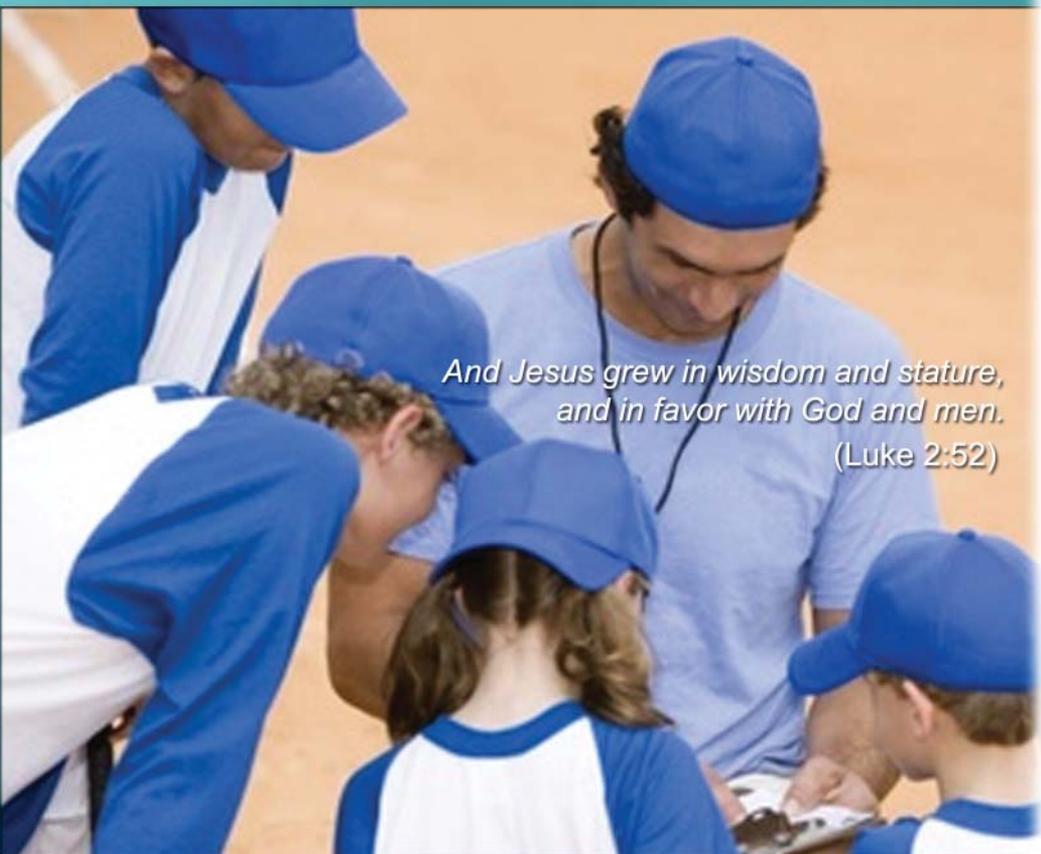


# COACHING OUR CHILDREN

HOW TO HAVE EFFECTIVE FAMILY  
DEVOTIONS FOR ALL STAGES OF FAMILY LIFE



*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature,  
and in favor with God and men.  
(Luke 2:52)*

PASTOR KEITH MISSEL

# **“Coaching Our Children”**

*Deuteronomy 6:1-9*

**How to Have Effective Family Devotions  
for all Stages of Family Life**

**Pastor Keith Missel**

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## ***Children's Spiritual Development***

God has given the Christian parents an incredible opportunity and responsibility, the spiritual development of their children. Around 390 B.C. Socrates wrote these words about the Athenian society; "Could I climb the highest place in Athens, I would lift up my voice and proclaim, 'Fellow citizens, why do you scrape and burn every stone to gather wealth, and take so little care of your children to whom you must one day relinquish all?'" (*Honey for a Child's Heart*, p. 103) If Socrates were living today, I think his rebuke of the American society, even the Christian community, would be quite similar.

What does it mean then to care for the children? How can we as a society, as families, raise children who fulfill the great commandment, "*to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind*"...and "*love your neighbor as yourself*?" (Matthew 22:37-39) I believe the answer is found in Proverbs 22:6 which exhorts parents to "train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." The Hebrew word for train is Hanak, which supports the idea of initiating or dedicating, someone or something. Our challenge then is to initiate training in our children's lives. But what kind of training are we talking about? That is what this paper is all about. I personally believe that the training of children is the primary

responsibility of parents. Some might like to pass the buck and think that the educational institution will be adequate. But according to Ronald Nash, in *The Closing of the American Heart*, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people.” (p. 19) The separation of church and state no longer allows spiritual input into the lives of our children in school. Neither can we leave the task to the Christian schools or the church, for at best, both are called to support not replace that which is to take place in the home. With this in mind, we must as Christians turn our training toward the home. I believe one of the most effective ways that we as a family can raise our children to the glory of God is to incorporate family devotions as a normal practice in our home.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 supports this idea and gives sound advice to parents as to the content and manner of family devotions. **We read:** *Hear O’ Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.*

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## **Vital Devotion**

According to the Lord, the first thing that is vital for family devotions is that parents are walking with God. The Lord challenged mom and dad first, to have His commandments on their hearts. Before effective family devotions could ever take place, parents must have a vibrant devotional life themselves. Initiating spiritual truth in a child’s life could never take place unless the parent or parents are walking

with the Lord. Once parents have personally laid the foundation for spiritual growth, they in turn can impress these spiritual truths upon their children.

Another exciting concept to glean from this passage is the freedom and flexibility in form for effective family devotions. The Lord instructs his people to view the training of the child holistically. When you “sit at home” teach your children. As you “walk along the road” instruct them in the ways of the Lord. As you “lie down” and when you “get up” build into them the love and fear of God. Family devotions are all encompassing and include every aspect of life. With this great challenge in mind, for the remainder of this paper, I would like to focus our attention on the stages of a child’s development. I will also offer suggestions for family devotions during these stages.

1. **Preschool (ages 1-4)** Someone has said; “give us a child until he is five years old, and his character will be formed forever.” (*The Bible in Pictures For Little Eyes*, p. 5) It is vital that Bible training and spiritual truth are taught to children at the earliest possible age. Little minds have the ability to grasp spiritual truths that sometimes even the great sages cannot comprehend. Jesus said; “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14-15)

The question that needs to be answered is; how does one conduct family devotions with preschool children? I believe the answer includes two primary concepts: regularity and creativity. In her article “Family Devotions,” Denise Williamson suggests that “children between the ages of 2 and 4 learn by smelling, tasting, touching and feeling-and using all of these senses makes devotions fun.” (*Focus On The Family*, March 1987, p. 5) Some suggestions for regular devotions in the home might include reading from a children’s picture Bible, singing a lively song and praying a short prayer. Some creative devotional ideas include: hiding a treasure chest for the children to find and talking about biblical treasures; working with Sunday School

take home papers and even watching a children's Christian video together. The need for creativity with preschool children is vital. Don't let your family devotional times get dull, routine, or boring. Stimulate the children's interest by being as creative as possible.

**Some important aspects to keep in mind when having devotions with preschool children include the following:**

- a. "It is important that devotions be associated with positive, happy feelings." (Ibid) Try not to make discipline the major focus of the time together. Children will be fidgety, give them some room to adjust to the family time together.
- b. "Spontaneity is also an important factor in instructing preschoolers. Experts say that children constantly mix secular and sacred thoughts." (Ibid) A child, during a Bible story, might ask if or why God made the mosquitoes. You might think this is a distraction from your original text or purpose but be encouraged to capitalize on the "teachable moment."
- c. When reading to children, purpose to make the environment as free from distractions as possible. Listening to someone read is an art that takes time to develop. When reading, read slowly and watch for the child's attentiveness.
- d. According to James Dobson "the one key word for family devotions is brevity." Unless something unique is happening during the devotional time a good rule of thumb would be 5-10 minutes together. (*Straight Talk To Men and Their Wives*, p. 76)

**Some resources to use for preschool family devotions include:**

- a. *Leading Little One's To God*, by Marian M. Schoolland. Each lesson includes a short story, some questions for discussion, a Bible verse to be read, a hymn to be sung and a suggested prayer.
- b. *Precious Moments Stories from the Bible* by Samuel J. Butcher. This book was designed to teach children thematic truths from the Scriptures about salvation, God and Satan and godly living until Jesus comes again.

- c. *Little Ones Listen to God* by Hook and Boren. Each story is limited to one page and includes scriptural reference, background information and “chatter” questions to discuss what was read.
- d. *The Picture Bible* by David C. Cook. This Bible is filled with pictures and text that can either be read by or to the child.
- e. *The Bible in Pictures for Little Eyes* by Kenneth Taylor. This book was designed to be read to children ages 3 1/2 to 6 years old. Kenneth Taylor is the one who paraphrased the Living Bible and is a master at telling Bible Stories.

2. Elementary (ages 5-10)-In his book, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions*, James Dobson states: “I believe the fifth year of a child’s life is most critical. Up to that time he believes in God because his parents tell him it is the thing to do. At about five or six years of age he comes to a fork in the road: either he begins to reach out and accept the concept as his own, or he does not. At that point, he may buy it and put his feet down onto a more solid foundation---or he may start to doubt it, laying the basis for rejection.” (p. 43)

Because of this, Dr. Dobson suggests that our most diligent efforts be given during these crucial years to spiritual training in the home. Personally, I think this is the time to get a child involved in the family devotional time. A transition should be made from reading to or teaching the child what the Bible says, to learning together about things of the Lord. If a child senses he or she has something to contribute to the devotional time together, the child will be more inclined to be excited for the time together.

Dean and Grace Merrill have written an outstanding book called *Together At Home*. The purpose for writing this book was to give tried and tested devotional times during this period of the children’s development. The conclusion of their book included what they believe are the “Seven Keys to a Successful Family Night.” I believe that if the average Christian family follows this pattern for these crucial years, they will experience greater success.

### **The Seven Keys include the following:**

- a. "Mix it up." Always look for ways to be different, purposing at all times to keep it enjoyable.
- b. "Decide what version of the Bible to use, and make sure everyone has his or her own copy." *The New International Children's Version* (Sweet) is a more simple translation written at a third grade level.
- c. "Let the children take the lead as soon as possible." Children have a lot to offer, giving them the platform shows them they are important and have something to contribute to the Lord.
- d. "Keep varying the locations." This will stimulate creativity and enjoyment.
- e. "Never stop scavenging ideas." Regardless how creative you might be, without shared resources you will run out of ideas.
- f. Don't let illness or fatigue stop you." All things in the family don't have to be rosy to have family devotions. Sometimes the best devotional times will be when times are rough.
- g. "Enhance the family night with symbols." Symbols become things we can count on, like a theme song for the time together. (pp. 187-191)

### **Some resources to use for elementary age devotions include:**

- a. *Together At Home* by Dean and Grace Merrill.
- b. *Honey for a Child's Heart* by Gladys Hunt.
- c. *Building Happy Memories and Family Traditions* by Verna Birkley and Jeanette Turnquist.
- d. *Little Pilgrim's Progress* by Helen L. Taylor, from John Bunyan's classic work.
- e. *The Smoke of a Thousand Villages* by David and Naomi Shibley.
- f. *The New International Children's Version of the Bible*.

3. Pre adolescent (ages 11-13) Although I believe a lot of what I have already written about family devotions applies to this stage of a child's development, I do believe there are some distinctions. The first thing I believe is important to realize, is that it is time now for children to consistently be having their own devotional time. If a child does, it will be more natural for the child to come together with the family and share what the Lord has been teaching them.

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## ***Addressing Life Issues***

Another thing I see changing are the life issues that the child is now addressing. Publications like *Youth Walk* from Walk Through The Bible can have a great impact on a child during this stage. I do believe it is time too, for the parents to invest in a study Bible for the child. This will help the child take the next step in their devotional time, by thinking a little deeper about scriptural truth and its application. Although Bible memory is something that is started early on in a child's life, I think challenging the child to a greater depth of Bible memory will be welcomed. The Bible Memory Association is a good resource for a Bible memory system. The junior high years are very moldable years and through thoughtful family devotions God can continue the process of molding a child into the image of his Son.

### **Some resources for pre adolescent devotionals include:**

- a. *Youth Walk* by Walk Through The Bible.
- b. New International Version Study Bible.
- c. Serendipity studies for junior high students.
- d. *Putting God First, Making Life Count and Living Your Life... As God Intended* by Jim Burns.
- e. *Moving Toward Maturity* series by Barry St. Clair.
- f. *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis.

**4. Adolescent (ages 14-18)** Because this is an age where teens progressively seek independence from their parents, much wisdom is needed when it comes to the area of family devotions. I was a youth pastor for a number of years in a relatively large church and I would have to say the majority of our senior high families did not have family devotions together. It is difficult to know precisely what is best for this age group, but one thing I would like to encourage that supports the whole idea of a teens devotional life, is a discipleship relationship with another adult in the church.

Sam George was a senior in high school when he challenged me in our discipleship relationship to read through the Bible in a year. We began in September and at the time of writing this paper we were on track. When we got together, Sam and I shared highlights of what God had been teaching us throughout the week in our devotional reading. If I were Sam's parents, I might capitalize on his initiative and have Sam lead a family devotional every now and then, based on his own personal devotions and discipleship.

There are a few guidelines that parents should keep in mind if they continue to have family devotions with their teenagers.

**They include:**

1. Don't preach at your kids. This will turn them off quicker than a boring sermon on Sunday morning.
2. Encourage their participation. Have them lead. Teach them that they are "priests" unto the Lord and are called to minister.
3. Do topical studies together, that relate to teen issues including: friendships, dating, God's will, the future, etc..
4. Pray with them about their needs, hurts and concerns.
5. Encourage them for a discipleship relationship with other adults.
6. Be flexible with their schedules. They are trying to juggle school, sports, friends, work, church, ministry, personal relationship with God, etc.

7. Love on them continually and unconditionally.

**Some resources for adolescent devotions include:**

- a. *So You Want Solutions, So You Want To Get Into The Race and So You Want To Set The Pace* by Chuck Klein.
- b. *Alive* volumes 1 & 2, Campus Life Books.
- c. Serendipity Bible book studies.
- d. Navigators 2:7 series.
- e. *Family Walk* by Walk Through the Bible.
- f. *Under Siege* by Josh McDowell and Chuck Klein.
- g. *13 Things You Gotta Know* by Josh McDowell and Bob Hosteller.
- h. *This Present Darkness* by Frank Peretti or the *Left Behind* series by Tim LeHay.

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## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to offer a gauge as to measure whether or not one's family devotions are being effective and accomplishing its goal. In his book *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*, Dr. Dobson has suggested a "Checklist for Spiritual Training" for parents to follow. He challenges parents to take seriously the task of "systematic religious training." The five areas of development, which Dr. Dobson believes should be a gauge for child rearing include: to "love the Lord thy God" (Mark 12:30), to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:31), to "do thy will, for Thou art my God" (Psalm 143:10), to "fear God and keep his commandments" (Eccles. 12:13) and to bear the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). (pp. 74-75)

Regardless of the child's age, family devotions won't come easy and will cost parents something. Much time, energy, creativity, and vulnerability are needed to pull off the spiritual development of one's

child but the dividends are worth it, for they are eternal. My prayer is that God would challenge my wife and I and many other Christian parents to accept the great opportunity he has given us “to train up a child in the way he should go.”

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## ***Additional Resources***

1. *Family Time, A Revolutionary Old Idea* by Grady Nutt-Million Dollar Round Table
2. *Contemporary Object Lessons for Children* by Lois Edstrom-Baker House
3. *Little Visits with God* by Allan Hart Jahsmann & Martin P. Simon-Concordia Pub. House
4. *Everybody Can Know* by Francis & Edith Schaeffer-Tyndale House
5. *Making the Most of Your Child's Teachable Moments* by Wanda Pelfrey-Focus on the Family
6. *The Christian Kids Almanac* by Robert G. Flood-David C. Cook
7. *Christian Family Activities* by Wayne Rickerson-Standard Publishing
8. *The Magnificent Machine* by William L. Coleman by Bethany House Publishing
9. *On Your Mark* by William L. Coleman-Bethany House Publishing
10. *The Effective Father* by Gordan MacDonald
11. *Boundaries With Kids* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
12. *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp
13. *Effective Parenting in a Defective World* by Chip Ingram
14. *The Parent You Want to Be* by Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott



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