

The Peril of Putting Your Kids First

-by Jeff Rockwell, OCHEC vice-president

(Editor's note: The following subject matter may be considered controversial regarding parenting styles. The intent is not to offend, but rather to bring to light the ineffectiveness of a particular style).

It is a well-known reality that parents who home educate their children commit deeply to the process. Effective instruction at home requires much time, energy and dedication, not to mention money. Those who accept the challenge of developing their child's mind, body and spirit apart from organized public or private institutions must pour themselves into the task without reservation. The intent of such an investment is surely to benefit the child. However, it is possible that the very intensity of the focus of assets and energy could work to the child's detriment. The peril lies not so much in the practice of education as in the parental perspective on the child.

Many modern parents (Christians included) have fallen unwittingly into the trap of child-centred family life. Home educating families can be particularly susceptible to this malady because of the constant absorption of both parents in the needs of their children. The irony lies in the fact that it is the potent resolution to help children, which may place them dangerously at the centre of family life. Parents who build their world around the nurture and training of their children are child-centred. A family that is child-centred is a family in which children cannot achieve their God-given potential. Because of their sin natures, children are very receptive to the idea that the world should be brought to them on a silver platter. If this mentality is permitted to grow and take root, the child will never grasp the essence of his humanity in God's design. Rather than equipping our children to love God and others, child-centred parenting feeds the selfish pride that lies at the heart of every human failure. Most everyone has witnessed the sad spectacle of a child who is the final authority in his own eyes. Disrespectful, demanding and petulant, he moves through life neither giving nor receiving the joy he was made to know. The tragedy is that this occurs even within the ranks of those who have consecrated themselves to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

What does child-centred parenting look like? In a nutshell, a child-centred family builds its worldview from the children out. The pursuit of their happiness guides every decision either directly or indirectly. Assessing and responding to the child's feelings of the moment becomes the arbiter of family policy. Often masquerading under the banner of building self-esteem, child-centred families actually construct self-indulgent progeny. Furthermore, because the child has not learned to respond to the needs of those around him (not a necessary skill when the family revolves around him) he will be unable to develop healthy social relationships as he grows. His loyalty will be based on what he can get out of relationships rather than what he can give (a sure recipe for marital and other relationship disasters in the future).

How can we know if our child is suffering from a child-centred approach to family life? As with most anything else, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Self-centred children are characterized by a number of readily recognizable behaviours. One of the earliest to develop is the habit of continually interrupting the conversations of others, particularly adults. When parents tolerate this, they reinforce the child's concept that his wants and needs are paramount in any situation. Children who whine, cry, sulk or throw temper tantrums upon any denial of their desires evidence the lack of self-control that will mark their failure to mature. Inappropriate familiarity and verbal liberties taken with authority figures (including relatives, church leaders and adult friends of the family) also signal trouble. When children are allowed too many freedoms prematurely, they become "wise in their own eyes." Self-reliance apart from self-discipline is corrosive to young hearts.

But how do children arrive in this dangerous land of "I matter most?" One of the most telling factors relates to the parents' view of their own marriage. When a couple fails to acknowledge their marital bond as the priority relationship in the family, they undermine their children's emotional and spiritual development. Kids need to know that not only do their parents love each other, but that the nourishment of that love is the first priority of family life. The parent child relationship must be subject to the spousal union. Children are not peers of

their parents. When the family is democratized, God's design is abandoned to the detriment of all.

Another way in which parents contribute to the unhealthy growth of self-indulgent, self-reliant pride in their children is through a failure to train biblically. Christians acknowledge that God's Word reveals a standard of thought, speech and behaviour. This code is based in His character and is therefore both perfect and immutable. Because God's truth (and all of its moral implications) is absolute, they apply uniformly to all. Many parents, however, tend to bring the standard to the child rather than the child to the standard

It is both a fascinating and disturbing spectacle to observe parents who continually adjust the boundaries to avoid conflict. Fearful of "losing his love," or "damaging his self-esteem," they do not consistently call the child to complete and immediate obedience. Thus the child's fancy begins to dictate both his and, ultimately, his family's course. Because the child has not developed sufficient self-control or wisdom, he cannot chart a course toward holiness and harmony himself. That is the role of his parents! Giving a child free reign is not loving, nor will it establish a healthy self-concept in his heart before God.

How can home educating parents respond to the peril of "kids first" living? First, the issue of the primacy of the marriage relationship must be settled and explained to the children. The issue is not that Daddy loves Mommy more than he loves the kids, but that Mom and Dad's love for each other is the basis for parental love. Practically speaking, prioritizing your relationship means spending uninterrupted time together at home in front of the children. It means regular dates (and no, guys, once a year is not regular enough) and even brief "getaways" to tend and nourish your marriage as a priority. You must also encourage and challenge each other spiritually, examining your relationship together for need areas. There are many resources available to help with this process.

As a couple, you must also commit to effectively training your children to God's standard of moral and ethical behaviour. Matters of courtesy, integrity, selflessness and service are not options. Children (and adults!) of every temperament and in every environment are subject equally to divine direction. Shy or talkative, passive or competitive, a child's make-up is the context for our training. It is not, however, the form around which the truth must be bent to suit the child. Scripture has already provided the blueprint for godly character. As parents we must work with the particulars of our children's' individuality, but always in the pursuit of God's moral standard.

One of the great tools God has given us to help shape our kids hearts in unselfish living is work. Parents do children a great disservice when they "protect" them from old-fashioned physical labour. Children need chores to help them grasp the natural interdependence of the family unit. Do not pay your children for contributing regularly to the normal workload of family life. This would deprive them of the blessing of serving others from a pure heart. It may also foster a mercenary, materialistic mindset.

As home educating parents, we must carefully examine our hearts and our homes to ensure that our children have the stability and spiritual nurture they need to grow in grace. In wisdom and humility, we must monitor carefully the temptation to place our children in a position of primacy that will harm them and disrupt the family. As we aspire to God-centred homes and God-honouring marriages, our children can find their proper place with confidence and joy.

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