playing options shouldn't include serial killers, vampires, or other relentless evildoers. Suggest more heroic or more neutral characters.

2. *Destructive scenarios.* If your child's pretend characters do nothing but ninja-kick, wave laser sabers, fire toy guns, and generally inflict make-believe damage on others, you may want to suggest some less violent alternatives.

3. *Toxic fantasy*. This is a tough call in some cases because fantasy elements of many stories (such as C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*) can serve to convey some very positive values. But role-playing that involves “pretend” occult practices (such as séances or Ouija boards) or elaborate spell-casting could whet young appetites for more hazardous activities later on.

4. *Too much of a good thing*. Preschoolers can become so enthused about pretending to be Superman or Pocahontas that they don’t want the game to end. They may also try to use their character to gain power or attention. When your call to get into the tub is met with a resounding refusal (“X-wing pilots don’t need baths!”), you’ll have to decide whether to have your way by playing along (“Your bath orders come directly from your squadron leader!”) or by calling for an intermission.

5. *Early adolescence*. Little girls often love to play “lady dress-up” with old hats, costume jewelry, and gloves. But when a four-year-old insists on putting on nail polish or becomes overly infatuated with the social life of a popular doll, you might want to encourage her to broaden her horizons. The same observation applies in the case of boys: There will be plenty of time for the teenage years when they actually arrive.

To summarize, imagination can be a great thing, but you have a responsibility to help your preschooler understand the difference between truth and make-believe on a day-to-day basis. At an age when there is so much to learn about the world and so much going on inside your child’s head, the boundaries between reality and fantasy will wear thin at times. So if you hear a breathless report that there are giant spiders crawling around his room, and if it appears that his main interest is in gathering attention or reassurance, explain what can go wrong if he makes up alarming stories. If he tells a whopper to explain how the lamp was broken (“A big gorilla climbed through the window and knocked it over!”), you’ll need to coax the truth out with some finesse. In particular, he should understand that telling a lie to escape punishment is a much bigger concern than the actual misdeed itself.

If you have further questions or would like to talk about your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you’ll feel free to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.⁴²

In Other Words ...

“Have you stopped dreaming? That’s easy to do when you’re raising a family and established in a career—one that perhaps pays the bills but doesn’t satisfy.... It’s easy to fall into a rut, a mindset often labeled ‘being realistic.’ But if we do that, and stay stuck there, our children are likely to imitate us and to think and live in ruts as well. If we want our [kids] to be dreamers ... we need to be (or become) blue-sky thinkers ourselves.... If we believe that blue skies lie ahead—that life is still full of possibilities and opportunities provided by a loving heavenly Father—our [children] will believe it, too.”⁴³

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Larry-Boy and the Fib from Outer Space!*, a VeggieTales video (DVD, Big Idea Productions, 2004)
- *The Way They Learn: How to Discover and Teach to Your Child's Strengths* by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1998)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Friends Have Aggressive Preschooler

Question

Our best friends have a preschooler about the same age as our children. This boy is habitually mean and aggressive around our kids. We try to keep visits short and supervised, but inevitably one of our children ends up getting kicked or whacked. How do we put a stop to this without offending our friends?

Answer

The first question that comes to mind is this: *Why* is your friends' son so impulsively mean and aggressive? Without knowing more about the situation, we can only speculate, but we're guessing that his behavior is due either to ineffective parenting, some kind of family dysfunction, or more severe psychological problems.

Since the parents are your best friends, perhaps it wouldn't be inappropriate for you to suggest that they have their son evaluated by a mental health professional. This could be a child psychiatrist, a child psychologist, or a licensed family counselor. If it turns out that his aggressive behavior is simply a result of ineffective or inconsistent parenting, your friends should be able to get some good parenting instruction from the professional who conducts the evaluation. We also have a wealth of parenting materials available here at Focus on the Family. For more information, you or your friends can visit our Online Store or the Parenting page of our website. For referrals to licensed therapists practicing in your area, feel free to call our Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In the meantime, you need to protect your own children from harm. It's your friends' responsibility to step in and administer consequences when their son becomes violent or aggressive. Since it sounds like this isn't happening, here's what we would suggest.

Sit down with this couple and explain that while their friendship is important to you, the safety of your kids needs to be your number one priority. Then ask them if they will agree to this plan: Next time your children visit, they should inform their son that if he is mean to them or acts aggressively in any way, your kids will immediately need to go home.

Then, the next time it happens (as it certainly will), you should clearly announce that hitting is not allowed and that your family is leaving. Don't stay to discuss the matter. Leave immediately, even if their son protests or cries. Do this every time he displays aggressive or mean-spirited behavior of any kind. Since he obviously values playing with your children, it will probably only take a few incidents like this to put a serious dent in his negative behavior. If you and your friends are consistent, the behavior should eventually disappear.

If you feel the need for more personalized advice, please don't hesitate to call our counselors.

In Other Words ...

“For parents dealing with a bully in the home, the first step to resolving the problem is expressing what is appropriate behavior and what the consequences will be for ill treatment—either verbal or physical—of siblings or other family members. Mom and Dad should decide together what the house rules will be.... Once the boundaries have been clearly set, increase supervision to ensure that the bully's behavior improves. If the bully's behavior continues to be a problem or worsens, consider speaking to a counselor for additional advice.”⁴⁴

—Dr. Bill Maier

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *No More Jellyfish, Chickens, or Wimps: Raising Secure, Assertive Kids in a Tough World* by Paul Coughlin (Bethany House, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

Part 4: Siblings and Birth Order

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Sibling Rivalry

Question

I love my daughters, but they seem to be engaged in a constant battle. My mother says I should intervene, but my husband thinks sibling rivalry is normal for kids their age. Should I be worried about this?

Answer

Sibling rivalry *is* normal and extremely common, but that doesn't mean that it has to be tolerated. If carried to extremes, it can be potentially harmful, especially if the constant bickering is characterized by anger, bitterness, and mutual disrespect. Intervention may be necessary, but it's unlikely that you'll achieve anything simply by talking to your children. What's needed in a case like this is decisive action.

Look for a good opportunity to hold a family conference—a quiet evening when there's been a lull in the fighting and everyone is in a good mood. You and your husband should sit down with the kids and tell them that you're concerned about the disrespectful way they treat each other. Let them know that you've had enough of this kind of behavior and that you're determined to see some changes made. As part of this new program, make it clear that you're going to be implementing some new household rules. Explain that there will be consequences when they bicker or snipe at one another.

These consequences should be *immediate, consistent, and powerful*. For example, if your children receive an allowance, tell them that you will be deducting a dollar a week for every violation of the new "respect policy." You could also take away favorite toys, activities, or privileges for a period of time. Be sure to choose activities or privileges that really matter to your girls—phone or computer access for a pre-teen or adolescent, biking or dolls or time with friends for a younger child.

Write out your new rules and consequences in the form of a contract. Have your children sign it and post it on the refrigerator. Since it's important to emphasize *positive* as well as *negative* consequences, you might want to include an "earn it back" clause, whereby the kids can regain privileges by treating each other appropriately for a predetermined period of time. Once the plan is in place, stick to your guns and be diligent to implement the agreed-upon consequences consistently. When arguments arise, make a determined effort to avoid long discussions about "who started it." Model patience, kindness, and respect in your own behavior toward your children and in your relationship with your husband.

As a footnote, it's worth bearing in mind that sibling rivalry can sometimes be a cry for attention. If that's the case, then your system of rules and consequences are unlikely to yield the desired results until you've taken steps to deal with the root cause of the fighting. Ask yourself if you and your husband are scheduling sufficient one-on-one time with each of your children. It's important to "date" your kids at least once a week. This could involve something as simple as a trip to the store, going out for hot chocolate and a bagel on a Saturday morning, or a walk around the neighborhood in the evening. As you begin to spend more individual time with your girls, you may begin to see significant changes in the way they relate to one another.

If none of these approaches work, it might be advisable to seek the help and guidance of a qualified Christian family counselor. You can get that process started by calling our Counseling Department here at Focus on the Family headquarters. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book. One of our phone counselors will be happy to discuss your situation with you and provide you with a list of referrals to trained therapists in your area.

In Other Words ...

"Just because your kids fight, it doesn't mean that they don't love and appreciate each other. Yet sometimes as parents, we have to remind our children of this. Dusty loves to bug his big brother, and Dylan doesn't always handle this very well. The two of them can yell, hit, push.... Yet Dusty constantly wants to spend time with his big brother, and Dylan says that the scariest event in his life was when he thought Dusty might die because of a burst appendix."⁴⁵

—Dr. Steve Stephens

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Sibling Rivalry](#)" by Grace Stopani
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)

Child Mistreating Pets and Siblings

Question

I'm very concerned about my oldest son. We constantly have to reprimand him for hitting his younger siblings, and lately he's been alarmingly cruel to the cat and dog. I used to think he was just aggressive or hyperactive, but now I'm not so sure. Is this behavior pathological?

Answer

The first question that comes to mind is, "What else is going on in your child's life that might be driving him to take out his frustrations on pets and smaller, weaker siblings?" Is there tension or dysfunction in the household? Conflict between Mom and Dad? Recent or impending divorce? Trouble at school, bullies in the neighborhood, a death in the family, or some other type of trauma or loss? Any one of these circumstances could touch off the kind of behavior you're describing. If something in this list jumps out at you, or if other issues suggest themselves as likely sources of anger or aggression, we'd encourage you to go straight to the heart of the matter. Deal with the underlying cause first. Only then will it become possible to deal directly with the abusive acts that are causing you so much concern.

If you're still baffled, ask yourself if your child's behavior can be traced to outside influences. Is there another boy in the neighborhood who treats *his* pets this way? Has your son recently been exposed to a lot of violent television or video games? Are there other people in his life—friends or members of the extended family—who display abusive tendencies? Remember, children learn by imitation and often copy what they see exemplified in the world around them.

If neither of these lines of inquiry proves fruitful, you'll have to step up the intensity of your investigation. We suggest you begin by sitting down with the child and asking *him* what's going on. See if you can get him to pinpoint a reason for the cruel treatment he's been dishing out to the animals and his siblings. Don't raise your voice or blow your top. Instead, draw him out gently and question him patiently. Do your best to encourage him to talk.

We would also strongly encourage you to enlist the help of a child psychologist or family counselor. It's particularly important that you seek out professional assistance if you feel that your son's behavior indicates a *pattern* of abuse. A trained therapist will have a number of tools

at his or her disposal, such as play therapy and personality analysis, that will help you get to the bottom of the problem.

Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with referrals to qualified Christian counselors practicing in your community. Our staff would also consider it a privilege to discuss your needs and concerns with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Sometimes entertainment can promote violent behavior among children. If a child feels angry or hurt, songs or movies that endorse violence can encourage that child to react in violence.... A video game that allows a child to roam the streets and kill his enemies conveys the wrong message to that child. He may grow to enjoy the feeling he gets when playing a game where he has the power to hurt others.... Avoid allowing these types of influences in your home. Instead, provide encouraging alternatives. Play uplifting music in the home or when driving in the car; choose family films that have strong moral and encouraging themes; monitor video games and enforce time limits.”⁴⁶

—Dr. Bill Maier

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Helping Kids Deal with Anger* by Tim Murphy (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *Plugged-In Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)

Older Boys Pick on Younger Brother

Question

We have three boys in grade school and our two older sons are constantly picking on their younger brother. I intervene when I can, but the youngest one is beginning to play the victim, and I don't want to encourage him in that attitude. How do I handle this complicated situation?

Answer

If it's any consolation to you, you're not alone. Every parent with more than one child deals with sibling rivalry at some point. In some families these conflicts even extend into adulthood, with siblings in their 30s, 40s, and 50s competing with one another like grade school kids. That's why it's important to do everything you can to nip conflicts in the bud before the situation escalates.

You didn't mention whether you're a single parent, so for purposes of our answer we'll assume that you're married and that your sons are growing up in a home with a present, involved, and caring father. Dads have a powerful influence on their sons, whether for good or ill. Boys tend to imitate their father's behavior, including his treatment of other people. This leads us to ask the following questions. In your household, does Dad model patience, kindness, and respect in his relationship with other members of the family? Does he set firm limits on the boys' behavior, implementing swift consequences when the older ones pick on their little brother? If not, it's time for him to step up to the plate.

If he *is* doing these things consistently, then the issue may be that your older sons feel they need to compete for their *mother's* time and affection. Strange as it may seem, picking on little brother may be a way of saying, "Mom, I want you to pay attention to me."

In a case like this, one good way to solve the problem is to make sure that both Mom *and* Dad schedule one-on-one time with each of the boys a few times each week. This could involve something as simple as a trip to the store with you, a game of catch in the park, or a walk around the neighborhood. If your older sons are acting out because they're feeling a bit neglected, this individual time with them could make a huge difference in their behavior.

If you have additional questions or would like to discuss this situation at greater length with a member of our staff, you're invited to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your

own convenience. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book. In the meantime, you may want to pick up a copy of Dr. James Dobson’s best-selling book *The New Strong-Willed Child* and pay special attention to Chapter 9, “Bitter Brothers and Surly Sisters.”

In Other Words ...

“Anticipate tension times. Children have times when they are more prone to conflict, such as when they are tired, hungry, or overwhelmed. Give a warning. When you see things escalating, calmly tell your kids that if rules are broken there will be consequences.... If stuck, separate. Sometimes children need some distance to let their frustrations subside and emotions cool down. Give them time apart and then try to resolve the issue.”⁴

—Dr. Steve Stephens

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Sibling Rivalry](#)” by Grace Stopani
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *No More Jellyfish, Chickens, or Wimps: Raising Secure, Assertive Kids in a Tough World* by Paul Coughlin (Bethany House, 2008)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)

Spacing of Children

Question

Our first child isn't a year old yet, but we're already thinking about having another baby. Do you have any thoughts on the spacing of children? Are kids happier when they're closer in age, or is it better to plan them farther apart?

Answer

There is no simple answer to the question you've raised. The significance of the age-spacing of children can only be determined on a case-by-case basis; its role in shaping sibling relationships will probably vary from family to family. There are a number of different factors to be taken into account, and both wider and narrower spacing arrangements come with their respective pros and cons.

Children of the same sex born within two years of each other are more likely to forge close bonds and enjoy mutual companionship than those spaced farther apart. Unfortunately, they will also have more opportunity for conflict and competition. A great deal of good can come out of close sibling relationships of this nature provided Mom and Dad manage the details wisely. Maximum parental involvement is the key to achieving the happiest outcome.

Kids born four or more years apart will probably experience less camaraderie while growing up. This may translate into a more peaceful household, but such is not always the case; in many instances the conflicts will simply assume a different character. There are also some subtler issues that parents will want to bear in mind in this situation. For example, if the older child, who is naturally bigger and stronger, displays aggressive behavior, then providing safety and protection for the younger child will become a priority. If, on the other hand, the older child is mature, compliant, and cooperative, Mom and Dad may be tempted to place too many adult responsibilities on his shoulders—to expect him, in effect, to act as a “junior parent.” A child in this position needs to be encouraged to play and allowed to be a kid.

In very general terms, there may be more important reasons for planning a baby at a particular time than the ages of the children already present in the household. Of far greater significance is the health of the mother, the couple's desire for another child, financial considerations, and the

stability of the marriage. Mom and Dad should consider the steadiness of their own temperaments as well as the current condition of their budget. Factors such as genetically based depression, chronic anger, stress, unemployment, and substance abuse should also be weighed carefully before deciding how soon to bring another child into the world.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to invite you to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our trained counselors will be happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. They can also provide you with a list of referrals to licensed Christian family therapists in your area who may be able to offer further assistance. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Remember that 'not now' doesn't always mean 'never.' There's a big difference between wanting to have a baby and wanting to have a baby *now*. This may not be the best time; it certainly isn't if your spouse isn't comfortable with it... You don't want to coerce your spouse into having a child; you want him or her to be an eager participant. If you're not jointly committed to this, you need to wait."⁴⁸

—Sandra Lundberg

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Preparing to Start a Family](#)" by Steve Watters and Candice Z. Watters
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- "When Should We Have Children, and How Many?" by Lon Adams in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Concerned About “Middle Child” Issues

Question

We have two young children. My husband is afraid of having a third child anytime soon because he doesn't want to deal with “middle child” issues. Is this something we should be concerned about? If so, how can we overcome “middle child syndrome”?

Answer

You can tell your husband that his fears are largely unfounded. The good news is that middle children often grow up to be unusually well-adjusted, easy-going adults. Dr. Kevin Leman, who has done a great deal of research in the field of birth order studies, says that, on the whole, middle kids tend to do quite well. Their “in-between” position teaches them to be flexible, balanced, and good at coping with a wide variety of situations. They also tend to be good negotiators.

Of course, there *is* a downside—as with anything else. The middle child's unique experience of life sometimes inclines him to avoid conflict at all costs. As a corollary, he often learns to keep his real thoughts and feelings deep inside. Under certain circumstances, these characteristics can lead to problems later in life, particularly in marriage. That's because in order to have a healthy, thriving marriage, couples need to be able to communicate their deepest feelings to each other. But this is not an issue that is likely to have serious implications for you, your husband, or the rest of your family during your kids' early years.

To counteract some of these tendencies, Dr. Leman suggests that parents make an intentional effort to spend plenty of one-on-one time with their middle child—enough time to listen carefully to his heart and make him feel special. It's particularly important that Mom and Dad avoid comparing the middle child with an older brother or sister.

On the whole, then, there's very little reason for you and your husband to be overly concerned about the impact that a third child might have upon your second one. If you'd like to learn more about the effect that birth order can have on your children's temperaments, personalities, and relationships with one another, you may want to pick up a copy of Dr. Leman's *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. If you'd prefer to discuss your concerns at greater length

with a member of our staff, feel free to contact our counselors. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“We can say with certainty that middle children feel squeezed from above and below. They often feel they just don’t get much respect or attention. I often point out in seminar workshops that the middle child appears the least in any family photo album....

“In addition, be aware that a middle child often feels, ‘Nobody cares what I think.’ Look for ways your middle child can be allowed to lead or make a choice about where the family will stop for a treat, for example. Being recognized as someone who can make choices that affect the rest of the family will do a lot to gain better cooperation from a middle child on things like cleaning his room.”⁴⁹

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2009)
- *Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2000)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Parenting Twins

Question

We just became the proud parents of twins. This double pregnancy was a total surprise to us when we first learned of it, and we're still shell-shocked. What do we need to know about raising them?

Answer

First, a word of congratulations: We're excited to hear about the birth of your twins! We know that your days are going to be full and interesting, and we consider it a privilege to come alongside you with a little help and encouragement as you set out on the adventure of raising these precious children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Apart from the fact that it's twice the work (*and* twice the fun), raising twins doesn't differ significantly from rearing other children. Generally speaking, it's based on the same foundational principles of love, limits, and close parental involvement. There are, however, some special considerations to bear in mind, particularly if you've been blessed with *identical* twins.

The natural closeness and identification between two kids growing up in this situation is a wonderful thing, but it can also tend to obscure the individual identities of the children involved. There's nothing wrong with highlighting the similarities between your twins—for example, by dressing them in identical clothes when they're small—but you should also be looking for ways to appreciate and emphasize their differences. Make a point of allowing each child to be himself. As far as possible, love and discipline each one individually, according to his or her own temperament and personality. As they grow older, check in with them from time to time to see how they're doing. Ask questions like, "How does it feel to be a twin in this family? What can Mom and Dad do to help you figure out exactly who *you* are and what you want to do with your life?" In short, do everything you can to ensure that the uniqueness of each child isn't overlooked.

In the meantime, don't neglect your own needs as parents and as a couple. We recommend that you invest some time and effort in building and maintaining a strong support system. Don't be afraid to request help from parents, relatives, and friends. Get babysitters as often as possible,

plan regular date nights, and work hard to keep your marriage healthy and strong. Raising twins is a big job, and it can be exhausting at times. But with prayer, faith, God’s grace, and generous amounts of help from other people, we believe you can manage it successfully. We want to encourage you to tackle it with courage, composure, confidence, and a deep sense of joy.

For further information, you may wish to write to the Center for the Study of Multiple Births, Suite 464, 333 E. Superior Street, Chicago, IL 60611. In addition, the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Club, Inc. has a coping/outreach program providing referral agencies, coping centers, research studies, etc. You may contact this organization at 2000 Mallory Lane, Suite 130-600, Franklin, TN 37067-8231. The telephone number is 248-231-4480, and the e-mail address is info@nomotc.org. Please note that both of these organizations are secular in nature and Focus on the Family cannot guarantee that all aspects of their philosophy are compatible with our own. However, we feel they can be very helpful in the area of parenting twins.

If you need extra help, don’t hesitate to contact Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Our licensed Christian counselors would be more than happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“The best way to gather practical advice and information about a pending multiple birth is to make contact with a local parents of multiples group. Parents of twins, triplets, quads, and more have knowledge and experience which can be very comforting to expectant parents... While expectant mothers should follow their health care provider’s advice and instructions, the biggest benefit to joining a parents of multiples club is the opportunity to interact with other parents who have gone through a similar experience. There is nothing as helpful to a new or expectant parent as talking to another parent who has ‘been there.’”⁵⁰

— National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc.

Need More Help?

Online

- [National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc.](#) offers support, advice, resources, and research results to parents of twins and other multiple-birth children.
- [Center for the Study of Multiple Birth](#) provides research and education as well as information about festivals for twins and their families.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Part 5: Discipline

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When Should Discipline Begin?

Question

I'm a brand-new, first-time parent. I'm anxious to do the best job I can of raising my child. I keep hearing that if I don't start disciplining early, I'll never be able to catch up. How soon should I begin disciplining in earnest?

Answer

Excellent question. As you know, children pass through a wide range of developmental phases during the first couple of years of life. It should be obvious that there are different sets of parental responses appropriate to a child's behavior at each stage.

To begin with, it's important to understand that "discipline" as we normally understand the term is meaningless where infants are concerned. Babies who are not yet mobile and whose lives consist primarily of eating and sleeping are too young to understand instruction of any kind. When they cry or fuss, it's usually because they need something—to be fed, changed, comforted, or rocked to sleep. What they require most from parents at this stage of development is consistent and loving attention and care.

Accordingly, there should be no punishment for a child younger than 15 to 18 months old, regardless of circumstance. It's especially important to resist the temptation to resort to physical punishment. Hitting or shaking an infant can cause serious neurological damage, which can occur as the brain is slammed against the skull. Do not risk any kind of injury with a baby!

Once a child becomes capable of interacting with his environment, whether by crawling (usually somewhere between seven and ten months of age) or simply by touching and manipulating objects within his reach, the need to control and redirect his behavior is more pressing. But it would still be a mistake to think of such control or redirection as a form of "teaching" or "correction." At this stage, a child is still incapable of willful rebellion; most of the

behavior that Mom and Dad tend to regard as “negative” or “troublesome” is simply an expression of his desire to explore. The parent’s major responsibility during this phase is to ensure the child’s safety. Generally speaking, this means establishing and enforcing boundaries within the home, whether by verbal reprimands, “child-proofing” measures, gates and barriers, or other methods of physically separating a crawling infant from potential hazards.

The need for genuine discipline doesn’t usually arise until about midway through the child’s second year. At this time, boys and girls become capable of understanding what you’re telling them to do, and as a result they can very gently be held responsible for their behavior. A firm “No!” or a mild slap on the hand can be effective in certain situations, though on other occasions it may be far more helpful to mandate a brief “time-out” (two or three minutes at the most) or take away a favorite toy for a short period. Bear in mind that a child’s attention span and memory are extremely limited at this age, and that he will not be able to grasp the significance of long-term “punishments.” He can, however, begin to learn some basic lessons about boundaries and parameters in his relations with others and the world around him—for example, “no touch,” “no hit,” and “no bite.”

Through the next 18 months, you’ll gradually establish yourself as the benevolent boss if you can consistently mean what you say and say what you mean. Contrary to what you may have read in popular parenting literature, this firm but loving approach to child-rearing will not harm a toddler or make him violent. It is most likely to produce a healthy, confident child.

If you feel a need to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we’d like to encourage you to contact our Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation. Our counselors will be happy to discuss your questions with you. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“You don’t need to live in a state of constant anxiety, wondering whether one false move on your part will unleash a career criminal years later. The discipline of children involves an overall mindset rather than a cookbook full of behavioral recipes (‘If he does this, you should do that’). Discipline can include a variety of techniques and approaches that vary depending upon the child’s age and temperament. And what brings about a desired result with one child may prove to be a dismal flop with a sibling. While you will want to have an overall plan in mind, you will have to improvise along the way.”⁵¹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.
- “[Newborns](#)” from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)

Discipline: Uncooperative Child

Question

Our young son is disobedient and talks back. He won't do his homework and refuses to clean his room. When we try to discuss these issues with him in a calm, mature way, we usually end up getting angry and yelling at him. What are we doing wrong?

Answer

You're not alone. Many parents try to use words and reasons to convince their kids to behave. They think of children as miniature adults who can respond to rational argument in a logical way. The problem with this method is that it usually doesn't work, and generally leads to failure and frustration. That's because words and reasons don't shape a child's behavior. *Consequences* do.

A *consequence* is something that happens as a result of a particular behavior. Consequences can be positive or negative. You can use positive consequences to increase a positive behavior and negative consequences to decrease a negative behavior.

By way of example, let's consider your son's apparent difficulties with homework. When he comes home in the afternoon, you might say to him, "I need you to finish your homework by 5:00 P.M. If you finish by 5:00, I'll let you have an extra half hour of TV time tonight." TV time is a simple positive consequence that doesn't cost a parent anything.

What if he doesn't follow through? What if 7:00 P.M. rolls around and he hasn't even looked at his homework? That's the time to apply negative consequences. In this case, a negative consequence—which, by the way, should be spelled out clearly in advance—might be that your son doesn't get *any* TV time that night.

In order to work, consequences need to be *immediate*. Kids have brief attention spans and short memories, and they need all the help they can get connecting the dots. This means that consequences can't wait until tomorrow. They need to take effect *right now*. You can increase their immediacy by using tokens or a point system. Award points or tokens for good behavior and take them away for bad behavior.

Consequences also need to be *consistent*. You have to follow through even when you're tired and don't feel like it, and you need to be willing to do so *every* time your authority is challenged. Otherwise, your child will quickly learn that you don't mean what you say.

Finally, a consequence should be *powerful*. If it doesn't mean anything to your child, it won't have any effect. If your son isn't particularly interested in an extra half-hour of TV time, you'll have to come up with something else that really hits him where he lives—skateboarding privileges, perhaps, or maybe the chance to spend a weekend fishing with Dad. It should be obvious that the motivating power of specific consequences will change as a child grows older; for instance, a seven-year-old girl may take a keen interest in a new doll, but when she reaches the pre-teen years her thoughts may begin to run in a different direction.

If you feel the need to consult with a qualified family therapist, our Counseling Department would be happy to provide you with a list of referrals for your area. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“For the lesson to stick, the child needs to feel the consequences of defiant behavior. Sometimes it means you suffer too (not being able to go to an event you wanted to go to). However, letting a child do her activity that day, after saying I'm sorry, means she hasn't learned anything (other than to continue manipulating you). And neither have you.”⁵²

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Effective Biblical Discipline](#)," a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)

Spanking

Question

As first-time parents of a toddler, we have some serious questions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of spanking as a form of discipline. How can anyone recommend it in this day and age?

Answer

The key to effective child discipline is immediate, powerful, and consistent *consequences*. A spanking can serve as a meaningful negative consequence in cases of undesirable behavior, but it tends to be most useful—and necessary—when a child is under three and a half years of age. That’s because reasoning and taking away privileges simply don’t work with very young children.

With kids from three to five years of age, parents can use spanking and time out as part of a comprehensive discipline plan, but they should also begin to work with other types of consequences, such as taking away privileges. If Mom and Dad rely solely on one method, it will become less and less effective as a child grows and matures. For many school-age children, the removal of pleasures or privileges is actually more “painful” than a spanking.

Generally speaking, we take the view that corporal punishment should be applied only in cases of willful disobedience or defiance of authority—never for mere childish irresponsibility. In no instance should it be administered harshly or capriciously. We also believe that spankings are not appropriate for children 15 to 18 months old or younger. And spanking an adolescent is almost always a serious mistake.

It’s important that parents employ proper technique if they’re going to spank their children. Give your child a warning before each “spankable” offense. If he deliberately disobeys, inform him of the upcoming spanking, escort him to the designated room, and mete out the punishment. Typically this would involve one or two swats on the buttocks (note that while there may be a transient redness immediately following a spanking, it should never be done in such a way as to bruise a child). Follow up the spanking with a brief review of the offense. At all times parents

must be guided by the need to balance sensitivity and love with the appropriate measure of firmness.

If your child is out of control, we suggest that you repeat the spanking procedure up to three times. Then hold the child tightly in your lap, facing forward, until he or she calms down. This may take five or ten minutes.

For more information about the appropriate use of spanking, call our Counseling Department. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book. Or visit the website of the [American College of Pediatricians](#).

In Other Words ...

“Spanking—not slapping or hitting—should always be done by a parent who is in control of his or her emotions. In our home, we used a wooden spoon to spank. My kids dreaded seeing the wooden spoon coming, but they never had to dread the hand of Mom or Dad. Our hands were used exclusively for loving touches, caresses, and hugs; an inanimate spoon was the object of discipline. That may seem like hairsplitting to some, but I believe that in the psyche of the child, there’s a tremendous difference.... Regardless of the method, the Bible’s word on discipline clearly demands that parents be responsible and diligent in spanking, but strongly prohibits physical abuse of any kind. Obviously, the biblical approach is balanced, reasonable, and controlled.”⁵³

—Chip Ingram

Need More Help?

Online

- The [American College of Pediatricians](#) is a national organization of pediatricians and other healthcare professionals dedicated to the health and well-being of children. Its website includes a number of statements on parenting issues, including spanking.
- “[Approaches to Discipline](#),” a series of articles providing an overview on disciplinary methods
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

- *Effective Parenting in a Defective World* by Chip Ingram (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Does Spanking Teach Violence?

Question

If we spank our child, will this lead her to assume that violence is acceptable? Or that it's okay to hit others or even to hit *us* back?

Answer

Opposition to spanking has been growing significantly in elite circles over the past decade or so. Critics are asserting that spanking a child is not only abusive, but that it also promotes youthful violence and contributes to adult dysfunction. Your question would seem to be a reflection of this trend.

So how about it? If you spank your child, are you teaching her that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems or deal with conflicts? Are you running the risk that she will one day apply this lesson with disastrous results in her relationships with other people? Our response is simple: Everything depends on your attitude and approach. As we see it, the question is not *whether* to spank, but *how* to spank.

To say it another way, it's important to make an intelligent distinction between an appropriate spanking and physical abuse. This is precisely what many of the studies claiming to establish a connection between spanking and violence have neglected to do. In fact, the research upon which these studies are based commonly includes openly abusive forms of physical punishment, such as kicking, punching, and beating, under the umbrella of "corporal punishment." No wonder they conclude that this kind of "punishment" is associated with negative outcomes!

What, then, is an "appropriate" spanking? We'd define it in the following terms:

- It's physically non-injurious.
- Its sole intent is to modify behavior.
- It's administered only to the extremities or the buttocks.
- It's applied methodically rather than capriciously or impulsively.
- It's never employed as an expression of anger.
- It's used selectively and in conjunction with other forms of discipline (time-outs, restrictions, taking away privileges, etc.).

- It's reserved only for situations involving willful disobedience or defiance of authority.
- It takes place within the context of a loving parent-child relationship.
- It's always followed by a "talk" designed to clarify the reasons for the disciplinary action.
- It is not to be administered to children under eighteen months of age.

Spankings administered in accordance with these specifications have never been shown to be harmful to children in any way. A six-year longitudinal study of a racially mixed population of 1,112 children ages four to eleven in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* concluded, "Regression analysis within sub-groups yielded no evidence that spanking fostered aggression in children younger than six years, and supported claims of increased aggression for only one sub-group: eight- to eleven-year-old white boys in single-mother families" (thereby indicating that spanking may not be the best option when there are other "family management" problems in the home).

Meanwhile, other research has suggested that childhood aggression may be more closely linked with maternal permissiveness and negative criticism than even with outright abuse. Further, some studies have indicated that there can actually be an *increase* in child abuse in homes where appropriate spanking does *not* occur. The reason? When parents are frustrated by the lack of this effective disciplinary tool, they are sometimes driven to extreme emotional reactions.

Before closing, we should add that there *is* some danger of communicating an unhealthy message about the value and uses of power (as in "might makes right") when parents spank a child for hitting another youngster, or if corporal punishment is the *only* tool in Mom and Dad's disciplinary toolbox. But it's important to balance this statement with a reminder that spanking is only one example of parental power, and that there are many occasions when the exercise of power and firm control is absolutely essential to effective parenting—for instance, when a toddler refuses to sit in his car seat, or when a young child tries to break away from Mom and run across a busy street. Here again, the point is not that power is "bad," but that it has to be used judiciously and appropriately. Moreover, it's important to note that spankings generally lose their effectiveness as a child enters into and progresses through the elementary school years. As alternatives to corporal punishment, we recommend time-outs, the suspension of privileges (such as computer or TV time), or the temporary confiscation of a favorite game or toy.

If you feel it would be helpful to discuss these ideas at greater length, don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your feelings with you over the phone. They also can provide you with referrals to qualified family therapists in your area who specialize in parenting and disciplinary issues. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Using ‘battle’ terminology when talking about discipline may seem harsh to some, but from all the psychological research I’ve done, a clear and controlled spanking is far less damaging to a child than the repeated yelling and screaming a lot of parents go through. It’s also far less damaging than the ambiguous boundaries and mixed messages a lot of parents give their children. When a child knows he’s done something wrong—something that is clearly forbidden—and is spanked for that wrong, shown love, prayed with, restored, and allowed to proceed with a clean conscience, he experiences much less trauma than the child whose parents don’t know how to enforce discipline.”⁵⁴

—Chip Ingram

Need More Help?

Online

- The [American College of Pediatricians](#) provides perspective on various parenting issues, including the use of corporal punishment in discipline.
- “[Effective Child Discipline](#),” a series of articles by Chip Ingram
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)

Strong-Willed Child Won't Stay in Bed

Question

My strong-willed child is a handful at any time and under any circumstances, but nothing can top his defiant and uncooperative behavior at bedtime. He refuses to stay in bed; no matter how many times we put him there, he gets up again and again. I feel as if I'm losing my mind for lack of sleep. What can we do about this?

Answer

Battles at bedtime are not unusual when there's a strong-willed child in the house. In some cases this problem may even persist into the elementary years. The remedy is basically the same as the one we'd prescribe in any conflict with a strong-willed child: firm, loving, persevering discipline. The key to winning this confrontation is not to punish harder but to conquer a child's will by outlasting him, even if that process takes two or three hours.

In a situation of this nature, it's vital to take appropriate action and stick with it until the undesirable behavior has been eliminated. Success depends on your ability to establish meaningful consequences and apply them consistently and impartially. Be sure to discuss these consequences ahead of time. The child should understand what is and isn't acceptable before he's held accountable to keep the rules.

You might begin by saying something like, "We all have jobs and responsibilities in this household. Your job right now is to stay in bed and go to sleep." Let your child know that if he fails to fulfill this responsibility, something unpleasant will happen. This could involve the removal of some privilege directly associated with the bedtime ritual or routine. For example, if his door is usually open or a night-light is left on in the hallway, make it clear that the door will be closed and the light extinguished if he doesn't stay in bed. If he's used to listening to music, looking at a picture book, or cuddling a stuffed toy, take them away until he decides to comply with your wishes.

After putting the child to bed, Mom and Dad should be prepared to intercept him immediately if he gets up. It might be a good idea to take a book or some paperwork and sit just outside his door. If he comes out, take him back to bed and sit quietly with him. Talk calmly and firmly

about the importance of staying there. Explain your concerns about safety in the house and why you can't permit him to walk around while others are asleep. Say, "What we need right now is for you to stay in bed. What do you think we can do to make that happen?"

If he decides to climb out of bed a second time, repeat the process. Be firm but not angry or exasperated. Having drawn your boundaries, stay within them. Your goal is to outlast your child, no matter how long it takes. It's a matter of simple endurance. Once the battle has been won, the child will usually live within the parameters established. If it's lost, the next conflict will be even harder to resolve.

Meanwhile, don't forget to invest an equal amount of energy on the positive side of the ledger. Here, as in so many other areas, it's important to stay vigilant and "catch your child being good." When he has a *good* night, find some way to encourage him and praise him on his accomplishment. We're not thinking here in terms of rewards, which can promote selfishness if offered in excess, but rather of family celebrations. Let your child choose a fun activity or pick a family he'd like to present with a batch of homemade cookies. This will give him the sense of control and self-determination that's so effective in moderating the behavior of strong-willed kids.

If you feel a need to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to encourage you to contact our Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Here are a few suggestions for creating a bedtime ritual for your children that will leave a lasting impression:

"Set clear bedtime rules and be consistent about when it is time for bed. Use a whistle or other signaling device to announce the start of their bedtime ritual. It can come to serve as an important conditioned cue for sleep.

"Set aside priority time for your children's ritual, say 20 or more minutes each evening, and be consistent yourself. In these days of stress and work pressures, parents need to give this time the highest priority.

"Allow your children to tell you about their day or talk about whatever is on their minds. This helps to identify any bad experiences and gives you an opportunity to do some therapy. (Yes, moms and dads have to be therapists as well!)"^{ss}

—Dr. Archibald D. Hart

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Bedtime Routines and Fears](#),” from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author
- “[Effective Biblical Discipline](#),” a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Parenting Isn't for Cowards* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1987)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Child Runs Away

Question

We're having a hard time disciplining our preschooler. He's constantly running away from us. We have to chase him down just to talk to him, let alone correct his behavior. Is this normal? How should we respond?

Answer

It would be helpful to have more detailed information about your relationship with your child and your methods of disciplining him. It's possible that his habit of running away is nothing more than a gimmick designed to get your attention. Preschoolers crave attention from their parents, and if your boy isn't getting it in response to his *positive* behavior, he'll do whatever it takes to get you to notice him.

With that in mind, we'd suggest that you try to head this problem off at the pass by making an intentional effort to "catch" your son being *good*. In other words, whenever he is the least bit helpful, cooperative, or respectful, praise and reward him for his behavior. You'll be amazed at how quickly he will respond to this type of positive attention.

With specific reference to the "running away" issue, we'd suggest that you can extinguish this behavior by learning to use consequences effectively. As we've mentioned elsewhere, consequences form the basis of all effective discipline, and there are three important guidelines you should follow when using them.

First, *consequences must be immediate*. Don't wait until after your son runs away and you've had a chance to chase him down. Before the fact, spell out clearly what is expected of him and what will happen if he doesn't obey. Make sure he knows what the consequences of his negative behavior are likely to be. For example, you could say, "If you don't put your toys away in five minutes, you won't be able to play with them tomorrow." Given his tendency to run away, you might add, "If you run away from me, you won't simply lose the privilege of playing with your toys. You also won't be able to watch TV tonight."

Second, *consequences must be consistent*. If you don't follow through on your promises—and do it *consistently, every* time the situation requires disciplinary action—your child will learn that

you don't really mean what you say. He'll come to the conclusion that your words are nothing but idle threats. So don't disappoint him. Stick to your guns and do what you've said you would do, even when you're tired and don't feel like it. If you say, "No toys and no TV," you'll completely undermine your authority if you later give in and allow him to enjoy either of these privileges.

Third and last, *consequences must be powerful*. If the consequence you've chosen to implement doesn't mean anything to your son, it won't have any impact on his behavior. What's more, something that represents a powerful reward or consequence for him today won't necessarily affect him the same way a year from now; taking away toys or TV privileges won't work if he's decided he's more interested in riding his bike or playing online games. So you're going to have to stay on top of the situation if you want your discipline to remain effective.

One last thought: Consequences must always be delivered with love. Explanations can be provided *after* the consequences have been applied. In other words, when in doubt, *act*—don't yak!

If you have additional questions or concerns about your son's behavior, we hope you'll feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department for a one-time over-the-phone consultation. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"When younger children use negative behavior to get your attention, say, 'I see you need extra attention today, don't you?' Such a comment generally takes the fun out of the behavior, which means the child isn't as likely to do it again. Then say to the child, 'Honey, I'd be more than happy to give you attention. Do you want me to just sit and look at you? Would that be enough? Or do you want me to take time to read you a story and play with you for a while? ... But just so you know, I saw you push your little sister over. Was that part of your need for attention? If so, you don't need to push your sister over to get it. If you need a hug or a kiss, just come and tell me that, and I'm happy to do it.'"⁵⁶

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Effective Biblical Discipline](#)," a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Bedtime Blessings 1 and 2* by John Trent (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Defiant Child

Question

Our school-age child is extremely defiant. Just the other day her behavior included telling me to “shut up,” slamming a door on her younger sister, and trying to steal money from my wallet. She hates school, has trouble getting along with friends, and frequently disobeys her teacher. I’m worried about her future. What should I do?

Answer

Without more detailed information on your family situation and your child’s background, it’s difficult to make definitive recommendations. But we can tell you this much: This kind of defiance and bad behavior doesn’t simply come out of nowhere.

Our guess is that the scenario you’ve described represents the culmination of patterns that have been developing over a period of time. Now that you’ve reached the end of your rope, you’re ready to break those patterns and get some serious help.

If we were in a position to do so, we’d ask you for a detailed family history. Here are some of the questions we’d ask: Are you married? If so, how’s your relationship with your spouse? Is he or she an active, involved parent? Do the two of you provide your daughter with all the love and time she needs from you? Do you encourage and affirm her at every opportunity? Does she know that you’re her biggest cheerleader? How do you handle discipline in your household? Are you harsh and authoritarian, or do you discipline with patience and consistency? Do you know how to use consequences effectively?

If your family relationships are healthy, if you’re balancing love and limits, and if you’re giving your child all the quality *and* quantity time she needs, we might begin to suspect that some type of developmental or impulse control disorder is responsible for her violent and erratic behavior. It’s also possible that her problems might have a physiological cause.

Based on what you’ve told us, the possibility that comes most readily to mind is Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. ADHD is characterized by impulsiveness, hyperactivity, and distractibility. It’s estimated that in every classroom in America, there may be one or two children who have this disorder. Sadly, many of them are never diagnosed, leading to

much greater problems. A significant proportion of kids with ADHD develop something called Oppositional-Defiant Disorder, or ODD. Your daughter seems to be displaying many of the signs of ODD.

Our recommendation is that you have her assessed by a licensed child psychologist or psychiatrist. If you live in a rural area this may involve traveling to a larger city. For referrals, contact the Children’s Hospital in the city nearest you or call our Counseling Department here at Focus on the Family. Our counselors would be happy to discuss your situation with you at greater length over the phone. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Seek help sooner rather than later. Parents often wait too long, hoping the situation will fix itself. Sometimes things *are* resolved on their own, but sometimes they only get worse.... You don’t have to reach for a therapist at the first sign of trouble, but you do need to reach out. If the level of help you enlist successfully addresses the situation, great. If it doesn’t do the job, seek the next level.”³⁷

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *God, I Need to Talk to You About Lying* by Dan Carr (Concordia Publishing House, 2004)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Why A.D.H.D. Doesn’t Mean Disaster* by Dennis Swanberg, Diane Passno, and Walt Larimore, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)

Teaching Toddlers to Obey

Question

Help! I'm a parent of a toddler, and my child is in the thick of the "terrible twos." His favorite word is *no*, and at any given moment he seems to know exactly what it takes to aggravate me to the point of desperation. How do I get this self-willed ball of energy to listen and obey?

Answer

Parents of toddlers frequently contact us, seeking advice on how to teach their young children to obey. Administering discipline can be frustrating and unpleasant, but it's a crucial element of parenting. Somewhere between the ages of 18 and 24 months children need to begin to recognize, understand, and respect parental authority.

This basic lesson should be taught with wisdom, discernment, and creativity. It must also be administered in an atmosphere of genuine love. The key to the entire process is the skillful use of consequences, negative and positive. Children have to understand that different types of behavior produce different results—some pleasant and some not so pleasant.

On the negative side, a time-out—two minutes for a two-year-old, three minutes for a three-year-old—can be a useful method of extinguishing willful, undesirable behavior. A spanking or a slap on the hand may also be effective, provided it's applied with love and restraint. There are also some occasions when the best way to discourage flagrant disobedience is simply to ignore it: when a child is acting out in order to gain attention, his naughtiness tends to disappear as soon as he loses his audience.

On the positive side, it's a matter of the utmost importance to *model what you teach*. If you want your child to learn kindness, be kind. If you're attempting to extinguish aggression, it obviously doesn't make sense to be harsh and aggressive yourself. You can also have a powerful impact on your toddler's behavior by inventing ways to recognize and highlight his positive actions. We're not thinking here of rewards, which can promote selfishness if offered in excess, but rather of family celebrations. A good way to do this is to place a box in a prominent place and allow your child to put a wooden block in the box every time he does something you want

him to do. Then, when the box is full, you can celebrate by taking the entire family out for ice cream or another fun activity.

If your child is extremely rebellious or disobedient, it might be worth asking yourself a few simple questions. Is he well fed? Are you making sure he gets enough rest? Is your own schedule so hectic and chaotic that it's placing stress on the rest of the family? It may also help to engage in a bit of self-examination regarding your own expectations and the motivation behind them. To a certain extent toddlers must be allowed to be toddlers. Parents who want perfection from kids at this age are often dealing with emotional issues of their own.

If you feel a need to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to encourage you to contact our Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation. Our counselors will be happy to discuss your questions with you. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Although you have probably heard the phrase ‘terrible twos’ more often than you care to remember, the birthday cake with two candles on it shouldn’t create a feeling of impending doom.... While you have your work cut out for you in many respects, you will also have the privilege of watching some incredible developments in language, thinking, and creativity unfold during this twelve-month period. The transition from infant to child will be completed by the third birthday, and with this transition will come the joy of having more complex interactions and sustained companionship with him.”³⁸

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Toddler Misbehavior](#)" by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)

Pay Kids for Chores?

Question

We're wondering if it's a bad idea to pay our school-age children for doing household chores. When I was growing up I always received an allowance, but my spouse says that kids need to work without being paid because that's part of being a family. What do you think?

Answer

There's no right or wrong answer here. Some parents believe in paying an allowance; others pay their kids for individual chores. Still others don't pay anything at all, but give their children money for purchases based on their overall attitude and helpfulness.

Whatever system you decide to adopt, it's important to remember that one of your major goals is to prepare your children to live in the "real world"—the world of work, taxes, tithing, and investments. In *that* world nobody is going to pay them for making their beds or taking out the trash. On the other hand, they will be paid for things like managing a group of employees, tuning up somebody's car, or selling a pair of shoes to a very demanding customer.

With that in mind, here's what we suggest. Kids ought to perform certain tasks around the house simply because they're part of the family. This could include jobs such as taking care of their own rooms, picking up their toys, helping to prepare meals, washing their own clothes, and yes, even taking out the trash.

On the other hand, it's fine to pay children for chores that demand more time and energy—contributions to the life of the household that "go beyond the call of duty." This list might comprise activities like mowing the lawn, washing the car, or, in the case of a responsible teenager, babysitting a younger brother or sister for an entire Saturday afternoon.

For younger kids, it can be helpful to write down the steps of a particular chore on an index card, including a realistic deadline for finishing the job and how much they can expect to earn if the work is done to Mom's or Dad's satisfaction. With teenagers, parents might draw up a more adult-oriented contract, and the kids might choose to work for certain privileges instead of money. Whether it's a regular responsibility or a chore that earns a paycheck, it's important to

communicate clearly what you're looking for in terms of deadlines and the level of quality you expect.

If you'd like to discuss this topic at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to contact our Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Our children receive allowances to teach them about money by having their own experience with it. In other words, we don't tie the payment of an allowance to the completion of chores. The two aren't dependent on each other. If you paid for every chore, what would you do when the child refused because he had enough money or wasn't motivated by money? In addition to required chores, certain jobs around the house are optional. Our kids receive compensation for these tasks."⁵⁹

—Ron and Judy Blue and Jeremy White

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Motivating Kids to Clean Up](#)" by Dr. Bill Maier
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Your Kids Can Master Their Money* by Ron and Judy Blue and Jeremy White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Money Matters for Kids* by Larry Burkett and K. Christie Bowler (Moody Publishers, 2001)

Disciplining the Elementary School Child

Question

My child is in grade school now, and I don't know how to handle discipline without resorting to what I did in his preschool days—which doesn't work for either of us! How do I need to change my approach?

Answer

If your elementary-age child is acting out or misbehaving, the first thing you need to do is put forth some effort to determine what's driving the disobedience. Cultivate an awareness of your child's feelings, his personality type (compliant, defiant, strong-willed, shy, etc.), and the day-to-day details of his life at home and at school. Take time to talk about any fears and anxieties that may be lurking behind his defiant exterior. Get him to reflect on his personal belief system by asking questions like, "How do you feel about yourself?" or "Finish the following sentence: I am ____." You can let your child know that you're on his team if you simply express concern for his well-being and teach him some basic skills for managing negative emotions and maintaining positive relationships with other people.

As you go through this process, emphasize the idea that good behavior is all about becoming a valuable and contributing member of the family. Instead of harping on negatives, teach your child how to have positive relationships with other people and enable him to think in terms of service to the larger community. Pick your battles wisely. In particular, don't turn grades and school performance into matters for disciplinary action. This is largely counterproductive in that it tends to instill a hatred of school into a child's mind. As an alternative, teach sound time-management skills.

When it becomes necessary to deal decisively with disobedience, take care to ensure that the consequences are appropriate to the behavior. A child should not be punished for behavior that is not willfully defiant. The most important step in any disciplinary procedure is to establish reasonable expectations in advance. The child should know what is and what is not acceptable before he's held responsible for those rules. Remember that, for the most part, spankings don't work very well at this stage in a child's development, and that their ineffectiveness can actually

escalate the situation and lead to abuse. As alternatives to corporal punishment, we recommend time-outs, the suspension of privileges (such as computer or TV time), or the temporary confiscation of a favorite game or toy.

On the other side of the coin, it's equally important to stay vigilant enough to "catch your child being good" and to recognize and highlight any attempt on his part to cooperate and observe the rules of the household.

It's crucial to add that these recommendations probably won't work if your child is dealing with mental or emotional issues such as ADHD or Anxiety Disorder. In that case, you will need to learn and implement a whole different set of disciplinary measures. For assistance in this area we strongly recommend that you seek the counsel of a trained professional. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified Christian family therapists practicing in your area. Our counselors could also discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Allowing consequences to play out is a potentially powerful approach to discipline, especially during the school-age years. The basic principle is this: Look at childhood mistakes as learning opportunities, and avoid rushing in to rescue your child from natural consequences (provided, of course, they are merely unpleasant and not potentially dangerous)... Because what he learns from an uncomfortable episode as a child may save him from a disastrous or even lethal miscalculation as an adolescent... Going without his lunch won't kill him, but getting involved with illegal drugs or premarital sex might."⁶⁰

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Effective Biblical Discipline](#)," a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Strong-Willed Child: Elementary Grades

Question

I seem to hear a lot about the discipline and training of strong-willed toddlers, but not so much about older kids whose behavior expresses the same kind of unyielding temperament. My child is now in the elementary grades and life in our household is still a continuous battle. Can you help us?

Answer

You're not the only one facing this problem. We often hear from weary parents who've nearly reached the end of their rope with a strong-willed elementary-age child.

If most of our ministry's materials about the strong-willed child tend to focus on toddlers and preschoolers, it's simply because we believe that early childhood is the time for parents to establish their authority and set clear boundaries. Parents who neglect to take these steps at that stage are almost certain to face a more difficult task as their child grows older. Nevertheless, many of the same basic principles still apply, and it's vital that you begin now to put them into practice.

Perhaps it would help to start with a few general observations. In dealing with a strong-willed child, it's essential to stay calm, maintain a sense of confidence, and have a carefully conceived plan of action in mind. Make sure you're eating healthy meals, getting enough sleep, and taking care of your own emotional health; you need every ounce of strength, poise, and self-control you can muster to handle a challenge like this.

If your system of discipline is to be effective, you'll need to lay out your expectations in advance and make sure everyone in the household understands them. Consequences for rebellious or disobedient behavior should be spelled out beforehand. Implementation of those consequences should be prompt and consistent. You can be sure that your strong-willed child will challenge these standards at every opportunity, but it's crucial to keep your cool in the face of his defiance. Don't give him an opportunity to seize control of the situation.

Sometimes this will mean casting your fear of embarrassment aside and confronting unacceptable behavior in public places or in front of other people. For example, if your child

won't stop arguing about clothes when you're at the mall, don't hesitate to cut the shopping trip short. Escort your child to the car and head home. Then make it clear that he will not be accompanying you on any further outings of this nature until his behavior improves.

It's also crucial to watch out for strategies designed to drive a wedge between you and your spouse. Most strong-willed kids possess a special talent for pitting the "softer" parent against the "stricter" one. You and your spouse must take steps to ensure that you're on the same page if you're to foil these "divide-and-conquer" tactics.

Take care to match disobedient behaviors with appropriate consequences. As we've mentioned before, keep in mind that as a child matures, spankings generally don't work as well as in earlier stages of development, and that their ineffectiveness can actually escalate the situation. Instead, try time-outs, suspending privileges (such as computer or TV time), or temporarily confiscating a digital music player or camera. It's also possible to arrange "real-life" consequences for willfully defiant or irresponsible actions—for example, clothes or toys that aren't picked up before bedtime can be locked in a cupboard for a predetermined period.

As we've also mentioned before, it's equally important to stay vigilant enough to "catch your child being good" and to celebrate any attempt on his part to cooperate and observe the rules of the household.

You should also make a determined effort to stay in touch with your child's feelings and to keep up with what's going on at school and elsewhere. Talk about fears and anxieties hidden under his seeming rebellion. Can you gain any insight into circumstances that may be driving the disobedience? You can let your child know that you're on his team if you simply express concern for his well-being and teach him some basic skills for managing negative emotions and maintaining positive relationships with other people.

If you feel a need to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to encourage you to contact our Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"With a younger child, consistency of expectation and follow-through wins the battle. And a period of isolation and think time about his actions is also effective in changing the defiant behavior. If your older child (10 and up) is purposefully defiant, then you have a much larger problem. You have a son or daughter you cannot trust. What's the answer? What works best with defiance is—all of a sudden, without warning—giving the child vitamin N (No) at every turn."⁶¹

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Effective Biblical Discipline,”](#) a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Special Needs of a Compliant Child

Question

My oldest daughter is a model child—pleasant, cheerful, agreeable, obedient, soft-spoken, and, for the most part, a real joy to live with. Naturally, her brother is the exact opposite. I may contact you about *him* some other time (believe me, there's plenty to say), but for now I can't help being concerned about the impact this arrangement is having on his sister. What's going to happen to her?

Answer

It's very perceptive of you to ask. While they're on the whole far easier to raise than their defiant counterparts, compliant kids do have some special needs of their own. It's a good idea to keep them in mind as your family grows and your child moves through the stages of maturing and growing up.

As you seem to realize, it's easy for a compliant child to be overlooked and taken for granted, particularly when there's a more defiant and outspoken youngster in the family. As the saying goes, it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. If there's an unpleasant job to be done, this child may be expected to do it because Mom and Dad just don't have the energy to fight the tiger. When it's necessary for one child to sacrifice or do without, there's a tendency to pick the one who won't complain as loudly. Under these circumstances, the compliant boy or girl comes out on the short end of the stick.

The consequences of such inequity should be obvious. The responsible child often becomes angry over time, developing a sense of powerlessness and resentment that simmers below the surface. She may also become prideful about her "good" behavior, like the older brother of the Prodigal Son, and overconfident in her own abilities and worth as a person. This combination of pride and a sense of injustice can lead compliant children to become passive-aggressive, manipulative, and devious in their dealings with others. They may also be prone to perfectionism and its most pernicious side effects, stress and depression, since they often feel trapped by their desire to cooperate and their need to please other people.

For these reasons we recommend that parents seek to balance the scales in dealing with the compliant child by making sure she gets her fair share of parental attention—and helping her find ways to cope with her more overbearing sibling(s).

Within reason, Mom and Dad should give their compliant child the chance to make her own decisions. It's also important to head off depression and stress by allowing compliant kids to be kids, teaching them to have fun, and showing them that failure is an inevitable part of life.

You can begin moving in this direction by setting aside some special time to spend with your daughter on a regular basis. Make a date to have ice cream, go for a walk, or simply sit down and talk together at least once a week. Pay attention to her feelings and the day-to-day details of her life. Talk about worries or resentments that may be masked by her quiet and cooperative exterior. Explore her personal belief system by asking questions like, "How do you feel about yourself?" or "Finish the following sentence: I am ____." Let her know that you're on her team and that she's an extremely important and highly valued member of the family.

If you feel a need to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to encourage you to contact our Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation. Our counselors will be happy to discuss your questions with you. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"In the story of the prodigal son, the father clearly represents God... The father shows his concern not only for the prodigal son, but also for his older son—the one who remained faithful to the father. This son did not leave home and engage in wild living. He stayed home and outwardly kept the rules—but all the while he seethed with resentment... The father gave himself for both sons, regardless of how they behaved... The father, with his boundless compassion and forgiveness, was willing to pay any price to restore the relationship with his sons. As you deal with your own children, my prayer is that you will imitate the actions of the prodigal's father, who is a beautiful example of our heavenly Father. Whether our children tend to be strong-willed or compliant and inwardly rebellious, our goal should be to establish and to maintain close fellowship with them."⁶²

—Dr. Michael Youssef

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Effective Biblical Discipline](#)," a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Worn Out by a Strong-Willed Child

Question

Help! As the parent of an extremely strong-willed child, I go through life feeling shell-shocked, shattered, frazzled, dazed, and tired to the bone. Every day—almost every hour—brings another confrontation, and sometimes I feel I don't have the strength to go on. Can you offer me any hope?

Answer

The first thing you need to understand is that you're not alone. We've heard from many mothers and fathers who are facing similar struggles in their attempts to raise a child who's determined to test the limits of authority in every possible way. In fact, statistics indicate that 85 percent of families include at least one strong-willed child. So while your situation may seem overwhelming at times, it's not unusual.

Second, bear in mind that parenting the strong-willed child can be a lonely job. It's important to resist a tendency toward isolation. We recommend investing some time and effort in building and maintaining a strong support system. Talk to someone who can help shoulder your burden. Reach out to other parents who deal with challenging kids of their own and allow them to reach out to you. You've been given a difficult assignment, but with prayer, faith, God's grace, and generous amounts of help from other people, it *can* be carried through to a successful conclusion. We encourage you to tackle it with courage, composure, and confidence.

Third, it's vital to remember that every strong-willed child is unique. That's why there is no single book or parenting program, no comprehensive curriculum package, no one individual's advice that can solve all your problems and provide all the answers you need. In the final analysis, it comes down to finding the energy to hang in there, stick to your guns, and win your battles one day and one step at a time. So get plenty of sleep, eat well, and set aside a reasonable amount of time for rest and recuperation as individuals and as a couple.

Finally, along with strength and patience, cultivate an attitude of calm sensitivity and compassion. Surprising as it may seem, compassion can be a powerful tool for molding and shaping a strong-willed child. Most of these kids respond readily to adult empathy and

understanding. As often as you can, then, let your child know that you're not oblivious to the emotions and inner struggles that drive him to act out. Make it plain that you can relate to the feelings behind the misbehavior. Whenever appropriate, say something like, "I can tell that you're angry right now, and I understand that your anger makes it hard for you to cooperate. I can't let you have your own way, but I'm here to help you in any way I can."

The good news is that this phase won't last forever. These tough-minded children may argue and fight and complain throughout their growing-up years, but observation and experience suggest that a majority will eventually come around to their parents' point of view and adopt their parents' values as their own. Some will even put the steely fiber of their unyielding temperament to good use by standing up to the adolescent peer group or resisting negative social trends as young adults. It's entirely possible that you are raising one of the leaders of the up-and-coming generation.

So take courage. What you're doing is important, and things *will* get better. If you need some extra help, don't hesitate to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"One mom told me that when her son was about two, she wanted to run away from home. She'd moved to a new town and felt she could not ask anyone to give her a break from caring for her demanding young son.... One day she'd reached her limit. The moment [her husband] walked in the door, she said she was going out. He asked, 'Where to?' and she replied, 'Anywhere!' After driving around for a while, she returned calmer and better able to help her husband understand her need for some time alone. Some of this mom's difficulties came because she had a strong-willed child, but her isolation made her more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.... If you are a single parent, the need for outside friendship and support is even more critical. You need hands-on help and periodic breaks."⁶³

—Laurie Winslow Sargent

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Effective Biblical Discipline](#)," a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](http://www.focusonthefamily.com) (<http://www.focusonthefamily.com>) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Boundaries with Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2001)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, Focus on the Family radio broadcast, 2010)

Discipline: How Do I Know When I've Crossed the Line?

Question

I was disciplining my five-year-old last night and feel that I got out of control in the way I handled the situation. I'm terrified this morning that I may have crossed—or may be in danger of crossing—the line between appropriate and inappropriate discipline. How can I know for sure? What should I do to guard against this?

Answer

The good news is that you're aware of your own moods and behavior—painfully so—and sensitive to the dangers of going overboard. Sadly, many parents who become truly abusive fall into that trap because they don't realize what they're doing until it's too late. The fact that you're raising the question leads us to suppose that you're pretty safe in that regard.

We'd be in a better position to help if we had more information. Precisely *why* do you believe that you may have crossed a line? What exactly happened to inspire you with this fear? How far over the line did you go? Did you sense that anger was beginning to dictate your actions? Did you raise your voice? Did you actually strike your child? Did you strike him more than once?

If you honestly feel you were out of control or on the verge of losing control—and this, as far as we're concerned, is the more important issue—then another set of questions comes to mind. Has this kind of thing happened before? Have you had problems with controlling your emotions in the past? Is there anything in your family background that might account for your struggles in this area? What kind of strains and stresses are you facing at home? Are you a single parent? Is your spouse serving in the military? Are you desperately in need of rest, respite, or some time away? Would it ease your burden if you could get some help from family, friends, or neighbors? Overwork, fatigue, and anxiety can contribute significantly to difficulties like those you've described.

If you believe you may have a serious problem with anger management, we'd urge you to seek out the assistance of a professional therapist. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with referrals to licensed Christian counselors practicing in your area. Our staff

counselors would also be happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In the meantime, it might be a good idea to pin down a working definition of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” discipline. Here are a few principles to bear in mind as you attempt to organize your thoughts in this area:

- The key to effective child discipline is learning to balance love and limits. Allowing a child to have his way without any restraint is not an expression of love. At the other extreme, harsh, rigid, or authoritarian treatment of children isn’t an appropriate exercise of limit-setting.
- Many problems can be avoided if parents assume leadership in the home. Children want to know and will ask in a variety of ways, “Who’s in charge here?” If the child’s answer is, “I guess I am,” the result will be uncontrollable, disruptive, and unhappy children.
- Corporal punishment should be applied only in cases of willful disobedience or defiance of authority—never for mere childish irresponsibility. In no instance should it be administered harshly or capriciously, or to any child younger than 18 months of age.
- With kids from three to five years of age, parents can use spanking and time-outs as part of a comprehensive discipline plan—but they also should begin to work with other types of consequences, such as taking away privileges. If Mom and Dad rely solely on one method, it will become less and less effective as a child grows and matures. For many school-age children, the removal of pleasures or privileges is actually more “painful” than a spanking.
- Instead of waiting for problems to arise, try to “catch your child being good.” You can keep track of this by putting stickers on a chart or jelly beans in a jar every time your child does something you want him to do. When the chart or jar is full, celebrate with a family outing or other reward.
- Stay on your knees. You’ll never be able to figure it all out, and that’s precisely why you need the Lord’s supernatural help so desperately. There’s only one Father who completely understands all sons and daughters on the face of the earth, and seeking His wisdom on a daily basis should be a priority for all who train and nurture children.

In Other Words ...

“[Lydia] needed practical, hands-on ideas to de-escalate her emotions. The strategy that seemed to work best for Lydia was to sit down on the floor right in front of the child she was angry with. When she sat face-to-face at the same level as her child, she found it harder to rant and rave. When she was standing and pacing and swinging around her arms, it was easy for her anger to escalate, and in turn, scare her kids. As Lydia sat in front of her child, she pulled herself together. She did this by breathing deeply, praying, speaking gently, looking into her child’s eyes, listening, and talking to herself.... Every parent has moments when he or she needs to step back

from a situation. Distance can help you regain your objectivity and handle a frustration without regret.”⁶⁴

—Dr. Steve Stephens

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Effective Child Discipline](#),” a series of articles by Chip Ingram
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *ScreamFree Parenting* by Hal Edward Runkel (WaterBrook Press, 2008)
- *Keeping Your Cool ... When Your Anger Is Hot!* by June Hunt (Harvest House, 2009)

Part 6: Work and Child Care

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Separation Anxiety (Infant)

Question

Our baby seems to be suffering from severe separation anxiety. If we put him down for five minutes he starts to scream uncontrollably. Rocking, soothing, noisemakers, sleeping with us—nothing seems to help. My wife has been forced to take him to work with her, but she can't get anything accomplished. What's the answer?

Answer

The first thing you need to do is have your child evaluated by your pediatrician to make sure there isn't some kind of physical cause for this behavior. Once you've ruled out potential medical issues, you can proceed to try other methods of solving this problem.

You might begin by taking a close look at the schedule you've been keeping. It's possible that what you call "separation anxiety" is nothing more than a bad habit that has escalated into a continuous negative cycle. There are some things you can do to arrest that cycle and regain control of the situation. Here's a simple plan you might try.

Arrange your baby's crib at an angle in the nursery so that you can observe him through the partially closed door without his seeing you. When you put him down, set a timer for 30 minutes. Then go and get involved in something elsewhere in the house—read a book, for instance, or listen to some quiet music. If he's still crying after 30 minutes, go back into his room, lay him back down, and pat him gently while saying, "It's okay. Time to sleep now." After that, leave the room and repeat the pattern over and over again until he falls asleep.

Some parents might disagree with us, but we don't recommend that you make a habit of bringing your child into your bed on a regular basis. He may quickly decide that he wants to sleep with you *all* the time; once that pattern has been established, it will be very hard to break. You may win the immediate battle, but you will end up losing the war.

Are any of the grandparents available to coach you through this difficult process? How about an aunt or uncle or an older couple in your church or social network? It's sometimes helpful for extended family members to work together as a team. You'd be surprised how comforting it can be just to have Grandma or Grandpa present in your home during one of these extended crying bouts. Among other things, more experienced relatives can help soothe *your* nerves and reassure you that your baby's behavior is normal. They also can pick up on subtle cues that young parents sometimes fail to notice and help them break negative patterns.

Whatever approach you take, it's important to persevere and be consistent. Don't give up too quickly. Stick with it for several weeks in a row before deciding to try something different. The goal is for you to overcome your feelings of panic, to achieve a measure of calm and repose, and to transfer that soothing influence to your child. This will mean working with your spouse persistently over the next couple of months. If you hold the course, eventually your baby's nervous system will mature, your confidence will increase, and your home will be a little more peaceful.

If you need to talk with someone at greater length about the trials you're enduring, we'd like to invite you to give our counseling staff a call. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Though the timing can vary from child to child, separation anxiety typically first hits around eight months, when babies suddenly grasp that their parents exist apart from them... This anxiety may last several weeks, or even a few months, until your child realizes that you're not, in fact, abandoning him for life—you're just going to the bathroom."⁶⁵

—Suzanne Schlosberg

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Childhood Fears](#)" by Colleen Shemeley
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Your Marriage Can Survive a Newborn* by Glenn and Natalie Williams (B&H Books, 2005)

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Afraid to Leave Baby with Anyone Else

Question

I'm a new parent, and I'm struggling with feelings of uneasiness about leaving my child with anyone else for even a short time. For example, I don't like the idea of dropping my little one off at the church nursery for an hour or so; I'm afraid it might be unhealthy for a young child to be separated from his parents that long. Do you agree?

Answer

No, we don't. There's nothing "unhealthy" about the kind of separations you have in mind. In fact, it's possible to see them as preliminary steps in the long and complicated process of growing up. They're part of the progression by which we all make the difficult transition from infancy to adulthood. As such, they're positive, healthy, and desirable events in the life of every child.

How these separations should be approached and handled depends to a great extent on the age of the child and the amount of time involved. If it's a matter of dropping off an infant or toddler at the church nursery for an hour every Sunday morning, parents should be prepared to deal with a set of challenges specific to that situation. If we're talking about a school-age child who will be staying with an aunt and uncle for several days while Mom and Dad are away, there will be different hurdles to overcome. In both instances, however, the basic needs are the same: Kids want to be assured that they haven't been abandoned, and parents want to feel that their youngsters are receiving adequate care.

In the case of babies and toddlers, it's important to remember that children at this age have no sense of time. All they want to know is, "Are Mom and Dad *ever* coming back?" For this reason, it can be helpful to take an incremental approach with a one- or two-year-old. Arrange a "trial run" with your sitter, child care worker, or nursery staff. If your departure elicits a gale of howls and screams, try coming back for a brief "visit" every ten minutes or so during your first outing. Bring the child a distracting toy or treat each time you pop into the room. Next time you can stretch the intervals to 15 or 20 minutes, then to half an hour. Eventually your child will get used to the idea that you *do* return every time you leave, and separation will no longer be an issue.

The problem is a bit trickier where preschoolers and kindergarteners are concerned. Parents don't have the option of interrupting classroom situations in order to deal with a child's separation anxiety. In such cases, you can reinforce the desired behavior by rewarding your child or arranging a special celebration—like an evening out for pizza or ice cream—during the early stages of adjustment when he or she gets through the day successfully or demonstrates progress in the right direction.

When leaving children with friends or relatives for an extended period—perhaps while you're off on a business trip or a weekend retreat—it helps to do everything you can to remind them that you love them and that you'll be thinking about them while you're away. Use some creativity and you'll discover that the possibilities are endless. You might write a series of sealed notes for the kids to open, one each day during your absence. Enclose a tangible token of your love with each of these brief messages—a small toy, for instance, or a piece of candy or gum. Let them know that you miss them and that you're looking forward to being together at home again. Obviously, you can communicate the same thoughts by way of a daily phone call. The important thing is to maintain a sense of connectedness during your absence.

In dealing with separations of all types, it's vital to bear two things in mind. First, this is a good thing and an important step for a growing child. Second, it's okay to comfort him or her in any way you think appropriate if separations are difficult in the beginning; in other words, there's no need for harshness here. If you need help applying these concepts to your situation, we invite you to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. They'd be pleased to assist you. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“If it hasn't become apparent by now, you will soon become acutely aware that you cannot guarantee the absolute safety of your child. In addition to loving, comforting, teaching your child, and taking appropriate safety precautions where you live, now is the time to renew your commitment to pray for her as well. Remember that she is on loan, entrusted to your care for a season, and her Creator ultimately knows and loves her far better than anyone can imagine. Acknowledging that fact and seeking his wisdom on a daily basis—even for the everyday routines of parenting—will help keep your concerns in perspective and tap into strength and insight that extend far deeper than your own.”⁶⁶

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Your Marriage Can Survive a Newborn* by Glenn and Natalie Williams (B&H Books, 2005)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Finding the Right Babysitter

Question

My spouse and I desperately need to get some time away from the kids. We'd like to start "dating" each other again, at least every other week or so, but we're nervous about finding the right babysitter. Can you provide us with some guidelines for choosing the best person to care for our children in our absence?

Answer

You're right to be taking the time and trouble to give this question some serious thought. It's no light matter to entrust your child to another person's care. While it's important to be diligent regarding the choice of a long-term caregiver, it's equally vital to be careful in your selection of babysitters, even though the time your child spends in their care may be much shorter.

A great deal depends on the age of your child. During the first six months of infancy, it's best to leave him or her in the hands of experienced relatives or other adults. Later on, younger babysitters can be employed; in fact, some of the best babysitters may turn out to be high school or middle school students. Just be certain you've done your homework before leaving *anyone* in charge of your kids. If the sitter is a teenager, make sure that you're thoroughly acquainted with her, her family, and her personal background before arranging anything. If possible, have her watch your child while you're at home doing some other work. This will give you a chance to observe how she interacts with your child. You may also find some excellent sitters and have an opportunity to see them in action in the church nursery or Sunday school.

It's a good idea to build a roster of trustworthy babysitters before you actually need one. Find out if the individuals you have in mind are trained and equipped to handle emergencies. In many communities, hospitals or other organizations offer short courses (including CPR training) for babysitters. Those who've completed such a program would be excellent candidates for you to consider.

We should note that some experts have advised against using adolescent boys as babysitters. The idea here is that the many sexual and hormonal changes occurring during the teen years may get the better of young males and lead to sexually inappropriate behavior with children while

parents are out of the house. We agree that there *may* be room for special concern where boys are concerned, but we would hasten to add that in this day and age, given the prevalence of Internet pornography and other sexually addictive materials, girls and older adults may also have problems in this area. Caution is *always* appropriate. The key is to be thoroughly acquainted with the person you're engaging to care for your kids—*whoever* he or she may be.

Many couples are avoiding some of these difficult questions and decisions—and saving money at the same time—by sharing babysitting responsibilities with other young parents. One couple goes out for an evening on the town while the other cares for both sets of kids; then, the following week, they trade places. This is just one of the ways you might get creative about finding child care so as to free yourselves up for regular “dates.”

When you do leave your child with a sitter, always write down where you're going and how you can be reached. This will usually include your cell phone number and the location and phone number(s) of your destination(s). You should also provide the phone number of your doctor, the local hospital, and another relative or friend who'll be home in case you can't be reached. Let the babysitter know when you expect to be home and what you expect to happen while you're gone—including feeding, bathing, and bedtime routines (if you happen to be in the neighborhood, don't hesitate to “drop in” unexpectedly to keep the sitter on her toes and make sure all is going according to plan). If a child needs medication, make sure the babysitter knows exactly how much and when to give it.

The sitter should also know any other family rules, such as those applying to TV or videos, as well as any reliable ways to comfort your child when you leave. The babysitter should allow no visitors into your home unless you've made prior arrangements. If your child is old enough to understand, tell him or her that you're leaving and you'll be back. Don't try to sneak out when he or she isn't looking, and don't be pulled into a long, emotional parting scene. Your child will survive and, with rare exceptions, will calm down shortly after you depart.

If you have additional questions or would like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you can call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.⁶⁷

In Other Words ...

“Make sure that your pay rate is clear from the start. Ask a friend what the going rate is for each age group and don't hesitate to offer more for the best sitter on your list. If you would like the sitter to clean up dishes or straighten up elsewhere in the home, offer to pay a little extra.”⁶⁸

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

We Suspect Our Babysitter

Question

It's painful even to think about this, but we have reasons for suspecting that our babysitter may have behaved inappropriately with our young child. What should we do? What are some "red flags" or telltale signs we should look for?

Answer

A detailed response would depend on the precise age of your child. But generally speaking, you should keep an eye out for noticeable shifts in normal behavior.

Youngsters in the elementary grades who have been subjected to some kind of abuse may exhibit signs of regression—for example, thumb sucking, bed wetting, baby talk, or academic setbacks. In some cases they can become aggressive, while in others they disconnect and lose themselves in a daydream-like world of their own. A child who has been sexually abused may begin to act out sexually with siblings or other children in the neighborhood, or become obsessed with sexual self-stimulation. In other instances, he or she may turn abnormally secretive or quiet. If your child seems to be afraid of the babysitter, this is a good indication that something isn't right. On the other hand, if he or she is strangely eager or anxious to have the babysitter return, it probably would be a good idea to find out why.

With smaller children, you should watch for signs of injury or irritation of the genital area and have your child examined should you discover any unexplainable irregularities. Also observe for nighttime restlessness and disruptions in established sleep patterns. Be aware of the child's daily activities and ask yourself whether his or her mental, emotional, or physical equilibrium seems to have been thrown off in any way. Try to remember how your young child reacted the last time the babysitter came to your house. Do you recall any occasion on which he or she appeared to be agitated or upset while in the babysitter's arms or under the babysitter's care? If so, the situation may require further investigation.

Older kids who might normally be reluctant to talk about a traumatic experience can sometimes be encouraged to open up if you take an indirect approach. The key is to keep the conversation as relaxed, informal, and low-key as possible. Wait until your child is involved in

some other activity—playing with toys, for instance, or helping you with some simple chore like raking the leaves or washing the car. As the situation permits, turn the discussion gently and unobtrusively in the direction of the babysitter. Ask open-ended questions like, “What do you think of [name of babysitter]?” Avoid “leading” or manipulative queries designed to elicit a particular response (for example, “Has ____ ever done anything to make you feel uncomfortable?”). Let the information emerge naturally and of its own accord. If you need help, it might be a good idea to engage the services of a trained child play therapist. The police department or sheriff’s office can also answer general questions and offer general suggestions in this area.

If at any point you become convinced that you have a serious problem on your hands, contact the Social Services Department and/or your local sheriff’s office immediately. You owe it to your child and to any other children in the area who may have had contact with this babysitter to take appropriate action without delay.

If you’d like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. We can also supply you with referrals to qualified professionals practicing in your area. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“It is critical to take appropriate action to protect the child from the perpetrator. Aside from the obvious step of ensuring that the abuser does not have further access to the child, appropriate legal action should be taken. There may, however, be considerable reluctance to put a child through the trauma of interrogation by police, testimony in court, and so forth, especially if the abuser is known to the family. But it is also critical that the child knows that this violation is not going to be ignored or taken lightly. Furthermore, taking action could prevent other children from being victimized by the same perpetrator.”⁶

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Caring for Sexually Abused Children: A Handbook for Families and Churches* by R. Timothy Kearney (InterVarsity Press, 2001)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Should Mom Go Back to Work?

Question

I'm a mom with two young kids. Recently I was offered an opportunity to return to the workplace. The challenge is exciting, and a second income would be a *big* help to me and my husband right now. At the same time, I get stressed out just thinking about juggling a full-time job and my family's busy schedule. How can I make this decision? What do you think I should do?

Answer

This isn't a decision anyone else can make for you. The most we can do is suggest some principles and guidelines that will help you resolve the issue in a way that seems best for you and your family. But before saying anything else, we want to make it clear that, all things being equal, we believe it's best for a mother to remain at home if she can, especially while her children are young. No one can take a mom's place in the lives of her little ones, and for this reason we'd encourage you to do everything in your power to keep your energies focused on *their* needs for the time being—at least until they're old enough to handle an increasing amount of independence.

In connection with this last thought, we'd like to encourage you to open your mind, explore your options, and expand your horizons a bit. Don't assume that your only two choices are staying home or working full-time. In today's world, many other alternatives are available—particularly to someone who is valued by her employer, past or present.

One of the best ways to review your alternatives is to map them out in what might be called a *decision matrix*. This is simply a tool designed to help you take an objective look at your needs, goals, and desires so that you can come up with a plan for using your time, energy, and skills in the best possible way. The decision matrix entails six steps:

1. *Write out or verbalize the actual decision you need to make.* For a wife who is considering a career or part-time job, the decision might be worded as follows: "I must choose the best way to spend my time, my talents, and my energy." Note that this wording takes the focus off of the

immediate issue—to work or not to work?—and places it on the deeper issues that need to inform the decision.

2. *List all the objectives that relate to this decision, both quantitative and qualitative.* Think about the things you want to maximize and minimize. For example:

- Maximize time with husband and children.
- Maximize use of skills and talents.
- Maximize income.
- Minimize boredom.
- Minimize commute time.
- Minimize costs (child care, transportation, etc.)
- Minimize stress.

3. *Rank your objectives in order of importance.* Since you probably can't have everything, you need to have a clear idea of your priorities. Give each objective a number value from 1 to 5, with 5 being a non-negotiable priority and 1 being an objective you can live without. Obviously, the objectives and their relative rankings will be different for each individual and couple.

4. *List all possible alternatives.* Write down all of your options, no matter how unappealing or unattractive they may initially appear. Decisions of this nature rarely involve a choice between *right* and *wrong*. Instead, they're a matter of picking the best alternative on a scale between *almost right* and *probably wrong*. Since your decision can never be better than the best alternative you *know* about, it pays to come up with as many choices as possible. In your case, the options might include staying at home with your children, working in a full-time career, working part-time outside the home, or working part-time or full-time at home.

5. *Evaluate each alternative based on how it fulfills your objectives and priorities.* If an alternative meets a particular objective, give it "points" based on the numerical ranking you assigned to that objective in step 3. If the alternative allows you fully to maximize (or minimize) an objective, give it the full value of its rank. If it contributes toward the objective but does not entirely fulfill it, assign it a partial score. The idea is to begin thinking in terms of *objectives* rather than *alternatives*.

6. *Choose the alternative that best meets your objectives and priorities.* Add up the "points" under each alternative based on the evaluation you did in step 5. The alternative that scores the highest should receive careful consideration as the best "almost right" option. But this isn't necessarily the end of the procedure. There's no reason to feel locked into the choice with the most points.

Once you've worked your way through the decision matrix, take time to evaluate the possible risks associated with your decision. Where the welfare of your family is at stake, it's a good idea to take a second look. You may even want to get a second opinion. If such factors as using your professional skills and supplementing your family's income are important to you, don't assume that you must take a full-time position in an office. Many employees today are opting for alternatives that give them greater flexibility, including freelancing, job sharing, telecommuting, or working variable hours.

Whatever you decide, it's crucial that you and your husband sit down and talk about this opportunity together. If you do return to work, the entire family will face a number of new challenges as well as new rewards, and every member will have to be prepared to take a more active role in the management of the household.

If you need help applying these thoughts to your personal situation, please don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Focus on the Family's counselors would be happy to listen to your concerns and assist you with some practical suggestions. They can also provide you with referrals to advisors and counselors who specialize in helping families with financial issues. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.²⁰

In Other Words ...

"When most couples with a Christian commitment come to a fork in the road, they want to know their choice of direction reflects God's will. But decisions aren't always a matter of right or wrong; sometimes they're about preference. If consulting Scripture and other mature believers doesn't turn up a spiritual principle to follow, you're probably picking between two or more valid choices.

"Some couples fear they'll miss the 'one and only right choice,' putting them 'out of God's will' and dooming them to lives of misery. But God doesn't want to confuse you. As you seek Him, He promises to give you wisdom to make wise decisions (James 1:5). God is waiting to give you wisdom for your next decision—both of you, working as a team."²¹

—Sheryl DeWitt

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Pursuing Financial Unity](#)," a series of articles by Dave Ramsey and Laura Sweat
- [Dave Ramsey](#) offers financial advice, recommendations of service providers, and resources.
- Author [Mary Hunt](#) provides money-saving tips, recipes, and more.
- [Crown Financial Ministries](#) presents "practical, biblically based solutions for managing your personal finances."

Other Resources

- *Moms on the Job* by Sabrina O'Malone (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Working Mom's 411: How to Manage Kids, Career and Home* by Michelle LaRowe (Gospel Light, 2009)
- *The Total Money Makeover* by Dave Ramsey (Thomas Nelson, 2009)
- *Making Money from Home: How to Run a Successful Home-Based Business* by Donna Partow (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Faith-Based Family Finances* by Ron Blue with Jeremy White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)

Mom Returns to Work: Is Breastfeeding Over?

Question

My maternity leave is ending and I'm preparing to return to the workplace. Is there some way to work breastfeeding into my new schedule?

Answer

With some planning, creativity, and assistance on the home front, it is definitely possible for a mother to return to work *and* continue breastfeeding. The necessary adjustments will vary considerably depending on the age of your baby, the location of your job, and the hours involved. Obviously, you'll have to arrange the details with your spouse, your child care provider, or a friend or relative who shows a willingness to help. You may also need to bring your employer into the loop.

It goes without saying that nursing mothers who begin or resume work outside the home may have to contend with daily absences of several hours from their babies. Some moms choose to give up breastfeeding at this point and resort to formula as a satisfactory substitute. But you can continue to maintain your baby's nourishment with your own milk if you're willing to take the time to learn how to pump and store it for immediate or future use. Once you've mastered this procedure, you can arrange to have anyone—your husband, a child care provider, a family member or a friend—feed your child with your milk at any time. Pumping is fairly simple, though it may take some getting used to.

To pump or “express” milk, wash your hands with soap and water and make sure your breasts are free of lotions or creams. Before any milk is expressed, each breast should be gently massaged. Using the palm of the hand, stroke several times from below, above, and the sides of the breast toward the nipple, applying gentle pressure. At this point you're ready to express milk from each breast, either by hand or with the assistance of a breast pump. Either method is acceptable, and the choice of one or the other approach can be based on effectiveness, comfort, convenience, and cost. As with the first days of nursing, you may find it easier to begin pumping milk for three to five minutes at a time and then gradually progress to ten- or fifteen-minute sessions if you are collecting milk on a regular basis.

To express by hand: Sit in a comfortable position and lean over the container in which you will be collecting the milk. Place the thumb and index finger of one hand about an inch to either side of the nipple and press toward your chest while gently squeezing the fingers together. At first you may see a few drops, a literal spurt, or nothing at all. Keep pressing until the milk begins to flow. When it stops, release your fingers, rotate to another position, and squeeze again. If you don't see much milk, keep trying and don't give up. It may take some practice to become adept.

To express using a breast pump: Make an airtight seal between the pump and your breast by applying a little water or milk to the skin where contact is made. The apparatus should be applied snugly enough to make a good seal but not pressed so tightly as to restrict the flow of milk. Pumping can continue until after the milk has stopped flowing for a minute or so. After you are finished, use soap and water to wash those components of the pump that came into contact with the milk and allow them to air dry. Check the manufacturer's directions for specific details about cleaning and proper handling of the equipment you're using.

Your milk can be collected in a clean baby bottle or a breast milk storage bag that attaches directly to the pump. Your baby can immediately drink what you've collected, but you can also store milk for future use. Remember that breast milk is a perishable food. Here are some guidelines for handling it so that it will maintain its nutritional value and not become contaminated.

1. If you plan to refrigerate or freeze milk, do so as soon as you've finished collecting it. You can use plastic or glass containers with sealable tops or sealable plastic bags designed specifically for storing breast milk. Label and date the containers.

2. You may feed a baby fresh breast milk that has been left at room temperature for up to ten hours. After that the milk should be discarded.

3. Breast milk that has just been expressed may be kept in the refrigerator for seven days, but any that is thawed from the freezer must be used within twenty-four hours and should not be refrozen.

4. Various time limits for safe storage of breast milk in the freezer have been recommended; they range from two weeks (in a refrigerator freezer compartment that is opened frequently and whose temperature thus varies) to six months (in a deep freeze). A reasonable guideline would be to store frozen milk no longer than one month. Mark each bottle or plastic bottle liner with the date you collected it, and use the oldest milk first.

5. You can combine the milk from both breasts into a single bottle or plastic bottle liner. If a particular pumping session has not yielded enough milk, you can freeze it and then add more cooled milk to the same container later—but don't change the date on your label.

6. When it's time to feed your baby with expressed milk, it should be thawed by placing the bottle or bottle liner in warm (but not hot) water. Heating milk in a microwave is not recommended because it may cause "hot spots" in the milk that could burn the baby's mouth. Overheating may also destroy some nutrients in breast milk.²²

In Other Words ...

“Keep in mind that it is hardly a major setback if nursing slows your life down for a while. Your body needs time for rest and restoration after accomplishing the formidable tasks of completing pregnancy and childbirth. Do you really need to accelerate immediately back into the fast lane of your pre-pregnant lifestyle? This very dependent season of your child’s life—whether she is breast- or bottle-fed—is relatively short, and it would be beneficial for both of you if you could settle back and enjoy it as much as you can. (This applies whether or not you need to return to a full- or part-time job outside the home or have other children making demands on your time.)”²³

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Mom’s Guide to Your Body after Baby* by Susan Besze Wallace and Monica Reed, M.D. (Revell, 2008)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Day Care

Question

My spouse and I disagree about putting our toddler in day care. I have some serious misgivings about this option, but my husband thinks it's fine. Is there any research on this subject? What other choices do we have as working parents?

Answer

There *has* been a great deal of research on day care, but the findings are mixed. Some experts believe that children do just fine when placed in a high-quality day care center staffed by well-trained workers. In fact, they argue that kids from low-income backgrounds often receive more intellectual stimulation in a good day care setting than they do at home, which may contribute to higher academic achievement once they enter school.

But other research has produced some very different findings, leading another group of analysts to draw contrasting conclusions. Certain studies, for instance, indicate that young children often suffer negative effects when they are separated from their mothers and placed in a day care facility for many hours each week. Longitudinal research shows that kids placed in day care beginning at an early age and for long periods of time each day may have behavioral problems when they enter kindergarten. There is evidence to suggest that these children are more likely to be disruptive in the classroom, aggressive with their peers, and disrespectful toward adults.

Still another body of research suggests that some children placed in day care have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol in their bloodstream. Cortisol is the hormone present in the blood when we experience fear or anxiety. In some children, cortisol levels rise in direct proportion to the amount of time they spend each day at a day care facility.

Focus on the Family takes the position that, whenever possible, women with young children should make every effort to put their kids first and their career second. As we understand it, the most reliable research indicates that very young children do best in every area of measurement when they are allowed to thrive under a mother's care at home. At the same time, we're keenly aware that circumstances don't always permit a mom to make this choice. A variety of factors

may make her employment outside the home unavoidable. Financial pressures, marital disruptions, a disabled spouse—these are just some of the conditions that may force wives and mothers into the workplace. Such circumstances are regrettable, but sometimes they're realities with which we have to live. We're sensitive to the plight of both married and single moms who must work out of necessity, and we believe in supporting and encouraging them in this difficult task.

To return to the specifics of your case, you didn't mention *why* your husband wants to place your child in day care. If he simply wants you to supplement the family income, we would challenge him to re-examine his priorities—especially if you aren't struggling financially. If his motive for having you go back to work is to provide the funding for a higher standard of living—in other words, to buy a bigger home or a nicer car—the two of you are going to have to sit down together and ask yourselves some tough questions. In the larger scheme of things, is affluence really more important than the well-being of your child?

Speaking of finances, it might be a good idea to “crunch the numbers” and see how your potential return to the workforce looks on paper. When you figure in the high cost of quality day care, the possibility of a jump to a higher tax bracket, and the extra money you'll need to spend on gas, clothes, and other work-related expenses, you may decide that the added income you expect to derive from a job will be minimal at best.

We realize, of course, that decisions of this nature can be extremely complicated. If you feel a need to discuss the details of your situation at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to invite you to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“If, after reviewing your options, you decide that someone else must watch your child, consider a babysitting co-op. It has at least three advantages: Its cost is negligible or nonexistent; it allows your child to receive some of the socialization that can be a strength of preschools and day care centers; and, when it's your turn to help with the co-op, it lets you see your child interacting with other children. If you're organizing the co-op yourself, you can choose those who are involved—making for shared values.”⁷⁴

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- At WorkingMom.com, author Sabrina O'Malone provides support and practical help “for people trying to give 100 percent on the job and 100 percent to their family at the same time.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Moms on the Job* by Sabrina O'Malone (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Becoming a Chief Home Officer: Loving and Surviving Your Career Shift to Stay-at-Home Mom* by Allie Pleiter (Hearts at Home, 2002)
- “Should We Put Our Child in Day Care?” by Sandra Lundberg, in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Behavioral Problems at Preschool

Question

Our child is having behavior problems at preschool. He gets defiant when there's a change in the schedule or when the teacher asks him to switch activities. He wants to do things his own way and in his own time. How do we break him of this?

Answer

The solution to your problem may need to begin at home. It's rare for a child who's normally compliant and well-behaved with his or her parents to become defiant and uncooperative in other settings. You didn't mention anything about your son's attitudes and behavior around the house, but is it possible that he's just as defiant with you as he is with his teachers?

If so, it's likely that you've developed a pattern of giving in to his demands and allowing him to have his way when he resists your authority or throws a tantrum. Now, at preschool, he finds himself in a situation where this mode of operation no longer "works" for him—where he's expected to obey adults, follow rules, and get along with other children. This is all new to him, and he doesn't like having limits set to his behavior. That may be why he's acting out with the preschool staff.

That's one scenario that may describe your situation. Another possibility is that you've been anything *but* too permissive with your child—that, on the contrary, your parenting style has been overly strict and punitive, in which case he may be experiencing a high level of stress. In a situation like this, the child never internalizes the positive character traits his mom and dad are attempting to instill in him through their harsh disciplinary methods. He simply obeys in order to avoid punishment. Then, when he's outside the home, in a less rigid environment, he "lets loose" and misbehaves in a variety of ways.

You can decide whether one of these two situations describes your relationship with your child. We'd encourage you to take the time to subject your parenting practices to a careful examination. Are you providing a healthy balance between love and limits? Are you affirming and rewarding your child for good behavior as well as punishing him for negative behavior? Are you helping him to develop compassion and understanding for others rather than simply adhering

to a strict set of rules and regulations? Are Mom and Dad on the same page when it comes to discipline, or is one of you more permissive while the other is more authoritarian?

If after an honest examination of the facts you conclude that your child has a problem with defiance, you should start implementing consistent limits at home. This will involve administering specific consequences for specific instances of misbehavior. Your son probably won't like this. As a matter of fact, we predict that his behavior will get much worse before it gets better. That's because he'll be doing everything he can to convince you to give up on this new program of discipline. But if you stick to your guns, you should begin to see positive results within a couple of weeks.

It might be helpful to ask the preschool supervisor if it would be possible to observe your child in the classroom setting, so that you can see how he interacts with the other children. If that's difficult to arrange, another option would be to ask one of the staff members to videotape your son during preschool hours. That way you'll be able to get a clear picture of his behavior there.

You can also work with the preschool staff to establish a set of consequences at home for misbehavior at school. Ask the supervisor to provide you with daily reports by way of written notes or phone calls. This will have the effect of keeping your child accountable. He needs to learn that if he's defiant, aggressive, or destructive at preschool, there will be unpleasant penalties awaiting him at home.

If you'd like to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to contact our Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"To become effective advocates [for our children], we must be willing to look at our own strengths and weaknesses. Our strength lies in our relationship with our kids; our weaknesses can be defined by the information, expertise, and insights we don't have. Overcoming our weaknesses requires a willingness to ask questions and track down answers....

"Frame questions in a way that invites help, not defensiveness. Ask, 'What can we do to help Johnny stay focused in your class?' instead of, 'Don't you think if you made your lessons more interesting Johnny would pay attention?'"²⁵

—Vicki Caruana

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Effective Biblical Discipline,”](#) a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Working Moms

Question

I've noticed that you spend a lot of time affirming stay-at-home moms in their role. What about us moms who work outside the home—by choice or necessity?

Answer

It's a fair question, and it can be answered from a couple of angles. First, we work hard to affirm stay-at-home moms because our culture tends to tear them down. In many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the media, the educational establishment, the corporate world, and the radical feminist movement denigrate these women, making them feel as if they are "less valuable" because they've chosen to dedicate themselves to their kids. We feel we've been called to do what we can to counteract this destructive trend.

Second, we regard this as a task of the utmost importance because we believe that stay-at-home mothers occupy a role of vital importance to the well-being of society as a whole. The best social science research indicates that young children often suffer negative effects when separated from their mothers and placed in day care facilities for many hours each week. Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers *need* their mothers in order to thrive and become emotionally healthy.

In fact, the situation is even more serious than that. Recent studies suggest that kids who spend the majority of their time in day care are often more aggressive and display poorer work habits when they enter school. To make matters worse, doctors have found that many children in day care have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol in their bloodstreams.

For all these reasons, Focus on the Family takes the position that, whenever possible, women with young children should make every effort to put their kids first and their careers second. That being said, we understand that life circumstances don't always allow a mother to stay at home with her kids. We're particularly sensitive to the plight of single moms who must work out of necessity. They have the hardest job in the universe, and we are committed to help and encourage them in their task in any way we can.

We're not sure what your circumstances are, but if you have very young children and are working full-time by choice, we would urge you to take another look at your options and

priorities and carefully weigh what's best for your kids. If, on the other hand, your children are older and you've re-entered the work force as a way of supplementing your family's financial needs, we want you to know that we support you in this decision. Our prayer is that the Lord will use your abilities and education to make a unique contribution to the workplace and that you'll be a shining example of Christ's love to your co-workers.

If you have additional questions or would like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, you can call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Practically speaking, what's an overstressed, overburdened working mom to do? I'll tell you what I did. First, I prayed about my situation frequently. Next, I resolved to pay closer attention to [my husband] Dan's strengths and look for ways he could contribute toward managing our family in a manner that would naturally suit his personality and talents. 'Lord, show me how we can both use our strengths,' I prayed. God was quick to show me the way....

"My husband now puts the kids to bed at night. The kids play, read stories, recount their day, and say bedtime prayers with him. I make my exit and am free to do whatever needs to be done around the house, have some time to myself, or just retire early."²⁶

—Sabrina O'Malone

Need More Help?

Online

- At WorkingMom.com, author Sabrina O'Malone provides support and practical help "for people trying to give 100 percent on the job and 100 percent to their family at the same time."
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Moms on the Job* by Sabrina O'Malone (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Long Work Hours Keep Parent from Family

Question

My job requires me to put in long hours every week, and as a result I'm not able to give as much attention to other things—including my family—as I would like. How much work time is *too* much? Do I need to look for another job?

Answer

You may not be too surprised to learn that we don't have a hard-and-fast answer for this one. We can't tell you where to work, exactly how many hours to devote to your occupation, or how to balance business affairs with family life. These are questions you need to resolve by praying, listening to God's voice, discussing your needs and priorities at great length with your spouse, seeking the counsel of close friends, and working through your personal commitments and priorities in light of biblical principles.

In a case like this it can be helpful to remember that God has granted us tremendous liberty in Christ (Galatians 5:1). As a Christian, you aren't called to slavish legalism but to freedom and discovery. It's not a matter of obeying rules or mapping out a tightly constructed schedule. Instead, it's about walking by faith, living in the Spirit, and learning through trial and error how to fulfill your unique God-given calling while loving others with the selfless love of Christ.

If, in the course of seeking the Lord's mind and consulting your own conscience, you decide that you really *are* working too much—if it seems clear to you and your spouse that your long hours are having a damaging effect on your marriage, your family, your health, or your relationships with others—you'll have to stop and figure out how you got into this situation and ask yourself if there's a feasible way out. Do you really *have* to spend this much time on the job? To be more specific, are you responding to your employer's demands or to your own pressing financial needs? If the latter, can you possibly find other ways of balancing the budget—for example, cutting costs, downscaling your lifestyle, or eliminating materialistic goals and values?

That last question brings us back to the issue of priorities. By getting a handle on what matters most to you, you can clear the air of a lot of confusion, eliminate non-essentials, and gain a sense of focus and purpose. Rather than accepting your lot at face value, try to discern what

God wants you to do. Don't be defined by externals—instead, define yourself in terms of God's principles and His plan for your life. It's a question of learning how to channel your time and energy into the fulfillment of your own unique calling.

On the other hand, if you believe your priorities are in order and your long hours at work are due simply to the demands of an unreasonable boss, you may want to start thinking about changing your situation. That's not something to be undertaken lightly, of course, especially when economic conditions are challenging. Still, if you're feeling pressured, unhappy in your work, and deprived of meaningful relationships at home, it might be time to step out in faith and take some risks. You don't want to spend the rest of your life hating what you're doing.

Here are a few things to bear in mind as you evaluate your current occupation and ponder the possibility of taking up a new career. When trying to ascertain if you're cut out for a certain profession, ask yourself the following three questions:

- Do I have a passion for this kind of work?
- Do I possess the required background and skills?
- Do I feel called to do this?

If you can answer all three in the affirmative, then go for it. There's an excellent chance that you'll find success and fulfillment along that path.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. You can contact our Counseling Department for a free consultation. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Here's a great way to find out what matters most to you. Flip through the half-hour blocks in your Day-Timer or BlackBerry or paper calendar. Then check the entries in your checkbook register. Suddenly your priorities will become very clear. If you were faced with the choice between your money or your life, would you be standing there, like Jack Benny, shouting, ‘I'm thinking it over!’?”^z

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Balance Work and Family](#)" by Mike Yorkey with Greg Johnson
- "[Husband Too Busy for Family](#)" by Dr. Bill Maier

- [Family and Home Network](#) is dedicated to “helping families spend generous amounts of time together.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Choosing to Cheat: Who Wins When Family and Work Collide* by Andy Stanley (Multnomah Publishers, 2003)
- *Restoring Balance to Your Life I-II* with Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)
- *Moms on the Job* by Sabrina O’Malone (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* by Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (NavPress, 2004)
- *It’s Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Part 7: Health Concerns

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Newborns: Medical Issues

Question

We've got a newborn, and we're really nervous. What are some of the most common medical problems to watch out for during the first three months or so of our baby's life?

Answer

One of the most common and earliest appearing conditions is *jaundice*, a yellow-orange discoloration of the skin caused by the buildup of a substance called *bilirubin* in the bloodstream. Bilirubin is a by-product of the breakdown of worn-out red blood cells, a process managed by the mother's liver and circulatory system during pregnancy. After birth, the newborn's liver takes a few days to gear up for the job, and during this time the level of bilirubin will increase by a modest amount. If a significant backlog of bilirubin develops, the baby's skin will take on a yellow-orange hue, beginning with the head and gradually spreading downward.

Whether or not jaundice is significant will depend on several factors, including the level of bilirubin, how soon and how fast it has risen, the suspected cause, and whether the baby was full-term or premature. In some instances, extremely high bilirubin levels can damage the central nervous system, especially in the premature infant. If you notice that your new baby's skin is turning orange and the whites of the eyes yellow, and if your infant is feeding poorly, see your doctor immediately. He or she will order blood tests to check the bilirubin level and other studies may be done to look for underlying causes.

Normally jaundice will resolve on its own, though some healthy babies will carry a slightly yellow tint for several weeks. Occasionally extra help is needed, in which case your pediatrician may adopt one of the following approaches:

- Treatment for underlying causes (such as an infection).
- Increasing the baby's fluid intake.

- Exposure to *indirect* sunlight. This involves undressing the child down to his diaper in a room bright with sunlight that *does not shine directly on his sensitive skin*. Since indirect sunlight has only a modest effect, don't use this approach unless you're sure that your baby won't become too hot or cold.

- Occasionally an enzyme found in mother's milk may interfere slightly with the clearing of bilirubin. In such cases, your healthcare provider may ask you to stop nursing briefly and use formula until the problem improves. It's important to express milk in the meantime so your breasts will still be producing it when your baby is able to resume breastfeeding.

- A treatment called *phototherapy* may be used if the bilirubin level needs to be treated more actively. Under a physician's direction, the baby, wearing protective eyewear, lies under a special intense blue light like a sunbather at the beach. A baby can also lie on a thin plastic light source called *BiliBlanket*.

Other health issues to watch out for during the first three months of life include colds and other respiratory infections, which are relatively uncommon in this age group. When they occur, the irregular breathing patterns they produce may cause you some concern. A doctor's exam is in order when watery or thick drainage appears from one or both nostrils. Excess nasal discharge can be suctioned out with a rubber-bulb syringe. Do not give any decongestant or cold preparations to a baby this young unless directed by your baby's physician.

Infections of the middle ear (*otitis media*) may complicate a cold in any baby, including a newborn. Unfortunately, they're difficult to detect. If an infant is acting ill, irritable, running a fever, or all of these, he'll need to have his ears checked by a doctor.

A narrowing of the tear duct in one eye or the other can cause the eye to overflow with tears. This can lead to a local infection manifested in goopy, discolored drainage, crusting, and, if more widespread, a generalized redness of the eye known as *conjunctivitis*. The crusting and drainage will have to be removed gently using moist cotton balls, which should be promptly thrown away. Your pediatrician may also prescribe antibiotic eye drops or ointment for a few days.

Spitting up breast milk or formula is not uncommon during the first weeks of life, especially if the baby is not adequately burped. If an infant in this age group begins vomiting more forcefully, you should seek prompt medical attention. Projectile vomiting may be a symptom of *pyloric stenosis*, a thickening of a muscle in the portion of the small intestine known as the *pylorus*. If there's a marked increase in the amount of stool (usually indicating that an infection has developed in the intestinal tract), the baby will need to be taken to the doctor and observed carefully for signs of dehydration.⁷⁸

In Other Words ...

“Newborns are much more sturdy and resilient than you might think, and there are very few mistakes that loving, attentive parents might make that cannot be straightened out later on. While it is normal to feel some anxiety over the responsibility of full-time care for a new baby, the

process of parenting a newborn should not be dominated by fear and uncertainty. Be confident that you and your baby can and will survive and thrive, even while all of you are learning.”⁷⁹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.
- “[Newborns](#)” from *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)

My Child Has a Fever

Question

It's the middle of the night and my child is running a high temperature. How can I know if this is a serious situation? What should I do to treat the fever until we can get him to a doctor?

Answer

The most important thing is to stay calm. This may be easier said than done if your child is very young, but it's absolutely essential if you're to maintain the clear-mindedness required to assess the situation accurately and take appropriate action.

Remember that a fever is not a disease in itself, but a sign that the body's regulation of temperature has temporarily changed. Fever in children is most commonly a response to infection, and it is now known to serve a useful purpose by stimulating activity of white blood cells and other functions of the immune system.

The actual height of the temperature is important, but equally significant are *the age of your child* and *what else is going on*. Before calling the doctor, determine if there are other symptoms such as coughing, runny nose, sore throat, rash, or (in children who are old enough to communicate) pain in some location.

Even more important is *the way your child is acting*. This can help you decide how urgent the problem is. A normal child will usually become somewhat irritable, less active, more clingy, and less hungry when a fever is present. In a typical acute illness, such as a cold, your child may act like her old self again when the fever subsides. With more serious infections, however, changes in behavior tend to be more profound. If you're uncomfortable with what you're seeing—for example, marked lack of responsiveness—get medical help right away. You should also take immediate action if a baby under three months of age has a rectal temperature over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit.

Most acute illnesses that generate a fever in infants and children are caused by viruses and will disappear on their own. Illnesses involving bacteria will respond to specific antibiotic treatment (certain viral illnesses, such as influenza, may also improve more rapidly with treatment). If the fever persists for more than twenty-four hours, a call to your child's physician

and possibly an evaluation may help determine the problem. In the meantime, here are some general measures that may be helpful.

1. Dress your infant or child in light clothing and keep the room at a comfortable temperature. If he or she is shivering, provide a light blanket for comfort. (Remember, though, that shivering is a process that will raise the body temperature.)

2. Give your child fluids, since some body fluids will be lost as a result of sweating. Appetite is typically reduced when a fever is present. Large or fatty meals should be avoided, since fever tends to slow movement of food through the digestive tract.

3. Your child does not need to be strictly confined to bed, but activities should be kept on the quiet side since vigorous exertion might increase the temperature. If the illness is potentially contagious (and most viruses are), your child should be kept isolated as much as possible.

4. Sponge bathing an infant or child to bring down a fever is not necessary, except in unusual situations (such as heatstroke) where temperatures exceed 106 degrees Fahrenheit. Sponging may help the child feel more comfortable, especially if the fever is higher than 104 degrees Fahrenheit. It's helpful to give a dose of acetaminophen or ibuprofen at least thirty minutes before doing so to lower the set point of your child's thermostat. Otherwise, she will simply shiver her way back to her original temperature. To administer the sponge bath, set the child in an inch or two of lukewarm water and use a sponge or washcloth to keep body surfaces wet for thirty to forty-five minutes. You do not have to bring the temperature down to normal—lowering it a couple of degrees will help the child feel better. *Do not use cold water*, which will make her shiver, and *do not use rubbing alcohol*, which can be dangerous when absorbed through the skin or inhaled.

Note: *Febrile convulsions*—seizures precipitated by fever—occur in 2 to 5 percent of children sometime between four months and five years of age. These seizures often begin early in an acute illness, usually during the rapid upswing of a fever (which doctors refer to as a *spike*). In fact, an infant or child whom you find hot and cranky with a 104 degree F temperature is not likely to have a seizure in the immediate future because, with rare exceptions, she has already arrived at the high temperature without incident.⁸⁰

In Other Words ...

“When you need help getting your child's needs met, it's time to ask ... queries like the following: Is this situation considered common? How is it normally handled here? When something happens to our child that makes us anxious or ready to fight, we forget that, for service providers, this may seem like just another day. For example, when my obstetrician announced that my son was ‘breech,’ he said it as offhandedly as I might say to my husband, ‘Oh, and pick up some milk on your way home.’ To the doctor, this was a common occurrence; for me, it was devastating news. To gain perspective, it's crucial that we find out how serious service providers think the situation is.”⁸¹

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The Baby Care Home Video: Reassuring Step-by-Step Instruction for New Parents* (DVD, Beckles & Associates, Inc.)

Vaccination and Immunization

Question

Are vaccinations and immunizations dangerous? Several of our friends, who are also new parents, have very strong feelings against this practice. I'm not sure I understand their view, and I'm very nervous about running unnecessary risks with our baby. What should I do?

Answer

The first thing you need to know is that, contrary to the claims of some groups and individuals, vaccines *are* safe. Before any vaccine reaches your doctor's office, it has undergone several rounds of rigorous clinical testing. The government continues to monitor all vaccines after their release to ensure that they are as safe as possible. While a small minority of children may experience mild reactions, including irritability, tenderness in the area of injection, and low-grade fever, the likelihood of a severe reaction to a vaccine is extremely small—*much* smaller than the likelihood of complications due to the disease.

Some vaccines are administered in combination (for example, the measles-mumps-rubella and diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis triple vaccines) and infants often receive several during a single office visit. This has led some parents to express concerns that their infant's immune system might be weakened as a result of receiving too many vaccines at one time. In actuality, a child's immune system is exposed to far fewer antigens over the entire course of recommended vaccinations than a child will face within the course of a normal day.

It is extremely important that immunization occur when children are young and still vulnerable. It's also vital that we continue to vaccinate for childhood measles, which we no longer see nearly as often as we once did. The fact of the matter is that these diseases have *not* been eradicated—we simply see them less frequently because most children are immunized against them. Even for diseases that have not occurred in North America for years, vaccination is still essential. The accessibility of international travel means that someone elsewhere in the world who is infected with polio, for example, could carry it into parts of the world that have not seen it in decades.

We should add that many diseases commonly regarded as benign childhood ailments can be far more serious than many people suppose. Rubella (German measles), for instance, can result in infant death and cause serious birth defects. Prior to immunization, pertussis (whooping cough) struck between 150,000 and 260,000 individuals annually and caused as many as 9,000 deaths per year. Before we had a vaccine, nearly everyone in the United States could expect to contract measles. At one time, this disease was responsible for about 450 deaths nationally every year (and it still kills more than 100,000 children every year around the world annually).

It's worth noting that there may be instances in which a doctor might postpone immunization—for example, when a child is ill or recovering from a severe illness.

There is, of course, a great deal more we could say on this subject, given the time and space. We could explain, for example, why the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Institute of Medicine have concluded that there is no relationship between autism and the MMR-II vaccine. We could provide documentation spelling out why there is no significant threat of mercury poisoning associated with modern childhood immunization. We could argue at length that the idea that physicians are involved in a global conspiracy to promote immunization at the expense of children's health is ludicrous at best and slanderous and dangerous at worst. But by this point we think you've probably got the main idea—we strongly favor the practice of protecting small children against dangerous infections by way of immunization. If you need more detailed information, we suggest you consult your family doctor or pediatrician.⁸²

In Other Words ...

“It's only right for parents to raise their concerns and ask questions when it comes to their children's well-being. In fact, the members of the Physicians Resource Council of Focus on the Family have heard many of these concerns and questions about immunizations. While the PRC recognizes that vaccine research and monitoring must continue in order to produce the safest vaccines possible, it also recognizes that the vaccines currently available are not only beneficial but essential to the health of children.”⁸³

—Focus on the Family position statement

Need More Help?

Online

- The website of the [Immunization Action Coalition](#) offers information about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines to patients, parents, health care organizations, and government health agencies.

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Is My Child Obese?

Question

Our pre-teen child has suddenly put on a lot of weight. Is this a normal part of puberty? At what point should we begin to regard his weight gain as a matter of serious concern?

Answer

The *body mass index* (BMI) is a number calculated on the basis of an individual's height and weight. We use this number to get a general idea of a person's weight status—underweight, normal, overweight, or obese. In children and adolescents, the significance of a given BMI depends more on age and sex than in adults. As a result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has established specific charts of *BMI-for-age* for both boys and girls. You can find BMI calculators on several websites, such as [this one](#).

Currently the CDC uses the following terminology when referring to excessive weight in children and teenagers:

- Being *overweight* means that the BMI lands between the 85th and 95th percentiles for age and sex.
- Being *obese* means that the BMI is more than the 95th percentile for age and sex.

Over the past three decades or so, the prevalence of this problem among children and teens has risen dramatically. Altogether, about 13 million young Americans between the ages of two and nineteen are *obese*.

The consequences of this condition can be serious. For young people, the fallout from excessive weight involves three major types of issues. First, it can involve a number of *immediate and ongoing health risks*, including insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease, orthopedic problems, sleep apnea, and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Another sobering statistic indicates that 60 percent of overweight children between the ages of five and ten already have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease, such as an elevation of cholesterol, triglycerides, or blood pressure. Twenty-five percent have two or more of these risk factors.

Second, overweight teens and kids are likely to struggle with *long-term weight problems*. The amount of fat in your body reflects both the *size* and the *number* of fat cells, and the number of cells increases most dramatically during late childhood and early adolescence. The overweight child gains more of these cells than his lean counterpart and may begin his teen years with as many fat cells as an adult. When weight is lost—and this is the important point—fat cells shrink in size *but not in number*, and people with more fat cells regain lost fat more quickly. As a result, the overweight child or early teen is more likely to become an overweight adult who has difficulty maintaining any weight loss. Furthermore, those who are able to control their weight later in life are still more likely to develop coronary artery disease and arthritis than adults who were not overweight as children or teens. This is a key reason for dealing thoughtfully and carefully—and as quickly as possible—with a child’s weight problem.

Third, there are *emotional and social risks* that go with being overweight. This is especially true for kids, whose culture at school (or down the block) isn’t usually characterized by kindness and understanding. When you’re young and overweight, every day can be a brutal gauntlet of insults, snubbing, and loneliness. This ongoing assault on the heart and spirit may have lifelong consequences, and preventing or limiting it is one of the most important reasons for parents to take an active role in their child’s nutritional health.

The answer to your original question, then, is *no*—it is *not* “normal” for a pubescent child or teen to be overweight, but it *is* increasingly *common*. Based on the facts and statistics outlined above, we think you can see that this is a disturbing state of affairs. The time to do something about it is *now*.⁸⁴

In Other Words ...

“It’s human nature to look for someone else to blame when things go awry.... Distancing ourselves from the never-ending blame game aids us in squarely facing the problem of obesity. God wants us to take responsibility for ourselves and quit passing the buck. Parents must be accountable for their children just as adults are accountable for themselves.... Parents need to patiently take charge of their children’s nutrition and exercise routines. It won’t be easy, and you may have failed in the past. But be persistent and get help from your friends, family, pastor, and doctor.”⁸⁵

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Preventing Childhood Obesity

Question

Why are so many kids overweight these days? I'm afraid mine could go in that direction, especially since there's a history of it in my family. What can we do to help our children avoid obesity and develop healthy eating habits?

Answer

The “why” part of your question isn't as easy to answer as you might suppose. To a certain extent, the reason for the weight-related issues we're facing today is the same for young and old alike: Over an extended period of time, more calories are going in than are being used, and our bodies are responding by storing the extra fuel as fat.

Obviously, the long answer is more complex. There are a number of interrelated factors affecting how an individual gains or loses weight, and the impact of each varies considerably from person to person. Heredity is important, of course: Certain people gravitate toward being thin or overweight no matter what they eat. But it's a mistake to attribute weight and body shape entirely to genes. Activity levels are also important, particularly in the case of contemporary kids who are now spending an increasing amount of time sitting in front of the TV or the computer screen. So are family eating habits, the influence of culture (particularly in the area of portion sizes), the predominance of “fast” and pre-packaged foods, and the relationship between food, emotions, and socializing.

What can you do to help your child stay trim and healthy in a society that seems geared to promote obesity? In a way this is like asking, “How can I help prevent my child from becoming a smoker or a drug user?” Certainly there are defensive measures to consider, but accentuating the positive and becoming a role model of healthy eating and physical activity is definitely preferable. As with so many other dimensions of parenting, it's a matter of avoiding extremes. You can't afford to sit back and let marketers and media determine what your family will eat. But neither should you become an uptight, repressive food dictator. Here are some thoughts you should bear in mind and some strategies you can try.

If your child is still small—a toddler or a preschooler—start now to establish healthy patterns of diet and exercise. Give him many opportunities to try a variety of nutritious foods in modest quantities. Whatever you do, don't force him to sit for hours until he finishes every last morsel on the plate—he should eat when he's hungry and stop when he's not. Stay away from fatty, salty, sugary, or “fast” foods that are aggressively marketed to kids through colorful packaging and TV ads. *Never* use food to manipulate a child's behavior. And establish clear limits and expectations regarding computer time as well as TV and video viewing. Remember, a child probably won't become *less* attached to these sedentary activities as he gets older, so be very careful about the habits you set in place for him at a young age.

If you're raising school-age kids or adolescents, it's especially important to fight the temptation to use restaurants, fast-food chains, and pizza deliveries as your family's primary food suppliers. This is easy to do when you're dealing with the pressures of extracurricular activities and hectic schedules. That's not to mention that a child's interest in the Internet, video games, movies, and TV goes into high gear at this age. The amount of time spent sitting and staring at screens can increase exponentially as a result.

One of the best ways to combat these trends is to establish several family meals as predictable events every week. This will take some effort, but older children and teens can and should be involved in the planning, shopping, preparation, serving, and cleanup. These should be times to introduce and reinforce the value of such staple items as vegetables, fruits, lean meats, and whole grains.

While you're planning the family's sit-down meals, think through with your kids what they're going to do about breakfast and lunch. A wholesome breakfast (juice, fruit, and whole-grain cereal) and a packed lunch may require some extra planning, but they're well worth the effort. Skipping meals (especially breakfast) is common among teens, but definitely *not* recommended by nutrition experts.

In the meantime, phase out soft drinks and other flavored, sweetened beverages. Keep fresh fruits and vegetables available as snacks (nuts can be great snacks, too, as long as they're consumed in small portions). Set clear limits on recreational screen time—TV, videos, electronic games, and Internet. And encourage all kinds of physical activity. You'll be glad you did.⁵⁶

In Other Words ...

“Your goal shouldn't be weight loss alone, but improving your child's overall fitness and health. Among the benefits: fewer obesity-related dangers, and greater strength, endurance, flexibility, and confidence. The most important thing to keep in mind is that this isn't a temporary, stopgap measure. It's a change in your family's lifestyle, and it must continue indefinitely.”⁵⁷

—Robert Andersen, M.D.

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Helping an Obese Child

Question

Our pre-teen child is seriously overweight. He loves food and gets extremely disappointed when we turn down his requests for snacks and treats. He also becomes depressed after several days of healthy eating. How can we reverse this trend?

Answer

You're right to consider this a serious problem. At the moment your major concern shouldn't be with your child's happiness—with what he "loves" or doesn't "love," or the fact that he "becomes depressed after several days of healthy eating." At this point you should be focusing on doing everything you can to *save his life*.

If he's clinically obese—a point you need to settle with your family physician at the earliest opportunity—he's at high risk for diabetes, heart disease, vascular disease, stroke, arthritis, emotional illness, and early death. Furthermore, obesity has dire implications for a child's self-esteem. Overweight kids are often teased and bullied in school. Sometimes they react by becoming bullies themselves.

We suggest that you make a determined effort to focus on five things: better nutritional choices; an increase in physical activity; eating meals together as a family; better rest and recreation habits; and wiser media choices, which means severely reducing time in front of the TV, computer, or video game terminal.

It's crucial that you make this a *family* project. One of the first things we'd advise is to turn off the TV and begin taking walks in the evening several times a week. If you don't work *together* to establish healthier habits in your home, your son will never be able to embrace the dramatic lifestyle changes he so desperately needs to make.

By the way, contrary to the concern you've expressed, there's no evidence whatsoever that eating healthy, nutritious food leads to depression. It *is* possible, however, that your child has become accustomed to having so much sugar in his diet that he tends to "crash" when you take him off the junk food. There's also a slight possibility that he could be suffering from some kind

of endocrine problem. This is another question that you need to take up with your pediatrician or family doctor.

As a supplement to these home-based activities, you might also want to talk to your son's teacher and let him or her know that you're attempting to help your son make healthier eating choices. Perhaps the teacher would be willing to monitor your child's eating habits at school. You can maintain a degree of control over his caloric intake during the day by packing him a nutritious lunch instead of allowing him to eat in the cafeteria. If you've been giving him money to buy snacks or soft drinks from school vending machines, you will, of course, want to stop that immediately.

However you decide to approach this problem, it's vital to bear in mind that your child needs to be reassured of your love and acceptance throughout the entire process. In other words, do what you can to help him lose weight, but make it clear that his place in your affections does *not* depend upon his success in achieving that goal.

For more help and information you may wish to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by phone. Our counselors are all committed Christians and licensed marriage-and-family therapists. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"For now, control what you keep in your house. It will be a few more years before your child can drive to the store or the burger joint. To minimize the chance that visits with friends will sabotage your efforts, talk with the parents of your child's friends. You can request confidentiality, but let them know if you're engaged in a weight loss effort and that any help they can offer is welcome. You may want to ask them not to let kids eat junk food at their house when your child is there."^{ss}

—Dr. Robert Andersen

Need More Help?

Online

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Other Resources

- *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Diet Pills or Surgery for Overweight Child?

Question

Our daughter is obese, and nothing seems to work in getting her weight down. We're getting desperate. We keep hearing about diet pills and even bariatric surgery as potential solutions. Are these safe?

Answer

Diet pills are not recommended for adolescents and children. Prescription diet medications currently on the market offer very limited (if any) help in weight loss for adults, and non-prescription pills, supplements, and other concoctions sold as cures for obesity serve only to lighten the wallets of those who put their hope in them. *These are not appropriate for children*, and are as unlikely to produce significant results in overweight adolescents as in adults. Prescription medications for weight loss should be considered only after careful evaluation of the situation by a dietitian and a physician who have special expertise in their use by kids in this age group.

Some bariatric surgery centers are now carrying out gastric banding and bypass procedures on adolescents with severe weight problems. In properly selected cases involving teenagers with significant, long-standing obesity (especially when medical complications have developed)—those who have failed ongoing supervised weight-loss attempts, who have reached their adult height and who have been carefully screened medically and psychologically—this type of procedure *may* be health- and even life-preserving. But it should only be carried out by surgeons who are highly experienced in performing this surgery on adolescents within the context of a comprehensive program, most likely in a university or major medical center.

If you have a teenager who is contemplating this type of procedure, ask your primary care physician (who should be involved in this discussion) for a referral to a qualified bariatric surgeon. You can also check the website of the [American Society for Metabolic & Bariatric Surgery](#) (ASMBS) to obtain names of members in your area, or contact the ASMBS at 100 Southwest 75th Street, Suite 201, Gainesville, FL 32607. The phone number is 352-331-4900.⁸⁹

In Other Words ...

“What about camps for overweight children? These vary greatly, so ask your doctor for a recommendation. As you research options, keep the following thoughts in mind:

“1. Camp can, and should, be a fun time for kids. Look for one that emphasizes physical activities—especially teaching new ones to children, so that when they return they’ll know more ways to stay on the move.

“2. Examine the camp’s philosophy and policies. What are kids fed? What are they taught about eating? Are kids allowed to eat anything as long as they limit portions? Are most junk foods not available? Does the camp support the fitness principles you’ve been trying to teach?

“3. See if you can find a friend or two to join your child. Bringing your own support group fights loneliness, boosts acceptance, bolsters confidence, and increases the likelihood that the program will be effective.”²⁰

—Dr. Robert Andersen

Need More Help?

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Other Resources

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- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Frequent Stomachaches

Question

My child frequently complains of a “stomachache”—especially when it’s time to do his chores or get ready for school. Is this pain real, or is it just a ploy? Should we take him to the doctor, send him to bed, or just tell him to tough it out?

Answer

As a matter of fact, recurrent abdominal pain is a common and vexing problem among school-age children. While you shouldn’t assume that these discomforts are imaginary or manufactured to escape responsibility, judgment will be required to gauge your child’s tolerance to pain in general and the severity of these pains in particular.

The good news is that the vast majority of these episodes are not caused by diseases such as infection, cancer, inflammation, or structural abnormalities that need to be repaired.

The bad news is that the most common form of recurring discomfort, known as *functional abdominal pain*, is very real and can be quite disruptive to a child. Research suggests that functional abdominal pain arises from abnormalities in the communication between the central nervous system and the enteric nervous system, a complex network of nerves supplying the entire digestive tract. One explanation is that children with this problem may have an increased sensitivity to pain within the bowel—so sensitive, in fact, that normal changes in pressure within the bowel may be perceived as uncomfortable. Whether this arises from a malfunction within the enteric nervous system, the central nervous system, or both—or even a complex interaction between the two—is uncertain.

Functional abdominal pain may be sharp or dull, high or low in the abdomen, widely spread or somewhat localized. After one to three hours, the pain typically disappears. While these episodes may interfere with a variety of daytime activities, they rarely awaken the child from sleep. Very often there appears to be no obvious relationship to food or time of day, and there are no other signs of illness such as fever, weight loss, persistent diarrhea, or blood in the stool (indeed, if any of these symptoms are present, the problem cannot be assumed to be functional abdominal pain).

In many cases, the pains seem to be related to stress, whether of the everyday variety or from more significant events such as harassment by a schoolyard bully, uncertainty generated by a stormy parental relationship, or more serious forms of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. If you have reason to suspect some such cause, a medical evaluation may need to be accompanied by some sensitive questions.

If diagnosing functional abdominal pain is a challenge, treatment is an art. Reassurance, passage of time, mild pain relievers, stool softeners, and some troubleshooting of the issues of life should be on the agenda. If recurring episodes of abdominal pain are particularly disruptive, and especially if there is uncertainty about the diagnosis, your pediatrician might recommend an evaluation by a specialist. Remember that your child will need more immediate medical attention if an episode of abdominal pain

- is severe and sudden;
- doesn't let up after a few hours;
- is accompanied by repeated episodes of vomiting and/or diarrhea;
- is associated with a fever over 100.4 degrees F;
- is accompanied by other symptoms such as headache or listlessness;
- begins in or shifts to the upper or lower right side of the abdomen; or
- is associated with blood in the stool.

If you have questions about the potential psychological dimension of this problem, Focus on the Family's staff counselors would be happy to discuss them with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.⁹¹

In Other Words ...

"By the time our oldest reached the end of kindergarten, I realized that this school was unable or unwilling to meet his needs as a gifted learner.... He began to shut down in his regular class. The tension was so thick that it began to choke the joy out of our lives.

"By the middle of second grade, Christopher and the school had seen enough of each other. I didn't want to give up; I wanted to find a way to make this work. But when my son stopped trying and complained daily about stomach-aches, I had to change my behavior. We pulled him out of public school, and I homeschooled him for the rest of his elementary school years."⁹²

—Vicki Caruana

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Getting Kids to Eat Healthy Foods

Question

With so many kids growing up on junk food, we want to start training ours early to eat good foods and maintain a healthy diet. But we don't want them to hate us for it. How can we keep from caving in the way so many parents seem to?

Answer

The first thing you need to realize is that little children—toddlers and preschoolers—often display wide variations in their desire for food. A ravenous appetite one day followed by picking and dawdling sessions the next aren't at all unusual. So don't become obsessed with the amounts of food your kids are consuming. *Your* job at this point is to provide an appropriate mix of healthy options. *Their* job is to decide how much of each (within reason) they will consume.

If you need a calorie estimate of your children's needs, figure about forty calories per pound of body weight per day. A child weighing 35 pounds, for example, will consume about 1,400 calories per day. Between 25 and 35 percent of those calories should be in the form of fats. Milk should be kept to a maximum of 16 ounces a day. Vitamin supplements are not necessary at this age, but if you have any special concerns, check with your doctor.

In the coming months, you will want to pay more attention to the patterns of your children's food intake than to the details of what they eat at any given meal. In particular, you will want to keep the following in mind:

- *Emphasize variety and freshness.* The average North American supermarket contains a dazzling selection of vegetables, fruits, grains, and meats. Children should be exposed to this rich diversity at an early age. Remember that fresh foods are more nutritionally intact than frozen or canned items.

- *Resist the encroachment of sugary, salty, fatty, and otherwise low-quality enticements.* Your kids may be getting the good stuff at home, but advertisers are working overtime to lure their taste buds in other directions. While you still have control over what lands on their plates, do what you can to mold their tastes, and don't let them manipulate you into buying products that are short on nutritional value.

• *Don't allow food to become an accompaniment to a whole gamut of other activities.* Eating is a good thing to do when your kids are hungry or when the family sits down together for a meal. Period. It should not become a cure for boredom, a pacifier for a stubbed toe, or a bribe designed to get children to do what you want them to do.

• *Don't turn meals into power struggles.* If you provide a wholesome selection of foods at a meal and your children seem uninterested, don't fight over it. Don't make it the main subject of conversation or force them to sit for hours at the table until they've cleaned their plates. Instead, put the food in the refrigerator and take it out again when they get hungry. Whatever you do, don't be badgered into making something special for them at every meal, and don't allow them to get stuck in a rut of three or four foods that are "the only things they ever eat." They won't starve if you stick to your guns and hold your ground.

Regular mealtimes are another important part of the formula. While busy schedules may rule out formal dining three times a day, there should be at least one meal a day when the family gathers together around the table at the same time. Dinner is the usual choice, but for many small children breakfast is the biggest meal of the day, and socializing at that time may be more productive than later in the afternoon or evening. For some families, one or two meals a week—perhaps Saturday breakfast or Sunday dinner after church—can also serve as special times of togetherness.⁹³

In Other Words ...

"Don't be too sure about what your children may develop a taste for.... When my daughter Heather was six, our family took a vacation. One day, in a restaurant, a waitress walked by with a plate of oysters on the half shell. Not being a fan of the slimy little creatures, I didn't give them a second look. But Heather did.

"Dad, what are those things?' she asked.

"Oysters.'

"Oysters. Are they good?'

"They're okay, but I don't care for them. Do you want to try some?' I thought I was safe with that question; no way would she want to try something as exotic as an oyster.

"Sure!' came her swift and enthusiastic reply.

"To my astonishment, she ate not one but several. Lesson: You never know what kids may try or learn to like. Sometimes you just have to give them a chance."⁹⁴

—Dr. Robert Andersen

Need More Help?

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Other Resources

- *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Child Isn't Physically Active

Question

Our school-age child spends too much time in front of the television and the computer screen. We're actually getting worried about his health and physical fitness. We've urged him again and again to play outside more often, but so far it hasn't helped. What can we do to encourage more physical activity?

Answer

When your child was a toddler, you probably felt like he was a perpetual-motion machine. Now that he's older and his attention span has increased, he's fallen prey to the lure of electronic media and the sedentary lifestyle they encourage. It's an increasingly common problem. Nowadays, far too many of our young people are exiting childhood and adolescence overweight and underactive.

What can you do about it? How do you launch a child into a healthy trajectory in this important area of his life? Basically in the same ways you promote *any* value that you care about: by modeling it yourself, by doing it with him, and by encouraging him to do it on his own.

1. *Modeling physical activity.* If you really believe in the importance of staying in shape, it stands to reason that you'll invest a fair amount of time in a regular exercise program of your own. It will make all the difference in the world for your child to see you setting a good example in this regard. You can do this by joining a gym or buying fitness equipment to use at home—a treadmill or a set of free weights, for example. But an even more effective approach involves finding creative ways to work more physical activity into your daily routine. Let your child see you taking the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator. If you have to run an errand that isn't too far away, walk or ride a bike (and have your son join you). Do your own yard work, and involve your child in these tasks as much as possible. When socializing with other families, consider options beyond merely talking and eating. Try walking or hiking together, or playing recreational sports such as tennis. And place limits on the amount of time designated for TV viewing in your home.

2. *Doing physical activities as a family.* Young children rarely turn down an opportunity to play a physical game with one or both parents. For older children and adolescents, these activities can play a huge role in establishing their identity as members of your family. So if you jog or walk, have your child join you. Tennis, golf, and skiing can be enjoyable family pastimes if you have the resources to participate in them. Backyard games like badminton and volleyball can also be a lot of fun for you and your kids. When you go to the beach or park, bring along a ball or Frisbee as well as blankets and food. Plan vacations that include walking, swimming, and other physical pursuits.

3. *Encouraging your child's physical activity.* You can take a major step in this direction simply by limiting the amount of time your child is permitted to spend with the TV, the computer, or the PlayStation. A maximum of no more than two hours a day is a good rule of thumb. When your son arrives home from school, help him make time for some kind of physical activity before plowing into his homework. When buying birthday or Christmas presents, think about gifts that will promote exercise, such as a tennis racket or a baseball glove. Encourage participation in school physical education classes and programs even if this isn't your child's strong suit. If he has trouble keeping up, take an active role in helping him improve his performance.

While competitive sports can have many benefits for children, we'd like to add a few cautions. They also have the potential to cause physical injury, generate considerable stress or permanent emotional scars, and nourish negative attitudes such as elitism, hostility, and an obsession with winning. We'd advise you to keep this in mind as you attempt to help your child find a physical outlet that's suited to his particular needs, interests, and capabilities. You may have loved Little League, but he may prefer soccer. If the sport or activity you choose becomes a thorn in his side or constantly drains him of energy and joy, you'll need to reconsider. It has to be something that *he* considers fun. Otherwise, he'll end up hating it, and you will have lost an opportunity to provide him with the exercise he so desperately needs.

If you feel a need to discuss these points at greater length with a member of our staff, don't hesitate to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.⁹⁵

In Other Words ...

"There really is no magic to weight control and fitness; but that's okay, because no gimmicks are necessary. It's all about small changes, patience, and consistency. Your family can return to wholesome eating, daily physical activity, and eliminating junk food and the "couch potato" mentality. It may not be easy, but you know that anything of value rarely is. Keep a positive attitude. Constantly encourage your child to be the best he or she can be. Remember that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. For the sake of your kids, and with God's help, it's time to take that step."⁹⁶

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- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Is My Child Sleeping Too Much?

Question

My six-year-old does not want to wake up in the morning, even though she goes to bed early and sleeps through the night. Should I be concerned? Do you have any suggestions?

Answer

It's not unusual for a six-year-old to have difficulty getting up in the morning, especially on school days. At first glance, the scenario you've described looks pretty normal. We could be wrong in our assessment, of course, particularly if there are complicating factors you've neglected to mention. A great deal depends on the underlying reasons for your child's unwillingness (or inability) to get out of bed.

If you're uncertain about this, we suggest you conduct an informal investigation. You might begin by enticing your child with an enthusiastic reminder of a positive thing or event that's in store for her that day—something you know she really wants or really likes to do. Or you might see how she responds to an unexpected surprise, like a trip to the beach or a package that's arrived for her from Grandpa and Grandma.

If she immediately jumps out of bed, there's a good chance you're dealing with nothing more than a case of plain old laziness or copycat behavior (this sometimes happens if there's a teen in the house who has a habit of sleeping in). In that event, you may be able to resolve the problem with a simple system of rewards. Post a chart in your daughter's room and allow her to place a sticker on it every time she gets up on schedule; then, when the chart is full, let her choose a fun family outing that the entire household can enjoy. If that doesn't work, try giving her an extra half-hour in the morning and see if it helps.

If the fatigue and sluggishness persist, you may need to dig a little deeper to find out exactly what's going on. Is the child really sleeping through the night, as you're assuming? Or is it possible that she's secretly suffering from insomnia or getting up too often to go to the bathroom? A few simple questions should be sufficient to uncover any mysteries of this kind. If you're still coming up blank, it might be time to ask yourself if there's a more serious issue behind this problem. Depression is notorious for disrupting normal sleep patterns. It's also

possible that your child’s behavior is a symptom of withdrawal due to some kind of stress—for example, bully trouble or other pressures at school. To complicate matters, difficulties of this nature can become self-perpetuating, since too much sleep can actually increase fatigue. If you suspect any of these causes might be present, consult with your pediatrician.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss your child’s situation at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. You can contact them for a free consultation. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“When it comes to figuring out how much sleep your children need, you are better off just sticking with the recommended sleep times for different-aged children:

“• For children aged 1 to 3 years old, 12 to 14 hours is recommended.

“• For 3- to 6-year-olds, 11 to 12 hours.

“• And for 7- to 12-year-olds, 10 to 11 hours.

“Teenagers are more challenging. For 12 to 17 or even 18 years of age, they should be sleeping between 8.5 and 9.5 hours every night, or even longer.”⁵⁷

—Dr. Archibald D. Hart

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sleep, It Does a Family Good* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Part 8: Parents with Problems

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Adult Scarred by Parents: Will My Kids Suffer?

Question

Though I'm grown with children of my own, I continue to struggle with feelings of bitterness towards my parents. When I think of them, I remember only their harsh criticism, dysfunctional parenting, and unloving attitude. I don't want these memories to affect my relationship with my kids. How do I break this negative pattern?

Answer

The dilemma you're facing is very real, and probably more common than you suspect. It's obvious that you were seriously wounded as a child by your parents' attitudes, words, and actions, and as a result you're still carrying around a great deal of anger and bitterness.

You've taken an important first step in the right direction by recognizing that you need to deal with these emotions; in the long run, feelings of bitterness only harm the person who harbors them, not the one who inflicted the pain in the first place. What's more, you're correct in supposing that the resentment you feel toward your parents could have a negative impact on your relationship with your own kids, particularly during the teen years. It's best to resolve this internal struggle before it begins to affect the rest of your family.

The best way you can do this is by learning to *forgive*. This is something you need to do for the sake of your *own* mental and spiritual well-being. Ultimately, it's not about your parents; it's about encouraging your own personal healing. Bear in mind that, from the biblical perspective, forgiving and loving someone is an act of the will, not the emotions. You may never experience warm and tender feelings toward your mom and dad. Why should you, given the way they've hurt you? But you *can* choose to love them with the unconditional *agape* love of Jesus Christ. And you won't be able to move ahead with your own life until you give up your right to be angry at them for making your childhood miserable.

We have four suggestions for you. First, commit the situation to prayer. Ask the Lord to allow you to feel the emotions from which you've been trying to escape for so many years. Remember the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Then pray that He might grant you deliverance from the negative memories that have been clogging your spiritual arteries, binding your emotions, and holding you captive for so many years. The Gospel declares that Christ has come to set you free (Luke 4:18; Galatians 5:1), and we believe that God will not fail to keep this promise if you look to Him in faith and lean on Him with all your heart.

Third, if your parents are still living, you may want to consider the option of setting up a time to meet with them in order to discuss your feelings (of course, there may be some situations in which this would not be advisable; be careful to use discretion here). If your spouse is supportive, it would be a good idea to bring him or her along. Tell your mom and dad how much they've hurt you and how the memory of their words and actions continues to cause you pain. Keep your emotions under control, but be straightforward and honest. Explain that your purpose in bringing this up is not to hurt them in return, but to find release from the negative effects of your memories. This will take a tremendous amount of courage on your part, but it can be an important part of gaining the freedom you're seeking.

Finally, try to develop some empathy for your parents. Ask yourself what it was about their personal backgrounds that made them treat you the way they did. Find out what *their* childhoods were like. It's likely that they, too, grew up with harsh, unloving parents—that you're on the receiving end of a problem that spans several generations. If you have a chance to talk with them about this, try to pose some carefully considered questions about their past. If they're no longer living, you may be able to locate a member of the extended family who can provide you with the information and insights you need. A deeper understanding of their backgrounds and motives will give you a broader perspective on their behavior. This won't excuse the mistreatment you received at their hands, but it may help you release some of your bitterness.

As you begin to work your way through this process, you may find yourself in need of some outside assistance. A trained Christian counselor can be a tremendous help to you in this regard. Focus on the Family's counseling staff can supply you with a list of referrals to licensed family practitioners in your local area. They would also be more than happy to discuss your feelings with you at greater length over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"The past doesn't have to be the last word on the future of your family. You can help reverse the fathering deficit that seems so prevalent in our culture. It's really the best gift you can give your children.

“I’ve gotten to know a number of men whose heritage was nothing short of a handicap. Their fathers and grandfathers didn’t seem to care what kind of legacy they were passing on. But I’ve seen these men take on the challenge of making things different for their own children... For your kids’ sake, don’t get so hung up on your heritage that you fail to shape your legacy.”⁹⁸

—Carey Casey

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Learning to Forgive Others](#)” by Ed Chinn
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Blessing DVD Series* featuring John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)
- *When You Can’t Say ‘I Forgive You’: Breaking the Bonds of Anger and Hurt* by Grace Ketterman, M.D. and David Hazard (NavPress, 2000)
- *Total Forgiveness* by R. T. Kendall (Charisma House, 2007)
- *When You’ve Been Wronged: Moving from Bitterness to Forgiveness* by Erwin Lutzer (Moody Publishers, 2007)
- *Healing Your Family’s Wounds I-II* with Dr. Tom and Beverly Rodgers (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2009)
- *Castaway Kid* by R. B. Mitchell (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)

Parent Regrets Being Overly Critical

Question

I'm afraid I've had an overly critical attitude toward my children, and the results are now beginning to surface. How do we turn this around?

Answer

You'll be encouraged to know that other parents have confronted and successfully dealt with the challenges you're facing now.

As a first step toward resolving this issue, consider stating the obvious to your children. Try saying something like, "Your mom and I have made a mistake. We've been overly critical with you kids. We've placed too high a standard on ourselves, and as a result we've done the same thing to you." Cite a couple of specific instances. Then bring the message home by concluding, "We're really sorry. Will you please forgive us?"

Eating humble pie is never easy, but in God's economy it can lead to some of the most precious teachable moments you'll ever experience as a parent. In this case, it will provide your children with a concrete example of servant leadership and an unforgettable lesson on the meaning of mercy and grace.

The damage *can* be reversed if you make the effort to set a different kind of example. Pay attention to the standards you set for yourselves. Let your kids see that you and your wife can accept yourselves (and each other) even with all your flaws. Embrace each other's little quirks (unless, of course, those "quirks" are actual sins).

In conversations with your children, pay special attention to their feelings. If they put themselves down or express a lack of self-confidence, avoid the temptation to shake them out of that mood with a sermon or pep talk. It's rarely helpful to say, "You shouldn't think that way. Look at all the wonderful talents and abilities God has given you!" Instead, *listen* to your child carefully and repeat back what you hear. Respond with something like, "It sounds as if you're feeling insecure [disappointed with yourself, embarrassed, nervous, etc.]. Is that right?" Let her know you can relate to her feelings—that you sometimes feel the same way yourself. In so doing

you will create an atmosphere of understanding, openness, and acceptance in which she will be able to bloom and grow without fear of failure and disapproval.

If you're dealing with a particularly stubborn child, the situation gets a bit more complex. It's difficult to guess exactly what's going on in his mind, but after seeing the high expectations Mom, Dad, and even siblings have set for themselves, some kids give up in discouragement. Sometimes a child's outward behavior is simply a mask for what he's experiencing inside. Naturally, there should be consequences for a mere stubborn refusal to cooperate. But even here it would be helpful to avoid conflict as much as possible and spend some time trying to get in touch with your child's heart.

As always, if family dynamics don't turn around eventually you shouldn't hesitate to seek professional assistance. Our staff counselors would be happy to take your call if you feel inclined to discuss this situation with them. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Your [child] might respond by granting forgiveness. He might be stunned and say nothing. If he's still angry, he might say, 'No.' What should you do if you get a negative response?

"Smile. Pat him on the shoulder or knee and say, 'I love you.' Then walk away—not angrily, but knowing that what you did to hurt your [child] might take time to heal. Allow him that time. After all, if someone dropped a concrete block and broke your toe, would an apology take away the pain?"⁹⁹

—Joe White

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions..

Other Resources

- *The Power of Love: Building Relationships that Work*, part of the Essentials of Parenting video series (DVD, Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Building Confidence in Your Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Revell, 2010)
- *Why Christian Kids Rebel* by Dr. Tim Kimmel (Thomas Nelson, 2004)

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Blessing DVD Series* featuring John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Child Says Dad Is Abusive

Question

My dad is a very angry person. He's never been physically violent, but he verbally abuses my mom, my sister, and me almost constantly. I'd move out if I were old enough, but I'm not. Can you help me deal with this situation?

Answer

You're right to be concerned about your family's situation. You may have been spared physical violence up to this point, but if anger is a major part to your father's personality—as you suggest it is—then things could easily take a turn for the worse with very little warning.

Your entire family needs to seek professional assistance and intervention as quickly as possible. You or your mother can start the process by calling Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book. After discussing your concerns with you over the phone, our counselors can provide you with referrals to licensed family counselors in your area.

If your dad refuses to take part in the counseling process, it would still be advisable for you and your mom to get individual counseling as well as family counseling including your sister and any other siblings that may be living with you. Among other things, this would provide you with some skills that will be helpful in preventing uncontrolled conflict and confronting your father's behavior. With your mother's help, you could also seek out an adult mentor—one in your church who is recommended by your pastor—who will be able to encourage you and guide you in your life decisions.

In Other Words ...

“The time necessary to disassemble and disable an abusive relationship is limited. But during that limited time, expect manipulative maneuvers and emotional ups and downs. Assume your actions will make the abuser angry. Allow him or her to react without reacting yourself. Don't

seek to placate this person; it won't work. Think of this time as comparable to surgery—it's a painful experience, yet it provides the only hope for healing and having a healthy relationship."¹⁰⁰

—June Hunt

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Understanding Emotional Abuse](#),” a series of articles by Mary J. Yerkes
- The [HopeLine](#) with Dawson McAllister offers online coaches and mentors for young people who need to talk.

Other Resources

- *Help! My Family's Messed Up* by Emily Parke Chase (Kregel Publications, 2008)
- *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse* by Gregory L. Jantz and Ann McMurray (Revell, 2009)

Struggling to Make “Quality Time” for Kids

Question

It seems like there aren't enough hours in the day to do all that needs to be done. What with working and maintaining a household it's difficult to spend quality time with my kids. What can I do?

Answer

You may have more time than you realize. If not, it's crucial that you put out an effort to find or make some.

A few years ago family experts were preaching that what's important is “quality time,” not “quantity time.” More recent research shows that kids need *both* “quality” *and* “quantity” time with their parents. In fact, the more involved parents are with their children, the less likely they are to have social, emotional, or academic problems, use drugs or alcohol, become involved in crime, or engage in premarital sex.

It's not always possible to *plan* meaningful interactions between parent and child. Such serendipitous moments can't be cooked up and crammed into a few minutes of “quality time” every day. Many opportunities to teach or model moral values may catch you off-guard and will be gone in the blink of an eye. You can't seize the moment if you're not there to do the seizing. And that means spending lots of “quantity” time together with your kids.

Without more detailed information about your family situation, it's hard to know exactly how to advise you. But your inquiry leads us to believe that you *may* need to re-examine your priorities. You can begin by asking yourself a few simple questions:

- Is your employment outside the home a matter of providing for basic needs, or are you driven by materialistic desires or a longing for personal significance?
- Are there any aspects of “maintaining a household” that you can afford to sacrifice?
- Do you attach a greater value to status or appearance than to the well-being of your kids?

After all, a spotless home isn't nearly as important as a close relationship with your children. As an anonymous poet has written:

For when at times I'm forced to choose
The one job or the other,
I'd like to cook and clean and scrub,
But first I'll be a mother.

Another suggestion: One of the easiest ways to make more time for your kids is to *turn off the TV*. In the average U.S. home, the television is on *49 hours a week*. By way of contrast, the average amount of time that both parents spend in meaningful conversation with their children is *39 minutes a week*. If you're serious about wanting more time with your kids, make the obvious choice. Instead of watching TV, read to them, play board games together, take a walk to a local park, or just talk to them.

It's also important to avoid the temptation to get your kids overly involved in activities outside the home. Some parents feel pressure to sign their children up for numerous sports teams, music and dance lessons, social clubs, and all kinds of community organizations. Don't fall prey to this mindset. Kids don't need a dozen different weekly activities. They need quality and quantity time with loving, involved, and committed parents.

We hope these few suggestions have been helpful. If you'd like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your own convenience. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"You don't need bigger amounts of time to make your kids happy—you need to use what you have better.... The old saying 'If you look after the pennies, the dollars will take care of themselves,' is so true. I stopped looking for big chunks of time to use to become a better dad and started using the pennies—or the minutes—that I had. This turned out to be the most important and effective parenting skill I ever learned, and it's made a huge difference in my relationship with my children. In being faithful with all the small opportunities to be a good dad, I'm being made ruler over the big task of being a parent. The dollars are taking care of themselves."¹⁰¹

—Rick Osborne

Need More Help?

Online

- [Family and Home Network](#) is dedicated to “helping families spend generous amounts of time together.”
- “[The Involved Father](#),” a series of articles about finding time with children and spending it wisely

Other Resources

- *Seven Solutions for Burned-Out Parents* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Parenting at the Speed of Life: 60 Ways to Capture Time with Your Kids* by Rick Osborne (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2004)
- *It’s Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The 21-Day Dad’s Challenge*, Carey Casey, general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Moms on the Job* by Sabrina O’Malone (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* by Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (NavPress, 2004)

How Do I Leave Work at the Office and Concentrate on Family?

Question

I'm an executive with a large corporation, and my job eats up a lot of my time and energy. The struggle to balance work and family is aggravated by the fact that business concerns tend to dominate my mind even during off-hours. Over and over again I come home at the end of a hectic day, determined to spend quality time with my wife and kids, only to find that Vice President X, Manager Y, and Client Z are still carrying on a heated conversation inside my head. I'm afraid I've lost the ability to jump off the treadmill and leave the rat race behind. What can I do?

Answer

Short of downgrading your position, reassessing your standard of living, and reconfiguring your lifestyle—options which are always on the table, and which we have no wish to dismiss lightly—there are several strategies you can use to gain ground in your mental battle.

The key is to learn what it takes for *you* to shift gears, slow down, and mentally change locations so that when you get home you can be *present in the moment* with your wife and children. Though the struggle is psychological, you can fight it effectively with a few very simple physical weapons. If you can get your body moving down a particular pathway—a pathway of your own choosing—it can sometimes be easier to persuade the mind to follow the same trajectory.

Next time you find yourself driving home from work with echoes of that afternoon's business meeting still reverberating through your mind, consider pulling off the road a few blocks from your house—into a nearby parking lot, perhaps—and taking five or ten minutes to regroup. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and utter a simple prayer—something like, “Lord, take me into Your hands, grant me Your peace, and prepare me to focus on the task of loving the people who are waiting for me at home.” Then get out of the car, walk around to the passenger side, open the door, and ask Vice President X, Manager Y, and Client Z to step out of the vehicle. Let them know that while you respect them and value their contributions to the workplace, they haven't

been invited to accompany you home on this occasion. You might even speak these words aloud in a determined, forthright tone of voice. Then shut the door, walk back to the driver's side, take your seat at the wheel, and drive off.

When you get home, see if you can arrange to spend ten or fifteen minutes alone with your spouse. Do this first—before engaging with the kids, sorting through the mail, flipping on the TV, or tackling the clogged drain in the bathroom. Sit down with your wife and have a quiet talk at the kitchen table. Then take a shower and change clothes. Hang up your suit and pull on your jeans. Assume the attitude and demeanor of a loving husband and caring father as you would put on a comfortable old shirt. Perform whatever personal “rituals” you need to in order to shake off your work-based identity and leave your “office self” behind. Make yourself at home, 100 percent. Concentrate on the moment and let business worries take care of themselves.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these suggestions at greater length, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. You can contact them for a free consultation. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“I have a friend who’s a major-league surgeon. He came to see me after realizing he was losing touch with his [kids]. He could see them frozen in the distance, almost like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I suggested he come home.

“He looked at me, his face etched with despair. ‘But I can’t.’

“I knew what he meant. His skills were in constant demand at all hours of the day and night. So I challenged him with what I hoped would be a reasonable goal. ‘Try to give 10 percent of each day to your kids. Just 10 percent.’

“He did. To his astonishment, his [kids] began to respond. What he thought he’d lost forever, he regained—when he gave only 10 percent of his time.”¹⁰²

—Joe White

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Balance Work and Family”](#) by Mike Yorkey with Greg Johnson
- [“Husband Too Busy for Family”](#) by Dr. Bill Maier
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Choosing to Cheat: Who Wins When Family and Work Collide* by Andy Stanley (Multnomah Publishers, 2003)
- *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* by Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (NavPress, 2004)
- *Restoring Balance to Your Life I-II* with Richard A. Swenson, M.D. (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

How Can I Handle Worry?

Question

I'm a perfectionist, and I really struggle with worry. I worry a great deal about everything in life, but especially my children. Fears and anxieties about what could or might happen to them are a constant feature of my everyday life. You don't have to tell me that this is wrong, that it's a problem, and that the Bible commands us not to worry—I'm already painfully aware of that. What I need to know is how to stop.

Answer

Let's begin by defining some terms. It will help to know exactly what we're talking about before attempting to suggest solutions or cures.

Fear is an intense emotional reaction to a *legitimate, present* danger.

Anxiety is an intense emotional reaction, usually of dread, to a *perceived, anticipated, or future* danger. Clinical anxiety can involve symptoms such as trembling and shaking, restlessness, sleep problems, fatigue, anger, and depression.

Worry is a non-technical, non-clinical term for anxiety.

Concern is Christianese for "worry."

Panic is a negative behavioral reaction to being overwhelmed by fear or anxiety.

Obsession is a persistent, often unwanted flooding of thoughts that is very difficult to control.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a condition in which the subject tries to stop obsessive thinking by engaging in repetitive behavior, such as hand-washing, counting, cleaning, and double-checking.

If you think you might be obsessive-compulsive or suffering from clinical anxiety, we'd urge you to see a Christian psychologist or psychiatrist right away. It's possible that you're dealing with something that you won't be able to handle on your own—not without medication, intensive consultation, and the assistance of a trained professional. Focus on the Family can provide you with a list of therapists practicing in your area who specialize in treating disorders of this nature.

If, on the other hand, you're just a garden-variety "worrier," there are some things you can do to help free yourself from the pernicious thoughts and imaginations that seem to be taking possession of your mind. The first step is to recognize that worry is basically a habit, and that habits can be broken. This pattern of thinking can be summed up in the phrase, "What if?" For example:

"What if my husband loses his job?"

"What if our son ends up in jail?"

"What if my daughter doesn't get the scholarship?"

"What if we come down too hard on our teenager and he runs away?"

The problem with "what if" thinking is that it shifts your focus. It pulls you into the future and away from the present. Present-tense *fear* says, "The house is burning! Run!" Future-oriented *worry*, on the other hand, says, "What if the house starts to burn tonight when we're all asleep?" It debilitates and paralyzes effective action because it gets the mind stuck on things that haven't yet happened and may never come to pass.

What can you do to address this bad habit? At the most basic level, you need to remind yourself that you can only live in the present moment. There is no alternative. Once you've convinced yourself of this fundamental truth, the challenge is to find practical ways to keep your attention focused on the situation immediately at hand. Here's a simple technique that you may find helpful:

Write the following four questions on an index card:

1. What are five colors I see right now?
2. What are five sounds I hear right now?
3. What are five things I physically feel right now (not emotions, but sensations like "the wind in my hair")?
4. What do I need to be doing—or thinking about—*right now*?

Place the card on your nightstand or dresser. When you wake up, go over the four questions to get your brain going in a new direction. After naming those five colors, sounds, and sensations, ask yourself what you need to do the moment your feet hit the floor. Go to the bathroom? Put on your robe? Make the coffee? Once you have the answer, go and do that one thing. Don't try to handle the rest of the day right now. Don't get sucked into "what if" thinking. *Just make the coffee.*

Take your index card with you and review the four questions three to five times a day. Ask them again when you get ready for bed at night. Enjoy going to bed instead of fretting about tomorrow. Practice keeping yourself *in the moment*. It won't come easy in the beginning, but hang in there. With patience and a little help from the people who care about you, you *can* change.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. They can also provide you with a list of referrals to trained therapists practicing in your area. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.¹⁰³

In Other Words ...

“When I began using [the four questions] technique myself, I had no idea if it would work. I just knew I had to do something different from what I’d been doing all those years. I had to find a way to slow down the worry that was driving me ‘out of control.’

“But in the course of two to three months, the change happened. The present began to take root, and the ‘what if’ records played less and less. That thinking still sneaks in sometimes, but not nearly as often. Now that I’m more focused on *what is*, the ‘what if’ feels foreign.

“The same can happen for you.”¹⁰⁴

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Moving Beyond Fear and Worry* with Max Lucado (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2011)
- *Breaking the Worry Habit ... Forever* by Elizabeth George (Harvest House, 2009)
- *The Anxiety Cure* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart (Thomas Nelson, 2001)
- *Calm My Anxious Heart: A Woman’s Guide to Finding Contentment* by Linda Dillow (NavPress, 2007)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

Can't Afford Expensive Kids' Activities

Question

I'm a stay-at-home mom and my husband works hard to support our family, but we don't have money for extra frills. Other people seem to be buying their kids tablet computers and sending them to sports camps, art classes, and even other countries. We're afraid that without those things, our children won't be able to compete in the real world. What can we do?

Answer

In case you haven't noticed, parents are under tremendous pressure to buy the latest educational toys and video games for their kids, send them to expensive computer camps, and generally spend wads of cash making sure they aren't deprived of anything our materialistic and consumer-oriented culture has to offer. The good news for moms and dads in your position is that none of this is necessary.

Write this down and remind yourself of it every time you begin to question the choices you've made as a stay-at-home mother: The happiest, most well-adjusted children are *not* those who are involved in a million different activities and who own every electronic gizmo on the market. On the contrary, the kids who thrive best are those who have committed, caring parents who spend time with them on a regular basis, take a genuine interest in their lives, and emphasize the importance of character over consumerism. So if you're feeling guilty because you don't have the money to buy your kids everything our culture says they need—*don't*.

There are dozens of ways you can provide stimulating activities for your children that don't cost much money. A great place to start is your local library. You can help your kids check out books and DVDs that will introduce them to people and places they've never dreamed of before. If they're old enough, they can get personal library cards and select their own materials for checkout. Most libraries also have Web access (which parents should, of course, monitor) and many offer special after-school learning enrichment programs. If it becomes a regular activity, we predict that your weekly or bi-weekly trip to the library will become an event that your children look forward to with great anticipation.

You should also be taking advantage of public museums, science centers, and zoos in your locality, most of which offer low-cost or free children's programs. If you live in a rural area this may involve a special weekend trip once in a while, but it's well worth the time and effort.

It would also be a good idea to start introducing your children to the world of music and drama. Many communities and universities offer classical or popular concerts for kids and Saturday morning children's theater productions. There are also a number of local classical radio stations across the country that produce educational programs aimed primarily at children.

These are just a few suggestions. If you put your mind to it, we're sure you can come up with many more ideas on your own. If you need some help brainstorming, feel free to call and talk with a member of our staff. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"What's better than a day of kicking through fall leaves? Or building a leaf fort with plastic deck chairs? Or finding enough tall sticks to make a teepee in the backyard? Or finding a toad under the front steps of your house? Those are the things childhood should be made of, not ceaseless 'programs' that dull creativity and try to force all children into a one-size-fits-all box.... This is one area in which I honestly believe that parents with less money have an advantage."¹⁰⁵

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *77 Ways Your Family Can Make a Difference: Ideas and Activities for Serving Others* by Penny A. Zeller (Beacon Hill Press, 2008)
- *99 Ways to Entertain Your Family for Free!* by Mack Thomas (Random House, Inc., 2009)

Sharing Past Moral Failings with Kids

Question

Is it appropriate to share my past mistakes and sins with my children? I'm a strong Christian and a dedicated parent, but during adolescence and young adulthood there was a time when I chose to "walk on the wild side." How much of this do my kids need to know?

Answer

We're glad you framed the question that way. *Need* is one of two pivotal concepts you'll want to keep in mind as you seek a satisfactory solution to this problem. As a general rule, we're of the opinion that "less is more" in a case like this, but everything depends on the temperament, personality, and maturity of your kids, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the circumstances occasioning any discussion of this delicate subject. You're looking at a potential minefield, but it *can* be negotiated safely and successfully if you allow yourself to be guided by one all-important consideration: *What's in the best interest of the child?*

Why do we say this? Because a parent in your position faces twin dangers, both of which arise out of the temptation to place your own needs, feelings, and concerns ahead of those of your kids. On the one hand, we all derive a certain pleasure from sharing our "war stories" with the younger generation. Even under the best of circumstances this kind of reminiscing can be less than helpful, and in the worst case it has the potential to degenerate into an unhealthy form of boasting. On the other hand, feelings of shame or fears of unintentionally "condoning" bad behavior can inhibit you from making a timely revelation of necessary information—information that *could* save an adolescent's life. You need to be able to discern the difference.

That leads us to the second of our two pivotal concepts: *motivation*. If you find yourself speaking at length about your youthful misadventures, it's crucial to stop and ask yourself why. Could it be that you take a certain perverse pride and pleasure in portraying yourself as a rakish, devil-may-care teenager? Again, if you're hesitant to be candid about your personal failings, is it possible that you're holding back out of fear or pride? As we've already indicated, the key in either instance is to put thoughts of *self* aside. Let your words and actions be guided purely by a

desire to give your children the best guidance possible—the guidance they really need for the situation at hand.

Bottom line: Truthfulness is essential and transparency is critical. But the detail and specificity of your confession has to be dictated by a number of complex and interrelated factors. We've already mentioned the age and maturity of the child. To this we should add the *child's* motivation. Is he *requesting* that you reveal personal data—as in, “Did you smoke pot when you were in high school?” or “Did you and Dad have sex before marriage?” If not, you need to ask yourself if there's any good reason to volunteer this information. If he *is* trying to elicit the facts about your past history, how is your narrative likely to be used? If it's a case of a hostile and rebellious teen stockpiling ammunition to be used against the authority figures in his life, you should obviously proceed with caution.

On the other hand, if you sense that your child is sincerely reaching out for empathy and guidance in the midst of a personal battle with temptation, it can't hurt to respond by revealing a bit of your own human weakness (with appropriate reservation, of course). As a matter of fact, this can be an unparalleled teaching opportunity—a chance to share valuable real-life wisdom drawn from real-life experience. This is the time to say—with humility—“I fell into that trap when I was a kid, and here's why I don't want you to make the same mistake.” In the process of bringing your personal failings into the open, you can show a struggling or fallen teen exactly what it means to correct course and *redeem* the errors of the past through faith in the grace of Christ. This will add credibility to your warnings and influence your child's future in ways you can't possibly predict.

We have a staff of trained, licensed Christian counselors here at Focus on the Family who would love to discuss these ideas with you at greater length if you would be willing to give us a call. They can also provide you with referrals to qualified family counselors practicing in your area. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Silence—choosing not to disclose all events of the day or all thoughts that cross your mind— isn't necessarily dishonest. In fact, sometimes the loving thing to do is to keep your mouth shut. Giving a diplomatic answer in love rather than a cold, blunt truth is not the same as lying.”¹⁰⁶

—Phillip J. Swihart

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Your Past, Your Kids: The Conversation”](#) by Daniel Huerta

- “[Before the Talk: Dealing with Our Past](#)” by Linda Klepacki
- “[Facing the Truth](#)” by Tricia Goyer

Other Resources

- “How Honest Do We Have to Be?” by Phillip J. Swihart in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- “What If We Disagree over How to Raise the Kids?” by Mitch Temple in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Marital Conflict Affecting Children

Question

My spouse and I have what I'd call a "high-conflict marriage." For the most part we've been able to keep our relationship intact in spite of frequent arguments and disagreements, but I'm concerned about the impact this is having on our kids. What can we do to minimize the danger?

Answer

Everything depends on the way you approach and handle your differences. Believe it or not, it might be a good thing for your children to see you and your spouse having an argument—provided you manage the situation in a respectful and healthy way.

It's a sad fact that few people ever have the opportunity to observe their parents resolve conflict in a positive and mutually satisfying manner. Instead, disagreements within a marriage all too often deteriorate into yelling matches and character assassinations—either that, or they are suppressed and repressed. Children who've repeatedly observed one or more of these destructive responses to conflict are likely to be ill equipped to manage the disagreements that will inevitably arise in their own lives and relationships. But if Mom and Dad can learn what it means to model healthy methods of solving problems in the home, every member of the family will benefit in the long run.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you should make a habit of arguing in front of the kids. There's room for discernment here. In particular, you should never voice a disagreement in front of a child who is the subject of that disagreement. Generally speaking, if there's to be any kind of positive outcome, the child should be old enough to comprehend what you are talking about and emotionally mature enough to grasp the concept that you can disagree with someone whom you deeply love and respect. Preschoolers and grade-school children may misinterpret a spirited parental exchange as the unraveling of their world. They probably should rarely, if ever, witness a serious parental disagreement. Older children and adolescents, on the other hand, can learn something by watching two mature people settle an issue in a constructive fashion.

Obviously, this isn't the place for a detailed exposition of all the principles involved in settling marital disagreements. But the following basic concepts can serve as a helpful foundation for parents who want to work on this important area of family life:

1. *Mutual respect is an absolute necessity.* Respect acknowledges the ultimate worth of the other person. If parents do not respect one another, or if respect flows only in one direction, attempts to resolve issues are likely to be unsuccessful or hurtful.

2. *When a disagreement arises, conversation should focus on the issue and not the person.* In other words, avoid the temptation to attack your spouse. Stay away from "you" statements, especially those containing the words *always, never, should, or shouldn't*. Replace them with statements that accurately express your own feelings about the issue at hand.

3. *When an issue needs to be discussed, pick an appropriate time and place.* Not at the end of the day when energy is low and fuses may be short; not right before bed; not when anger is at a fever pitch or when there isn't time to work through it. It's helpful to have discussions of this nature in a place that's relatively free of distractions and interruptions.

4. *Pray together before discussing the issue.* Laying the problem before God can help keep it in perspective and reinforce your common ground.

5. *Each person must be able to express his or her viewpoint fully, without interruption.* Learn how to listen carefully, and get into the habit of checking frequently to make sure you understand what the other person is saying.

6. *Avoid dragging events from the distant past into the current issue.* Comments such as, "Here we go again!" are never helpful.

7. *The discussion of an issue should eventually arrive at a point of exploring possible courses of action.* It may help to list a number of possibilities. Remember that there may be times when you will have to "agree to disagree." When this happens, the other person's viewpoint is not to be subjected to constant ridicule.

Some couples will have been over these principles during premarital counseling. Virtually every marriage could benefit from reviewing them. If, after trying to implement these measures, you find that your chronic conflicts continue to drag on, never reaching resolution, it may be time to seek professional help. If you need referrals to counselors who are qualified to assist you in this area, don't hesitate to give us a call. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of professionals in your locality who specialize in communication issues and marital dysfunction. Our staff would also be more than happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.¹⁰⁷

In Other Words ...

"Remember, your kids are watching and listening.... Kids are smart and they know more about your conflicts than you might think.

“A healthy fight between parents can be good for your kids to observe. It shows them that conflict doesn’t have to be a crisis and it doesn’t have to end badly. It also teaches them how to fight kindly. A fair fight conducted with respect and honesty can be a positive example. So when you fight, pretend that every word and tone of your voice is being recorded. Watch what you say. Show your children how to fight and compromise and find resolution and make up. Let them know that a good fight can have a happy ending.”¹⁰⁸

—Dr. Steve Stephens

Need More Help?

Online

- [FamilyLife](#) offers marriage and parenting advice, plus marriage-strengthening events like “Weekend to Remember.”
- “[Marriage and Relationships: Communication and Conflict](#)” is a series of more than two dozen articles designed to bring spouses closer.

Other Resources

- *The Surprising Way to a Stronger Marriage* by Michael and Amy Smalley (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- The Essentials of Marriage Series (DVD, Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart and Wilford Wooten, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* by Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2004)
- *Love and Respect* by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Focus on the Family/Integrity Publishers, 2004)
- *The Language of Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Recovering Alcoholic Wants Relationship with Children

Question

Several years ago my lifelong struggle with alcoholism finally led to the breakup of my marriage and family. There are no words to express the feelings that torment me every day as a result of this tragedy. I'm happy to say that I've recently found the Lord, and I'm in the process of kicking my drinking habit. Now I'd like to reestablish contact with my kids, but they don't want anything to do with me. How can I be reconciled with them?

Answer

It's wonderful to hear that you've given your heart to Christ and put your life on a new footing. We want to encourage you to keep moving in that direction, strengthening your walk with God through prayer, serious study of the Scriptures, and regular involvement with a solid, Bible-believing church. If you haven't yet found such a church, feel free to contact one of our pastoral counselors for practical help and guidance. See the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

Regarding your relationship with your children, it's vital that you proceed with caution and resist the temptation to entertain unrealistic expectations. It's true that, in the spiritual realm, God has forgiven you in Jesus Christ for all your past mistakes and removed your sins from you as far as the east is from the west. Unfortunately, the Bible also teaches very clearly that, where human relationships are concerned, there is a sense in which we "reap what we sow."

There's a reason your kids don't want anything to do with you right now. Through your addictive behavior, you've destroyed their family and deprived them of the stability and security they desperately needed during their most formative years. In some sense or other, they'll be dealing with the fallout of this for as long as they live. Harsh as this sounds, it's the inescapable truth. At this point it's unrealistic for you to expect your children to welcome you back with open arms. Your interest in reestablishing a relationship with them is understandable and commendable, but you're going to have to earn the right to make that dream come true. This will require patience, humility, and time—probably a great deal of time.

Before doing anything else, it might be worth your while to ask yourself some tough questions. What exactly is behind your desire to reconnect with your kids? Do you really have *their* best interests at heart, or are you simply trying to get rid of your own feelings of guilt? Scripture says that there is a vast difference between selfish guilt or “worldly sorrow,” which only produces death, and the “godly sorrow” that inspires genuine repentance and leads to salvation—in other words, genuine remorse for harming another person and breaking a relationship (2 Corinthians 7:10).

If you sincerely want what’s best for your children, you should give them the time and space they need in order to reconnect with you. Let them move toward you at their own pace, which may be cautious and slow. Don’t expect to start with personal visits or phone conversations. It would be much better to express your remorse and ask their forgiveness through letters or e-mail.

Let them know that you understand how much pain and anger they must feel and that you will respect *their* wishes regarding reconciliation. If and when they decide that they’re ready to meet with you, you’d be wise to arrange this with the help of an experienced family therapist. Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department can refer you to a licensed professional in your area. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

Should you require further assistance in dealing with your alcohol problem, Focus on the Family offers a number of resources designed to meet the needs of individuals and couples dealing with alcoholism and other addictions. See our Online Store (accessible through www.focusonthefamily.com) for those that are currently available.

In Other Words ...

“So [my dad and I] talked about it and actually he apologized for everything. He started crying, and I’ve never seen my dad cry. He started crying and said that he was sorry that he’d missed the past 18 years of my life. There was no way he could get them back. That was really hard to do, but it was such a relief to finally know that at least he realized that he wasn’t there and he realized he wasn’t a dad to me at all. So that was good to hear, especially the apology part.”¹⁰⁹

—A Teen

Need More Help?

Online

- [Promise Keepers](#) offers events and guidance for men who want to honor their commitments as husbands, fathers, and followers of Christ.

- The [National Center for Fathering](#) supplies research-based training and resources to help dads address their children's needs, with the goal of reversing the cultural trend of fatherlessness.
- [Alcoholics Victorious](#) support groups “offer a safe environment where recovering people who recognize Jesus Christ as their ‘Higher Power’ gather together and share their experience, strength, and hope.”
- “[Fatherhood](#),” a series of articles on key roles a dad plays

Other Resources

- *Championship Fathering* by Carey Casey with Neil Wilson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The 21-Day Dad's Challenge*, Carey Casey, general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing DVD Series* featuring John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Part 9: Parenting Roles

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Differences Between Mother's and Father's Roles

Question

Some of the guys at church seem to think moms and dads are supposed to act totally different with kids, and that most fathers aren't filling their roles as men. As a dad, I try my best to do what's right for my kids: I'm actively involved with them on the weekends and evenings, and I even go to school meetings when I can. Am I shortchanging them? Are they going to turn out wrong? Is there something I'm supposed to be doing as a father that's different from what my wife does as their mother?

Answer

You're to be commended for taking such an active role in your kids' lives. They'll benefit greatly by having an involved and committed dad like you. The Bible teaches us that fathers have a unique ability to *bless* their children. This concept has roots in the Old Testament, where we often find descriptions of fathers imparting the family's spiritual heritage to their children—see, for example, Jacob's blessing of his sons in Genesis 49. It is also reflected in the New Testament's portrayal of Christ's baptism, where God the Father opens up the heavens and blesses Jesus at the outset of His ministry.

Such is the significance of a father in the life of his kids that a spoken blessing from Dad often proves crucial to a child's sense of value and worth as a person. It can play an extremely important role in imparting strength, confidence, and spiritual boldness to the next generation.

You can also bless your children on a daily basis by modeling Christlike character in everything you do and say. A caring and diligent father needs to be intentional about teaching his children about the Christian faith and praying for them on a regular basis. Deuteronomy 11 instructs men to fix God's words in their hearts and minds and to teach those words to their

children, speaking of them at home and on the road, in the morning and at bedtime, and in every situation of life.

How is this different from what your wife provides for your children in her role as a godly mother? Sociologist David Popenoe of Rutgers University has done extensive research on the different functions that moms and dads play in the lives of their kids. His studies show that while fathers tend to emphasize the importance of competition, challenge, initiative, and risk-taking, mothers are more likely to stress a child's need for emotional security and personal safety. In the area of discipline, moms offer flexibility and sympathy while dads provide predictability and consistency. That's why kids do best on every measure of well-being when raised in a home where both a mother and a father are present.

If you'd like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"The Father affirmed Jesus as a loved Son of whom He was proud. It's pretty obvious that all of us need that kind of affirmation from our earthly fathers as well. I'm fortunate to know that my father loved me and was proud of me. And I never got tired of hearing it. That's why, in our fathering seminars, we often ask fathers to stand up if their dads left them a difficult heritage. Then we have other dads lay hands on them as we adapt that blessing from God: 'You are My son, whom I love. In you I am well pleased.' It's a very healing exercise for those men."¹⁰

—Carey Casey

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Parenting Roles](#)," a series of more than three dozen articles about the unique and vital parts moms and dads play
- The [National Center for Fathering](#) offers resources, an e-mail newsletter, and a free quarterly magazine to assist men in their role as dads.
- The [National Fatherhood Initiative](#) is an organization that seeks to improve children's well-being by increasing the number of children growing up with involved and committed fathers.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Blessing DVD Series* featuring John Trent, Ph.D (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)
- *Championship Fathering* by Carey Casey with Neil Wilson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The 21-Day Dad's Challenge*, Carey Casey, general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Raising a Modern-day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *She Calls Me Daddy: Seven Things Every Man Needs to Know About Building a Complete Daughter* by Robert Wolgemuth (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

New Dad Struggling to Adjust

Question

I'm a new father. I love our child very much, but I'm having a hard time getting used to the "new normal." Whenever my wife asks me to help with the baby, for instance, I get frustrated and angry—especially when I'm in the middle of something else. How can I give up the way things used to be and accept the way they are now?

Answer

Take heart. It's common for new dads to experience difficulty adjusting to a new baby. Some men feel left out when they discover that all of their spouse's time and energy is getting directed toward the child. What's more, some guys may find it hard to relate to an infant. It's been shown that many men have an easier time getting close to older children with whom they can interact physically.

The good news is that you realize what you're up against. You understand that you have to find a way to put the needs of the baby above your own. Your infant is totally dependent on you and your wife right now. As you're learning, the job of a parent involves a great deal of patience and self-sacrifice.

It's vital that you express your feelings of frustration to your wife. If you've been feeling lonely or ignored since the baby arrived, say so. Let her know exactly what's going through your mind. Naturally, most of her time and attention has to go toward the child for the time being; that's a fact of life, and you need to adjust to it. But it's also crucial for new parents to make sure that their "couple" relationship doesn't suffer unnecessarily.

Susan Yates, author of *And Then I Had Kids*, stresses the importance of establishing a regular date night, even with a newborn at home. This isn't as difficult as it sounds—all you have to do is ask a friend or relative to watch the baby for a few hours each week. It will go a long way toward keeping your marriage healthy.

That said, it's only fair to add that we're a bit concerned about your use of the word "angry" to describe your state of mind. If you've been feeling true anger toward the baby, there may be some deeper issues that you need to deal with. If so, we'd like to suggest that you contact Focus

on the Family’s Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Don’t compare your experience with others. Many ‘successful’ parents of newborns are those with very poor memories or were just plain ol’ lucky.

“The changes and adaptations you’ll make with a newborn are a training period for your relationship. By working through these difficult months, you’ll develop the skills required for parenting and maintaining a great relationship with your partner. View this as your relationship boot camp. It’s tough, but you’ll come out stronger.”ⁱⁱⁱ

—Glenn and Natalie Williams

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Parenting Roles](#),” a series of more than three dozen articles about the unique and vital parts moms and dads play
- The [National Center for Fathering](#) offers resources, an e-mail newsletter, and a free quarterly magazine to assist men in their role as dads.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Your Marriage Can Survive a Newborn* by Glenn and Natalie Williams (B&H Books, 2005)
- *Championship Fathering* by Carey Casey with Neil Wilson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *And Then I Had Kids* by Susan Alexander Yates (Revell, 2009)
- *Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way* by Gary Chapman (Northfield Press, 2007)

Dad Lacked Role Model

Question

I grew up without a father. Now I'm married with kids of my own and I don't have a clue how to be a good dad. Can you help me fill in the gaps? How can I lead my family when I've never seen what that looks like?

Answer

It's tough to grow up without a dad, but your situation is not without its positive points. You understand, perhaps in a way that many other men can't, just how important it is for kids to have a male role model in their lives. As a result, you're motivated to become the best father you can possibly be.

The first thing you should do is find a mentor—an older man who has experience as the head of a household and who can help you learn what it means to be a godly husband and father. Your church is a great place to begin the search. Ask your pastor if he can match you up with a mature Christian man in the congregation who'd be willing to give you some guidance. If you attend a larger church, it may have a strong men's ministry that offers support groups designed to disciple men and help them develop into the kind of husbands and fathers that God wants them to be. Another excellent source of mentoring possibilities is the Promise Keepers ministry. You can find a local chapter by visiting their [website](#).

If you're not studying the Bible on a regular basis, we'd challenge you to make that a priority. Chapter 5 of Galatians, chapter 3 of Colossians, and chapters 5 and 6 of Ephesians contain some great advice for Christian husbands and fathers.

It's possible that your personal experience as a fatherless child has left you with some unresolved emotional issues. You'll want to work through these aspects of your psychological makeup as you seek to become the best dad you can possibly be for your own kids. Your wife may want to come alongside you in this process. Start by building a strong, healthy marriage. Then, on the basis of that firm foundation, work on your relationship with your children. If you call our Counseling Department here at Focus on the Family, we can refer you to a licensed

Christian family therapist in your area who will be able to assist you. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Dads receive on-the-job training, and make a ton of mistakes in the process. Somehow, somehow, you (and your son or daughter) find your way through it. If you have the benefit of coming from a solid and stable family, the lessons you learned there are invaluable. But what if you’re like me and don’t have a reservoir from which to pull good advice?...

“Break the cycle! If you grew up in a dysfunctional home, you can, with the Lord’s help, be the dad you didn’t have but so desperately wanted.... Regardless of your upbringing, your child needs you to listen to good advice, think back to your own childhood needs, and pray for him or her.”¹¹²

—Jim Daly

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Parenting Roles](#),” a series of more than three dozen articles about the unique and vital parts moms and dads play
- The [National Center for Fathering](#) offers resources, an e-mail newsletter, and a free quarterly magazine to assist men in their role as dads.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “No Experience Required” by Jim Daly in *The 21-Day Dad’s Challenge*, Carey Casey, general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Championship Fathering* by Carey Casey with Neil Wilson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Anchor Man: How a Father Can Anchor His Family in Christ for the Next 100 Years* by Steve Farrar (Thomas Nelson, 2000)
- *The Father Connection: How You Can Make the Difference in Your Child’s Self-Esteem and Sense of Purpose* by Josh McDowell (B&H Publishing, 2008)
- *Straight Talk to Men: Timeless Principles for Leading Your Family* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)

- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Blessing DVD Series* featuring John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Husband Won't Help with Kids

Question

My husband likes the fun part of raising kids; he's great at getting down on the floor and wrestling with our toddler. But when it comes to the practical side of parenting, I don't think he's pulling his weight. He *never* offers to change the baby's diapers or get dinner for the family. What can I do about this?

Answer

Here, as in every other area of married life, open *communication* is the key to mutual understanding and a successful relationship. Many couples never talk to each other about their parenting expectations. Nor are they willing to open up and share the fears and struggles they're facing as they take on the challenge of caring for a child. In most cases, both of them are doing the best they can, and both are feeling insecure. The first step toward resolving this difficulty is to air these thoughts and feelings in an honest, non-threatening way.

It's also important to understand how the God-ordained distinction between male and female comes into play in this particular instance. Nature has delegated the functions of pregnancy, childbearing, nursing, and nurturing to the woman. As a result, mothers tend to have an immediate and intuitive connection with a new baby, whereas fathers sometimes feel uncomfortable and "out of their element" when asked to step in and lend a hand. Women often say they want their husbands to assist with parenting tasks like diapering and feeding the baby, but when Dad tries to help, Mom jumps in to correct everything he's doing. This leads to greater irritation on both sides, and the husband shrinks from trying to help next time, fearing his attempts will be criticized. These are only general observations, of course. You will know best how relevant they are to the situation in your home.

The solution, as we've already indicated, is to *discuss* your feelings and expectations. If you and your husband share the traditional belief that Mom should stay home with the kids while Dad goes out to earn the income, consider the practical ways in which this arrangement might play itself out on a daily basis. Does it mean that the wife is supposed to tend to the children all day *and* all night? Does it include a proviso that she must also keep the home spotless and have

dinner ready when her husband gets home from work? If you have a less traditional view of gender roles, it's even more important that each of you clearly understands what the other is thinking.

These days it's common for spouses in our culture to share child-rearing tasks to a much greater extent than their grandparents did. This is largely because it's also common for both husband and wife to be employed outside the home. Many contemporary couples are convinced that it's impossible to live on one income. We suggest this is an assumption worth challenging. If you have enough courage to give it a try, you might discover that you can cut back on expenses and stretch your resources so that Mom is able to stay home with the kids. This may go a long way toward resolving some of your conflicts over the question of sharing child-care responsibilities.

Whatever approach you take, it's vital that you and your husband learn how to function as a team. God designed babies to benefit from the love and care of both parents, and you and your spouse were designed to fall in love with your child. None of this can happen unless you spend time together. Some parents, especially dads, avoid spending time with their little ones, protesting that they're unfamiliar with the routine. But child-care skills can be learned. No one should use inexperience as an excuse for abdicating responsibility. This is yet another area in which husband and wife need to be patient with one another and cut each other some slack.

If you and your spouse are struggling in your respective roles as mother and father, our staff counselors would be happy to come alongside you and lend you a hand. It would be their privilege to listen to your concerns and offer their perspective over the phone. They can also provide you with referrals to qualified counselors in your area who specialize in marriage and family therapy. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.¹¹³

In Other Words ...

"It's normal to be inexperienced and uncertain when taking care of infants. This is an area in which to give each other grace, not to criticize. If you're more experienced than your spouse in being with small children, be patient. Let your mate find his or her own way and comfort zone with the baby."¹¹⁴

—Sandra Lundberg

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Language of Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Two Sides of Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1990)
- *The Hidden Value of a Man* by Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- “Part 3: Roles” and “Part 6: Communication” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart, Ph.D. and Wilford Wooten, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Father-Daughter and Mother-Son Relationships

Question

I've heard that it's really important to have a good father-daughter or mother-son relationship, especially as your child enters the teenage years. I'm sure mine could be better. Is this going to mess my child up? How can I improve the relationship in a hurry?

Answer

You've heard correctly. It's only natural that, in many families, fathers have more interests in common with sons and mothers with daughters. But the importance of nurturing father-daughter and mother-son relationships can't be overstated, especially during adolescence.

The tendency in father-son and mother-daughter relationships is for the parent to compare (with some anxiety) the progress of the child with memories of his or her own adolescence. Thoughts such as *He's not doing as well as I was at this age* or *I don't want her to make the same mistakes I did growing up* can cloud your appreciation of your teenager's uniqueness and your enjoyment of his or her company. By way of contrast, since Dad was never a girl and Mom never a boy, these ongoing comparisons and concerns aren't as likely in opposite-gender relationships. There are many advantages in this set of circumstances.

For a girl, Dad is usually the man in her life for many years. How he treats her will affect her relationship with men throughout her teenage and adult life. She looks to him for affection, respect, and affirmation of her femininity. If he provides these things for her, she will usually expect the same type of treatment from the males in her life later on; in other words, she isn't likely to tolerate men who behave disrespectfully or abusively toward her. If, on the other hand, she's become accustomed to living with neglect, criticism, and abuse, she may spend decades enduring the same from men who are self-centered, irresponsible, and predatory.

It's worth mentioning that, for a variety of reasons, mothers and daughters tend to butt heads more often during the adolescent years than at other times in their lives. When this happens, a father's insight can help de-escalate conflicts and build Mom's image in the mind of his frustrated daughter. This is another reason his input is so important in her life.

Mothers can also have a unique and extremely significant relationship with their growing and nearly grown sons. While Dad can and should instill standards for behavior with members of the opposite sex, Mom is usually in a better position to serve as an adviser in matters of the heart. When a son is struggling with a relationship that ties his emotions in knots, a woman's perspective can offer insight and comfort.

We're only grazing the surface of a very profound subject. Psychologists have written volumes on the subtle sexually-related aspects and dimensions of parent-child relationships, especially during the years following puberty. If you need help sorting through these issues or would simply like to discuss them at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.¹¹⁵

In Other Words ...

"Boys often love to be tousled and teased by their dads. Girls love to be cherished. Boys can be 'spoken to' with single words, half sentences, and grunts. Girls want their dads to talk to them in complete sentences. Boys long to live without their dad's protection. Most girls thrive with confidence when they know their dad will be there."¹¹⁶

—Gary Smalley

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Parenting Roles](#)," a series of more than three dozen articles about the unique and vital parts moms and dads play
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *What a Difference a Daddy Makes: The Indelible Imprint a Dad Leaves on His Daughter's Life* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Thomas Nelson, 2001)
- *That's My Son: How Moms Can Influence Boys to Become Men of Character* by Rick Johnson (Revell, 2005)
- *Bringing Up Girls* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)
- *Bringing Up Boys* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2001)

Part 10: Troubling Habits

87

Pacifier/Blanket Attachment

Question

At what age do you think a child is too old for a pacifier? We've tried several times to take it away, but it's like pulling teeth. I've also been wondering about my son's attachment to his blanket. Is it potentially damaging to allow this to go on too long? At this point the thing is nothing but a dirty old rag, but he still won't give it up. What should we do?

Answer

It's best if a child can be weaned from attachment to a pacifier somewhere between the ages of two and three—in other words, when he or she outgrows the bottle and starts learning to drink from a cup. This is about the same time most children get their first set of teeth.

On the whole, we believe it's wisest if parents avoid turning this into a major point of contention until they're prepared to make an all-out, concerted effort to help their youngster drop the pacifier for good. Leave the issue alone until you're ready to take action, then pull out all the stops. There's a good reason for this. Quite often, parents have a tendency to talk a great deal about this problem without taking decisive steps toward changing the behavior. They drag the process out until a child develops a complex about it. When this happens, the situation becomes all the more difficult to handle.

It's also advisable to take an incremental approach to the problem. In other words, don't take the pacifier away in one fell swoop. Instead, make it available for a progressively shorter period of time each day. In the meantime, provide alternatives. Give the child other options, other activities with which to occupy his or her attention. Get out some modeling clay or Play-Doh. Encourage him to paint or draw or play a game. Buy him a squeeze ball he can manipulate. The possibilities are almost endless.

Our perspective is similar where blanket attachment is concerned—though, on the whole, we tend to regard this as a less formidable problem. Most children derive a sense of comfort, reassurance, familiarity, and order from clinging to a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. In our view, a child can continue sleeping with an object of this kind almost indefinitely with few negative consequences. If, on the other hand, a blanket becomes a social problem—if other youngsters are beginning to ridicule a child for dragging around this symbol of infancy—then it probably should be taken away by about four years of age.

Here again, the key is to come up with a strategy that involves *replacements*, distractions, and acceptable options. If you're going to take the child's blanket away, you need to help him find other ways of soothing anxious feelings and coping with the challenges of his environment.

If you'd like to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“What harm will it do to suck on a blankie? Will it hurt the blankie to get wet? Will it make the blankie gross? Gross never bothered a kid yet.... What I'm trying to say, parent, is that if you pay attention to all these little things that will change anyway as kids grow and mature, you'll drive yourself completely nuts. Everyone has a different view of thumb sucking and blankies or certain stuffed animals as psychological crutches. But will any of this mean a hill of beans to you or your child in a couple of years? Most likely not.”¹¹⁷

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Thumb-sucking

Question

My child and I are locked in a battle over thumb-sucking. It's an embarrassing habit in a boy his age, and I've done everything I can think of to put a stop to it—without success. Can you help me?

Answer

As with habits like sucking a pacifier or dragging around a “security” blanket, we recommend that parents wait to make an issue of thumb-sucking until they're prepared to pull out all the stops. In other words, leave it alone until you're ready to take action. That's better than talking a great deal about the problem without taking decisive steps toward changing the behavior—which drags out the process and develops a sensitivity about the child's thumb-sucking. He or she begins to feel “shamed,” making the situation harder to handle.

Once parents have made a decision to help a child break this habit—as you have—we think it's a good idea to start by trying to understand the emotions that may be behind the behavior. Ask your child, “What are you thinking about when you suck your thumb? How does it make you *feel*?” In some instances thumb-sucking may be self-soothing or self-calming in intent—in other words, it may be a kind of nervous habit or mechanism for dealing with stress or anxiety. If this is the case, attempts to extinguish the behavior will be relatively ineffective until the underlying issues are addressed. Older children (school age and above) who continue to suck their thumbs in response to emotional or psychological issues should be referred to a professional therapist for counseling.

Sometimes—perhaps in most cases—thumb-sucking has nothing to do with deeper psychological problems. It's just a habit, and generally has roots that go back to early infancy. Many parents get anxious when it continues past the stage of babyhood. They feel particularly uncomfortable if their child is still sucking his or her thumb long after “other people's” children have stopped. And there's legitimate cause for some of their concerns: Dentists have frequently warned of the orthodontic damage inflicted by thumb-sucking, and there are many other health problems that can arise when children habitually place unwashed hands in their mouths.

So what can you do to stop it? We'd suggest that some of the negative approaches recommended in the past—for example, covering the thumb with a bad-tasting liquid during the day or applying splints at night—may prove less than helpful. It's never wise to call attention to the behavior you're trying to eliminate. If you're constantly saying, "Don't do that!" you're probably only making things worse.

A far more effective approach involves coming up with replacements or distractions. Give the child options. Provide other ways for him to occupy his hands and/or mouth. Get out some toy cars and build a racetrack. Make salt clay or string beads into a necklace. Sing along with a CD. Buy a squeeze ball your child can manipulate when he feels the urge to suck. There are plenty of possibilities.

If you'd like to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Since thumb-sucking is an unconscious self-comforting measure, it should not be treated as a punishable offense. Parents may wish to devise a simple, nonjudgmental signal (such as a wink or saying the child's name in a friendly tone and then pointing to your hand) that can serve as a reminder when you see him sucking his thumb. Whether family members ignore or actively try to discourage thumb-sucking, a child will eventually outgrow this habit."¹¹⁸

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Biting

Question

What do you do with a kid who bites other people? Our strong-willed toddler has been doing this with increasing frequency over the past couple of months. How do we put a stop to it?

Answer

When dealing with toddlers, the best way to extinguish any kind of negative behavior, including biting, is to administer swift consequences. One consequence that can be very effective with kids at this age is an immediate time-out.

The technical term psychologists use to refer to this method of discipline is “time out from positive reinforcement.” In other words, you remove your child from the situation and confine him to a very boring location for a short period of time. You put him in a place devoid of external stimuli of any kind.

A portable playpen is excellent for this purpose. Simply put the playpen in a location where your child is “away from the action,” but where you can still keep an eye on him. Then require him to stay there until he’s “served his sentence.” Typically we suggest one minute of time-out for each year of a child’s age, so that a two-year-old would receive a two-minute time-out.

It’s important that the time-out be characterized by a lack of external stimuli. The child should not have access to toys during that time, and you shouldn’t interact with him at all. Don’t lecture or scold. Just ignore him. In the mind of a toddler, even negative attention is better than no attention at all. It’s likely that he will scream or throw a tantrum, but don’t give in to the temptation to pick him up until he’s served his time.

If you’re at a friend’s house or out in public when the biting occurs, you may need to be a bit more creative. But the same principle applies: Immediately remove your child from the situation and take him to a neutral, boring location.

Once the time-out has been served, require your child to apologize to the person he bit. You may wish to help him out here by saying something like, “Tell Jamie you’re sorry for biting him.” If he refuses or becomes disrespectful, then it’s back to the time-out location for another two or three minutes.

As a side note, we've heard some parents claim that time-outs don't work for their kids. In such cases, it might be that the time-out isn't being administered correctly. If you're consistent with your follow-through and don't give in to whining, screaming, or temper tantrums, you should find that the biting behavior decreases fairly rapidly.

If this doesn't happen, there's a remote possibility that your child may be suffering from a more serious developmental problem. In that case, we recommend that you consult with your pediatrician. If your doctor gives your child a clean bill of health and determines that this is nothing but an instance of persistent strong-willed behavior, you may want to get a copy of Dr. James Dobson's book *The New Strong-Willed Child*.

For more information—or if you simply feel a need to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our staff—feel free to contact our Counseling Department. Please see the [“How to Reach Us”](#) page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“Along with maintaining zero tolerance for your child's biting anyone, consider some preventive measures as well. If you hear a conflict brewing between two toddlers, don't wait for them to negotiate through their disagreement because they can't (and won't) at this age. Distract, separate, take whatever is in dispute out of the picture, or simply call it a day if it looks as if everyone is tired and cranky.”¹¹⁹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Toddler Misbehavior”](#) by Lynne Thompson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)

Handling Childish Irresponsibility

Question

My pre-teen lacks maturity. He's not disobedient or defiant, just irresponsible. For example, he doesn't put things away; he leaves his bike in the front yard where it could easily be stolen, and I'm constantly tripping over his clothes, shoes, and toys. How should I discipline him when he keeps doing this?

Answer

Every parent has his or her own method of handling such challenges, and there's a sense in which we're hesitant to impose our perspective on your personal style. At the same time, we feel pretty certain that rigid "discipline" isn't the best way of dealing with a situation like the one you've described. As a matter of fact, a hard-nosed approach could prove counterproductive. You don't want to do anything that might have the effect of pushing your child over the line and transforming thoughtless irresponsibility into premeditated rebellion.

To the extent that you can, we recommend you take full advantage of *natural consequences*. The bicycle in the front yard is a perfect case in point. If you live in a neighborhood where theft is a real danger, warn your son of the potential results of his negligence. A word or two should suffice; constant nagging isn't necessary. After that, see if you can't dredge up the courage to sit back and let events unfold as they will. If the bike is stolen, so be it. If the boy comes to you complaining of his misfortunes and asking for a new one, calmly explain that you aren't in a position to replace the bicycle at this time. Maybe he'll get the point that it pays to put things away in a safe place.

When it comes to his shoes, socks, clothes, and toys, you can appeal to a similar motivation by adopting the following plan. Using a strip of masking tape, mark off a boundary—probably at the door of his room—between his personal "messy zone" and the habitable portions of the house where other members of the family are expected to live. Then say, "Inside the 'messy zone' you can do as you please. But if you want anything that's been left on the floor *outside* the 'messy zone,' make sure you pick it up before bedtime. After that, it will be confiscated and placed in quarantine until you have enough money to buy it back. The going price is one dollar."

If nothing else, this is a good way to reduce clutter in the house. It can also provide you with a handy fund of money for fun family outings or pizza-and-movie nights.

If these strategies don't work, and if you come to the conclusion that there may be something more serious going on—for example, if you suspect there are physical or emotional causes, like ADHD, for your child's inability to concentrate and follow through on simple tasks and responsibilities—you may want to make an appointment with a family counselor who's trained to diagnose such conditions and who can help you come up with a plan for dealing with the problem.

Focus on the Family's counseling staff can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

“The most important thing is to be consistent in your actions. Keep the ball of responsibility in your child's court, not yours. Don't harass, threaten, or warn your kid. Don't say, ‘Well, if you had gotten your jobs done ...’ Instead, simply state that the jobs aren't done, and until they are, the next event won't happen. A child of any age can understand that reasoning.”¹²⁰

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Effective Biblical Discipline](#),” a series of articles on more than two dozen key topics
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

- *Why A.D.H.D. Doesn't Mean Disaster* by Dennis Swanberg, Diane Passno, and Walt Larimore, M.D. (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)

Bed-wetting

Question

What causes a child to wet the bed? Our son is well past the age of potty training, yet I still have to change his bedding several times a week. I've lost my patience with him more than once, and I can tell he's hurt by it. Is there a solution to this problem?

Answer

Gaining consistent control of bladder and bowel functions during daytime hours is a significant milestone for a toddler or preschooler. For many children, keeping the bed dry at night is a more elusive goal, one that might not be reached until quite a bit later in life. You may be surprised to learn that by age five at least 10 to 20 percent of children still have issues with bed-wetting. In some cases this problem persists for years. In such instances, there's often a family history of *enuresis* (the involuntary passage of urine into the bed or clothes at least once or twice per month in a child who is at least five years of age).

Children who wet the bed at night well into their grade-school years often take an emotional beating (and in some sad cases a physical beating) for it. One of the greatest difficulties faced by bed-wetting children is a parent with unrealistic expectations that every child should be completely dry, day and night, by the age of three. What makes this especially unfortunate is that the behavior *is not under the child's conscious control*. That's why rewards, reprimands, humiliation, and punishment are ineffective and have no place whatsoever in dealing with bed-wetting. The problem is one of physiological maturity—nothing more, nothing less. Accordingly, the best solution in nearly all cases is patience, continued use of diapers or training pants, lots of reassurance, and a few more birthdays.

To deal with bed-wetting effectively and supportively, it's important that parents understand some basic realities of nighttime bladder function in children. Only about 1 percent of children with enuresis will be found upon medical examination to have an underlying disease or disorder such as a urinary tract infection, diabetes, significant constipation, a congenital abnormality of the urinary tract, or a disturbance in the central nervous system. We'd recommend that you see your pediatrician before ruling out these remote possibilities.

In the other 99 percent of children with enuresis, the problem may involve one or more of the following (note: clinicians are not in complete agreement about the relative importance of each of these factors):

- *Delayed maturation.* During infancy, the bladder automatically empties six to eight times per day when a certain volume of urine is present. As a child matures, this emptying reflex is inhibited by the central nervous system. In general, control is achieved earlier by girls than by boys.

- *Small functional bladder capacity.* A normal child can usually voluntarily hold urine in an amount of ounces equal to his age in years plus two. If a child cannot hold at least the same number of ounces as his age, this decreased capacity may contribute to enuresis.

- *Increased formation of urine during the night.* Normally, a hormone called *vasopressin* suppresses urine production during sleep. Some bed-wetters apparently do not secrete more vasopressin during the night and thus produce more urine than their non-bed-wetting peers.

- *Difficulty awakening when the bladder is full.* Many parents have observed that bed-wetters are difficult to awaken and seem “able to sleep through anything.”

- *A family history of enuresis.* Since so many of the factors contributing to bed-wetting have an inherent physiological basis, it should not be surprising that this problem often runs in families.

The following measures may help a child with enuresis:

- Encourage fluid intake during the day, but discourage drinking liquids within two hours of bedtime. If your child wants a drink before bed, limit it to one or two ounces.

- Have your child empty his bladder just before bed.

- Encourage your child to get up during the night to urinate. Leaving the light on in the bathroom or providing a potty-chair near the bed can help.

- To a degree that is appropriate for his age, let him participate in the cleanup process. *This should be presented not as punishment but as a matter-of-fact routine.*

- Protect the mattress with a plastic cover.

- Offer praise when the child has a dry night or gets up to use the toilet.

- Avoid expressing dissatisfaction, dismay, or anger when he is wet in the morning.

- Bed-wetting “alarms” may be helpful for a child who is eight or older. Retail prices for such devices range from about \$70 to \$120.

- In certain cases, drug therapy may be appropriate. Two medications have been recognized as potentially helpful in controlling bed-wetting: Imipramine and Desmopressin. The use of either requires a doctor’s prescription and a thorough understanding of potential benefits, risks, and proper use. For further information, you should arrange a consultation with your physician.

If you’d like to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to contact our Counseling Department. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book.¹²¹

In Other Words ...

“If your child has an accident at school, call it an accident. Don’t make a big deal about it. Bring your child a change of clothes. Do not, however, put an extra set of clothes in your child’s backpack *in case* your child has an accident. That would simply be reinforcing the behavior.”¹²²

—Dr. Kevin Leman

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)

Child Wets Pants When Angry

Question

This isn't exactly a bed-wetting problem; it happens during the day, and only when our six-year-old daughter is angry. She wets her pants every time she gets mad at someone. We've been making her hand-wash her clothes when it happens, but so far the behavior hasn't stopped. What can we do?

Answer

As you know, it can be extremely frustrating to deal with an older child who has a problem with enuresis. In some cases, when the problem is emotional rather than physical, this is a manifestation of classic passive-aggressive behavior. It's impossible to say for sure without knowing a great deal more about your home life and the details of your situation, but it's likely that your daughter is reacting to stress. Under certain circumstances, children regress when experiencing a high degree of anxiety or challenging adjustment in life. Parental separation or divorce is a good example of the kind of stress we have in mind.

You may be able to get a better sense of what's going through her mind if you take the opportunity to talk to her immediately after she's wet her pants. Does it seem to bother her? Does she regret her behavior and wish this wasn't happening? Get her to voice her feelings; that's extremely important. Ask what makes her angry enough to want to wet herself. Find out if there's something going on at school or in some other area of her life that's causing her to feel sad or worried or afraid.

If you need help with this part of the process, don't hesitate to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. They can also provide you with referrals to licensed Christian family therapists in your local area. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

Meanwhile, we think you're right on target in requiring her to wash her own clothes when one of these incidents takes place. The key to effective discipline is the implementation of meaningful consequences, and the need to engage in the cleanup process is a perfectly natural, non-shaming, non-punitive consequence of the behavior in question. If she has to hand-wash her

pants frequently, she may begin to think twice about expressing her anger and frustration in this way.

Once you've probed her emotions deeply enough to have gained a better understanding of her inner struggles, you'll want to help your child find more acceptable ways of dealing with them. How can she get her anger out constructively? Drawing pictures or scribbling on large sheets of newsprint taped to a wall can be a great way for kids to let out their frustrations. Talking about those things that make a child sad, angry, or afraid while engaged in some side-by-side physical activity, like hiking or biking, can also be a useful and meaningful way to help her open up. Wetting her pants may or may not have anything to do with what's going on in the family, but processing emotions is always helpful in the long run.

One last practical consideration in closing: Look for patterns in the timing of these pants-wetting incidents. If you can discern one, it might be a good idea to head off further problems by encouraging your daughter to go to the bathroom at certain fixed times of day.

In Other Words ...

“Many people believe that kids are like little rubber people—trouble bounces off and nothing bothers them long term. However, anger is a sign that children feel deeply and are not as resilient as we might think. Why? Because anger is a response to pain. It's like a blinking light on the dashboard of your car that tells you something is wrong under the hood. For this reason, wise parents will not ignore or minimize their child's anger.”¹²³

—Shana Schutte

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Uncovering the Pain Behind Your Child's Anger](#)” by Shana Schutte
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Helping Kids Deal with Anger* featuring Tim Murphy (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)
- *Stress and Your Child* by Dr. Archibald Hart (Thomas Nelson, 2005)

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, M.D., primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Lying Child

Question

I have a daughter who can't seem to stop telling "tall tales." I catch her in lies all the time at home, and now she's complaining that the kids at school don't believe anything she says. Does she simply have a great imagination, or is this a serious problem?

Answer

If your daughter is a preschooler—three to five years old—bear in mind that kids at this age often have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality. They can tell "stories" without really understanding that they're lying. In that case, Mom and Dad simply have to wait until their child outgrows this troublesome stage.

If, on the other hand, she's a bit older—a grade-schooler or a preteen—then she's old enough to know that what she's doing is wrong. Her behavior is conscious and willful, and as such it must have an underlying motive. Our first guess would be that it's calculated to gain attention. She may not feel confident and secure about who she is, and as a result she's desperately trying to find a way to get her peers to like and respect her. She assumes she can become more interesting and popular by embellishing the truth or making up fantastic stories about her life.

Does this analysis seem to fit your circumstances? And if so, is it possible that the problem has its roots in the circle of your immediate family? Have you been too busy to give your child the attention she requires at home? Maybe she just wants to be reassured of your love. Perhaps you should look for opportunities to spend one-on-one time with her. Ask her if there's anything she'd like to talk about. Remember that, according to the most reputable studies, *quantity* time with parents is every bit as important to children—if not more so—than *quality* time. If her problem with lying has a domestic basis, you may be able to come up with a solution without ever moving beyond the home front—if you handle it sensitively.

If this approach doesn't yield the desired results—if the "tall tales" seem designed purely to elicit a response from her peers—then you should make it clear that lying will almost certainly have a negative effect on her relationships with other kids. If her friends begin to believe she can't be trusted, they won't want to spend time with her. This, of course, is exactly the opposite

of what she's trying to accomplish. Bring this point home to her, and you may be able to make some real progress in extinguishing the unwanted behavior.

It may also be helpful to implement firm consequences for lying, such as taking away privileges when you catch her in a falsehood. Don't let yourself get pulled into a debate with her about whether or not she told the truth. Just deal with the behavior in a decisive way; act, don't yak. If her friends don't want to play with her if she persists in lying, encourage them to tell her so. Then, the next time she bends the truth, they should simply walk away.

To talk with someone at greater length about this problem, feel free to give our counseling staff a call at your convenience. A member of our team will be happy to give you a brief over-the-phone consultation and provide you with a list of referrals to qualified Christian family therapists in your area. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"After correcting your children, show them what they could have done instead. For example, if your child breaks something and then denies it or lies about it, explain that you are more upset with the lie than with the fact that the object is broken. Gently tell them what the proper response would have been—they should have come to you and simply explained what happened. Then you would have had only the accident to deal with, not the issue of the lie."¹²⁴

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*, John Trent, Ph.D., Rick Osborne, and Kurt Bruner, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2000)
- *Larry-Boy and the Fib from Outer Space!*, a VeggieTales video (DVD, Big Idea Productions, 2004)
- Max Lucado's Hermie and Friends Series: *Flo the Lyin' Fly* (DVD, Tommy Nelson, 2009)
- *God, I Need to Talk to You About Lying* by Dan Carr (Concordia Publishing House, 2004)

Child Uses Profanity

Question

I'm terribly frustrated. My child has developed a bad habit of using profanity, and it has a way of popping out at extremely inappropriate moments. I've confronted him about this several times, but the problem only seems to be getting worse. Do you have any advice for me?

Answer

Yes, but first we have a question. Where did he learn to talk this way? You hit the nail on the head when you described your child's foul language as "a bad habit." That's precisely what profanity is for the vast majority of people who use it—a mindless, meaningless, automatic, "knee-jerk" variety of speech, picked up from the behavior of others and reinforced through imitation and constant repetition. Do you and your spouse swear in unguarded moments? If so, you'll have to face up to your own language problem before you can deal effectively with your son's.

We realize, of course, that there are other places where kids can acquire this kind of speech—at the schoolyard or playground, in movies and television programs and video games, from books and magazines and the conversation of friends. This isn't something we should take lightly; though parents can't completely shield their children from the world (particularly as they grow older), it's still their duty to regulate the younger generation's media intake and oversee their social interactions to foster positive values and encourage virtue rather than vice. If you want to extinguish your child's negative speech patterns, take steps to keep him away from negative influences.

You should also inquire into the possible underlying causes of his behavior. What's motivating him to use these words, especially in your presence? Is his speech calculated to shock you? If so, a shocked reaction will only reinforce the behavior. Is it a manifestation of rebellion? Anger? A reaction to feelings of rejection? A way of compensating for an inner sense of powerlessness? In that case, it might be wise to ignore the language for a moment and cut straight to the heart of the matter by dealing with the deeper emotions. You may be able to draw some of this information out of your child if you can find a time to sit down with him—when

he's calm, collected, and in a good mood—and ply him with a few gentle but strategic questions about school, his social life, and how he feels about his relationship with you.

Of course, you'll eventually want to make the point that profane language is inappropriate and out of bounds for anyone who wants to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Teach your son what the Bible means when it says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29); or "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (Ephesians 5:4). Make it clear that he's expected to abide by these standards as long as he lives under your roof. If he defies you and refuses to cooperate, apply appropriate consequences—for example, the loss of television, computer, or video game privileges for a predetermined period.

You may also wish to encourage "helpful" speech through a program of positive reinforcement. There are many ways to do this. Here's one: Place a glass jar in a prominent place and allow your child to put a marble in the jar every time he resists the urge to use profanity or substitutes a helpful, meaningful word for a destructive swear word. When the jar is full, you can celebrate by planning a family outing or devising a creative way to get involved in serving friends and neighbors as a parent-child team. This will involve the entire family in the process of re-shaping your child's language.

Don't hesitate to give us a call if you'd like to discuss these concepts at greater length with a member of our staff. Focus on the Family's counselors would be happy to listen to your concerns and discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book.

In Other Words ...

"Paula's four-year-old daughter was always sweet and sensitive. One day, though, the little girl completely stunned her mother by angrily calling Paula the b-word. It didn't take a psychology degree to realize where that seemingly out-of-the-blue vulgarity had come from: The child had walked through the living room the week before, when movie dialogue included the same crudity....

"That's why it's so important to challenge our kids when they say, 'But it doesn't influence me.' The challenge doesn't have to be a confrontation; a calm presentation of the facts will do, and there's no need to present all the facts at once. You're not arguing a landmark case before the Supreme Court, you're encouraging your child to consider wisdom."¹²⁵

—Bob Waliszewski

Need More Help?

Online

- [Plugged In](#) (website) provides family-oriented reviews of movies, TV, music, video games, and more.

Other Resources

- *Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*, John Trent, Ph.D., Rick Osborne, and Kurt Bruner, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2000)
- *Plugged-In Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The New Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Practical Tools for Raising Well-Behaved Children, I and II* with John Rosemond (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast, 2010)

Bad Manners

Question

It seems good manners have become a thing of the past—especially for my kids. Sometimes I’m stunned by their behavior at the table, at the mall, even at church. Good manners are something I’m determined to instill in them, but I can see it’s going to be a hard row to hoe. How do I teach them to behave when the rest of the culture is moving toward self-centered disregard for the feelings, sensibilities, and rights of others?

Answer

Manners and etiquette are often seen as conformity to a set of social mores or culturally defined standards of “correct” behavior (think “Emily Post” or “Miss Manners”). From this point of view, they’re part of man-made custom and tradition. This can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the extent to which the culture in question is consistent with biblical values and sensibilities.

Part of the difficulty you’re facing comes from the fact that modern-day Western culture is drifting away from its Christian roots at an increasingly rapid rate. This problem isn’t new, nor is it unique to the 21st century. Genuine Christianity has always been countercultural, and real disciples of Jesus have always been out of step with the rest of society in certain important respects. Christ Himself frequently came into conflict with the human traditions of His day, and if we sincerely want to follow Him we should expect to find ourselves swimming upstream against societal expectations and norms on a pretty regular basis.

So we need to go back to square one and ask ourselves a fundamental question: Is there a way to define “good manners” from a purely Christian perspective? The answer is yes. As we see it, the entire subject is summed up in the phrase at the heart of your question: “How do I teach my kids to treat other people appropriately?” For the believer, it all comes down to the Golden Rule (“Do to others as you would have them do to you” [Luke 6:31]) and the Great Commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself” [Matthew 22:39]). The apostle Paul says it this way: “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10).

From the biblical point of view, then, love is our one infallible guide to the proper treatment of other people. *Agape* love, not the shifting sands of fashion or changing social mores, is the polestar of Christian behavior. And what does this love look like in action? The details are spelled out for us in a hundred different scriptural passages.

Love is patient and kind; it is “not rude,” nor is it self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). Love manifests itself as respect and courtesy toward others. It’s characterized by genuine affection and an eagerness to give first consideration to the needs and concerns of one’s neighbor (Romans 12:10). It looks out not only for its own interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). It steers clear of anything that might cause someone else to stumble (Romans 14:20-21). Love is marked by an attitude of gratitude in every situation (Ephesians 5:20; Colossians 3:15). Perhaps most importantly, love shuns favoritism and shows equal deference to all—rich and poor, high and low, powerful and weak, influential and obscure (James 2:1-9).

Practically speaking, this love and deference can find expression in an almost unlimited number of ways. Much depends on the situation and the attitudes and expectations of the person on the receiving end. For example, if Grandma expects Johnny to keep his napkin in his lap and his elbows off the dinner table, Johnny should be taught to comply graciously. If your neighbor is in the habit of asking visitors to remove their shoes before coming inside, you and your family ought to abide by his wishes. If family friends are accustomed to being formally addressed as “Mr. and Mrs. Jones,” make sure your kids are aware of and honor their preferences. On the other hand, if the gym coach at school insists that the students call him “Bill,” make it clear that his desires are to be respected. There is nothing absolute or sacred about “rules” of this kind, but that doesn’t mean we’re free to dismiss them. It’s all a matter of putting other people first.

How do you teach your kids to follow these principles in everyday life? The answer is simple: You model this kind of behavior yourself. Kindness, good manners, and deferential treatment of others are best instilled in young minds by means of consistent example. They are caught rather than taught. If you want your kids to be Christlike in their interactions with the people around them, be Christlike yourself—and remember that you can’t begin too early, and that the best place to start is at home.

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book. We look forward to being of service to you in any way we can.

In Other Words ...

“A preschooler is old enough to learn some basic table manners: keeping the volume of her voice reasonable, chewing with her mouth closed, saying please and thank you, using a napkin, and waiting until everyone is seated and a blessing is offered before beginning to eat. If she is done with her meal and conversation among the adults is extending beyond her interest and attention

span, don't insist that she sit indefinitely. But before she gets up, she should ask to be excused. After she departs, don't let her crawl around under the table with the family pets."¹²⁶

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Raising Respectful Kids in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Books, 2006)
- *Respectful Kids: The Complete Guide to Bringing Out the Best in Your Child* by Dr. Todd Cartmell (NavPress, 2006)
- *Teaching Manners to Kids* with Judi Johnston Vankevich and Sheryl Eberly (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)
- *How to Raise Respectful Kids I and II* with Jill Rigby (CD, *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast)

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