

APPENDIX 4

Ten Areas to Build Healthy Identity in Children

1. **Employ corrections, not punishment.**

One of the most difficult things to do as a parent is to reinforce a boundary and provide appropriate discipline. All too often, children have this uncanny ability to bring the worst out of us as parents. Sometimes we might overcorrect them or dish out punishment because we are angry. This should be avoided.

Punishment has to do with me preserving my right to be angry and maintaining my posture as the one in charge. It says that my child must pay for what he or she did wrong. Punishment is often done out of anger and lacks any training toward change. Put simply, it is the more powerful parent enforcing his or her will upon the weaker child. Punishment is about inflicting shame and pain for wrongdoing.

Correction, on the other hand, is not just about reward and punishment; it is more about challenging actions and shaping the will in a life-giving manner. In this way, the spirit of the child is guided and formed. It considers what is best for the child.

Correction takes time to administer because it includes instruction toward a different and healthier future. Punishment on the other hand is normally abrupt, reactionary and often given with little thought. Proverbs 29:15 says that the rod of *correction* imparts life. Job 5:17 reminds us that God also provides correction: "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty."

Correction provides training with love. It takes into consideration the gifts deposited within each child. Punishment provides pain, but no lasting effort toward change.

2. Train your children in the way they should go.

The book of Proverbs tells us to train our children in the way *they* should go. This can be interpreted as each child's bent, calling and gifts. Draw those gifts out. Find ways to encourage them and make use of them in order for your child to grow in his or her own identity. (See Proverbs 22:6.)

When our son was three years old, he would remove the pots and pans from the kitchen cabinet, place them on the floor upside down, sit on one, grab two wooden spoons and then play the "drums." It didn't take much to realize that we could identify his gifts and to do everything within our power to help him follow his interests.

Our son eventually progressed in his craft to the extent that he was drumming on two albums produced in Nashville. It truly was a calling for him.

3. Empower your children, rather than being powerful over them.

Far too many parents train their children to view Mom and Dad as having all power and control over them. Even when we do not try to give this impression, it somehow comes across fairly often. For example, have you ever heard a parent say, "Because I said so"? And then there is this one: "You will do this (fill in the blank) or you will not be able to do this (fill in the blank)."

These statements may work in the first several years of life, but as children mature, the commandeering approach needs to be adjusted. If it is not, we will train our child into thinking that they just need to resign themselves to our

power. The use of power is often void of relationship. A void of relationship creates a void of security.

One day, in the life of every child, that power will be resisted, tested or simply ignored. Powerless children become victims because powerless people view themselves as victims. Powerless people do not have to take responsibility for their actions; they can blame others. Eventually, powerless people may want everything provided for them. But there is an alternative. Empower your children to think and reason and make choices of their own. While providing proper boundaries, teach them to make decisions rather than you as the parent deciding everything for them.

For example, if your child is playing with their food rather than eating during a meal, try this: ask your child (as is age appropriate), "Would you like to finish your meal and then play a little longer with your friend outside or not finish your meal and stay inside to play by yourself?"

To a teenager you might say, "If you wash the car, you can use it tonight to see your friends, but if you choose not to wash the car, you'll have to find a ride on your own. It's your choice." Choices empower our children.

What's the difference? By giving a choice, you are empowering your child to reason, think through the process and choose their own conclusion and consequences (again, as is age appropriate). Powerful children will do powerful things one day as they take responsibility for their decisions.

As we train our children, some areas are negotiable and some are not. This is similar to the scenario in which some classes in high school are required and some are electives. I might say to my child that dress is a negotiable, but modesty in dress is nonnegotiable. It is primarily in the negotiable areas where we can give our children freedom of choice, helping

to empower as they approach those all-important stages of interdependence and finally independence.

4. Keep communication sacred.

Have a meal together every day and talk as a family. Discuss the good, the bad and the challenges. As parents, share about your workday and start the discussion. If we are not open as parents, neither will our children be open about their daily experiences. Have conversations about anything and everything at all age levels. Give each one your attention as they share and require that no one be laughed at but rather laughed with.

Ask questions instead of making statements. Questions require a response from your children while statements do not. Questions offer opportunity for them to expound on certain subjects and can lead to really important details. Looking for responses, opinions and input from your children emphasizes their value.

5. Teach your children the art of play without electronics.

Our son's pediatrician expressed to us as new parents, "Keep your child off the electronic games as long as you can. Teach him to play creatively, send him outside and go explore with him."

Did you know there is a National Toy Hall of Fame in Rochester, New York? Every year a new member is inducted into this toy hall of fame. In 2005, the cardboard box was inducted. What kid doesn't love to play in a cardboard box? One of my favorites was the toy that was inducted in 2008—a plain old stick. The stick was picked because of its "all-purpose, no-cost, recreational qualities." It is portable and versatile and "fosters learning creativity through play and imagination." It's the perfect price; it's all-natural; it's

organic; there are no rules or complicated instructions for use. It can be a horse, a sword, a hockey stick, a fishing rod or a snowman's arms.

6. Train your children in the world of finances.

Teach your children about money, saving, spending, credit, debt and giving. Children who are trained in the proper use of money will have the financial skills that will be essential in the "real" world. We train them to understand and respect money, not to love money. We train them in financial stewardship from God's perspective.

Use the financial lessons you have learned as a teaching tool to those little ones in your life, either as a parent, a grandparent, or a caretaker. Their future teachers and employers will love you for it. Author and financial teacher Larry Burkett once said that we are not responsible for our children's decisions, but we are responsible for their training. Here are some important areas to train them in.

God owns it all. We are to be the best stewards of everything He shares with us.

Because God is so generous, teach generosity. There is no greater blessing than to teach your children the value of giving.

Teach the difference between self-discipline, delayed gratification and immediate self-gratification along with the direct consequences of each.

Give your children regular and meaningful responsibilities: jobs without pay such as picking up their toys. Do not give an unearned, free-ride allowance, but rather give your children regular jobs like mowing the lawn or folding the clothes that they can be paid for.

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Teach your children to tithe and honor God's kingdom from every dollar earned or given to them. It is all God's, but discipline in regular giving grows a habit.

Teach your children to save a percentage of their income for the future (30-50%), even while designating a percentage that can be spent immediately.

Teach the difference between an asset and a liability (a consumable). Help them to understand the concept of investing and how that will help them beyond today into the future.

Develop a budget with your child as soon as they can comprehend the idea. Start a savings account (starting with a piggy bank) and when age appropriate, obtain a checking account and an ATM card. Teach them how to responsibly use and balance these accounts.

Train them in the proper use of credit and that the borrower is servant to the lender. Teach them the difference in borrowing for an asset versus a liability. Share with them the difference between paying interest and growing interest on their money and investments.

Share with your children your financial mistakes in a way that allows them to learn and benefit from them.

As appropriate, explain other financial concepts such as loans, taxes, utilities, owning a home, maintenance, buying a car, auto repairs, insurance, etc. Take the time to teach your children what God takes the time to teach you about money and His resources.

Financially savvy young persons are miles ahead of financially insecure persons. Learning financial responsibility will sow into one's identity to build further confidence and help keep them from certain financial failures.

7. Do not talk down to your children or speak words of critical judgment.

A recent study of primary school children centered on trying to discover the number one inhibitor to children's creativity and eventually to their performance. I was intrigued to know what these social scientists identified. While there were many ingredients, the area that stood out as the number one killer of creativity was *critical judgment*. Critical judgments are critical words that tear at one's spirit without mercy or grace. They involve criticizing something that is not necessarily changeable (e.g., a lack of athletic ability or academic ability). When words of critical judgment are cast upon another human being, that person begins to suffer a creativity crisis that can lead to an identity crisis.

When a child hears consistent words, tone of voice and nonverbal looks that say, "We never planned you; you were not wanted," they will begin to believe these words. Even when a child hears the words, "What's the matter with you?" or "Don't be so stupid," it indicates in a critical way there is something wrong with them. Their life will be scarred. Their demeanor, the look on their face, and their life expectations will take on this spirit of critical judgment. Proverbs tells us, "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18).

8. Teach your children how to resolve conflict.

Having children to raise, to train and to love is a privilege that can be stretching, maturing, tiring and, quite often, exasperating. I loved being a parent and now love grandparenting. If you are serious about parenting, you realize at times it is more than you think you can handle. At those times, I wondered if I was raising my children or if my children were raising me.

An inability to resolve conflict will keep us stunted for life. Of the dozens and dozens of couples that have sat before me for marital counseling, few of them had any clue of how to actually resolve a conflict. They were experts at having them, but clueless at finding solutions. When you teach your children the skill of resolving conflict in a healthy way, you will impart a talent that will serve them for a lifetime in every relationship, every job and practically every life situation.

You and your spouse cannot have out-of-control arguments without resolve and expect to teach your children how to resolve life issues. You must push toward a healthy solution to the problem with compromise, thereby modeling healthy conflict resolution. When children can learn to resolve conflict, there will be more peace and joy in their life. They will experience less anxiety and far less sadness over broken relationships.

9. Speak words of blessing.

Reading through the Old Testament books of Genesis and Exodus lately has been a great reminder concerning the blessing of God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the blessing of fathers to their children. It caused me to think about the fact that “the blessing” might be missing, dormant or decreasing among us as parents today.

When God speaks a blessing, He does not revoke it. Because of Joseph, the Egyptians were blessed. Even Potiphar, Joseph’s boss, realized blessing from the exemplary life of Joseph. The Scripture says, “The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field” (Genesis 39:5).

In the book of Exodus, a blessing was pronounced on food and water. Freedom from sickness was promised for those who blessed the Lord in worship. After all the plagues,

when Pharaoh finally summoned Moses and Aaron in order to relent and allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, he said, "Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. *And also bless me*" (Exodus 12:32).

10. Do not make your children your idol.

Your marriage was before children and will need to be a priority after your children are raised. My encouragement is to place God first, then your marriage and then your children. Our children, while extremely important, cannot be treated as idols. We are not called to worship them or their needs. Parents are not able to meet all the needs of their children, but we know Someone who can and will.

Further, we as parents are not to live our lives vicariously through our children. Parents who endeavor to do this are attempting to find their identity through their children. An example is to dress our young children in the latest, most expensive style of clothing. The children are unaware, but the adults around them notice and make comments of admiration concerning stylish dress.

Another area is sports. For example, you may not have excelled at sports, but your child does. You then live vicariously through your child's sports exploits and accomplishments. Yes, you are proud of your child, but you're more proud of the inferences and accolades you might receive because of your gifted child. You may be unknowingly entering into a competition for the admiration your child deserves.

Do not idolize your child or maintain the goal of becoming your child's best friend. You are not their peer; you are the adult. Choose to be the parent in each and every situation.

While these ten areas are not exhaustive, they encompass a lot of our day-to-day parenting. Do not let them overwhelm

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you; instead, read back over the above ten areas and pick one area to concentrate on. Perhaps take the time to write down three goals with that one area and begin to work on positive changes in your parenting. In the future, keep reviewing these ten areas. Choose another to work on, and then write down three new goals.