

## **The Secret to Faith-Filled Kids**

*How children really learn to follow God*

*By Kevin Young*

Call me naïve. I used to think that if my kids attended Sunday school, memorized enough verses, and sat up straight and tall during family devotions, we would produce in them extraordinary faith. About that time I began discipling teenagers for a living. I began to wonder why some students possessed raw courage and exceptional commitment, while others seemed to bob in shark-infested waters, waiting for the hit.

Where did the faith-filled ones get it? Why did the others fall prey? Frankly, I looked at my own children listening to "Wit's End" and "Psalty the Singing SongBook" tapes and felt terrified. Would this be enough to prepare them for the big leagues—junior and senior high school?

For the past 20 years I've motivated young people to live outside their comfort zone, to walk by faith. Many of the ones who stand strong for Christ come from what I call "hothouse environments," homes where faith has been cultivated. Even through the most turbulent moments of teenage hormonal imbalance, their faith actually insulates them from the affects of a secular culture, while not allowing them to become isolated from it. That has been my prayer for my children since the first moment I held them. I'm sure it's yours as well.

When our children stand strong in a godless culture, make no mistake—it's the grace of God. I've met few parents who could articulate how their children developed dynamic faith. They usually shrug their shoulders and apologize for all their blunders. So as we strive to build faith in our children, we need to examine the process God uses to strengthen our faith.

We grow as Christians through prayerful study of Scripture. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to the truths of God's Word and allows the truth to absorb into the fabric of our hearts. When that happens we are ready to ask God for the strength and

wisdom to apply his Word to our lives.

Though nothing guarantees faith-filled kids, following this time tested process could very well keep our children in the boat and out of the water. In doing so, we must keep in mind the workings of a child's heart and mind.

#### Children Observe

When God gave the people of Israel the Law, he told Moses to instruct the people to teach these commandments to their children at every conceivable time and occasion. That's because he knew more is caught than taught in the transmission of faith from one generation to the other. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses tells the people to teach while they walk, when they lie down and when they wake up. In other words, be intentional about teaching God's commands as a way of life. Moses knew that a consistent example of faith does more to prepare a child's heart than years of sermons combined.

That's certainly been true for my children. A few years ago, our daughters began to read the Bible and journal their spiritual insights. Every night when I tucked them in, I would catch them with their nose in the Book. Sometimes we would discuss what they read, but most of the time I acted like it was no big deal. Actually, my emotions were flying faster than an aerobic kickboxing routine! "Wow, God where did that come from?" I wondered. "We have never instructed them in that discipline."

Then it occurred to me that since their earliest days, our daughters have watched Mom and Dad pouring over Scriptures in the dim light of early morning. Like a picture, our example spoke a thousand words. Often, our actions can help our children gather the courage to take an initial step toward being obedient to God.

#### Children Absorb

The heart is a mysterious muscle. It has the ability to absorb the power of a good example and to harden itself against duplicity. Every parent I know, myself included, lives with regrets. We have made mistakes that we can't retrieve or erase. But children watch us during the daily grind of life, and their hearts respond to consistency, not perfection.

Kids know intuitively that their parents are going to make mistakes now and then. It's when they see inconsistencies in

our lives that their hearts become confused, then calloused to the message we teach. It takes work to ensure that our children absorb the right kind of message.

That work starts with a relational connection to their hearts. I travel many weeks out of the year, and so I have to work extra hard to stay connected with my children. Every night I'm at home, I meander into their rooms about the time they're getting settled for the night, sit at the end of their beds and chat. Taking time like that fosters an occasion for issues and insights to surface. They can hear how God helped me through my day and gather strength for their own unique set of pressures.

These spontaneous conversations show our children that we care deeply for them and can be trusted to listen to what matters in their lives. That trust lays the foundation for their ability to trust God with similar conversations.

We also need to be intentional about arranging shared ministry experiences with our children. As a family, take time to pray for your community and neighborhood. If and when the chance to talk about your faith with someone else comes along, let your child be part of the conversation.

Let your children see you living your faith out loud. I'll never forget taking my oldest daughter on a business trip with me and running into a forensic detective on a plane heading for New York City. She kept us spellbound with a litany of bone-chilling true crime stories. But the thing my daughter remembers most is when we turned the conversation to spiritual things and I ministered to this woman about the loss of her daughter.

Children will not remember everything you say, but they will grow up with a permanent impression of who you are absorbed in the heart. The seeds of faith grow when your children see your example of loving and living for God.

#### Children Apply

The earlier a young teen can step out in faith, the better the chance they have of forming convictions of their own, and, more importantly, owning the faith they have borrowed from us.

Last fall nine members of a small, rural, Christian school came to New York City to help in the wake of September 11th. I had planned their schedule, and one day found us on a subway heading to a remote school in Queens. The group sat quietly,

staring through the foggy windows at an overcast sky. They were anxious, brooding over their mission of talking with urban youth (in other words, they were scared to death!).

Then I had an idea. I moved from student to student, handed them a piece of literature that dealt with the tragedy of September 11 from a Christian perspective, and told them to offer it to a person close to them. Their wide, blinking eyes said it all: "You want me to talk to a perfect stranger?" With a little nudge they set off, each student taking the initiative to talk to someone new.

When we arrived at our destination, the students had handed out every one of my pamphlets. They were galloping up the aisles and laughing the way kids normally do. A businessman turned to me as he exited the train and mouthed the words, "Thank you." Several students took notice, and their eyes lit up. It wasn't that these kids lacked faith, just a chance to express it.

You might look at your child and wonder if anything you've said or done over the last decade has sunk in. I promise you, it has. When you faithfully seek God in your life, your children really will notice. When you take a genuine interest in them and build a heart connection with them, they really will cherish it. When you give them the chance to be part the incredible work God is doing in the world, they really will rise to the occasion. Then, instead of treading the water of adolescence waiting for the sharks to hit, they become the sharks, slicing through the currents of a secular culture without fear, teeth bared, and determined to make a difference in their world.

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