

Into the World

Are your children prepared to impact their culture for Christ?

By Letitia Suk

The day is forever burned in my memory. A shooting had occurred in the cafeteria of my son's high school, just a few tables away from where he was casually eating his turkey sandwich. No one was seriously injured, but the whole community was shaken. But when I picked him up that day, my son climbed into the van and immediately grabbed my arm and pleaded, "Don't take me out of this school."

Every day, we parents come face to face with a culture that threatens the moral and physical safety of our children. We can't open a newspaper, turn on the news, or surf the Internet without being reminded of the dangerous world we live in. Yet the issues we deal with in our culture are really not so different from the issues parent have faced for generations.

Even parents in the Old Testament had to figure out how to help their children live in societies that didn't always honor their beliefs. In Genesis 27:46, we find a conversation between Rebekah and Isaac concerning the future of their son, Jacob. Rebekah says, "If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land ... my life will not be worth living." Even this godly woman feared the impact of a hostile culture on her son.

Things don't get much better in the New Testament. The writers of Romans 1:29-32 and 2 Peter 2:14-22 bemoan the standards of their times. Over and over, God's people are forced to stand up in a world full of danger, evil, and temptation.

Yet God seems to think we can handle it. Over and over, the Bible tells of God's people seeking him in the midst of their culture, not apart from it. From the Israelites who lived in captivity to the first followers of Jesus who risked persecution, our fellow believers have shown us how to understand the culture, influence the culture, be wise about the culture, and—most importantly—teach our children to do the same.

Understand the Culture

The same God who ordained all our days (Psalm 139:16) knew what he was doing when he created us to live in this time and place. Acts 17:26 says God "determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." That means God knows about the kids down the block, the standards of the local school, and who hangs out at the mall.

This understanding allows us to be confident that God is present with us no matter the culture around us. Scripture is clear that we need to seek God in the midst of our world. One of the best

ways we can help our children live faithfully in the world is to know and understand the influences they face. This becomes particularly important as our children head toward adolescence, because teen culture is tightly bound to popular culture.

Pay attention to the life of teenagers in your community. Walk through the mall and notice the messages that are targeted at young people. What are they told is important? Read the magazines and check out the television shows aimed at your kids. Discover alternative media, such as *Campus Life*, *Plugged In*, and *Relevant* magazines. Do your homework on popular movies and video games. Read the lyrics (often available online) for CDs your child talks about. Talk to your child's coaches, teachers, and youth leaders to find out what they see as the challenges for today's kids. The more you know about the world your child lives in, the better you can prepare her to handle it.

You may even want to do some research on other religions. Our kids will likely have at least one friend who practices another religion, so it's wise for you to be equipped to talk with your child about the ways other religions differ from Christianity.

In Acts 17:16-32, the Apostle Paul talked about God with a large group of philosophers. But Paul understood the beliefs of the philosophers well enough to talk about God in a way that made sense to them. As a result, some of the philosophers asked Paul to come back and tell them more.

Influence the Culture

Of course understanding the culture is only the first step. Like Queen Esther, we also need to recognize that God wants us to make a difference in "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Again, the Bible is filled with this call from God. We are to shine like stars in a crooked and depraved world (Phil. 2:15). Jesus called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). How can we give a reason for the hope we have (1 Pet. 3:15) if everyone we know has the same hope? How can we be wise toward outsiders (Col. 4:5) if we don't know any?

It's hard enough for adults to find the appropriate balance between being in the world but not of the world, much less helping our children do so. The key is to keep in mind Christ's gospel of bringing God to the world. That means actively praying for your kids' friends and being prepared to be part of the answers to those prayers.

Develop an open-house atmosphere so your kids' friends will enjoy being there. Talk with your children about your values and the reasons you try to bring God's love to the lives of others. Help plan an outreach event at church. Hold a weekly Pizza and Movie Night at your home and see what kind of discussion might follow. Invite the kids' soccer team (and their families) over for a cookout or chat with other parents at the games.

Be Wise About the Culture

Of course the danger in working to influence culture is that culture can often influence us in negative ways. That's why God tells us to go into the world with wisdom and discernment (Prov. 4:23).

The ability to filter out harmful influences is perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our children. I've found it helpful to ask my children—and teach them to ask themselves—"Is this

(friend, movie, activity) helping you become the person God created you to be? Is it helping you grow closer to God?"

When the answer is no, I want my children to be confident that God will help them "stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13). That might mean making a difficult decision, like not spending time with a friend who has proven to be a bad influence, or staying home instead of going to a party where there will be alcohol.

We must also make sure our children know we are praying for them as they venture into the world. If you know your child is facing a difficult or tempting situation, take time to talk through her options, to pray with her, and to lovingly let her know what you expect of her. Show her that her spirit is precious to you. Praise her when she makes wise choices and help her learn from poor ones.

It's also essential that we as parents model this same discernment. I have to be willing to ask myself the same questions when I'm tempted to listen to a crude joke or gossip with my friends. I have to show my children that I must guard my own heart as I seek to bring God into my culture as well.

Seek God in the Culture

In the face of the dangers culture often presents, I find great comfort in knowing that God is in control of my kids—and of the culture. Four particular Bible stories are helpful as we work to live as God's people: the stories of Moses (see Exodus), Joseph (see Genesis 37-50), Esther (see Esther), and Daniel (see Daniel) all tell of godly kids growing up in ungodly cultures. Each of them were pulled, as children, from their families and their native cultures. Because of choices they made and how they lived, we're still talking about them today.

Baby Moses was rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter and taken to the palace to be raised. Although Moses' mother was able to play a small role in her son's life, he was essentially the son of the Pharaoh's daughter. Surely Moses' mother prayed fervently that her little boy would come to know the God of his people, that he would not succumb to the pagan culture into which he'd been thrust. Clearly, God honored those prayers.

Joseph grew up with his family but was kidnapped by his brothers when he was just 17 and sold as a slave into Egypt, where he was later imprisoned. His faith—and faithfulness—not only sustained him, but later elevated him to power and saved his family and as well as the rest of the Hebrew nation.

Esther was part of a class of people so persecuted that she didn't even use her given name in public. But when she was chosen as the new queen of her nation, she had the opportunity to save her fellow Jews from death. Risking death, she defied the order of the king and asked him to grant mercy to her people.

Daniel was also pulled away from his family as a young man and forced into the pagan Babylonian culture. And yet Daniel never compromised his faith. He boldly proclaimed God, even when he faced persecution. God used Daniel to influence an entire culture.

Yes, all these people were thrust into a foreign culture. But in a way, all Christians live in a "foreign" culture. According to 1 Peter 2:11-12, we're "aliens and strangers in the world." But that same passage urges us to impact this world by living "such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

God's plans for the lives of Moses, Joseph, Esther, and Daniel were not threatened by the culture. In fact, it was the culture that provided the backdrop for them not only to survive and thrive but to accomplish powerful acts for the kingdom of God. God can use our children in the same way when we shore them up with faith, prayer, and the wisdom to stand strong in the face of temptation.

After the shooting at my son's school, I felt God leading me to pray, to console worried parents, to sit tight because God was in control, but I didn't feel led to pull my son out of the school. In fact, I feel more strongly than ever that this is where my kids belong. Is there a "safe" school? A sinless neighborhood? A culture anywhere untouched by darkness? No, but there is also no place that the light of Christ can't shine. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). I do take heart and start my round of prayers again.

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