

# Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement  
For The Real World

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*"The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets a wise child will delight in him."—Proverbs 23:24*

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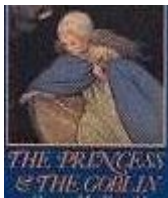


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*Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial*

## **Diligence—A Key To Success**

By Lowell Crosby

*Almost everyone dreams of one day “having it all.” By applying a simple value, you can improve your everyday life and reap lifelong rewards.*



**A**NOTHER SCHOOL YEAR will be drawing to a close in the next few weeks, and most young people have spent the last nine months in school or studying at home, hopefully preparing to be on their own in the future.

I would like to ask the young people reading this: Do you ever wonder what you will do to earn a living, what your career will consist of? Do you ever wonder how successful you are going to be, or what things you will be able to accomplish? Do you ever wonder if you will be able to enjoy the “good life” and afford the nicer than average things? Do you wonder if you will wind up having a job that you enjoy, or one that you must do out of necessity? Will you be able to support yourself and a family and own a nice home and automobile—all of those things we think of as the “American Dream”?



Probably most young people have these thoughts and questions from time to time. You may not *worry* about such things at this time in your life, but you do think about them.

We are all aware of the economic downturn in the United States, as our nation faces many problems at this time. Unemployment problems are continually in the news with many major corporations laying off employees as part of necessary cutbacks. Some of these may already be affecting your family. Many of you harbor legitimate concerns and are uncertain about your future.

Even with conditions that now occur in our economy, a way exists for you to be successful and to land a good job in this country. This key concept or way for you to be successful starts right now no matter your age or grade in school. It can be described in a word: *diligence*.

Diligence means “steady, earnest, energetic application and effort.” The opposite of a diligent person is one who is indifferent, lazy or a sluggard. An indifferent and lazy person displays a lack of interest or concern, placing little or no importance or value on their schooling and education. A sluggard is nothing more than a habitually idle or lazy person.

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*As strange as this may sound, there is no greater key to success in this life as your being able to produce what is called “an honest day’s work.”*

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### **Diligence reaps rewards**

Two scriptures in the Bible prove this point. Let’s see the downside of the first in Proverbs 13:4, “The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.” This person wants to be successful, with all of the wants and desires, but without diligence he cannot make it. The last part of the verse indicates the diligent person *is* going to be successful.

Proverbs 12:24 also verifies this: “The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labor.” The diligent person will be in control or in management—will rule. But the indifferent person, the sluggard, will be forced to work at the more menial paying jobs that won’t produce the good things or extras in life that most people desire.



Think about something as this school year ends. You could approach the rest of the school year from either of the two different attitudes we just read about. You could decide to just get through it—get your time of education behind you and deal later with whatever comes next. Maybe you treat some of your classes that way—just enduring them—while you enjoy and are diligent in other classes. What you are doing is setting a pattern that will follow you the rest of your life. As you leave this school year behind and go on to the next level, this way will probably continue in your life.

As strange as this may sound, there is no greater key to success in this life than being able to produce what is called “an honest day’s work.” If you start now to become diligent in every application of school—and as you either begin your work career or go on to college, whichever you choose—you will begin to set a pattern that will make you successful.

Shortcuts, just getting by, breezing through class with a passing grade and allowing others to tackle the tough jobs is not the way to success. If this is your pattern, you will be average or below average as a wage earner. You will have a life, and you will get by, but you won’t be able to enjoy the nicer things and share your success with others.

As you plan for your future, you need to know what employers seek. Many other young people are looking for jobs in your chosen field. If you have established a pattern and reputation of diligence as part of your character, you will get the jobs and advancements and will be successful.

Look at what Proverbs 10:4 has to say about this. “He who has a slack hand becomes poor, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” Those who are indifferent, lazy or just want to slide by and get it over with will wind up below average.

The diligent person brings success and even wealth to himself and to his family. A major key to your being successful begins in your life NOW. Diligence is *your* key to success.

**Recommended Reading:** For further understanding about a rewarding life, request our free booklet [Making Life Work](#).

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## When Will the Middle East Find Peace?

By John Ross Schroeder

*Why does it seem that the Middle East is always in turmoil, perpetually on the brink of another war? Will this troubled region ever see lasting peace?*



“**P**RAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM,” urged Israel’s King David 3,000 years ago (Psalm 122:6). Seeking a peaceful solution to the Mideast problem is the concern, if not the prayer, of many world leaders. But peace in the Holy Land has, over the centuries, been in remarkably short supply.

The area remains plagued by stubborn antagonisms that baffle and dispirit virtually anyone who hopes for satisfactory solutions to age-old problems.

Recent events dramatize the problem. Whenever it seems that Israelis and Palestinians might reach an agreement that would let the two sides live in peace, violence and bloodshed break out.

Ancient antagonisms are so great that political leaders are sometimes straitjacketed by their constituents. Prospects for peace remain dim in an area in which disputes have long been settled by sword, bullet and bomb.

Terrorism and other violence are not the only threat to peace in the Middle East. Wars fought with traditional methods abounded in the bloodstained 20th century. Battles in the streets between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian activists are only the latest in a long line of conflicts. The foibles and follies of human nature transcend time, geography and political borders.

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### Oil and age-old antagonisms

Why is peace so elusive in this troubled region? Let’s begin an assessment of the region’s problems by surveying the background behind the present situation.

Oil is the fuel of choice of the civilized world. Fifty percent of known crude-oil reserves lie buried beneath the sands of the Middle East. Oil is the real king (or all-powerful sheikh) in the Middle East. Oil is invariably the unseen player in the Persian Gulf region.

But far more fundamental than precious petroleum reserves are the area’s age-old antagonisms. Ancient territorial ambitions continue to spark friction between various nations in the region.

The mere existence of Israel remains an issue in many quarters. Over the years Arab leaders and groups have repeatedly called for forcible elimination of the tiny nation. Since its founding in 1948, Israel has fought five wars—in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982.

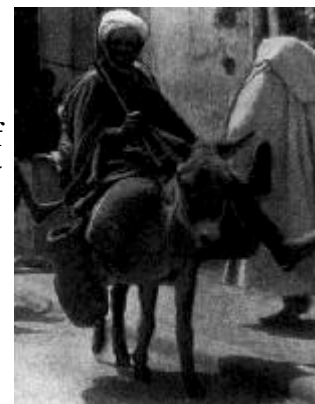
Does war ever make sense in the long run? Does it permanently solve these dilemmas?

### **Where it all began**

Perhaps more than any other spot on the globe, in the Middle East the past meets the future. No other human conflict is so firmly rooted in antiquity. As the early chapters of Genesis show, religion—true and false—began in that fabled area.

The Middle East is the home of three major belief systems that have significantly influenced the way we understand life and death, good and evil, right and wrong. The roots of three world religions—Islam, Judaism and Christianity—reside there.

Yet those three faiths have their profound disagreements and divisions. Fundamentalist revolutionaries lobby for extremist solutions to territorial problems. Modern Israel has periodically claimed the biblical boundaries of Judea and Samaria. Jihad—holy war—is a recurring Arab cry. Indeed a holy war is not out of character for the Christian tradition either, when we remember the Crusades, in which untold thousands of Muslims and Jews, as well as some Christians, were slaughtered. For many, the last sight of their mortal life was of the sword and cross-emblazoned shield of their executioner.



In today's chaotic and confused world, the Middle East is not the source of spiritual enlightenment God intended it to be. Instead, the atmosphere there has been marked by armed conflict, hostility and, most of all, misunderstanding—not the things the Creator wanted it to provide.

Serious physical and spiritual problems will last into the foreseeable future. With unbridled killing permeating the Mideast landscape, breaking the Sixth Commandment remains all too common. Arms proliferation is the dominant tendency in the region. No one knows when the buildup of weapons will explode into the next war.

### **Israel to be an example**

As recorded in the Bible, God told ancient Israel that its people were to serve as a good example to other nations. He presented them with an unparalleled system of laws that, if adhered to, would have provided peace and justice for all its citizens.

God meant for other nations to see for themselves the blessings and wisdom that would naturally stem from Israel's way of life and voluntarily choose it for themselves.

Notice Moses' words concerning the laws God gave to Israel: "I have taught you statutes and laws, as the LORD my God commanded me; see that you keep them... Observe them carefully, for thereby you will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about all these statutes and laws, they will say, 'What a wise and understanding people this great nation is!' What great nation has a god close at hand as the LORD our God is close to us whenever we call to him? What great nation is there whose statutes and laws are so just, as is all this code of laws which I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Revised English Bible).

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Those laws, if studied and applied, would lead to greater peace in the Middle East. The region desperately needs such genuine biblical and spiritual solutions.

### Conflict in the cradle of civilization

Meanwhile we need to understand the area's history. Since antiquity the Middle East has been a center of the world's attention. All nations are tethered to its geopolitical swings because it encompasses the fundamental story of man. To comprehend the present, we must, as always, examine the past.



We should not forget that the Bible, in its geographic origins, springs from the Middle East. The Garden of Eden lay somewhere near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Genesis 2:10-14). God called Abraham in lower Mesopotamia, the land between these two ancient watercourses.

How ironic that the cradle of civilization should often be the site of hatred, hostility and conflict. Yet it is not so ironic in the light of the history recorded in Genesis. How many realize that today's Middle Eastern antagonisms are rooted in events described in the Bible's first book?

After all, nations are nothing more than families grown great. For instance, much of the Arab world stems from Abraham and his close relatives.

An ancient passage of biblical wisdom advises us to "look unto Abraham your father" (Isaiah 51:2). Three major faiths trace their ancestry back to this patriarch. Yet historically the offspring of Abraham have split into bitterly feuding family factions.

This legacy of broken families has led indirectly to today's problems in the Middle East. Battles between brothers are a recurring theme: Cain murdered Abel; Ishmael was banished in a family dispute; Jacob and Esau struggled for their father's blessings; 10 of Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. On it goes, even to the present.



The saga that began in Genesis is spilling over into the 21st century. In the 1991 Gulf War an Egyptian woman's three sons were engaged in battle—one in the Egyptian army, one in the Saudi forces and another as an Iraqi soldier. Her greatest fear was that one son might kill his brother. How little has changed in the world.

### **The Bible and cycles of war**

No war brings permanent peace. Fighting typically only helps assure another war—and much suffering en route. Real peace is something that must be built when the battles have stopped and the participants can pause to comprehend the futility of their combative conduct.

But spilled blood begs for vengeance from the bereaved, and on we go again. World War I (supposedly the war to end all wars) begot World War II, which led to the Cold War.

Not surprisingly, the Gulf conflicts also grew in the soil of continuing aggression. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war helped spawn the invasion of Kuwait and the predictable Allied response in 1991 and again in 2003.

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War stands discredited as a permanent solution to conflict. As Basil O'Conner said in his address to the National Conference of Christians and Jews: "The world cannot continue to wage war like physical giants and to seek peace like intellectual pygmies."

Yet there could be real hope based on our common ground. True understanding of the roots of a problem is a step towards a solution. God has not left humankind without solutions. Long-neglected spiritual tools are still available that men and women ignore at their peril.

Christians, Muslims and Jews share some measure of respect for the Holy Scriptures. Although that commonality is neither complete nor perfectly expressed, all three religions agree on some of the principles and truths of the Bible and highly esteem such figures as Abraham and Moses.

### **Spiritual principles in common**

Bible principles could act as a bridge of understanding between the three great Mediterranean religions. Consider just three major spiritual precepts: We are instructed to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5), love our neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) and treat others as we would have them treat us. These three spiritual principles are enjoined in scriptures held sacred by Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

But in the Middle East the highest ideals of three faiths are largely awash in secular struggles for power, land and oil. Idealism is lost in the compromises wrought by greed and expediency. The same old desires for expansion and revenge submerge the lofty heights of a potentially devout life. However, if we are ever to work out our differences, we must implement the basic principles on which these three major religions agree.

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*God's great law of love will be practiced in Jerusalem, and nations will flow to the new world capital to learn to live by it.*

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The chief rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth succinctly illustrated what is desperately needed in an article in *The Times* (London). "The message is clear," he wrote. "You cannot have peace without communicating, without dialogue between faiths, between nations and races... Religion must once again become the principal communicator to bridge divisions."

### Hope in a fresh biblical perspective

The Middle East has the potential to serve as a positive example. The apostle Paul crisscrossed this area several times, spreading a way of life that embraces the tenets of two major religions, though he saw the two as one. Problems can sometimes emerge in the context of commonality. What do we share and how do we make the most of our common ground?

Humanly speaking, the only other option is catastrophe. Armageddon would soon be at our door. Weapons are deadlier by the day. The ancient words of Moses ring in our ears: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). This should be an anthem for humanity.

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*Yet there could be real hope based on our common ground. God has not left humankind without solutions.*

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An even broader perspective than different people's common religious ground compels our consideration. We are all of the same species. We were made "of one blood," as Paul reminded the men of Athens (Acts 17:26). The breathtaking view of our planet from space reminds us that we have a common home. Clumsy border disputes must seem bizarre from God's vantage point.

Somehow we have to turn our genetic and geographic intimacy to our advantage. Selflessness—the key to everything from the welfare of the planet to solving the bloodstained conflicts of the Middle East—is an art that must be learned.

As many concerned observers agree, certain essential priorities must be put before selfish interests. We desperately need a new vision, a new way of thinking based on biblical principles.

### Promise of peace to be fulfilled

Whatever happens in the meantime, our only permanent hope lies in the pages of the Bible. According to its words, what began in the Middle East will also end there. Scripture prophesies a great end-time conflict involving Arabs, Jews and Europeans (see Daniel 11 and 12). The final conflagration will finish only with the return of the King of all kings, Jesus Christ, to earth (Revelation 19:11-21).

Then, the Holy Scriptures assure us, human values will change for the better. God's great law of love will be practiced in Jerusalem, and nations will flow to the new world capital to learn to live by it (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4). Jerusalem, the city of peace, will finally live up to its grand name.



Oil, land and politics will cease to be the primary focus of interest. One geographic fact will dominate the globe: The spiritual headquarters of the future ruler of earth will be in the Middle East. From there the reigning Christ will look after the best interests of all countries, peoples and races. Representatives of many lands will then flow to Jerusalem, not to wage jihad, but to learn the way to peace.

At that time men, women, boys and girls in the Middle East will surrender their lives to their Creator. *Muslim* means "one who surrenders himself to God." Arabs and Israelis alike will yield their lives to a righteous God, giving up their narrow biases, prejudices and selfish interests.

These former enemies, and many others, eventually will become one with each other and, most important, with God. The Middle East will again be the land of promise, a place that will spread peace and spirituality to the entire globe.

But such a radical transformation will take a new spirit and new heart (Jeremiah 31:33). It will require a fresh burst of spiritual energy directly from God.

This is part of what Jesus taught us at His first coming. What began at Bethlehem and Nazareth will gradually spread to the entire world when He returns to earth a second time as the Christ, the Messiah.

**Recommended Reading:** What does the Bible reveal about the future of the Middle East? Be sure to request the eye-opening booklets [Are We Living in the Time of the End?](#) and [You Can Understand Bible Prophecy](#). Both will help you better understand the meaning behind world events and trends. [Click here](#) to order or read these booklets on-line.

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## Whatever Happened to Father in Children's Literature?

By Jean Jantzen

*The absent father in literature is a reminder of the intense need children have for their parents.*



The beauty of the world has two edges  
one of laughter, one of anguish,  
cutting the heart asunder.—Virginia Woolf

**W**ITHIN EACH OF US there is an innate desire to love and to be loved by a father. The origin of this desire and longing goes back to the Garden of Eden where the first Father and child relationship began. God made a beautiful Garden for His children to enjoy, and God said it was very good (Genesis 1:31). Mankind was created with the need to have a relationship with his heavenly Father who had first created him, just like the little child who is conceived has the need for love from his biological father. Therefore, the best—no, the greatest—gift to a child is a loving, secure relationship with its father and mother.

A child who is left on his or her own is a pitiful, defenseless creature. Children need both parents for guidance, protection and love; they not only need to feel secure physically, but also emotionally and spiritually, as well. Some youngsters in children's literature have mothers, stepmothers, or even surrogate parents, but it just does not seem to fulfill their need for a father. A mother is not enough, just as a father is not enough; children need to grow up with both parents to learn how to be good fathers and mothers themselves.

*Children need both parents for guidance, protection, and love; they not only need to feel secure physically, but also emotionally and spiritually, as well.*

Over the ages, childhood must have been difficult for most children. In the majority of children's literature a family does not consist of a mother, a father and a child or children. Instead books often portray abandoned or orphaned children having to make their own way in the world.

### Now you see him, now you don't

Not many children have survived childhood without trials or loss of family members. In my research to discover how the father is represented in children's literature I have found him mostly an illusive, absent or impotent figure. Now you see him, now you do not! In many of the children's stories he might appear in the first pages only to disappear till the very end or not return at all.

In Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, for instance, the yearning or desire for one's true parent is expressed poignantly in the following example of how a teenage girl responds to the return of her father whom she had not seen since she was a little child: "My father! How delightful that word father sounds! My father! May I say, my father? And will he own me, and will he love me, and will he give me his blessing, and will he fold me in his arms, and call me his daughter, his dear daughter? O, how I shall love him! I will make it the whole business of my life to please him!" (Maria Edgeworth, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 409).

*However, hope exists for the future. According to the prophet Malachi, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."*

By comparison, a child-parent relationship makes everything else pale into insignificance. This emotional scene parallels a religious experience. It feels like a religious experience! Even as grown-up children, we can empathize with this girl's emotional reaction to her father's sudden appearance into her life. There is so much emotion wrapped up in the word "father." However, wonderful as it seems to be, how is it she is not angry or shown to experience feelings of betrayal towards a man who deserted both her and her mother?

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, although written for adults, became a favorite of children because it was written in a structure similar to the fairy tale. This book, written in the 17th century, was second only to the Bible in everyone's home until 50 years ago; thus, it must have had a tremendously powerful influence on the minds of children.

Christian, who is the central figure, is a wanderer who leaves the evil city of Destruction to conquer and to make his way through the highways and byways while overcoming the trials and tribulations of this life. This makes for a very exciting adventure, but Christian is also a father of four little boys.

In the opening paragraphs we learn that the hero (who is poor) informs his family that "our city is to be burned with fire from heaven" (John Bunyan, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 8). But they do not take him seriously. Why does he, as father and protector of his family, not take charge and make the decision to save his wife and children? He is so afraid for his own life that he cries all night and the family thinks he has lost his senses. Instead of trying to persuade them he spends his time away from them reading and praying. Why, even if his wife refuses to be guided by her husband, does Christian not take his innocent little boys with him? Instead, he chooses to abandon them all as that seems to be the easiest solution. Bunyan uses vivid imagery to express the action: "He put his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life; so, he looked not behind him" (p. 10).

The example of this father as head of the household is a poor one, as we see him leaving his family behind him. He does not want to listen to their cries. While Bunyan's vision of Christianity is an energetic vision, it channels all of its energies into one main focus—one's own salvation. This individualistic approach, especially by the central father figure, does not include family or children; and therefore, its vision falls short.

### **Dickens' view of a father**

In Charles Dickens' *Dombey & Son*, we find in the beginning pages a cold, heartless father who is only interested in carrying on his particular lineage and business ventures through a son. Dombey seems happy he has acquired an heir, but it is an unhealthy bond. He feels "an indescribable distrust of anybody stepping in between him and his son; a haughty dread of having any rival or partner in the boy's respect and deference" (Charles Dickens. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 40).

On the other hand, Mr. Dombey is troubled when he thinks of his daughter, Florence. He states, "There was a face—he had looked upon it, on the previous night, and it on him with eyes that read his soul, though they were dim with tears... It was a trouble to him to think of this face of Florence...because the feeling it awakened in him—of which he had had some old fore-shadowing in older times—was full-formed now, and spoke out plainly, moving him too much, and threatening to grow too strong for his composure" (p. 237).

Fearful of expressing any emotion towards his daughter, Dombey remains rigidly aloof. He is not able to communicate nor understand the feelings of others, especially his children.

In name, Florence has a family, but in reality her childhood is a lonely, isolated, unhappy existence. She is brought up entirely by a nurse and housekeepers. Florence's sole ambition is to have a loving relationship with her estranged, unfeeling father. She watches longingly across the street where "children...had no restraint upon their love, and freely showed it. Florence sought to learn their secret; sought to find out what it was she had missed; what simple art they knew, and she knew not; how she could be taught by them to show her father that she loved him; and to win his love again" (p. 289).

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*Dickens' voice cries loudly for the vulnerable, lonely, unloved child of the 19th century, exposing the lack of a secure, supportive family and a loving father figure in his novels.*

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We find the innocent daughter takes on the guilt for the lack of a relationship between the two. She cannot understand what she is doing wrong. Although Mr. Dombey plays a major role in the story, he is portrayed as the distant, uncaring father figure, who is always present physically, while absent emotionally and spiritually. Florence wants to be loved so much by her father that she "crouch[es] upon the cold stone floor outside [his room] every night, to listen even for his breath; and in her one absorbing wish to be allowed to show him some affection" (p. 210).

Dickens' voice cries loudly for the vulnerable, lonely, unloved child of the 19th century, exposing the lack of a secure, supportive family and a loving father figure in his novels.

## Riches and fame don't replace parenthood

Another illustration about fatherhood is George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, published in 1882. This book is about a little girl who is a princess and has a king for a father. Irene is looked after by her nurse, Lootie, and protected by men-at-arms, but does not have her own loving family around her. Although the king is portrayed as a loving, kind father, he plays a minor character in the story. Her father is not introduced until the 10th chapter, and then is mentioned again only in the 17th and 30th chapters.

Coming home only once or twice a year to see his daughter, he is an impressive sight—having all the pomp and ceremony befitting his high position. The bugle blast was to her like the voice of her father calling across the distance: “Irene, I’m coming... It was a long time since he had been to see her, and her little heart beat faster and faster as the shining troop approached, for she loved her king-papa very dearly and was nowhere so happy as in his arms” (George MacDonald, New York: Puffin Books, 1964, p. 69).

It seems that no matter what, the child's affection remains constant for the father. He can do no wrong. MacDonald informs us repeatedly in *The Princess and the Goblin* how much the king loves his daughter. We are told in the first paragraph that the mother is not well, but she is hardly mentioned again, nor is she missed. The father, on the other hand, has more important things to do than spend time with his daughter—he is taking care of all the people in his kingdom. Although the king sets rules and guidelines to protect his daughter, he does it mostly from a distance. MacDonald illustrates to children that having a rich and famous father excuses his absenteeism.

## Foster parents of the 20th century

One more example, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, written in 1908, features a parentless child. Matthew Cuthbert becomes Anne's surrogate father. Montgomery portrays him as being an introverted, quiet, unassuming old bachelor who is shy and afraid of most women. Montgomery shows the impotence of the father figure in Matthew especially at the beginning where she describes him as “shy,” “silent” and “odd” (L.M. Montgomery, Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, Inc., 1935, pp. 2-3).

In the beginning chapters, when Anne and Matthew meet, Matthew cannot think on his own, nor can he make decisions. “I don't understand,” said Matthew helplessly, “wishing that Marilla was at hand to cope with the situation” (p. 10). Matthew leaves everything up to his sister, Marilla: “Matthew stirred uneasily. He felt glad that it would be Marilla and not he who would have to tell this waif of the world that the home she longed for was not to be hers after all... He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was going to assist at murdering something—much the same feeling that came over him when he had to kill a lamb or calf or any other innocent little creature” (p. 22).

As a father figure, Matthew shows concern regarding Anne's future welfare; however, he does not stand up to Marilla, but allows her to take the lead. Even after Marilla decides to keep Anne, Matthew takes a back seat in child rearing and says sheepishly that he will not interfere. In his own way he has a kind heart as we can see when he states, “There, there, Marilla, you can have your own way... Only be as good and kind to her as you can without spoiling her” (p. 48). Matthew does not play a large role in *Anne of Green Gables*, but he becomes a solid and steadying influence in Anne's life and rescues her from time to time from Marilla's overbearing, out-of-date ways.

## A modern view of fatherhood

*A Handful of Time*, written by Kit Pearson, is a modern children's book (1986) which I wanted to include to see if the father figure had changed significantly over time. This novel is written specifically for children who are experiencing a breakdown of the family. In this book the parents have not died as in some of the earlier novels. They are not royalty, nor are they cold and aloof, nor are they religious fanatics. Instead, they are just ordinary folk. These modern-day mothers and fathers have made a decision they no longer want to keep the family together. They each love the child in their own selfish way, but cannot make their relationship work. Both parents are relatively successful. The father is a journalist who is depicted as quiet, shy, rarely talking, reminding us of Matthew Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables*. "He seemed more comfortable with his word processor or his Cuisinart than with people" (Kit Pearson, Toronto: Puffin Books, 1988, p. 9). This aloof part of his personality reminds us of Mr. Dombey in *Dombey & Son*.

When a picture of her family was in a popular magazine, Patricia feels that "her parents looked handsome; Patricia looked as plain as ever... Still she could remember a moment of unusual security, squeezed between her mother and father, each with an arm around her. In the magazine they looked like a happy, united family. But the photograph was a fraud" (p. 6).



Patricia's father has a new wife and does not have time for his daughter. He does not even talk to her in person, but communicates to her through the cold machinery of his computer. "Naturally, Johanna and I would like to have you live with us this year. It's up to you to make the choice, however, and we don't want to pressure you in any way" (p. 168). The father figure in *A Handful of Time* is leaving the choice up to his 12-year-old child. He does not want to take responsibility for his own failed marriage and estranged daughter. He is made to appear weak and lacking warmth or affection. He does not make important decisions and once again echoes the impotent figure of Matthew Cuthbert.

In conclusion, I would like to mention a few more favorites which seem to have the common thread of absent or impotent father figures. The children's American classic, *Tom Sawyer*, written in 1876, is another story where the father figure is totally absent. Tom is brought up by his aunt. Another favorite with children, the foreign classic *Heidi*, written in 1880, is about an orphan girl who is raised in the Swiss Alps by her grandfather.

In another popular children's adventure story, *Swallows and Amazons* (1931), we find the father has gone to sea leaving the mother to cope with the children. Like the king in *The Princess and the Goblin*, he, too, is the absentee father ruling from afar. Although the mother is very much present in the children's lives, the mother must ask permission from her absent husband before her children can sail a boat. The quote from the father's telegraph becomes famous, "Better drowned than Duffers if not Duffers won't drown" (p. 14). It's okay for him to be aloof, as he wouldn't have to deal with the crisis of dead children from Hong Kong. Even though there is this reminder of the father's authority within the family, other than the telegram, we do not hear from the father again. He is only mentioned once when the mother is sitting down writing a letter to him.



It seems that children today find themselves in the same position they did centuries ago, sometimes without a mother or father or both. In the 17th century, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the father goes off and leaves his children in the name of Christianity. In *Dombey & Son* of the 19th century, we find a father figure who will not share himself with his daughter until his whole world collapses. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, we have a fine figure of a kingly father who dearly loves his daughter but cannot find the time to be with her. Both *Anne of Green Gables* and *A Handful of Time* reveal impotent father figures who seem to love their daughters; nevertheless it does not excuse their lack of heartfelt love, protection and guidance throughout the growing years.

Even today, no matter how we try to fool ourselves that we believe children are an important part of our society, somehow they are the very ones who are neglected the most. I looked at many more children's books apart from those mentioned above and was astonished to find that, for the most part, the children were abandoned or alone whether or not there existed a father or mother. Many times the father figure showed up after the child or children managed to make their own way. It never ceased to amaze me that the children were so forgiving and loving towards the father who had gone off to war or on some adventure and never returned until the children were no longer children.

It seems since the time of Adam and Eve when God's children sinned and were barred from the Garden of Eden that children and their physical fathers have experienced irreconcilable differences. The rift continues to this day. However, hope exists for the future. According to the prophet Malachi, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). A time is coming when fathers will take their proper responsibility towards their children, and the children will respond with love and affection.

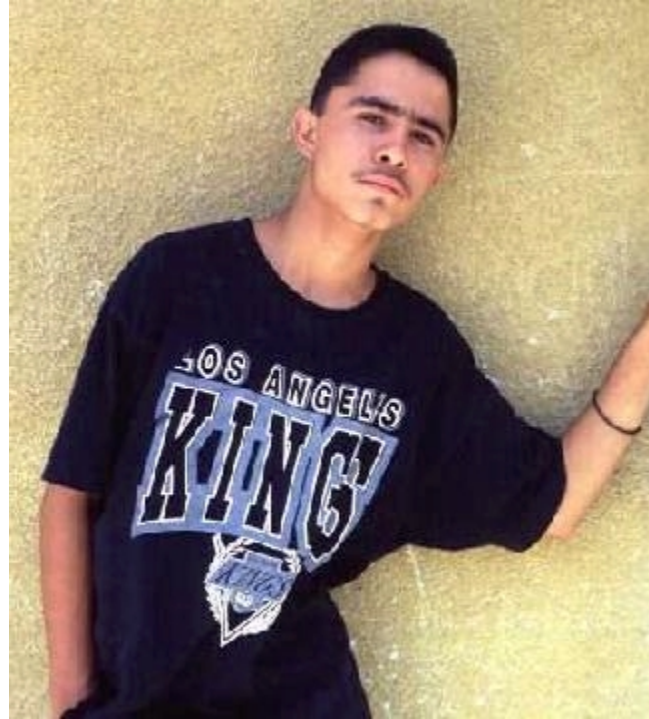
**Recommended Reading:** For more information about family togetherness, please request the free booklet [Making Life Work](#). One of our most important goals is bringing together the family—the most basic of units God created.

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## Youth Violence: Where Does the Blame Really Lie?

By Howard Davis

*Violence has come to roost in the nation's youth. A biblical prophet envisioned a time when children would be our oppressors (Isaiah 3:12). Are we living in those days?*



**I**N THE 1960S, Bill Roberts went from youthful innocence to the killing fields of Vietnam in months. Now, 30 years later, Bill has again felt an adrenaline rush like the deadly terror of guerrilla warfare he experienced long ago. This brush with death was not a war in Southeast Asia. It was in Portland, Oregon, a prosperous Northwest American city of one and a half million. And the enemy wasn't Vietnamese guerrillas, but gun-toting gang members in a schoolyard.

Bill Roberts is now a school principal, caring for my children. He is still a soldier, but in a social crisis which has shed America's innocence. His battleground runs throughout the underside of our culture. His war is the deadly explosion of youth violence that began some 20 years ago and is shouted in newspaper headlines around the country today.

Within the United States the prison population—which is comprised predominately of young men—is up to some 1,750,000, up from 750,000 in only 10 years. Youth violence now pulsates throughout American life. No one—rich or poor, white or minority, urban or rural—seems to be immune.

Easy targets for solutions are hard to come by because the American problem with youth violence is not primarily a trend fueled by desperation and poverty. It is mainly driven by a culture in which children treat human beings as if they are of no more value than the electronic video-game figures youngsters kill off by the hour for their self-amusement.



With the lines between fantasy and reality confused and blurred, some American youths have been sent the unmistakable message that it is entertaining to kill. The two teenage gunmen who killed and maimed 35 students and teachers at Colorado's Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, were reported to have laughed at times as they roamed the classrooms and halls gunning down their victims.

Some have clearly begun to think that killing real people is no big deal. They have learned, after all, that the goal of life is self-amusement anyway.

Yet, strangely, many violent teens are possessed of a sense of invincibility. Not only do they have no fear of God, they have little fear or understanding that they could be killed as easily as the fictional characters on a video-game screen. Sadly, many will be.

### Epidemic of violence

After a 15-year-old confessed to the May 1998 school shooting of 22 students and his parents in Springfield, Oregon, commentators pointed out that explosive violence had crept from the poor, inner-city communities in the 1980s and early '90s onto the manicured lawns of suburbia and the rural settings idealized in the American dream.

Not only is homicide now one of the greatest risks to our youngsters, says the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, it has progressively permeated the national landscape. The epidemic of gun violence began to peak among youth in the late 1980s, decimating a predominately poor minority generation of inner city residents, according to James Garbarino, director of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University.

*Not only do they have no fear of God, they have little fear or understanding that they could be killed as easily as the fictional characters on a video-game screen.*

National Council on Crime and Delinquency President Barry Krisberg notes a difference in today's profile of youth violence. Recent mass murder attempts and episodes "had nothing to do with drugs or guns," he said. "Some were from affluent communities and intact families."

In the last six years, 11 of 12 mass shootings with multiple victims happened in cities with populations under 80,000. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report nine of these were cities with less than a population of 52,000.

Initial studies indicate a shift in violent youth behavior from the low socioeconomic stereotype. Harvard School of Public Health professor Deborah Prothrow-Stith characterizes the movement of youth violence from poor urban communities to the rest of the population and regions as an effect similar to any other epidemic. "It's the second wave," she said. "First [it strikes] the most vulnerable community, and then it spreads."

There is also an explosion of copycat acts. In one study, 25 percent of young violent felons said they got the specific idea for their violent activity directly from television. “I can do that” is the remark attributed to the 15-year-old Oregon shooter in a conversation two months earlier to his school bus driver when he heard about the school massacre by two youths in Paducah, Kentucky.



Murders committed by teens age 14 to 17 tripled between 1976 and 1993 and then dropped somewhat, according to University of Oregon sociology department chairman Robert O’Brien. However, observers point out that upward trends in youth violence may be masked somewhat by imprisonment, aggressive policing and a dynamic national economy.

### A childhood jungle

Youth violence is, at its core, an outgrowth of an American crisis of values. Successful parenting requires values flowing from a firm commitment to children—a commitment that requires time, attention and resources. In their absence, children grow up in a hostile jungle.

It doesn’t have to be so.

Consistent, nurturing guidance of children works. Demonstrating love works. These parental commitments help stop violence through *prevention*. They require a *child-centered* approach that touches the spirit of the child rather than a manipulation of material circumstances masquerading as attention.

### Parental commitments help stop violence through prevention.

A central message of Jesus Christ regarding children is that they are to be loved because “of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). He showed that true love works. The explosion of youth violence is a clear warning that time is running out to begin practicing Christ’s approach.

Most youth violence comes from environments where violent adult behavior is modeled and acted out in what Barry Krisberg calls a widespread “nihilistic culture that does not promote community and social values.”

Not only are right values ignored, but wrong values are often celebrated. “Go to the movies and listen to the music,” says Krisberg. “It’s violent, it has misogynist content. There’s gross materialism and no ennobling values celebrated.”

### A new battleground

The war of youth violence continues in many communities around the country. At Bill Roberts’ Portland school ground, a battle almost erupted because a 12-year-old student had grabbed a basketball away from a gang member.

A few days later, school was just letting out when the gang arrived with revolvers under coats and dozens of umbrellas tipped with blades. They were ready for the boy.

What surprised Roberts and led him to instinctively sense he might witness a murder was the bizarre readiness of this 12-year-old with no violent history to take on the gang single-handedly.

As the boy raced out the front door toward the gang, Roberts grabbed him, handing him to two assistants who restrained the youth in the principal's office while Bill confronted the gang.

In schools across the nation, principals experience such potentially deadly conflicts daily. Although this situation passed without harm, Roberts is sure he will see similar problems again. And he fears America becoming another Vietnam.

The tentacles of youth violence have also traveled across the Atlantic and the Pacific into most other parts of the Western world. Take the United Kingdom as a case in point. In some British schools youth violence and disrespect for authority have clearly gotten out of control. One East Anglican instructor wrote an article entitled "How We Teachers Have Lost Control of the Classroom" (*Sunday Telegraph*). He said that there is only one target that matters: "reducing violence in schools."

### **Need for spiritually motivated love**

Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose leadership helped the American military and its allies emerge victorious in 1991's Operation Desert Storm, has said the problem of troubled youth is the greatest threat to the future of the United States.



Today's youth violence has roots in a parental culture that has spiritually abandoned them. More money, expensive schools and government programs run by well-meaning bureaucrats cannot substitute for parental love. Western nations so often look to institutional programs for salvation from social crises, but this is one money can't buy.

The 15 million children living in poverty are not alone in a landscape of emotional, interpersonal and spiritual impoverishment. Many children in the world's more prosperous nations are growing up without enriching values conveyed by the intimacy of sacrificial parental love.

Many of them have no concept of the sanctity of life—even their own. "This is the way we want to go out," read the suicide note from Columbine High School gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed 13 others in a rampage of bullets and homemade bombs before they turned their guns on themselves.

Having had materialism substituted for love, many of today's children possess no comprehension of an overriding purpose to life, no sense that life is about much more than today's wants and needs. They have scarce knowledge of an Almighty God with endless love who holds out a special purpose and destiny for each person—man, woman and child alike.

*Secretary of State Colin Powell has said the problem of troubled youth is the greatest threat to the future of the United States.*

Regrettably, these devastating social trends affect almost all segments of society. Even professing Christians aren't immune, with divorce and abuse characteristics often equal to the secular population. Too many political and religious leaders alike have largely abandoned belief in absolute standards such as those that flow from the immutable law of God that equally condemn abusive male authority and the sexual promiscuity that almost inevitably leads to single parenthood.

As a result, America's children drink deeply of a chaotic jumble of relative values which mingles pleasure-seeking materialism with self-destructive and aggressive behavior.

### Serious consequences

The Creator of all humankind said He would abandon the nation whose parents refuse to retain the spiritual knowledge flowing from the law of God and His authority to define right and wrong.

*“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you... Because you have forgotten the law of our God, I also will forget your children”* (Hosea 4:6, emphasis added).

Youth violence is not a mystery. It is a mistake, a sin and a tragedy for all concerned. But the good news is that the spiritual principles that have always worked still continue to work. Families, communities, societies and nations don't have to be destroyed if they will only seek the spiritual knowledge that shows us how to truly express love.

Societies and national cultures can change. In the case of America's crisis of youth violence, the problem begins in the home. It is here that parents must first learn about and then begin to nurture a family culture based on biblical values. Love, if it's genuine, always works.

**Recommended Reading:** The United Church of God is very concerned about the direction our families and youth have been taking. We have published a blueprint for stable homes, communities and societies: [The Ten Commandments](#). Without a solid understanding of this most basic of all biblical laws society has little chance of really helping its youth—the next generation—its most treasured possession. [Click here](#) to read or download a copy of *The Ten Commandments* or to request a free copy through the mail.

### The Spirit of Violence

To many of today's secular prophets, the frightening trends of youth violence are a harbinger of a coming social crisis of biblical proportions if not reversed.

A spirit of violence and death pervades American media and entertainment. Dysfunctional, violent and aggressive lifestyles increasingly bring to mind the decay of earlier civilizations and societies and the warnings of the biblical prophets.

While our youth may experience violence of epic proportions as the next century unfolds, this is no new story. The Bible describes periods of pervasive violence. Ezekiel prophesied to a

Testament history: “Violence has risen up into a rod of wickedness... The land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence” (Ezekiel 7:11, 23-24).

The social crises underlying the violence then and now are the same. The American problem can be traced in large part to a breakdown of family structure and cohesion. The Bible pinpoints this breakdown as a fundamental cause of violence: “...The LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? ...And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless” (Malachi 2:14-16, New Revised Standard Version).

### **A Generation of Abandonment**

Some have described American children as “a generation of rage.” Surrounded with materialism, the typical child may look healthy materially—but so many are emotionally abandoned to somehow find meaning in things which destroy the mind, heart and spirit.

Parallel with children finding meaning in violent entertainment is a meltdown in fatherhood.

While the average American child watches 220 minutes of television each day, he spends only *three to eight minutes* interacting face-to-face with his father—if he lives with one. Some have made the point that in the absence of a father’s presence television is actually parenting many of our children.

Approximately one in four children grow up with a single mother; another quarter with a stepfather. But even those with natural fathers in the home are often profoundly alienated. Struggling with ignorance of child development and nurturing skills, many fathers are unknowingly laying the groundwork for a future national mental health crisis. Most people are unaware of the connection between deteriorating psychological health, the absence of strong nurturing fathers and youth violence.

An epidemic of childhood mental health problems leaves increasing numbers of children, especially boys, prone to violent behavior.

Kip Kinkle, the 15-year-old who admitted to gunning down 22 students in Oregon, was diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and learning disability (LD) when he was 11. New York developmental psychologist Myriam Miedzian noted Kinkle was “given easy access to guns but not to effective treatment.”

“ADHD is six to nine times as prevalent among boys as among girls, mental retardation nearly twice as prevalent, and autism three times and conduct disorder four to 12 times as prevalent,” says Miedzian. “As a result, boys are at greater risk for violent behavior.”

From 1975 to 1990, the percentage of youths in the United States in need of professional mental health services nearly doubled, from 10 percent to 18 percent, said James Garbarino, Family Life Development Center director at Cornell University.

Some psychologists estimate 40 percent of the jail population and 30 percent of delinquent boys suffer from learning disabilities. "Not only do most high-risk children go untreated, they see more than 10,000 TV murders by the age 18," says Miedzian.

Not all of these trends in deteriorating youth mental health are attributed to genetic factors. Many now believe that young children, when lied to and disappointed enough by caregivers, exhibit a kind of schizophrenia. In a process called "crazymaking," children who are told they are loved by abusive or negligent parents learn to disassociate themselves from primary relationships. This can happen to children of wealth as well as children of poverty. Some experts see those youth obsessed with television exhibiting characteristics of attachment disorder, with "the tube" becoming their main reference in life.

## Successful Parenting Begins With the Brain

By Howard Davis

*Young children are virtual learning machines, eagerly absorbing information from everything around them. Researchers have discovered that parents play a crucial role in properly "wiring" their children's brains for success.*



**W**HEN MY WIFE CALLED my Seattle office the afternoon of January 19, 1987, I knew something was wrong. Rushing out of a computer system demonstration for a client, I raced home to find her collapsed on the floor. Our son wasn't due for nine weeks. But, a few hours later, Benjamin was taken by cesarean section. Monitors detected he was dying in a placenta disintegrating around him. Patti had lost so much blood that her life was in danger.

Although more than 16 years have passed now, some memories remain vivid. I often reflect on the powerful impact my decisions, emotions, actions and inaction have on our children's lives.



When Benjamin was in the incubator for seven weeks to gain weight—his low was about two pounds—I remember Patti driving to the Tacoma General NICU daily to talk with—and touch—our tiny son. I was so busy with business at the time I thought it wasn't important for me to see Benjamin every day. I didn't need to reach through the openings in the incubator's side and feel his small stick-size limbs as Patti felt compelled to do. After all, he seemed so peaceful resting there by himself, amazing me with his calm maturity for a person so very tiny. He didn't really need me, I thought.



Three years later, Benjamin was diagnosed with autism.

*I was wrong.* Benjamin had needed me more than than I could imagine.

Most fathers neglect to take the opportunity to help, stimulate growth, and nurture—at least sometimes and often out of ignorance. Benjamin already had autism—a serious neurological disorder, caused by brain damage, which leaves the child unable to process information in a normal fashion—but didn't know it. I would learn that much of his recovery depended on me.

### Early stimulation is critical

Our tiny son had gone from hypoactive (being underactive) for the first 12 months to hyperactive and explosive for the next two years. Days and nights were spent listening to this screaming, ever-moving child, a Jekyll and Hyde for whom we finally had a label for a condition we didn't understand.

*Mechanically, children are virtually learning machines. They are continuously learning beings made in the image of their parents.*

Science in the last decade has discovered that stimulating touch can be crucial to young children with autism. Parental attention in talking, smiling, singing, feeding and touching will make a significant difference to brain-damaged children. We now know that these traits of excellent parenting are vitally important for all young children. If we don't touch our infants in the manifold ways parents should relate to their children—through their bodies, eyes, ears, emotions and intellects—children are profoundly affected in ways that mark them for the remainder of their lives.

Why is this so?

It is because this kind of interaction of parents with children *builds* the brain structures necessary for all their further development. Brain research reveals the physical processes of building a personality through development of the child's central nervous system.

Mechanically, children are virtually learning machines. They are continuously learning beings made in the image of their parents. However, to not only survive but thrive, children need constant stimulus led by a competent parent.

## The learning brain

What is the most important factor in child development? Is it his genetic makeup, or is it his life experiences in interacting with parents, siblings, teachers and surroundings?

This question summarizes the nature vs. nurture debate. People have argued about it for 2,000 years, but research has proved that the either-or approach is fruitless. Nature and nurturing are *both* important.

Until the last generation, scientists thought that the brain was virtually hardwired with circuits in early childhood, with little change possible during the remainder of the person's lifetime. Each child is born with 100 billion neurons, the total number of nerve cells in the brain. This area does not grow significantly for the rest of our lives. For years researchers thought that basic brain development stopped after early childhood.

Now we know that the human brain's wiring is only *beginning* at birth. Most of the adult's conscious functions of logical thinking, goal setting, writing, planning and communicating are the result of connections between the neurons, called *synapses*, which develop throughout childhood. It is these connections that are responsible for learning.

In a real sense, parenting is the process of nurturing young brains to maturity, of correctly wiring the neural circuitry that will determine the child's personality throughout life. The actions and attitudes of parents exert a powerful force on the brain development of their children throughout childhood, regardless of their genetic makeup.

## The incredible learning machine

At birth, what appears to be a long and slow process of learning begins, but every day brings the brain a spectacular array of experiences to interpret, record and respond to. Billions of bits of information have to be processed and stored every hour of every day of young lives. Brain development occurs throughout life, but the rate in childhood is much faster than it will be later. Young brains are more flexible, because most of their connections are new.

Consider how marvelous the basic structures of the human brain are. The numbers are unfathomable. The human brain is perhaps the most complex object in the universe. In addition to the 100 billion neurons, the brain contains one trillion other cells that have roles other than computing messages.

Neurons hold the keys of communication and learning. Each neuron has a long extension, somewhat like a tree trunk, called an axon. The axon transmits the basic messages to other neurons. From infancy to adulthood each neuron grows elaborate tangles of side branches called dendrites. Each neuron develops up to 100,000 dendrites. Dendrites receive information from other neurons. Through sending and receiving messages, neurons both teach and learn from other neurons.

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*To put it simply, a child's brain is a three-pound inner universe with the potential to learn, be taught and change through life.*

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Fifty-three specialized chemicals, called neurotransmitters, transmit electrical messages across the synapses. Each synapse has at least 10 different strengths. The number of different

configurations, arrangements and patterns of these neurons, dendrites and synapses in one brain is at least 10 to the trillionth power—a number greater than all the atoms in the universe!

Learning is the process of the creation, growth, strengthening and weakening of these connections. Every experience either builds or weakens dendrites and connections in one or more parts of the brain.

God designed and made them available to us so we can learn, wonder, ponder, understand and plan. You are using millions of them as you read this article right now!

In *A User's Guide to the Brain*, Harvard Medical School's professor of psychiatry John Ratey, writes that "happily, this dynamic complexity is actually the solution to many people's fears that our nature is genetically 'hard-wired.'"

"The brain is so complex, and so plastic, that it is virtually impossible, except in the broadest fashion, to predict how a given factor will influence its state. Genes do contain direction for much of the brain's initial development, yet they have no absolute power to determine how the brain will respond" (2001, p. 11).

What does all this mean? To put it simply, a child's brain is a three-pound inner universe with the potential to learn, be taught and change throughout life. Childhood is a critically important time when all the connections are being established and strengthened for the first time.

### **An independent person in the making**

One more factor influences how the young brain will become wired. The brain is the seat and home of the whole little person who is more than just the sum of neurochemicals firing across cells in some mechanical way. Each child has an independent will. He or she is a bundle of wants, needs and desires to grow, experience and know. All of our basic desires are preprogrammed genetically. But, the kinds of choices a child makes are shaped by an interaction of the child's will and the environment—especially the environment shaped by parents. Parental style and choices in patterns of parenting become critical issues in creating a compliant, pleasant child or an aggressive, mean one.

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*In our 21st-century lifestyle, some of the ancient wisdom regarding basics of parenting have come full circle to be recognized as today's best practices—as if common sense is surprising.*

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Parents can achieve their best outcome in rearing their children when they understand that their child has continuous needs for care, love and respect as a small person with an independent will—just like his or her parent.

The environment is not the only factor beside genes at work in brain development. The independent will of the child also drives the brain's development. A child will develop best when parents guide the child to have an intrinsic self-motivation and desire to do and experience right and constructive behaviors, attitudes and thoughts. A parent therefore must provide guidance, direction and protection from harmful influences.

## Parenting for the positive

With each smile from Mom or Dad when a child wakes up, every redirection when the child gets in a fight with siblings, and each time a parent turns off sexually offensive or violent television, a child's brain is modifying some of its interconnected tangle of 100 trillion constantly changing connections. Through this process a child learns other choices he can make as to how to react the next time these challenges arise.



But it takes a committed mature adult to know how to shape the child's will to be positive instead of negative, to be obedient and cooperative instead of defiant and disobedient, to be outgoing toward others instead of self-obsessed and self-absorbed. The tantrum-throwing terror in the supermarket is often the result of parents who don't know how to help their children be better behaved and not the manifestation of the supposedly inherently evil nature of a child.

Harvard's Mr. Ratey says, "we do have free will, in a sense, for everything we do affects everything that follows... Genetics are important, but not determinative, and the kinds of exercise, sleep, diet, friends, and activities we choose, as well as the goals we set for ourselves, have perhaps equal power to change our lives" (p. 12).

In a real sense, all this research on the brain means that each child's brain is shaped—or "parented," you might say—by its interaction with its environment. That interaction is largely controlled by the quality and quantity of parental interaction. There is nothing static about it. The process continues until adulthood. In our 21st-century lifestyle, some of the ancient wisdom regarding the basics of parenting have come full circle to be recognized as today's best practices—as if common sense is now surprising.

The foundation of great parenting is described and directed in the Bible. God designed children to succeed under the guidance of competent parents. The principle is expressed so simply, yet so powerfully, in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

Training of that caliber comes from one huge but simple requirement to successful parenting: leadership throughout the child's youth, from infancy to adulthood.

### Continuously involved leadership

Research shows that from the first hours after birth, infants' eyes follow the shape of the mother and father, associating them with their voices, warmth, care and nourishment. As soon as a child's eyes develop enough focus to perceive the smile of its mother, it begins to imitate and mirror the movements of her facial muscles, lips and laugh lines.

The parent orchestrates a great symphony of connections, feelings, inferences and meanings which builds a new person in her or his own image. At birth, the parent leads the external stimulation of the brain, a process responsible for 80 percent of the developing personality through the formation of trillions of synaptic connections. Each of these sensations builds the superstructure of circuitry for all subsequent development of the child's brain.

A parent is a leader who shapes the development of the child. Children are natural followers. They are built to imitate their parents. Without the appropriate leadership from parents, children do not develop well socially and often are more aggressive with poor self-control.

In April 2001, results were reported on the largest study ever in the United States on the behavior of young children in day care compared with children who stayed at home with their mothers. In the study, more than 1,100 children in 10 cities were rated by parents, day care providers and others. The results are startling. Children in day care, researchers found, are three times more likely to have behavioral problems than those who stay at home with mom. Young children in day care also were reported to be more sad and unhappy.

“As time [the child is in day care] goes up, so do behavior problems,” said Dr. Jay Belsky, a major investigator conducting the study. Dr. Belsky said if children spend more than 30 hours a week in child care, they generally are “more demanding, more noncompliant, and they are more aggressive.” He added, “They scored higher on things like [getting] in lots of fights, cruelty, bullying, meanness, as well as talking too much [and] demand[ing that his needs] must be met immediately.”

We shouldn't be surprised.

### **Mothers are best**

Natural mothers dedicated to staying at home provide more continuous emotional warmth and support for their young children. This warmth and support, in turn, is registered in the neural connections of the brain. An at-home parent provides more continuous focused involvement throughout the day than a day-care provider who typically provides for many more children, all of whom are strangers to the child.

As every parent knows who has had to get a young child out of bed early, the child can be emotionally traumatized when dropped off in day care as the parent goes off to work. Even the parent is often sad at having to endure a struggle with the unhappy child who doesn't want to be separated from mom. Sad child plus sad mom thousands of mornings in childhood leads to brains of a different quality.

A parent is not an effective leader unless grounded in strong principles and role models. The process of successful parenting requires a great number of skills, many of which are not acquired until one actually becomes a parent. One might become an Olympic athlete, climb Mount Everest or claim the greatest job in the world, but parenting requires as much or more leadership as these activities. It can be just as rewarding and thrilling an experience.

But, like those endeavors, parenting involves enduring some tough times. Leaders must make the necessary course corrections and never give up. Successful parents constantly develop their skills to rise to the next level. They are committed and involved. The same principles that lead to success in life apply to successful parenting.

Parents always have an impact. Even though one may not perceive it, children are always learning by the action, attention, respect, disrespect, inaction and inattention of their parents.



As much as we would like to mystify children's behavior today, the quality of parenting is largely responsible for the nature of every child. Much of the negative behavior of youths is the result of parents who do not control negative influences, do not know how to love, nurture and discipline at the same time, and do not understand the spiritual needs of children.

We need to remember that every brain has a parent. If not the natural parent, some other influence will dramatically affect every child's brain and character.

### Parenting help from heaven

After Patti and I discovered our son Benjamin was autistic, we struggled to reverse the damage done before birth. Taking cues from outstanding professionals, I became his speech therapist and helper, tickling, wrestling and holding him, taking him to Little League baseball and on camping trips and climbing up mountains. Patti did the same. He received sensory and motor therapy, school intervention, love and care from many.

But Benjamin's neural wiring problems exposed mine. I had to admit I wasn't wired as the ideal parent from birth. I often hit the wall of frustration. I was not prepared in life to handle the intensity of parenting. But once you are a parent, there is no turning back. I realized then, as I still do, that I couldn't do it alone. I was often forced to go to God on my knees to get parenting help from heaven. After all, God is the greatest parent, the ultimate authority, the one who wrote the book. The Bible is a book about parenting and for parents, given by a God who is infinitely good.

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Benjamin is now 16. After that rocky start, he now has a good brain. He is doing well in middle school, has many friends, talks about things like any other 16-year-old, swims all over the state as part of the school district swim team, is taking Spanish and has forgiven me of the times I didn't know what I was doing.

His wiring will be fine in the end.

But I have learned something important. Like every parent's, my wiring is still under construction.

**Recommended Reading:** For more valuable knowledge about parental involvement and biblical guidance, [click here](#) to view the [Good News](#) magazine.