Chapter Four
Preschoolers

Emma Beth, now a toddler, is very different from her brother Stephen when he was a preschooler. When we play lively music, Beth jumps and turns excitedly with her whole body. Stephen, like most preschoolers, learned to do intricate hand motions corresponding to the words of the music. Beth makes broad strokes when coloring, ignoring the lines of the picture; Stephen carefully tried to stay within the lines and succeeded much of the time. Over the next couple of years Beth will need help with dressing, but like Stephen she will learn skills such as zipping and buttoning clothes, tying shoes, and brushing teeth without help. To help preschoolers learn these things, buy clothes that make zipping, buttoning, and other aspects of putting on clothes easier (Wallinga and Skeen 1988, 31). They will still need help deciding what to wear.

Preschoolers do not change clothing sizes as often as they did in toddlerhood because the rate of growth slows down. They don't eat quite as much as they did earlier, although this makes it very important that the food they do eat is nutritious.

Many other things change during the preschool years as well. Stephen outgrew his nap -- he would sleep a couple of hours in the afternoon at age three, but only a half hour or so by five. Preschoolers still need plenty of sleep at night -- about ten to twelve hours or so. Stephen began showing a clear preference for his right hand by about age four, as do 90% of children (if children prefer the left, it is unwise to try to change them). Preschoolers will still wiggle and be bored with church, so junior church or some other alternative to the standard service activity is needed. Children's nervous systems become more fully developed so they hear and see more details (Wallinga and Skeen 1988, 30-32). Sometimes we have to answer Beth's question a dozen times before she understands, older preschoolers may only need to be told once (if they listen the first time)

During the preschool years, from age three to six, the child takes great strides in becoming more self-sufficient. Youngsters feed themselves and even cut most of their own food. By the early preschool period most children are completely toilet-trained, using the bathroom when they need to, cleaning themselves afterwards, and not wetting the bed most nights. They are also less dependent upon parents as their circle of relationships broaden to include more friends and perhaps a preschool teacher.

Mental Development

Reasoning ability grows rapidly between the ages of three and six. During these years the child begins to reason things out concretely, but the knowledge of abstract concepts is still almost nil. Because of their concrete reasoning everything is either right or wrong, there are no shades of gray. Without a good environment, including good education and parenting, many people never outgrow this way of thinking.

To some extent the child still imagines that others see things the way the child sees them. For example, the preschooler may wonder why supper is not ready at the moment the child gets hungry, or suppose that everyone lives exactly the way they do (Fitch and Ratcliff 1991, 157).

The child is also easily misled by the appearances of things. In his classic experiment, Jean Piaget found that most preschoolers thought the amount of water changed when it was poured from one size container to another. One of our students remarked that her preschool son complained he did not get as much milk as the older sister because the level of liquid was higher in the sister's thinner glass! What that student saw was almost an exact copy of Piaget's experiment. Preschoolers often look only at the appearance of things in making conclusions and decisions, something the Bible tells adults to avoid: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (I Sam. 16:7).

Children at this age learn by example. Not only do they imitate their parents, brothers and sisters, and friends, but they also need a number of examples to learn new ideas. The Bible teaches by example -- consider the Bible "hall of fame" in Hebrews 11. Use good examples to teach new ideas at this age (Ratcliff 1988a, 9).

Using the word "why?" signals the beginning of cause and effect reasoning. At two and one-half, Emma Beth used this word but really did not understand what it meant. One time her mommy asked her why she was jumping so much. She replied, "jumping, jumping." Mommy replied, "But tell me why," to which Beth

replied, "why!" When preschoolers begin asking why, it may be good to encourage them to try to figure out why instead of immediately telling them the answer. Parents weary of all the "why's" at this age, but you may be encouraged to learn this signals a new advancement in their thinking.

Memory improves for preschoolers, and they can often remember three or four things at once. If you are teaching your youngster a Bible verse, have them learn it three or four words at a time rather than the six or seven that adults can handle. And be sure they can understand what they are reciting. Memory improves when things are repeated, so when your son or daughter wants you to read the same Bible story over and over, do it. It may be old hat for you, but they will remember it much better, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Acting out the story also helps them remember it better (more on this later).

Distance is often confused with time for preschoolers (Piaget 1971). "Long ago in a far away land" could mean last week across town! These things must be kept in mind when preschoolers are told stories or when we ask them to come in "soon" -- they simply have little or no understanding of time at this age.

Language

During the preschool years language develops rapidly with the child adding hundreds of words to his or her vocabulary every year. Even though they do not understand a lot of words, they try to make sense of what they hear. For example, a child told his father that in church they sang a song about a bear named Gladly who had crossed eyes. This puzzled the father until he realized his son was talking about the hymn "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear!" Children do their best to make sense out of what we tell them.

Children sometimes may appear to disobey when actually they have not really heard what you asked them to do or not do. They may hear only certain words the adult speaks, not the entire sentence, partly because the preschooler memory can only include about three or four words at a time. Children at this age often guess what people say by looking at the social situation (Shatz 1978). They try to make some meaning out of the few words they do hear, but the meaning they construe may be vastly different from what the parent actually said. How can you be sure they really understand what you say? Try having them repeat back to you the statement you made if what you asked is new or a bit unusual (this may be needed with older children as well).

Should you correct poor grammar? Research (Cazden 1972) shows that it does not result in more correct speech. There is also the danger that you will discourage communication if you make incorrect grammar a big issue -- correction can be seen as punishment that can affect the parent/child relationship. Actually children may use correct grammar and then begin to use poor grammar because they are learning more about language, a temporary reversal that helps them in the long run. For example the child may say "I saw a horse" and a few weeks later state "I sawed my friend." Actually that is an advancement, because he or she is learning that we add the "ed" when it occurred in the past. When you hear grammatical mistakes, you might repeat the sentence correctly for the child, so they will hear it in the right form, but don't overly emphasize the mistake. Eventually they will pick up the correct grammar if they hear it enough from others.

What else can you help your child learn more words and understand them better? Try reading them stories from books that have a lot of pictures. Talk around the dinner table, and include the preschooler in the conversation; never watch television while you eat. When the child watches television, talk about the show during commercials. It also helps language development to explain what is happening when you are watching something take place, and then having the child repeating your words (Coates and Hartup 1969).

Social and Emotional Characteristics

People need people. Those who lack good relationships are not mentally healthy -- usually they are lonely, empty, lack purpose, and suffer from emotional pain. Therefore parents need to teach their preschooler social skills by exposing the child to other children, preferably of the same age and sex.

During toddlerhood and up to age three or so the child will play next to other children, but not really play with them. They may talk to one another, but usually each one is talking about a different topic. Playing side by side is called parallel play. But later, at age four and five, they begin to play with each other, such as playing house or cops and robbers. They also talk to one another on the same topics. This is called cooperative play. This change in play shows that the child is less self-centered and is able to imagine another person's viewpoint to some extent. Think of it -- to play house, one must be able to understand not

only one's own role (daddy) but also how that relates to other roles (mommy, children, and so on). Cooperative play shows the child is growing in his or her view of the social world. Playing house can also give parents a picture of how the child understands family life and things that take place in life.

Gary Collins (1971, 50) suggests four benefits of play in childhood:

1. it permits discharge of energy
2. it provides needed stimulation
3. it helps children develop motor skills
4. it enables the child to act out and learn to understand adult roles.

Without question, play is not just nonsense: it is an important window to the child's understanding and a valuable means of learning. Someone once said that play is the preschoolers work.

Emotions are also a very important part in the life of preschoolers. Preschoolers are more likely to express their emotions freely than many adults who have learned to suppress them. Preschoolers experience fears, anxiety, jealousy, curiosity, joy, and primitive forms of love.

Preschools, Kid Swapping, and Preparing for School

While we spoke out strongly against day care in the last chapter, some time in a preschool may be helpful for three- to five-year-olds. It is important that the preschool program not be high paced and accelerated because these are likely to produce "burnout" and lack of interest in learning by the time the child is in third or fourth grade (Elkind 1987). Notice the emphasis upon some time. All-day, every day instruction is still inappropriate, as it can contribute to a "herd mentality," excessive conformity that will continue into the school years. There is also danger that certain kinds of preschools can cause psychological damage. Psychiatrists Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock (1972, 668) state, "inadequate facilities or personnel may be destructive to the proper psychological growth and development of children." Perhaps the government should require all preschools and day care centers to post that message on their doors, just like the warnings on cigarettes!

On the other hand, two or three mornings away from mother at this age may not only do the child some good but will give mom a little break. If you put your child in a preschool, be sure it has warm, loving, well-trained, multiple mother substitutes. Even at the best preschools, though, you can expect children to pick up more diseases and probably some vulgar words that will have to be corrected.

Some parents prefer to swap child-care with a neighbor or friend instead of sending the child to preschool. This may work well a couple of mornings a week, and give the kids added time with other children. Don Ratcliff did this with his children and found it worked well.

What can parents do to get kids ready for schooling? Reading simple books to them will help, especially if you pause during the story and ask questions about what is happening (Bruner 1986). This helps prepare them for the question and answer format they will use during the school years.

As noted above, the parent or preschool teacher should not try to teach a lot of academic subjects. Instead they can learn the social skills of cooperation, sharing, and give and take, as they play together. The parent or teacher might help them learn a few pre-reading skills, such as reciting and recognizing letters and numbers, but plan on gradually introducing these over a period of several months. If the child catches on quickly and wants to learn more, you could try teaching the sounds of letters and simple addition using objects. Again, if they begin getting frustrated and tired with this kind of learning, stop! They have plenty of time to learn it later. In fact, a number of studies described by Raymond and Dorothy Moore (1979) suggest that children learn academic subjects faster and better if they do not begin school until eight years of age! They suggest parents home school prior to eight, with emphasis upon social relationships and experiencing the world around them rather than formal learning.

Emotional Reactions to Violence

In an experiment at the University of Georgia, researchers (Osborn and Endsley 1971) studied the emotional reactions of young children to TV violence. They showed three brief, violent TV episodes to four- and five-year-old children while measuring how much the children sweat. The children were also

shown two non-violent films. As measured by the sweating, the children responded more emotionally to the violent films and remembered them better one week later. The emotion aroused by the violent films was primarily fear. Violent scenes with human characters aroused more fear than did violent scenes with cartoon characters. The children were able to recall twice as many details about the human violence than anything else they saw. This implies that when something triggers the emotions, it is more likely to be remembered later. The main lesson, perhaps, is that what we feed our children's minds will be there for years to come, especially if it stirs emotions.

Just about everything is on television these days. A great deal of it is simply not appropriate for children. While the media generally maintains that the violent and sexual nature of most of the programs does not affect children's behavior, the success of television advertising says just the opposite. Sales of Reeses "Pieces" skyrocketed just because they were portrayed for a couple of minutes in the movie "E.T." (even without naming them). Clearly what our children see on either the big screen or small screen can potentially affect their behavior. We must carefully monitor and control what we allow them to see and hear.

Personality Development

As we saw in the last chapter, the mother is especially important for personality development in infancy and toddlerhood. While the father need to be involved in child-rearing from day one, he takes an even more central place in the personality development of children during the preschool years. Christian fathers should spend much time with their sons and daughters. Research indicates that children at this age that lose their fathers (such as through divorce, death, or too many hours away from home) are affected for many years afterward. For example Hall, Lamb and Perlmutter (1986, 417) quote studies showing that preschool boys without fathers are more feminine, avoid competition, and "have difficulty establishing a long-term heterosexual relationship" as an adult. Preschool girls without fathers are more likely to be either extremely shy or become very seductive in adolescence. Emotional problems are commonly the result of father absence (Nicholi 1985). George Rekers (1986), in testimony before the United States, provides evidence that children who lack fathers are also more likely to have intellectual difficulties and adjustment problems. Elsewhere (Rekers 1982) he describes a wide variety of studies that also show how devastating father-absence is to children.

It is sad to see how Hollywood and the television networks are attacking fathers today. The typical father, as seen on the TV screen in homes today, is either extremely violent or is a powerless wimp. Movies, such as "The Little Mermaid," increasingly tell children that they need not obey their parents (Yoest 1992, 66). How far we have come from the days of the Waltons and the Cleavers!

In any Christian's home, a boy's best friend should be his father, and a girl's best friend her mother. It is especially important for fathers to spend large amounts of time with their preschool boys and mothers with preschool girls because these are the years in which children come to identify with they own sex. They need a parent of their own sex to imitate.

We take identifying with one's own sex for granted. When people fail to accept their given gender, this is considered a mental disorder (Meier, Minirth, and Ratcliff 1992, 136-137 and 154-155) and is often associated with a great deal of emotional pain. One of our jobs as parents is to help our children accept and value their sexual identities. Yet everywhere in our society this is being threatened, not only by the absence of parents but also through the unisex movement. It is sometimes hard to tell a boy from a girl today, but the Bible states that boys should dress like boys and girls like girls (Deut. 22:5). And, although no chores are exclusively masculine or feminine, encourage your boys to help daddy with his chores and your girls to help mommy with hers. It is also good to compliment daughters for looking feminine and boys for looking masculine, although praise should primarily be reserved for the quality of behavior and character, not appearance. Accepting one's gender is also encouraged by preschoolers having friends who are the same sex.

Sometimes preschool children come to think that somehow they will eventually marry the parent of the opposite sex. While Freud's old theory of childhood sexuality exaggerated this idea, many children do have this fantasy. Probably the best response is to matter-of-factly tell the child that this will not happen, but that

they are loved by both mommy and daddy. It is probably a good idea to not let preschool children sleep with the opposite sex parent (a practice more common than might be thought) and also that parents insist on more privacy in dressing, using the restroom, and bathing.

What is most harmful is when boys whose mothers are either no longer married or not close to their husbands, are unconsciously made little husbands for their mothers. This also occurs between fathers and daughters sometimes. Even if there is no sexual aspect of such a relationship, it is asking children to take on a role that is simply inappropriate. They often suffer emotionally for the rest of their lives. Parents should also not belittle or put down one gender or the other.

Parents are very important to children at this age. Some have said that they think the quality of time spent with their kids is more important than quantity. All we can say to that is "nonsense." A large quantity of time is essential, and if you can improve the quality during that large quantity of time, well so much the better. Some have suggested that when both parents work, they are more likely to get down on the floor and play with the child than is the stay-at-home mother. Several research studies indicate this is far from the truth (Yoest 1992, 21). Parents cannot possibly have energy and time for kids when they arrive home tired and worn out from a full day of work to be greeted by all the household chores yet to do. Interestingly, research indicates that even working fathers spend more time with their children when mom stays at home (Nock and Kingston 1988). What is most important is that at least one parent be available when children need them, not just in the evening or on a weekend, even if most of the time is not spent on the floor playing with them.

Defense Mechanisms

Like adults, children see the world through a microscope rather than a telescope. The human mind is highly selective, relying on specific impressions of what is factual and real, rather than what is actually the truth. Decisions are based on past experiences, conscious perceptions, prejudices, conscious and unconscious drives, emotions, social pressures, mental capacity to interpret reality, and many other factors. No one can see things the way they really are 100 percent of the time, although we are promised in Scripture that one day we will know "even as we are known" (I Cor. 13:12).

One way people disguise the truth from others (and themselves) is through defense mechanisms. While these first begin in childhood, they continue throughout life. People with healthy personalities keep defense mechanisms to a minimum, but nearly everyone uses them at least occasionally. A child who has experienced the unpleasant feelings of anxiety or depression will look for ways to prevent those unpleasant feelings from recurring, thus they use defense mechanisms.

The most basic defense mechanism is repression. This involves the banishment of unpleasant thoughts from the conscious mind. For example, a preschooler (or any age child) may resent the birth of a new baby brother by saying "I wish he was never born" or even "Why doesn't he die?" Since these thoughts are shocking to the parents, they may respond "Oh, you don't really think that" or "What a terrible thing to say!" Thus, to please the parents, a child may banish those very real feelings from the conscious mind, telling himself that he does not have those thoughts; repressing those ideas. It would be healthier for parents to try to find out why the child feels that way. They may even want to affirm the child by saying, "Yes, it is hard to not be the center of attention any longer." The resentment may, in fact, be an indication that one of the parents needs to spend more time with the child, as well as encourage him or her to see the positive aspects of the new brother.

Another defense mechanisms which makes an early appearance is regression. When children encounter something that makes them insecure, such as the parents arguing loudly, they may begin acting as they did at an earlier stage of development when they felt more secure. They may begin to wet the bed or suck the thumb long after they quit doing those things. These forms of regression often occur with older children as well, especially when a new baby is born.

Denial surfaces quite early with children as well, a defense mechanism that is common at all ages. The child (or adult) simply refuses to admit the fact that something disturbs them, even though it clearly does. For example, children may refuse to admit they are angry, in spite of the obvious fact that they are.

One other defense mechanism that surfaces in early childhood is projection, which is attributing one's own impulses or wishes to someone else. Thus the youngster who feels hostile towards his older brother, but does not want the uncomfortable feelings that accompany hostile wishes, will convince himself that it is really his brother who is angry at him. The same thing could happen with the parent -- the child may be upset with the parent, but think the parent is angry instead. Of course it can also go the other way -- parents may imagine problems in their children that are really their own hidden desires, such as the father of a teenage girl that mistakenly thinks she is sexually active. The parent may have unconsciously wished he was having an affair. Christ referred to this defense mechanism when he said: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged . . . Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eyes and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:1, 3).

Discipline

In the last chapter we emphasized the value of spanking, which should also be used during the preschool years. However, at any age it can be overused until it no longer works very well. This kind of punishment is far more effective if used only occasionally for clear-cut defiance. In addition, explanation of what was done wrong and why it was wrong should be provided. Give the child an opportunity to talk about the situation to correct possible misunderstandings (but don't let the child talk you out of the punishment!). Afterward, let the child cry and give affection if the child wants it.

Effective parents use a variety of discipline methods, not just one. Keep in mind that good discipline is not just to get rid of bad behavior, but also to instill good, alternative behavior. Thus praise, attention, and occasional rewards for positive, desirable actions are just as important as punishment for the bad.

One possible discipline technique is ignoring improper behavior. Sometimes attention of any kind makes an undesired action more likely to happen. Paul Meier has seen some neglected children misbehave simply because it was the only way they would get attention. Even a spanking is better than neglect, they feel. Thus attention can be a powerful reward. In some cases, simply refusing to pay attention to aggravating behavior makes it less likely to happen in the future. This is not always effective, but it comes in handy at times.

Isolation is an old standby for parents. Sitting on a stool for a few minutes can seem like an eternity to an active preschooler. Standing in the corner, going to the bedroom, and other forms of isolation can be effective ways to help the child obey. Be careful that the isolation is not rewarding, though, or it will not work. For example, if the child acts rudely and is sent to her room where she can play video games, she really has not been punished. Also be careful not to overdo the isolation -- a good rule of thumb is that isolation should last the number of minutes equal to the child's age in years. Thus a four-year-old should not be isolated for more than four minutes at a time. Finally, don't place the child is a frightening situation, such as a dark closet. Discipline should be effective but not traumatic.

Deprivation is another discipline technique to consider. Taking away favorite toys for a few days, going without dessert after supper, not letting the child go outside for awhile, or not allowing the child participate in a favorite activity may all be effective methods of discipline. It is a good idea to link deprivation with the misdeed whenever possible, such as taking away dessert because food was purposefully spilled on the floor, hiding a favorite doll because it was not put away, or not playing ball with the child when he refuses to share the ball with others.

Effective parents use a variety of discipline methods, and do not get stuck with only one. Variety makes each method more likely to work. Some methods are more effective for some children than others, but to use only one is to ask for problems. And, finally, good parents are careful to include a lot of positive, affirming, and encouraging comments and actions in their day to day activities with their children. Punishment is most effective when it comes from warm, loving parents (Hall, Lamb, and Perlmutter 1986, 407).

What does not do much good is prolonged reasoning about misconduct, in fact this is a futile waste of time. They cannot begin to think abstractly until they are into the school years. If we try to reason about the moral concept they have disobeyed, their minds are at least a mile away. A quick spanking or other form of discipline, severe enough to bring repentance, is much more effective in dealing with children this age.

Typical Problems

Fears and Nightmares

Like toddlers, preschoolers also have a number of fears, including fears of animals, monsters, and even story book characters ("the big bad wolf"). They have trouble separating fact and fantasy and may need to be reassured over and over by their parents of safety.

Nightmares and night terrors are quite common in preschoolers. Because there are many things that a three- to six-year-old does not yet understand, a larger portion of sleep time is spent dreaming and thus sleep disturbance is more likely. Most children have these problems at one time or another. Night terrors involve thrashing around in bed and crying out, but unlike nightmares the children do not wake themselves up. In fact, you may have a hard time waking them up during a night terror even if you shake them. Most children have them for only a short period of time; they go away as the conflicts causing them are resolved. Medication can be given to eliminate night terrors during this period of time, but usually this is not necessary. We recommend that you keep a nightlight in your preschooler's room so he or she can see that there aren't any animals or bogeymen. If your child comes to your bed at night after a nightmare, take the youngster back to his or her own bed and calmly talk to the child for a few minutes. Sleep walking is also common in young children, and is nothing to worry about if they stay in the house! Medications can stop this also.

Temper Tantrums

Between three and four years of age (if not before) children learn to throw temper tantrums. Don Ratcliff recalls the day that this first happened with his oldest son, then about three years old. A neighbor girl, about the same age, had
visited him for most of the afternoon. When her mommy told her it was time to come home, she fell to the floor kicking, crying, and demanding to stay. The embarrassed mother gave in to the little one's demand. You could almost see the wheels turning inside my son's head. He must have thought, "look's like a neat way to get what you want." Sure enough, the next day he gave it a try. The tactic did not work nearly so well for him; temper tantrums did not pay off for him; he didn't get what he wanted and he got something else he certainly did not want!

Temper tantrums continue only if they pay off in some way. They can become a way of life, with even parents of teenagers giving in to avoid a "scene." We are all motivated by rewards -- would you continue your job without a paycheck? -- and the same is true for preschoolers. The reward for tantrums is getting their way.

If you do not want temper tantrums for the rest of the child's life, you need to take appropriate action as soon as possible after each tantrum. For some children, simply refusing to give in is sufficient; ignoring is enough. Others will throw an even bigger temper tantrum when you ignore their out-of-control behavior. In that case you might grab them firmly by the shoulders and tell them to stop it, or even spank them if needed. Eliminating the reward is often sufficient, because the tantrums no longer serve a useful function.

Sexuality

Children often ask questions about sex-related things at this age, and -- as we saw in toddlerhood -- the healthy thing to do is answer them truthfully and matter-of-factly without showing embarrassment. You should not go on and tell them things they did not ask for, but answer their questions accurately and specifically. Teach them that some things are talked about privately and done privately. For example, we should not allow our children at this age to run around in the yard without any clothes on. Yet, if we find them in that situation, we should not become agitated and angry; simply tell them to put their clothes on again. If we find our child examining the genitals in bed at night when we happen to walk in on them, the best thing to do is ignore it or politely ask the youngster to leave the pajamas on.

Boys and girls often want to explore the differences between their bodies at this age. Most of us had the same tremendous curiosity about the physical differences of the opposite sex in the preschool years, though many of us have long repressed those memories. What is most crucial is that curiosity, not sexual arousal, is

behind the exploring behavior. If you discover your child has been examining another's genitals, encourage them to talk about it. Affirm their own gender, as well as the interest in the opposite sex, but firmly let them know that they should not continue this private exploration with the friend. Some parents have found that bathing two preschoolers of the opposite sex together, with parent supervision, helps satisfy curiosity in a healthy manner. Of course, this should only be done with the permission and preferably the presence of the other child's parents. Sometimes a better alternative is to babysit a infant of the opposite sex and allow the preschooler to watch when changing the diaper.

Bedwetting and Soiling

Even though many children are successfully toilet trained before the preschool years, bedwetting is still a very common problem during the preschool years. About 88 percent quit wetting their beds by the time they are four and one-half years of age, but about 8 to 10 percent still wet their beds from time to time when they reach six years of age and about 1 to 2 percent even after high school graduation (Freedman and Kaplan 1967, 1380). The best thing to do when this happens is have the child clean up his or her own bed, as much as is possible, but do not shame the child. You might also consider buying one of the "bell and pad" sets available from some sales catalogs, which rings a bell when the child wets the bed. The noise helps the child become aware of the release of urine from a full bladder. After using it for awhile, most children learn to wake themselves up when the bladder is full. Other guidelines for toilet training are found in the previous chapter of this book.

Soiling the bed, like bedwetting, can be expected in the preschool years. We would encourage you to remember that the age at which children are biologically ready for toilet training varies from one and one-half to four years of age. Thus soiling is not considered abnormal unless the child is past four years old. If your child is over four and still soiling from time to time, it would be best to get treatment from a child psychiatrist, or a pediatric specialist if the problem is due to physical problems.

Handicaps

Handicapped children are usually affected psychologically by the specific handicaps they have (Bentovim 1972, 634). Handicapped children frequently become very dependent, passive, and somewhat withdrawn. Sometimes handicapped children become scapegoats that the family teases and rejects.

Children who are physically handicapped often develop problems in their everyday behavior. For example, they may become frustrated and express that frustration in angry words or actions, blame others, withdraw by fantasizing a lot of the time, or become immature in their actions. In addition they may become timid and self-conscious, and react in more extreme ways that average children (Kirk 1972).

Another handicap sometimes found with preschoolers is some kind of vision problem. If you child rubs the eyes a great deal all day long, or you find him or her tilting the head or covering one eye quite a bit, this may indicate a sight problem. A lot of blinking, squinting, or holding books close to the eyes may also show eye problems. Crossed eyes, problems with eyelids, itching, burning, watery or red eyes also may spell problems in this area, as can complaints about double vision, blurring, dizziness, or headaches when working on something.

Preschoolers can also have hearing loss. If they complain of earaches, ringing in the ear, dizziness, sudden hearing loss, or if they hear better when they can see you, check with a doctor. Often children that do not hear well do not pay attention as well as other children, and ask adults to repeat things a lot. Turning the head a great deal, leaning forward to hear better, interrupting conversations, poor speech or speech that is too loud or soft, and withdrawing when speech is required may possibly show that there are problems in this area. These kids may also have a hard time telling where a sound is coming from, and sometimes confuse numbers that have similar sounds such as 15 and 16, or 50 and 60. Check with a doctor if you think there may be problems in this area.

Too often handicapped children find that parents and others let them have their own way because they feel sorry for them, breeding selfishness and self-centeredness. If you have a handicapped child, don't deny the handicap, but encourage independence. And don't pity the child -- love the youngster and trust the

child's ability to either successfully cope with the handicap or overcome it, as well as become a responsible individual.

Child Abuse

The Bible is clearly against child abuse and neglect. Consider the following passage: "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better of him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:5-6).

Although punishment is clearly equated with good parenting in the Bible, abuse is not. It is interesting to study some of the customs of the Canaanites and other surrounding cultures in Old Testament times. Horrible abuse, even killing of children was apparently fairly common. The accounts of sacrifices to the false gods Molech and Baal were often sacrifices of young children (Jer. 19:4-5, 32:35). Against this historical background, the Old Testament statements about discipline are very mild and child-affirming! Terrible abuse characterized the Romans, which again makes the New Testament concern for children a tremendous contrast (Clapp 1984).

Single Parenting

Another very serious problem in the United States is single-parent families. More than one in four American children are now in homes with only one parent, and in the black community the rate is an astounding 68%. These high rates for blacks and whites alike are not only because of the high divorce rate, but also the rapidly escalating number of births to unmarried women (Yoest 1992, 23).

The result is a disaster for children. A number of studies have found that children raised in single-parent homes are more likely to be delinquent, have sleep disturbances, get poorer grades in school, use drugs and alcohol, and grow up to have broken marriages (Yoest 1992, 24-25). No matter what the age of the child is at the time of the divorce, it is traumatic.

Judith Wallerstein (1982), in her studies of long-term effects of divorce, found that nearly all the children continued to have some difficulty even ten years after their parents were divorced. About one third were seriously disturbed, another third were coping but not fully recovered, and even the healthiest third still experienced loneliness and general unhappiness because of the divorce. These now grown children were likely to have a great deal of anxiety and guilt, as well as rush into impulsive relationships. In general divorce is harder on the children than on either of the adults.

There are so many Christian fathers and mothers who are failing in their responsibilities before God that it makes us grieve. We cannot repeat enough the fact that the father and mother's first responsibility from God is the family. All else comes in a distant second. Paul said that if a Christian does not provide for the needs of his own household, he is "worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8).

Nervous Habits

Don't worry about moderate nail-biting. A good number of college students still bite their nails! Nervous tics, however, such as regular squinting of the eyes, regular jerking of some part of the body, and constant clearing of the throat, may be signs of emotional conflicts requiring counseling. Tics usually go away as the conflicts are resolved. There are also medications that will eliminate many tics within just a few hours, but unless the person deals with the underlying problems the tics will return when the medicine is discontinued.

Stuttering in preschool children is considered normal and should just be ignored. Often the more attention you pay to it, the worse it becomes, because attention may either reward it or make the child more self-conscious. Stuttering nearly always goes away by age six. The reason it occurs so often is that during the preschool years the child's knowledge and vocabulary are increasing much more rapidly than the physical ability to get the words and thoughts expressed. If stuttering continues after age six, consult a speech therapist. Sometimes a psychiatrist can help by prescribing medicines -- even lifelong stuttering in an adult can be eliminated 60 percent of the time within two days after taking a low dosage of Haldol.

Obesity

Our society is obsessed with weight. Just recently a news release stated that nearly all of the major models could be considered borderline anorexics (a mental disease that produces extreme weight loss through self-starvation). The mannequins in most department stores are also extremely thin.

This obsession with thinness has filtered down to our children. A recent television special interviewed a number of nine- and ten-year-old girls that repeatedly commented that they had to be thin to be beautiful, and one skinny youngster openly wept about how fat she thought she looked. No wonder we have an epidemic of anorexia today!

Yet we must also be realistic with our children. While we might want our society to change its views, our children must still live in the real world. As a result, we advise strongly that you avoid obesity in your child at any cost. Being overweight will greatly hamper self-worth and limit respect received from peers. Preschool and elementary aged children are very tactless and will broadcast any defect they see in others. It's not right, but that's the way it is, so let's deal with the problem realistically. But if the child is of average size, don't encourage weight loss. It might help to comment on how the thinness of some people on television is not healthy. It can also help to avoid talking a lot about your own weight! Encourage your children to look on the inner person, rather than outward appearance, as noted earlier.

Depression and Excessive Stress

These two problems are not uncommon among preschoolers. Childhood depression is usually manifested by social withdrawal, continual sadness, and either a marked increase or decrease in activity (Meier, Minirth and Ratcliff 1992, 154). Depression frequently follows the loss of a loved possession or person (such as in divorce, death, or transfer of the father overseas). Weekly counseling sessions, and low doses of antidepressants, often meet with success.

Everyone has stress, and -- as noted earlier -- some degree of stress helps psychological development. Preschoolers have many adjustments to make as they reach towards the independence of being school-aged. Simple events like going to Sunday School, to the doctor or dentist, moving into a new home, having a new baby brother or sister, can all be very stressful for a preschooler. As a matter of fact, going to the dentist is usually quite stressful for us! The best way we, as parents, can reduce these stresses for our children is to prepare them for these events by talking about them ahead of time in words that children will understand (Collins 1971, 56). Always be truthful. It can even be distressing for children to go to sleep at night, only to wake up to find a strange babysitter there and their parents gone. We always tell our children when we are going out, even if they will be asleep before the babysitter comes, so they won't be surprised.

Spiritual Development

We must bear in mind that the child's reasoning ability, described near the beginning of this chapter, has a powerful effect upon spiritual understanding as well. For example, stories about Jesus and some of the little children in the Bible have a great deal of meaning to children at this age. In contrast, teaching them about abstract concepts like parable interpretation or "agape" love will only make them wish you would hurry up and get done so they can get back to their toys. One researcher, for example, told children the story about Moses and the burning bush. He then asked them what the "holy ground" was that Moses stood on. Some thought it meant there were holes that he could fall into, or that the ground was muddy, and one even thought it meant the ground was soft (Goldman 1964 -- also see Ratcliff 1987). The more appropriate the spiritual training the child has during these three years, the more he will understanding and rely upon his Christian faith when he is older and has meaningfully accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Can a preschooler be saved? We believe some children can understand enough during the latter part of their first six years to know that they are frequently sinful, that they want God to forgive them, and that they want to live forever in Heaven. They can put their simple faith in Christ, who taught that unless we as adults have faith like a little child, we will not inherit the kingdom (Luke 18:17). We both understood enough to put their faith in Christ at ages six and five respectively. We have also personally led to Christ four-, five-, and six-year-olds whom we felt to genuinely ready for salvation.

As we help our three- to six-year-olds develop spiritually, we must keep in mind that the main sources of their learning, whether at church or at home, are their total life experiences rather than just our words. Gary Collins (1972, 53) states, "A 'loving heavenly father' is foolishness if the child's earthly father is harsh and unkind . . . Even the child's views of God, Heaven, angels, and Hell are in terms of pictures he has seen."

Therefore, to help children understand Bible stories, and other Christian stories we might tell them, they need to get personally involved. Acting out stories especially helps in understanding them (Ratcliff 1988b, 264-265). As you tell the story, you can pause occasionally and act out the parts with them. If several children are available to play various parts, so much the better. After you finish, you can tell it again and the children can exchange parts. Research indicates that an adult taking part in the acting is important (Ratcliff 1985c), as is the pausing during the story to act out what is happening (Villarreal 1982). Acting out parts can also help the child understand church services and family religious rituals.

What are some things from the Bible that preschoolers can learn? Don Ratcliff and his wife Brenda have taught four- and five-year-olds simplified versions of the Ten Commandments in a half-day preschool and also in a Sunday School. Nearly every child could remember all ten commandments afterward when they were taught using acting by the kids, stories, coloring pictures, and lots of child-centered applications.

How do children picture God at this age? Often preschoolers and school-aged children envision him as a magician in the sky whose purpose is to grant their thoughtless and selfish wishes (Vianello, Tamminen, and Ratcliff 1992). We have known some adults who still pray that way. They try to play God and use God's magic to accomplish their will, instead of asking God to show them his will in the matter. As we pray with our children, we should show them by our example that prayer is a means of changing our will to make it coincide with the will of God.

During this stage of development, children pick up their notions of what is right or wrong by what they see us doing, not from what we say is right or wrong (Massey 1988, 96-97). For example, we know on the basis of Scripture that there is nothing sinful about feeling the emotion of anger, and we encourage our children to let us know when they feel angry (see Eph. 4:26). If they throw something or hit others due to anger, they get spanked, but if they tell us they are angry towards us or someone else, we thank them for telling us and we talk about it for awhile. Somehow, though, kids sometimes get the idea anger is wrong. One day the oldest son of Paul Meier watched a television show where a good man became angry over a stolen watermelon. An hour or two later he came to me and said, "Daddy, that man was bad!" I did not know what he was talking about, so I asked him. He told me that the man in the watermelon story was a bad man. "No he wasn't," I said, "he was a good man! What makes you think he was a bad man?" To my dismay he replied, "He was a bad man because he got angry." So I explained to him that it's all right to feel angry. It all depends on what we do with that anger.

Holidays

Another thing that can hurt our children's spiritual development is lying to them. This is a terrible thing to do, and yet lying to children is an American tradition, and even Christian families do it. For example, if a child loses a tooth, what do we ask him to do? We tell him that if he will put it under his pillow, a tooth fairy will sneak in at night and put money there. Some Christians tell their preschoolers about the Easter bunny bringing eggs as if it were really true. And when Christmas comes around, the American tradition is to go to all ends to convince our three- to six-year-olds that there is a man called Santa Claus who is omnipresent ("he sees you when you're sleeping"), all-knowing ("he knows when you're awake" "he knows if you've been bad or good,"), and all powerful (he can carry tons of toys all around the world in a matter of hours, flying up and down chimneys). As a result of being taught he has these God-like qualities, Santa Claus becomes an idol that replaces Jesus Christ, whose birthday we are supposedly celebrating (Collins 1972, 55-56). Later, when the child finds out that his Christian parents have been lying about something that has become a major part of their religious beliefs, is it any wonder they have doubts about the things they have been taught about Christianity by the time they are adolescents? Is this a laughing matter? We don't think so.

This does not mean we have to take all the fun out of Christmas. We can play the game of Santa Claus if we make it clear to our children it is only a game. When we go to the department store during the

Christmas season, we can say "There's another man dressed up in a funny red suit and beard. Do you want to sit on his lap and get some candy?" If a child asks, "Is there really a Santa Claus, Daddy?" we respond "No, Santa Claus is just a funny game we play." Our children have just as much fun as other children, but they do not get trapped into praying to him every night and they also know their parents tell the truth about everything.

There are many good ways to celebrate Christmas. There are also a lot of wrong ways to celebrate the birth of Christ. When his children were quite young, Paul Meier would tell them a true story about the birth of Christ while showing them a little manger scene. Everyone would pray for a minute or two, thanking God for sending Jesus to die on the cross for all the bad things that all of us (daddy included) have done. Then the family would drive around and look at the Christmas lights in town. At home a fire would be lit in the fireplace, everyone ate some pistachio ice cream and drank some eggnog, and then we all went to sleep. The next morning, Christmas day, we let the children open a few simple presents that had been sitting under the Christmas tree for days, presents they know are from mommy and daddy and not from Santa Claus. We tell them we give presents to remind us that the wise men brought presents to Jesus, and that Jesus is God's present to us. For preschoolers, that is as deep as we went. When the children got older, we told them other things, such as the fact that Martin Luther was the first man to put an evergreen tree in his home at Christmas, because it was shaped like an arrow pointing up to God in heaven. Don Ratcliff likes to use an advent wreath with candles to explain Christmas, helping to build anticipation for the birth of Christ over the four weeks before Christmas day.

Some Christians do not give any presents at Christmas because of the materialism involved, and we must admit we don't blame them a bit! They have their fun in other ways, and explain to their children why they don't buy presents for that particular day. We think that's a good idea, but we are satisfied with giving each other some simple gifts -- many of them things we need anyway. Some people prefer to give gifts on Christmas eve, or some other day, so children will even more clearly separate Christmas from Santa Claus (as well as allow the children to play with gifts while parents sleep in!).

As with Christmas, we tell our preschool children the Easter story very simply over and over again -- how Jesus died and came back to life again, because he is God, and he is still alive and helps us every day. But they can also take part in the local Easter egg hunt and we might even color a few eggs ourselves. We give them buckets or baskets with candy and plastic grass in them.

Another thing we can do to be truthful to our children is to be sure to let them know when we are telling them a fairy tale and when we are telling them a true story. It's very difficult for a young child to separate the two. We believe some of the traditional fairy tales people tell young children can be harmful. All the stories of violence and witches and people cutting off other people's heads can create tremendous fears in three- to six-year-olds who believe mean giants may be hiding in their closets at night. Don Ratcliff remembers thinking this even as a third grader, and it kept him awake some nights! Television violence, even on children's programs, can also create nightmares and fears.

We should even be selective about what Bible stories we tell our children at each stage of their development. We eventually want them to know all the Bible stories when they are ready to comprehend their significance. Naturally we don't read them the Song of Solomon, but we might when they are teenagers. The bloody story of Jael (Judges 4) is obviously inappropriate for little ones (it's even a bit rough for us adults!). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, metaphorical and abstract sections of the Bible cannot be understood by children this age, and probably not fully comprehended until after ten or eleven. For example, the little song "I will make you fishers of men" actually requires a level of understanding most kids do not have until they are nearly teenagers. Perhaps we spoil the potential appreciation of that vivid, powerful, and beautiful phrase because teens associate it with earlier childish actions.

Finally, we should mention the importance of family devotions with preschoolers. This might include a simple Bible story, brief prayer, and perhaps a time of discussion. The discussion could include talking about the story, the events of the day, or both. Keep it short, pleasant, and simple. Of course, family devotions do not take the place of setting a good example for the child all day long, or of helping the child see how Christianity relates to his or her everyday actions. We need a living faith that makes a difference in

everything we do, and this can only be taught to a preschooler in the midst of everyday living. But family devotions are the capstone to a lived faith.

Chapter Five
The School Years

Stephen, Don Ratcliff's middle child, is eight years old, well into middle childhood or "the school years" as it is sometimes called. Between six and twelve his rate of growth will slow even more than during the preschool years. Even so, he can be expected to grow a foot (from four to five feet tall) and double in weight (from 45 to 90 pounds on average). The gain in weight is more muscle than fat, so he will be stronger and more coordinated. His writing is already much improved because the small muscles in his hands are more developed, as well as the nerves throughout his body.

While kids are stronger, their bones are fragile and they actually lose some of the flexibility they had earlier. Children have a lot of injuries and accidents during these years; in fact injuries are the most likely cause of death at this age. Bones can be twisted and deformed for a lifetime by an overemphasis upon sports (especially those that involve throwing). Good warmup exercises can help children avoid such injuries, however. High quality physical education programs at the elementary school level can be healthy for children, as long as there is not too much pressure and the kids are not allowed to tease those that don't do as well.

The biggest change during this age, as suggested by the title of this chapter, is entering elementary school. As noted in the last chapter, it is best for children to spend most of their time outside a classroom until first grade, even though they might attend a preschool a couple mornings a week at age four and a half-day kindergarten at five. With this kind of preparation, and a healthy amount of independence from the mother, all-day schooling in first grade will be more fulfilling than fearful for the child. Some elementary school children must ride the bus to school or have their parents drive them. An extra hour or more in a hot or cold bus should be avoided if at all possible, at least during the early grades.

At this age parents need to make a rather important choice: where to school your child. There are at least three alternatives: public school, a Christian school, or home schooling. There are strong and weak points for each of these that need to be considered.

Perhaps the biggest advantage to public school is that you do not have to spend as much money (although notebooks, pencils, other supplies, and driving them to and from school will cost something). If you send your child to a public school, chances are they will come into contact with many different kinds of children. As a result they will be more likely to understand the natural differences between people. They may also have an opportunity to win others to the Lord, and they may even have an influence upon unsaved teachers. Perhaps you will even be fortunate enough to find a Christian teacher for your child. But plan on correcting poor habits that children easily pick up from unsaved peers, such as cursing, cheating, and so on. Kids will also tend to separate their education from God's truth and the Bible. After a number of years in public education, these are usually thoroughly divorced from one another, even though in reality "all truth is God's truth." Some teachers, even at the elementary level, can influence children away from Christian faith by teaching that one moral view is as good as another (that there is no ultimate truth in life), and other secular ideas.

The desire for combining Christianity with learning makes the Christian school attractive. Children are more likely to have godly teachers and friends in a Christian school, and perhaps they will develop fewer bad habits. Effective discipline is more likely in a Christian school, and they may learn good character traits as well as reading and writing. On the other hand, not all "Christian" schools are fully Christian -- some of them teach the secular subjects just like the public schools, even using the same books! Some Christian schools have unqualified teachers because the salaries are so low, and sometimes they admit problem students that can harm your children as much as the public schools. A few Christian schools are overly harsh and rigid, while others are far too permissive. Another obvious drawback is the high cost of tuition.

A third option is home schooling. This approach allows the parents to influence their children more than public and Christian schools, and parents can be more certain that the children get a thoroughly complete and Christian education. There are good teachers manuals that can help parents teach well, even if they

have little or no college education. There are also videotapes and correspondence courses that can help the parent. Research indicates that home schooled kids are more likely to be leaders and do better once they enter school (Moore 1985). The negative side is that some home schooled children may not get enough time with other children, so they might lack some social skills such as cooperation and sharing. Home schooling takes a considerable amount of time from at least one parent. It can also be costly, requiring several hundred dollars a year for materials. Some states have considerable restrictions on home schooling. Finally, some parents simply are not emotionally or mentally up to the task.

Which of these is best? It depends upon the child, the parents, and the quality of schools available in your area. Sometimes a particular child can withstand temptations and influences of ungodly teachers, and you can supplement the secular teaching with Christian values after school. If so, a public school might be best (a good public school may do less harm than a poor Christian school). If a good Christian school is within driving distance, and you can afford it, that might be best. If you have some ability at teaching and would like to be at home with the children all day, home schooling is a good choice. Of course, one of these might work better at some ages than others -- for example you might home school for first and second grades, then send your child to a Christian school. Take special pains to check out your child's first grade teacher. She needs to be a loving, understanding teacher, but also know how to control the class and provide good discipline. Christian or non-Christian, the first teachers will affect the way children look at the education process for the rest of their lives. It's also important for parents and teachers to work together so children will not get two different messages about what is right and wrong.

Mental Development

Mental development is one of the things to consider when making decisions about where to school your child. During the school years, certain areas of the brain mature that allow children to begin doing formal school work. This includes reading, arithmetic, writing, and other important skills. These skills are unlikely to be learned until the brain matures, regardless of how they are taught. For many children, these abilities take longer to develop because the brain is a bit behind schedule -- they are just as smart as the others, but they will not do all the same things at the same time. Many boys and some girls have this problem, often indicated by not reading well (or not at all), and they might write some of their letters backwards, until the nerves in their brain become mature. These kids are sometimes called "late bloomers," their abilities "bloom" a year or two later than other kids.

Don Ratcliff's, Stephen, is a smart boy, but he did not learn to read at age six. He just could not seem to get the hang of putting letters together with sounds, and my wife and I saw it was hurting his self-concept to push him in this area. He was unable to sit still and concentrate for very long. If he had gone to a standard classroom, I fear that he might have been mislabeled "hyperactive," treated differently by the teacher, and teased by other children. He might have been branded "slow" for the rest of his life.

We decided to home school him for awhile. We encouraged him to look at picture books, and now and then we worked on pre-reading skills such as learning the sounds of letters, but we didn't push him. We also talked to him about right and wrong, helped him explore some of his own interests, and encouraged him to learn good social skills, such as cooperating and taking turns, with his brother and sister, as well as other children. Much of the time he ran and played outside, eventually building himself a tree house. By the end of first grade he had gained some ability at reading, but he was extremely slow. It was almost painful for him to read to us because each word, even each part of a word, took such a long time for him.

About half way through second grade, when he was about seven and one-half or eight, his reading suddenly came alive. Almost overnight he began reading faster and with fewer mistakes. Within a few weeks he was reading all day long, book after book, at about two years above his grade level. He is now in a fine Christian school, and keeps up with the school's advanced level of learning (about two years ahead of the public schools). How glad we are that we did not push him too hard or force him to attend school when most other children begin!

Dr. Raymond Moore (1985), a professional educator and researcher, recommends that children generally not enter school until age eight or later. This is because many children have a difficult time learning in a standard classroom at six or seven years of age. Between ten and forty percent of children are, like Stephen,

not physically ready for reading and other skills until after first grade (Golden 1981, 181). What a tragedy to damage the self-concepts of these children, perhaps for a lifetime, because of poor decisions about school. Golden also believes that long-term learning problems, such as dyslexia (a reading disorder), can sometimes be the result of pushing "late bloomers" before they are ready. This also shows what a serious mistake it is to push children to learn academics at the preschool level -- no wonder they are tired and frustrated with learning long before they are even teenagers (Elkind 1987). It is amazing that more people do not realize that the more we push earlier and earlier education, the more the national test scores go downward!

Social and Emotional Development

During the elementary school years the child develops a real sense of belonging. Group participation, especially with other Christian children, should be encouraged. They can develop a sense of responsibility if they share chores with older brothers and sisters. A sense of belonging and the development of responsibility may help produce leadership abilities in the child. One must learn to obey before one can lead effectively.

The peer group, made up of same-age friends and classmates, are increasingly important at this age. If the child was placed in an all-day preschool, by the elementary school years he or she may have developed a "herd mentality" in which the child simply agrees with peers without thinking. The self-concept is also powerfully affected by peers at this age -- kids see themselves through the eyes of friends and classmates as well as parents, teachers and other adults.

Yet it is quite common for elementary school children to be vicious with one another. Calling one another names, and exaggerating the slightest defects, are very common. Each child's name is somehow twisted into some awful distortion. Sometimes several children will turn on a classmate with terrible teasing and ridicule. Parents and teachers have a responsibility to teach their children to avoid this practice, encouraging them to see how hurtful it can be. Adults should also intervene when they see this occurring on the playground or at home -- the teasing and put-downs are often remembered for many years afterward, scarring the self-concept permanently.

When younger elementary aged children play games such as football, basketball, or baseball, they often have poor organization, heated disputes over rules, lopsided scores, and accusations of cheating. They like to win, but must also learn teamwork -- the important ability to work together for a common cause with fellow human beings. They also like to play marbles and exchange comic books. We encourage you to buy your children some Christian comic books at this age, as this may give them an opportunity to witness to other children about Christ. They are not too young to do this. But you should probably avoid other kinds of comic books. Many of them are unhealthy morally and sexually. Even some of the comic book characters we all grew up are no longer wholesome. This holds true for cartoons on television as well. Some Christians have made it a policy to only let their children see Christian cartoons, such as Gerbert, Flying House, and Superbook. Unless you plan to watch the cartoons to screen them carefully (and explain to your kids why certain parts are bad), we suggest you stay with the Christian programs. This is also true for videos and television programs in general.

David Elkind (1981) emphasizes how people today tend to encourage children to grow up too soon. Childhood is not the time for children to do the things expected of teens and adults like dating and being fashion conscious. Television programs teach children all about adult concerns long before they are ready for them. Sometimes the youngsters portrayed use adult humor and attempt to act like adults. Let kids be kids!

Personality Development

During the elementary school years the child identifies with the parent of the same sex, if that parent is available to the child. Kids also identify with other people of the same gender. Hero worship is to be expected at this age, so it is important to provide the child with appropriate heroes. Parents can do this by praising certain individuals worthy of honor, such as certain athletes, ministers, and Bible heroes. If your

child was named after someone, explain who it was and why you appreciate that person. You might also tell the child the meaning of his or her name.

It is vital for boys to identify with males and for girls to identify with females. Without such identification the child might become a homosexual or lesbian, if the problem is severe, or have sexual maladjustments in marriage if the problem is less severe. It is unfortunate that we do not have more male elementary school teachers. So many boys go through life with either no father or an absent father, and few other male adults in the early elementary years. Constantly surrounded by female school teachers, Sunday School teachers, babysitters, and so on it is no wonder homosexuality is far more common in males than in females. We strongly recommend that churches provide male Sunday School teachers, at least for the boys and preferably for the girls as well. A healthy father figure at this age helps girls as well as boys adjust more normally in adolescence and in married life. Of course one must be careful that the men are trustworthy -- some teachers, scout leaders, and so on will induce boys and girls into sexual activity (this is more common with men, but can occur among women as well). In fact these perverted people are likely to seek out these kinds of jobs, even in churches, so be careful.

In the United States elementary aged children often come to dislike children of the opposite sex (this isn't true in many other areas of the world). This is the age of the "cooties" -- kids love to talk about how awful the opposite sex is. But don't let them fool you, they will still have a favorite or two of the other gender. Sometimes children even wish they could be the opposite sex. Kids need to see that each sex has its own distinct advantages, and parents should especially emphasize the advantages of the child's gender.

Healthy sex education can encourage personality development in a positive direction. The best place for sex education at this age is in the home. It should be done little by little, over the years, by answering questions the child asks. Be sure to answer the questions truthfully, using adult terms and talking in a matter-of-fact way without embarrassment. A child should generally know all the facts of life by ten or eleven years of age. Menstruation should be explained to elementary aged girls fairly early, because the normal range for the first period is anywhere from nine- to sixteen-years-old (the average is about thirteen) (Willson, Beecham, and Carringon 1966, 69). It can be terrifying if a girl has her first period without knowing what is happening -- she may think she is injured or bleeding to death. Of course boys do not need to know about menstruation at this age, but you might talk to them about wet dreams and masturbation by age ten or so. Generally boys reach puberty a bit later than girls -- usually about thirteen to fifteen (Ziai 1969, 38). This is why seventh-grade girls are often bigger than boys.

Discipline

We have spent considerable time in the last two chapters on this topic, and most of the comments made there continue to apply through the elementary years. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the use of the rod and reproof (see Prov. 29:15 for example). This suggests that these are important disciplinary tools, although other forms of discipline can be included from time to time.

Spanking needs to be short and immediate. If the child becomes angry, within a few minutes he or she will be over it. If children hit their parents or show any disrespect after a spanking, they need to be spanked again. If you don't demand respect when children are young, you won't get any respect when they become teenagers. When you spank, be sure it is hard enough for the child to feel pain. Of course, bruising a child is always inappropriate and we consider slapping the child's face or hitting with a fist to be child abuse. Spanking will work for any child that is not severely mentally retarded or is not using the spanking for attention, but you must be consistent. Our experience is that within a few minutes after a spanking the child usually says, "I'm sorry, daddy. I love you."

Discipline should always follow misdeeds quickly (Eccl. 8:11). It is a serious mistake for a mother to tell her child that the father will spank the child when he gets home. This is a violation of scripture and is also wrong psychologically. The average attention span of an elementary school child is only a few minutes, and by the time the father comes home the misdeed will be long forgotten and the punishment will have lost its effectiveness. Second, if the father does all the punishing the child may develop a distorted picture of God, since -- at least at the unconscious level -- experience with the father colors our picture of

God. Some mothers have the father do all the discipline because they want to separate the children from the father, winning the child's undivided relationship. This is extremely unhealthy psychologically.

During the school years, parents also need to continue the earlier practice of rewarding good, productive behavior. In fact, child psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) felt this is one of the most important aspects of child-rearing at this age. The rewards do not always need to be material, however. Because children begin to think more about the reactions of their peers, you might use time with friends as a reward. However, it is important to avoid excessive shame in front of the child's friends -- discipline should generally be a private matter between the child and parent. Spanking should be discontinued at about eleven or twelve and the parent needs to use more reasoning and adult-to-adult style communication.

Reasoning With the Child

Sometimes verbal reproof is all that is necessary for elementary aged children, especially if the child is committing a particular offense for the first time. Sometimes reproof becomes even more effective if you follow it by sending the child to his or her room to think it over for five minutes. Abstract reasoning about right and wrong is usually not very helpful until the child is ten or eleven because of limitations in thinking ability. However, simple concrete reasoning can sometimes be quite effective at this age. A few kids start reasoning abstractly before age ten, but most do not.

What kind of reasoning is most effective? This tends to vary with the age of the child. Ted Ward (1979) believes that we should use the moral reasoning of the child to help us in discipline. Ward notes that Kohlberg (1985), the well-known researcher in this area, found that young children often talk about obedience and punishment when asked why they make decisions. A bit later they add more positive reasons for doing the right thing, but they are still self-centered and emphasize what they will get out of the situation. They say people should do what is right because they will receive something good and right in return ("I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine").

Since kids naturally begin thinking this way during early childhood, it might be best to use this kind of reasoning in discipline. For example, four- and five-year-olds will understand that they need to obey because they will be punished otherwise. But many six- and seven-year-olds will begin to understand that doing what they should can be rewarding. In addition they can begin to see that if they are nice to others, other people are more likely to be good to them. They can see the logic of Daddy being more likely to play with them if they obey Daddy and let him read the paper without interruption for a few minutes.

Kohlberg found that in the late elementary years, by age nine or ten, children begin to reason morally in a more advanced way. The approval of others becomes more and more important. As a result, if they are developing in a healthy manner, they will appreciate the smile of parents (or friends) more than some specific reward. Of course, if they never get approval from parents this level of reasoning may not develop, or they will only seek approval from their friends. Children want to be seen as "good boys and girls." Later in adolescence, Kohlberg noted that some youngsters come to appreciate respect for authority and doing one's duty. Teenagers better understand the need for law and order.

Kohlberg's research suggests that reasoning with the older school child should emphasize social approval by parents and others. Encouraging them in being a good boy or girl might help reproof be more effective at this age. Children want the approval of others, and we may use that desire to encourage obedience and respect for parental and teacher authority. They can still appreciate rewards and punishments, and these still have a place in discipline, but our reasoning with them needs to also include an appeal to social approval.

Natural Consequences

One other method of discipline might be mentioned, the use of natural consequences (Dreikurs and Grey 1968). Sometimes it is best for children at this age to simply discover the natural results of their misdeeds. For example, not completing homework would result in the child receiving a failing grade. Of course, if they care nothing about grades this will not work. Another example would be that if the child spills something on the floor, he or she must clean up the mess. Sometimes natural consequences are simply the physical results of doing something wrong, and sometimes they would be the logical results of wrong-

doing. Even though it can be difficult, simply allowing natural consequences to follow an act is sometimes better than interrupting natural consequences and adding another kind of punishment.

Typical Problems

Divorce or Separation of Parents

Divorce is one of the most heartbreaking things in American society today, and it is nearly always the result of one or both parents being too selfish or proud to admit that their conflicts can be resolved. If both husband and wife are willing to work at it, many of their worst problems can be taken care of. The idea of having incompatible personalities and "unresolvable differences" is pure nonsense! Any two people with normal intelligence can learn to enjoy life together if they are willing to work on their conflicts. The easy way out is for a couple with marital and psychological conflicts to divorce and remarry. But then there are two couples with conflicts instead of one. Jesus listed adultery as one possible reason for divorce (Matt. 5:32 and 19:9) but he did not encourage divorce even under those circumstances. We should remember the Old Testament prophet Haggai who repeatedly sought the return of his wayward wife.

As noted in the last chapter, divorce is very unsettling for children. Children who have been fatherless for two years or more have many more psychological problems than children with fathers. They often see little hope in life (Kogelschatz, Adams, and Tucker 1972). Father absence due to divorce can also affect the child's identity with his or her gender (Hetherington, Camara, and Feathermore 1983). Usually the effects of divorce are worse than the effects of marital conflicts on the children. In fact, there is evidence that divorce does not stop the hostility between the spouses -- 52 percent continued to have angry interactions after divorce (Cline and Westman 1971). Wallerstein (1982) found that school-aged children were particularly likely to blame themselves for the divorce, and held on to fantasies of the parents getting back together even ten years after the divorce. She also found that these kids had more problems in selecting a marriage partner later on. Divorce not only hurts children, it also hurts the divorcees -- they have more psychological problems than any other group of Americans (Gilder 1974).

All parents have conflicts with one another, but they always have three choices: one that is mature and two that are immature. The mature choice is to resolve the conflicts, even if outside help from a counselor or pastor is required. The two immature choices are to continue to live together unhappily or get a divorce and live apart unhappily. Of the two immature choices, getting a divorce is definitely worse.

Death in the Family

A death in the family, either of a parent, child, or other relative, is a serious problem. But unlike divorce, which is a willful separation, a death in the family -- if handled properly -- can be a maturing experience for everyone involved, even though it is tragic (Anderson 1973, Dennehy 1966, Easson 1972, Hancock 1973, Saunders 1973).

When Paul Meier was a senior in high school, I had my first experience teaching Sunday School. It was a group of eight- and nine-year-old boys. After I taught the class several months, and came to know the boys fairly well, one of them developed a very serious form of cancer. I wept bitterly when I found out about it. The boy had accepted Christ as his Savior, and was a rapidly developing young Christian. His doctors were honest with his parents and the parents were honest with their son, explaining to him the best they knew how he would not have very much longer on this earth. They told him they would miss him a great deal, but Jesus would take care of him in heaven, and they would join him some day soon and spend the rest of eternity with him. Dying children need this kind of reassurance because the greatest fear of death is not knowing what will happen afterward.

He was allowed to grieve over his eventual separation from his parents, but soon brightened up and accepted it. I visited him frequently in the hospital. After his leg was amputated, he became the favorite of many of the doctors and nurses. He witnessed to them regularly, telling them about Jesus and his love, and how he was looking forward to living with Jesus. He had an obvious impact on the lives of those doctors and nurses. He had a powerful influence upon my life as well. When he died, we all grieved, but as a result of his testimony his father finally accepted Christ and became a strong Christian in the church. His older

brother, a teenager, also accepted Christ. Perhaps this illustrates how "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28), even in the middle of tragedy.

Children understand death differently at different ages. Until they are five years old most children believe that death is temporary. As a result they may continually ask when they will see grandpa again after he has died. Grief with young children tends to be brief and usually more the result of imitating others than anything else (Tamminen et. al. 1988). School-aged children, in contrast, come to realize that death is permanent in this life, and their understanding of death is much more like that of an adult (Vianello, Tamminen and Ratcliff 1992). Dying children often have a more mature understanding of death than do other children.

Children, like adults, usually go through several steps during their grieving (Kubler-Ross 1969). They don't always go through these steps in this sequence, and often people will go through some of the steps several times. Often when people first hear about the death of a loved one, they deny it. They simply do not believe it has happened. Once convinced that it is true, they often become angry -- at God, at the doctor, at the person who died, or at someone else. Kulber-Ross also noted that dying people may try to bargain their way out by promising things to God in exchange for a longer life. Depression is also common among dying people as well as those who are bereaved.

The child who does not comprehend death may become bitter at the dying or dead parent because he or she may believe the parent chose to die and leave the child. Guilt is often a part of the grieving process, which is anger turned towards the self. Children may blame themselves for the death of the family member, or feel that they did not treat the person right while alive, or even blame themselves for not saying goodbye before the death. Grief not only involves these steps --denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and guilt-- but also a remembering of many of the times spent with the deceased family member or friend, often accompanied by tears.

It is important for the child (or adult) to express grief openly, and not hold in feelings by pretending nothing is wrong. Unexpressed grief can lead to depression and other psychological problems that can last for many years. We have seen a number of psychological problems resolved by allowing the person to grieve over the loss of a loved one that died many years earlier. How much healthier it would be for them to have grieved in the first place! Two or three weeks of open grieving helps the healthy child go through the stages described by Kubler-Ross and therefore feel better toward God, self, the deceased loved one, and the rest of the family. Several months of sadness and less extreme grief are to be expected, but if serious grief lasts more than a year or two professional counseling is called for. The important thing in grieving, either for children or adults, is that one be honest about it with everyone. All involved should be allowed to grieve and certainly the dying child should be allowed to grieve. Holding back the tears is not bravery, it is a serious mistake.

Childhood Depression

If a child is seriously depressed, he or she will often become very withdrawn and frequently tearful over a period of several weeks. However, sometimes children show depression by irritability, becoming hard to get along with, or acting out aggressively. When a child has a sudden change of behavior, try to get to the root of the problem and find out what is bothering the youngster. Something needs to be done about it. The child may need to see a child psychologist or psychiatrist for several sessions, and sometimes medication is required.

Grandparents in the Home

We recommend that in general it is not a good idea for your parents to live in the home on a permanent basis, whether you have children or not. It is hard enough to keep normal marital conflicts resolved without having someone there to hear the arguments or even enter into them. This also goes for brothers, sisters, or other boarders. If you are married, it is best for you to live by yourselves with your children, even though one may be tempted to help out other family members. This is even more important if you have children -- adding relatives and outsiders is a real disservice to your kids. The children and your spouse need your

undivided attention. The best thing a newly married couple can do for the sake of their marriage is make the break from both sets of parents.

When Don and Brenda Ratcliff were first married, they became missionaries in the West Indies. We had little money for telephone calls, so we could not even talk to our parents for several months. Today we are thankful that we were so separated for those first few months -- we learned to resolve our conflicts instead of running to a mother or father for help. We are convinced that our marriage is stronger today because we separated ourselves at the beginning of our marriage. The Bible clearly states that we are to leave the parents and be united with the spouse (Gen. 2:24, a verse repeated many times in the Bible).

Later on, when you have children, we think it's fine to live within driving range of the grandparents. Children can have a very special relationship with grandparents that are emotionally healthy. Often they will identify most strongly with the grandparent of the same sex. If they are invalids, it may be permissible to live next door to one's parents, but even then it is crucial to maintain some distance.

The grandparents, too, are better off living in their own home or apartment. Sometimes they benefit from living in a retirement facility, with other older people with whom they can relate. As Christians, it is our responsibility to see that our elderly parents are taken care of when they can no longer do it themselves. In fact, this can be a real opportunity for our children to watch us take care of our parents, teaching them to do the same for us when we are too old to take care of ourselves. We must see to it that our aging parents are cared for (I Tim. 5:8), but this does not mean they should move in with you. If there is no other option, they should live in a basement or a separate section of the house, but preferably they should at least be next door. We have seen many families have parents move in and then regret that decision. It's hard to back out once that decision is made.

Rearing Children in Other Countries

There are different points of view on this topic, but we believe it needs to be addressed seriously. If parents are called by God to go to a foreign mission field, they should go. But they need to be sure they are called. A need does not constitute a call; there are needs everywhere. Increasingly it is being found that the most effective way to reach people overseas is through Christians of the particular country involved. Those who believe they are called to reach people of other cultures might also consider missionary work in the United States, "across town and down the street" with those who live in the inner city or immigrants who have never heard about Christ. All of us are called to be missionaries in some capacity, if only with our friends at work (see Matt. 28:19-20).

If you believe God has called you to live overseas, either as a missionary or "tentmaker," it is doubly important to be sure of your calling if you have children. Children who grow up in foreign countries have extra problems to face in addition to the normal ones. Many of these extra problems can be minimized by anticipating them ahead of time and discussing them openly. Special problems faced by missionary children include (Werkman 1972):

1. unusual child-rearing practices and customs
2. problems with the children's caretakers
3. unusual sexuality within the culture
4. special fears
5. a sense of alienation

Of course there are also advantages in being reared overseas, such as children learning a second language and understanding other cultures better (Sharp 1985). MK's (missionary kids) are also more likely to be influenced by their parents' values, at least if they are kept at home.

Often those who live in other cultures seek out special boarding schools in which to place their children. This may involve sending elementary-aged children hundreds of miles away from parents for months at a time. We may be wrong, but in light of scriptural commands to care for our families (both physically and emotionally) we really cannot see how it could be God's will to leave kids in a boarding school. We have friends who disagree with us, and sometimes such children grow up to be normal, but we have counseled many people whose missionary parents "farmed them out" to boarding schools. They often suffer severely as a result of this separation from their parents. Don Ratcliff attended college with one such person who

became a devout atheist because of what he saw as parental rejection (Paul Meier has seen this happen as well).

One woman in her twenties underwent counseling because of a traumatic boarding school experience. Her parents had ministered in a dangerous area and the mission board required her to attend boarding school as a precaution. When her parents said goodbye, she sobbed uncontrollably, fearful she might never see them again. An insensitive dorm parent told her, "your crying makes it harder for your parents to obey the Lord." Her parents eventually left missionary work because of the pain of leaving their kids. What a shame that good missionaries were lost because of an unwise mission board decision. And how tragic that this young woman still suffered from that decision. There is simply no justification for inflicting such emotional scars!

A part of the problem is that too many boarding schools have uncaring or abusive houseparents (Powell 1988). But, as we saw in earlier chapters, psychological problems often result from parent-child separation especially during the elementary years (see Ratcliff 1992b, 131-33 for summary of the specific problems with sending children to boarding schools). Children need real parents, not parent substitutes. Our children are our first calling from God, no matter what occupation God may call us into. If God called us to go to some foreign mission field, we would definitely go, but we would choose a mission board and a mission field where we would not have to send elementary aged children to a distant boarding school. There are plenty of other alternatives that allow kids to stay at home, including home schooling, national schools, correspondence courses, computerized learning, videotaped instruction, traveling teachers, and satellite instruction. Don Ratcliff participated in "pooled instruction" when he was on the mission field -- all the missionaries took turns teaching the children at our mission, each teaching the topics we understood best (we found that everything could be covered in two to three hours of tutoring a day). As mentioned earlier, you may even want to forego schooling until the child is seven or eight. The family has to be our first and utmost calling from God.

Handicapped Children

Having a handicapped child is usually a very difficult thing for parents. These parents generally face several special problems because of the child's handicap (Robinson and Robinson 1976; also see Ratcliff 1990 for a detailed summary of parents' reactions). First there are the special arrangements for training and care that must be made for the child. Second is the need for parents to adjust their expectations of the child to a more realistic level. Third, families with handicapped children often must explain to others over and over what the problems are. Sometimes they are not asked to attend church outings and other events, or the child may be made to feel unwelcome. Sometimes children may lack self-control, although this is often the result of poor discipline being used. As noted in the last chapter, handicapped children frequently become overdependent, passive, and somewhat withdrawn. Parents may even unconsciously reward the child for being weak. Finances are often a problem in families with a handicapped child, because of extra medical and transportation expenses. These families may also stop developing because they are "stuck" in the child-rearing stage for a longer than usual time. Because of these and other problems, family members may become bitter and envious that they are not like "normal" families. Sometimes this is indirectly expressed through child neglect or abuse.

Parents should not deny the reality of the child's handicap, but they should make every effort to encourage their handicapped child's independence. He or she does not need their pity. What is needed is their genuine love and trust in the ability to overcome or cope with the handicap, and the opportunity and encouragement to become responsible. Even retarded children can be helped to grow spiritually if given special training in church (Ratcliff 1985b). As noted earlier, elementary school children are very blunt and tease one another a lot about the smallest flaws, so the handicapped child is especially likely to face such assaults. Parents and teachers should do their best to help other children see how this hurts feelings, but keeping the handicapped child away from others will only make matters worse.

We can take heart in the fact that sometimes a handicap will strengthen a person beyond what would be attained without the handicap. God gave the Apostle Paul a handicap so Paul's pride would not hold him back from accomplishing great things for the Lord (II Cor. 12:7). John Milton wrote his best poetry after

going blind. Paul Meier knows a farm boy from a small southern town who made average grades in elementary school until he was afflicted with a handicap. That handicap gave him a real determination to prove himself and succeed in life. He became the valedictorian of his high school class, attained nearly straight A's in college, and has become an extraordinarily dedicated Christian doctor. He probably never would have achieved what he has without that handicap. Instead of pitying your handicapped child, try to figure out how God can use the handicap as a blessing to produce greatness.

School Phobias

A school-phobic child is afraid to go to school and stay there all day. This problem can develop for several different reasons. Sometimes it is because the child cannot bear to be away from the mother that long. These children are overly dependent on their mothers, who never allow them to exercise much independence prior to entering school They are often the youngest of several children, which adds to the temptation to spoil them and to resist their growing up and leaving (Berg, Butter, and McGuire 1972). These children become quite manipulative, since their mothers usually let them have their own way and give them very little discipline. If this is the reason for school phobia, parents should refuse to allow them to stay home under any circumstances, even if they play sick. And the mother should not go to school with them, as many of these mothers do. If the child runs away from school and comes home, give him or her a spanking and take the youngster back to school immediately. This may have to be repeated a number of times before the will is broken. Both parents need to sit down and re-examine their roles as parents, deciding how they can discipline and love the child in a healthier way so independence and respect will develop.

Sometimes, however, there can be other reasons for school phobia that require a very different approach to the problem. Sometimes the child may simply not be used to being around other children. You may remember the example of this in chapter three where the child had never been exposed to other children. Kids need to learn some basic social skills before they can cope with a room full of children.

Occasionally children become school phobic because they have learned to fear others. If your child has had several terrifying or painful experiences in group situations, and as a result cannot tolerate being in groups of children, he or she may need special therapy to overcome the fears. On the other hand, sometimes they can get over their fears by simply being around other children that do not attack or hurt them. Sometimes it helps to begin with only a few "safe" children, and then exposing them to larger and larger groups of kids. It may also help to reward them in some way for playing with others, but be careful not to reward the fear itself. Sometimes, in this situation, a parent going to school with the child a few times is a good idea, as long as this does not encourage overdependence.

Finally, immaturity may be the cause of school phobia. The obvious answer in this situation is to keep them out of school for awhile, until they are mature enough to cope. Home schooling may be the best alternative for such kids. Usually these children are also a bit behind in their pre-reading skills (see the previous section on mental development).

In sum, school phobia can have several different causes. The important thing is to locate the specific cause in your child because that will determine the best method of overcoming that fear.

Wetting and Soiling the Bed

About twelve percent of older preschoolers, ten percent of first graders, and seven percent of seven-year-olds still wet their beds (Freedman and Kaplan 1967, 1380-84). Bedwetting at this age is usually due to either a small bladder or psychological conflicts. About ninety percent of bedwetting after age six is considered to be a psychological rather than a physical problem. For example the child may have pent-up anger at the parent because the child has been encouraged to be overly dependent. On the other hand, if a doctor finds that the bladder is too small, it may be necessary to have the child hold his urine for longer and longer periods of time (up to several hours) to stretch the bladder. If the bladder is normal, it would be wise to evaluate whether you are doing things for the child that he or she could do without your help. For example, by this age the child should be able to dress and cut foods without help.

Whatever you do, do not shame a child for wetting the bed. Usually it does not happen on purpose. Don't become overly concerned about it. Just calmly have the child clean up the bed and change the sheets. But be sure the child does it, even if you think a small bladder is the problem. Children are less likely to feel so guilty if they clean up the mess themselves. In addition, if they unconsciously did it to get the parent upset, cleaning up the mess takes all the fun out of it so probably they will quit. Medications are also available which usually stop bedwetting but drugs should only be used as a last resort. See a child psychiatrist if you think medication is needed. The family might also benefit from insight provided by the psychiatrist as well.

Occasional soiling is common among preschoolers, but if it continues after age five or so this is considered more serious than occasional bedwetting. Soiling is more likely when the child's parents are divorced or when the father is gone almost all the time (Bemporad, et. al. 1971). Overprotective, critical parents that were overly concerned about toilet training in the toddler years are also more likely to have children with this problem. Again psychiatric medication and family counseling are recommended. Sometimes pediatricians are also equipped to work with soiling and bedwetting problems.

Paul Meier recalls treating one ten-year-old boy who had a divorced, mentally ill mother who was cold and rejected the boy. She would wrap up his stools to show the doctor. She had delusions about their being as large as horse manure and that they would plug up her sewer system. When the boy was hospitalized, he adjusted fairly well with only one "accident" when he was not allowed to have his way. When the suggestion was made that he might do better at a Christian home for boys, the mother pretended she didn't want to lose him but was obviously happy to get him out of the house. He was accepted and loved at the new home and emotionally matured a great deal. The mother was treated with medication and given counseling so that she and her son could live together a year or two later with a healthier home life.

Thumb-Sucking and Tics

About twenty percent of first graders continue to suck their thumbs (Freedman and Kaplan 1969, 1380-84). Thumb-sucking in older children usually is considered to be a sign of anxiety and a possible sign that the child and parents may need some counseling.

Children with perfectionistic parents sometimes develop nervous tics, such as repeated eye squints, constant clearing of the throat, head jerking, and other habits. These problems indicate a need for family counseling and possibly medication for the child.

Hyperactivity

Nine out of ten children thought to be hyperactive are boys. However, a lot of children people think are hyperactive really are not -- they simply have a high normal level of activity. The difficulty is that formal schooling in the United States requires children to be quiet and inactive, which is simply impossible for these active children. Boys are far more likely to have a high activity level because they have a higher androgen (a hormone) level than girls.

Paul Meier has evaluated and treated a large number of hyperactive children. During the evaluation I ask the parents quite a few questions about the kind of discipline they provide. Sometimes one or both parents are simply unwilling to give the child a good healthy spanking when he or she gets out of hand. Sometimes the mother selfishly wants the child to like her and therefore will not spank, even though she knows that would be for the best. In effect the child has no real limits. But children cannot stand to be without rules and limits. As a result such children will constantly misbehave and run around in order to get limits set. When parents set and enforce the rules with good discipline, most children quit testing the limits because they have the security of knowing what they are expected to do. They realize their parents care.

In contrast with these children, about ten to twenty percent of overly active children in Paul Meier's practice qualify as genuinely hyperactive. They usually have some minor problems in the functioning of the nervous system. Intelligence is often normal or above normal, but they tend to be a bit clumsy in fine movements of the fingers. They may reverse their letters when they write and have other indications of being a "late bloomer" (see the section on mental development). Their nerves are not as well developed as other children. Again, this lack of nerve development is more common in boys because girls tend to be a bit

ahead of the boys in this area. These children often have learning difficulties because they simply cannot concentrate. By the time they are teenagers most of these kids will have a normal activity level, but in the meantime they are often misunderstood and labeled as having a behavior problem, being learning disabled, or even retarded. They generally develop such a poor self-concept that they have life-long problems that are almost impossible to remove.

Fortunately, modern medicine can help most of these genuinely hyperactive children. Over ninety percent improve dramatically when given a low dosage of Ritalin. Paul Meier has seen many of them run around my office, spin around in the chair, and even climb the drapes, but within fifteen or twenty minutes after taking the medication they are sitting in a chair calmly answering questions. At home they begin to concentrate better and at school their grades go up. These kids are a joy to treat because the parents think I am a miracle-worker! Of course it is just the medicine which helps the immature nerves function as if they were mature. Every six months or so these children go on a "drug holiday" where we take them off the medication. When the nervous system becomes mature, the child will be as calm off the medication as on it. I have never seen a child become addicted to Ritalin, nor have I seen any adverse reactions to ending it all at once. There are also some other medications that can help if Ritalin does not do the trick. I have also seen Ritalin calm overly active children that got that way from poor discipline. For several weeks while the child is on medication we provide training in proper discipline for the parents, then take the child off medication as the parents begin using better child-rearing methods. It is recommended that you see a good child psychiatrist if you fear this may be your child's problem.

Homosexuality

In chapter one we considered some of the things that can lead a child into homosexual behavior. Today there is a lot of controversy about what causes this problem. Some researchers believe the brains of homosexuals are different in some way, but most of this research is seriously flawed and cannot be trusted (Knight 1992). Even if there is some physical reason it would only influence people, not cause the behavior. It would be similar to what has been found about alcoholics: there are certain biological influences that make people more likely to be alcoholics, but the individual chooses whether to give in to those influences or not. Likewise, if some biological factor is ever proven in homosexuality, the person still has a choice whether to act upon that abnormal desire. But so far the researchers have not proven that biological influences exist, and probably they never will.

There are a number of childhood experiences that more clearly influence children towards homosexual behavior in later life. For example, as seen in chapter one, an unhealthy mother/son attachment in which the son becomes a little husband to the mother can influence children towards homosexuality, especially when the father is weak or absent. Sometimes mothers try to convince their children that all men are degraded and worthless, which makes boys dislike their own gender.

Sometimes homosexuals report that their first sexual experiences were with boys or men. As a result they learn to be aroused in the presence of members of the same sex. We know that voyeurs ("peeping toms") generally learn to be sexually aroused by looking in windows because as older children or adolescents they try peeping (while they masturbate) just as a lark. However, the link between the arousal and the looking produces the voyeurism -- they have to peep to be aroused. Likewise, the early homosexual experience causes arousal and convinces the youngster that he is strange and different because of that arousal. He or she labels self as homosexual and the self-labeling makes it more likely that it will continue into a lifestyle of homosexual behavior, believing the opposite sex cannot excite them. These people need to realize that they can learn normal heterosexual arousal as well, if they simply give themselves a chance.

It is also common to find that homosexuals were sexually abused in childhood. This abuse can be by either the mother or father (most commonly a stepfather or someone the family knows). If the mother commits the incest, the child becomes repulsed by the mother's actions and therefore avoids close relationships with women in general. If the father or other male sexually abuses the child, the boy may associate the arousal with males and see himself as abnormal and unusual. Sometimes painful or unpleasant experiences with the opposite sex may incline the child towards homosexuality. This sexual problem may also be related to not identifying with the same sex parent. Interestingly, cultures with very distinct roles for

the different sexes and in which every boy has a father or father-substitute have virtually no homosexuality (Blitchington 1980, Rekers 1982, 37-50).

As can be seen, homosexuality can result from many different kinds of experiences. Sometimes it is difficult to find any specific influence. The Bible is clear in its denunciation of homosexuality as a sin (Lev. 18:22, 20:13, Rom. 1:21-32, I Cor. 6:9-10, I Tim. 1:8-10, Jude 6-7). What is most important is that the behavior is the result of choice, and that homosexuals can change (Walen, Hauserman and Lavin 1977). However, it is important to distinguish homosexual temptation and sin -- temptation is not in itself a sin, but dwelling on it or yielding is sinful. In spite of homosexual temptation, people can choose to be heterosexual and practice heterosexual behavior. At the very least, homosexuals can choose to abstain from acting on their sinful desires (Matt. 19:12).

When Paul Meier was in medical school he treated a teenage male who was a Christian but was struggling with strong desires to commit homosexual acts. I found that his
father, also a Christian, spent most of his free time playing with his older son, leaving the younger boy (my patient) home with his mother. When he got to elementary school, he found himself naturally wanting to play with the girls instead of with the boys. When he turned thirteen and entered puberty, he started to have crushes on boys, as did the girls with whom he played, and to imagine homosexual acts with the boys he liked. His older brother turned out normal. The boy I treated began doing things to become more masculine and to change his way of thinking, and would not allow himself to commit homosexual acts or even to dwell on them in his mind. Becoming normal sexually was a realistic possibility for him, but he will always carry around some scars from the poor parenting he received.

Spiritual Development

Michelangelo, the famous sculptor, is reported to have made the statement, "As the marble wastes, the sculpture grows." This statement not only applies to the development of sculpture, but also to the spiritual development of children. We as parents need to chip away at the rough marble we are given, attempting to sculpt our children into Christian adults. Between the sixth and eighteenth birthdays many psychological and spiritual struggles take place, but most of them are totally unnecessary. Effective love and discipline can minimize those struggles, although they certainly will not be eliminated.

Communication is an important aspect of spiritual development in the school years. Good communication, especially with the parent of the same sex, will encourage healthy self-worth, while poor communication can seriously damage it. Communication between parents is also important -- when a husband criticizes his wife, he unknowingly is tearing down the self-worth and self-confidence of daughters that identify with the mother. Likewise, when a wife criticizes her husband, she is also psychologically affecting her sons who identify with the father.

The Conscience and Salvation of Children

During the elementary school years, the conscience continues to grow and the child becomes more self-controlled as he or she imitates the parents. As noted in chapter one, however, the conscience can become overly rigid or remain immature given the wrong kinds of examples or unhealthy child-rearing practices. The conscience of the six-year-old is still much like that of the parents, primarily because he or she acts to gain parental approval and to avoid punishment. By the end of the school years, however, the child increasingly follows the morality of his friends. This need not overly concern parents, however, because if you train the child properly up to that point, he will probably chose friends that will be a positive influence.

The development of the conscience, as well as mental development, makes it possible for children this age to genuinely repent of their sins and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We have led six-year-olds to the Lord, and both of us became Christians by the age of six. There is certainly further spiritual development as children grow older, as their salvation experience takes on new meaning and they learn many of the theological concepts involved. But all a person needs for salvation is expressed in Acts 16:31 -- "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

The Spiritual Lifestyle and Atmosphere of the Family

The total atmosphere of your home needs to be devotional and godly. By this we do not mean that the family must sit in a corner praying all day. Rather, you should love, communicate, and play with your children, showing the fruits of the Spirit in your lives, and have some good Christian music playing from time to time, geared to the age of your children. Good, wholesome secular music also has a place from time to time. Every part of our lives is sacred -- even going to a ball game and eating hot dogs -- because we can show our children godly attitudes and values wherever we are.

Have family devotions together. This is a must. But make it quite brief for school-age children or it will become a torture to endure rather than a happy time of sharing Christ with one another. Bedtime and mealtimes are often convenient for this. Be creative. Use high quality story books about the Bible or that show Christian values at work. Reward your children for memorizing Bible verses, but select verses that are short and understandable to the child.

Paul Meier decided to begin his own daily Bible reading when he was ten years old, and has been doing so ever since. There was no pressure on me from my parents to read my Bible every day, since we had family devotions together regularly. But they had prepared me during the first ten years of my life to such a point that when the Holy Spirit moved me to begin personal devotions, I was willing and eager to obey.

Fathers, take your sons hiking and fishing and discuss godly children in the Bible, like little Samuel. Mothers, go shopping with your daughters and discuss the shopping techniques of the godly woman in Proverbs 31. Date your children, one-to-one, occasionally. Buy something together for someone else in the household or for someone else that is in need. Don't sit around watching television -- that is a poor Christian witness to your children, teaching them that your faith makes little difference in your life. We wonder, too, if perhaps daytime television programs might lead to depression, dissatisfaction with marriage, and undermine Christian values in parents as well as children. Could talk shows and soap operas, which constantly emphasize every sin imaginable, be contributing to mental illness in housewives?

Christian Camps

Christian camps are usually a good influence on the spiritual development of our children. Both of us have worked at Christian camps. We both had marvelous experiences. The philosophy behind good camps is that you should wear the child out all day by letting him or her have some old-fashioned fun, then the child will listen to a brief, but effective gospel message in the evening. It really is effective. Hundreds are saved each summer, and many more rededicate their lives to the Lord. We prefer this type of camp to those in which the children are forced to study the Bible all day and wish they were at home playing baseball.

Your Church Home

We have spoken at length earlier about the right kind of church. There are many churches that are unhealthy for children. Be certain that you attend a good one. Paul Meier once read an article about a man who sued the local church because his son had been terrified by the preacher's assertion that any boy with his hair below the ears was definitely going to hell to burn forever. The boy went forward when the invitation was given and a lady at the front of the church hacked his hair off with scissors. The poor boy as so frightened that his nose bled most of that afternoon. When asked about the incident, the minister replied, "But I didn't start it, the Lord did." It is so easy for people, even pastors, to push their own prejudices on others, and then make it sound like it is all the Lord's doing. The Lord called us to go into all the world and spread the gospel (Mark 16:15), not our personal preferences.

A good church and Sunday School can have an important positive effect on your children. Long ago, Hartshorne and May (1930) found that children who are enrolled in Sunday School are more likely to be honest, cooperative, persistent, and not display other undesirable behavior. Several other recent studies confirm the positive influence of Christian education in healthy churches (Hyde 1990, Tamminen 1991). School children themselves believe Sunday School is important, but they are sometimes disappointed with what they find there (Cook 1989).

The View of God, Prayer, and the Bible

Recent research (Vianello, Tamminen and Ratcliff 1992) indicates that school-aged children often see God as being more like Superman than divinity. This is probably because of the child's mental limitations -- he or she simply cannot imagine God as being fundamentally more than human. Until about age twelve most children see God as bigger and better than people in general, but not basically different from human. Sometimes kids understand that he is invisible, or perhaps like a giant or magician. Most school-aged children understand that he created the world (we wish more scientists would understand that). The fact that God knows everything tends to surface at about six or seven, the omnipotent (all powerful) aspect of God usually is understood by age eight, but the fact that God is everywhere may not be understood until about eleven or twelve.

Children during the school years often believe prayer to be a means of God serving them, giving them their wishes. The idea that prayer is devotional and a way of hearing from God is simply beyond them. School-aged children can understand the reality of miracles, that God can and does directly intervene in our world, but they are usually self-centered in this belief, thinking he acts because they prayed a certain way. These ideas may be left behind by nine or ten, however, as they develop a more mature understanding of prayer.

School-aged children usually have little question about the Bible being true, and some seven- and eight-year-olds even believe God wrote it and dropped it out of the sky! But by the teen years they can begin to understand that a number of people wrote the scriptures, guided to avoid error in their writing by the Holy Spirit. Most school-aged children take everything in the Bible literally, so you may want to avoid teaching them verses like "If your right eye cause you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29)! But the advantage of their literalness is that these kids will tend to believe whatever you tell them about God. Just make sure you don't tell them things they are likely to doubt later on, such as "grandma flies around in heaven with big, shiny wings."

As can be seen, the child's limited reasoning and understanding at this age can have some advantages. They are unlikely to be doubters, questioning what you tell them about God. But they simply cannot understand some of the abstract things in the Bible and their prayers will tend to be immature and self-centered. What we can do is teach them things they can understand and be good examples of what we want them to become. For example, we can encourage them to pray for others and show them how to pray in a less selfish manner by our example. But our prayers in front of children should generally be short and understandable to the child, and we should talk with them about the spiritual and moral aspects of things in the midst of our everyday living.

A Final Challenge

A basic idea we have tried to present throughout this book is that parents need to work hard and do their best at child-rearing. In a sense Christian parents are in competition with the world to produce children who become the very best in emotional and spiritual maturity. As the Apostle Paul once said, "Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air" (I Cor. 9: 24-26).

The analogy is clear: we must do our best to get the prize. The prize Paul speaks of is spending eternity in heaven. In parenting, the "crown that will last forever," also reflects the eternal destination of our children. Taking the parallel further, we must have instruction ("training") and definite goals ("not . . . running aimlessly . . . beating the air") to complete the task of parenting. Our task is to nudge our kids in the right direction, so they will find living for Christ to be the most logical and natural way of life.

That is not to say we can ever make the decision for them. Every person ultimately must make his or her own decision for or against Christ, and be held responsible for that decision. Perhaps we sometimes give too much blame (and credit) to parents (Myers and Jeeves 1987, 36-40). No one can blame sin on his or her parents; sin is an act of the will. No one can blame parents for not accepting Christ. But, on the other hand, we as parents need to give our children a positive taste for the things of God, and to encourage them in making the right decisions. What they do with the best parenting we can give them is up to them.

We have all heard the Proverb:

"Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not turn from it"
(Prov. 22:6)

James Dobson (1987, 184-6) has commented that this is not a promise, but -- like most proverbs -- a statement of what is most likely to result. For example, other proverbs state "diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4) and "many advisors make victory sure" (11:14). But we can think of exceptions to these and many other proverbs. Proverbs are brilliant statements of trends in human behavior, general rules that God inspired the writers to record, but not unfailing promises. Likewise, in Proverbs 22:6 God is telling us that if we do our best at parenting, we are more likely to have children that will not turn from the faith. But that is no guarantee -- even God, the finest parent possible, has wayward children (Hosea ll:1-5)! We're in good company if we have struggles with child-rearing!

Mistakes in Parenting

No one has perfect parents. We will not be perfect parents. We have, unfortunately, made our share of mistakes. So, if you feel you have made a lot of blunders in childrearing, well, welcome to the human race! But there is no use in dwelling on the past. Let's pick up the pieces where we are now, and develop ourselves into the very best parents our children can possibly have. Children can tolerate many parental mistakes, but the fewer we make the better for our children emotionally and spiritually. We cause psychological and spiritual handicaps in our children when we consistently refuse to cooperate with God's plan and principles. We can take heart that the general pattern of child-rearing is more important than occasional errors (Kagan 1979).

We encourage you to confess your past mistakes to God, remembering his promise that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). Forgive yourself for past mistakes and move on from there with the attitude that the Apostle Paul had when he wrote, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect . . . But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal . . ." (Phil. 3:12-14). May God reward you richly for turning from the selfish ambitions of this world and totally committing yourself to God's highest calling -- being a wise, strong, loving, and godly Christian parent.

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