

# Key Ingredients For Kids' Spiritual Growth

Steve Alley

Every child has basically the same needs in order to grow spiritually. It is important to understand the “big picture” of a child’s world, and how everything in it can either enhance or thwart spiritual growth. It is always a good thing to go beyond the lesson and become a significant person in the children’s lives.

Building a child’s spirituality is a complex process. God tells parents in Deut. 6:4-9 how to develop a child’s spiritual growth. It takes time and significant attention. For the sake of this overview of how to develop a child’s spiritual growth, the comparison will be made to baking a cake.

Most of us will follow a recipe when we bake a cake. That recipe gives clear directions about how to mix the right ingredients and how to bake the cake so that it is delicious and satisfying. Here is a recipe for “baking” a child’s spiritual growth.

## Spiritual Growth

### Spiritual Growth Recipe

#### *Ingredients*

- A consistent connection between home and church.
- Security
- A “culture” of Godliness
- Honesty/truthfulness
- Real examples to follow
- Freedom to fail and recover
- An actual beginning date/time
- Realistic expectations with consistent rewards/consequences
- Life-changing successes
- Increasing opportunities/challenges

#### *Directions*

1. Mix together honesty, truthfulness and security to create a “culture” of Godliness in the home and church.
2. Create a consistent connection between home and the church through good communication and mutual support.
3. Carefully and prayerfully add real examples to follow and freedom to fail and recover.
4. Place in the “oven” of real life by establishing an actual date and time of accepting the Lord.
5. Continue to “bake” by adding realistic expectations with consistent rewards.
6. Serve with celebrating life-changing successes and increasing opportunities and challenges.



## Preparing And Mixing The Ingredients

Obviously, every child is different, and every child's process of spiritual growth is also different. God's "work" with each child (and all of us) is unique and "intimate."

*"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*

Proverbs 22: 6

*"O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."* Psalm 139: 1-5

The "ingredients" are "common" things that those in parent support, children's ministry, education, or child development have established as critical factors in a child's spiritual development. This doesn't mean that a child must have all of these "ingredients" in order to grow closer to God; there are thousands of stories of children who become powerful "tools" for the Lord despite a lack in any, or even all, of these areas. It is God who "grows" a child, but the more we can do to enhance His work, the better.

### Ingredients For Spiritual Growth

#### 1. A consistent connection between home and church

Ideally, the parents are doing all they can to actively and positively "raise up" their child "in the way he/she should go" in the Lord. Whether this is the case or not, the church needs to work hard to create a consistent connection with the home to support and empower the parents.

- a. **Communicate what is being taught** – Assure that the parents know and understand what is being taught during children's programs through "take home" flyers or other printed material related to the lessons or experiences.
- b. **Offer practical parenting support** – Through parenting seminars, suggestions for spiritually focused family activities, and ideas for stimulating their children's faith through conversations throughout the day.
- c. **Utilize social networking** – To communicate and stay connected to the parents.  
**CAUTION:** Remember that social networking sites are not private!



#### 2. Security

A child's "sense of security" can significantly affect his/her perceptions of who God is, and whether or not He can be trusted. A child feels "safe" when he/she knows that he/she is loved, and that those who care for his/her needs will not harm or abandon him/her.

- a. **Protection** – The parents and children must know (based on our consistent actions and printed material) that we will protect the children from harm (physical, emotional, and spiritual).
- b. **Presence** – The parents and children must know that we will not leave or abandon the children (this is critical in light of the damage caused by divorce).
- c. **Provision** – The parents and children must know that we are committed to provide for the children's needs (not necessarily the "wants").



We should do all we can to affirm these factors every time we meet with the children. This "affirmation" can be expressed by words, actions, and attention.

## 1. A “culture” of Godliness

Ideally, the “culture” that we create in our children’s ministry programs matches that the child experiences at home. If the home’s “culture” differs from what we are committed in creating, we must understand that we may be faced with the presence of “culture shock” among the children. If that is the case, the children will require that we be more consistent and more supportive before they let the “culture” of the ministry environment have more affect on their lives.



- a. **Godliness must flow from inside us** – If we are “working hard to be godly,” then we may have to seek God to become a “new person”<sup>1</sup> whose intimate relationship with Jesus “flows” naturally into everything we think, say, or do.
- b. **Godly in what we do** – This MUST NOT be “phony” for the sake of the “show” during ministry programs. The children “see through” this “act” quickly. They will not respect “actors”!
- c. **Admit when wrong** – We must also be quick to admit when we have not acted in a “godly” manner. The children are watching to see how “real” our own faith is!

## 2. Honesty, truthfulness, “real” examples to follow and emulate

Children crave honesty. They know when we are being truthful, and when we are not! We can’t fool them! We should be “transparent” enough to be “real,” and yet be “hidden” enough to be leaders. God will give us discernment.



- a. **Listen / respect enough to give honest answers** – Be open to children’s questions! Respect their questions! If a child asks an honest question about life, choices, or spiritual things, we should give him/her an honest, truthful answer.
- b. **Be honest when not sure** – It is okay to say, “I’m not sure about that,” or “I don’t know the answer right now, but I’ll find out for you.”

## 3. Freedom to fail and recover

If we are concerned about the child’s life, and not just about his/her knowledge, we must challenge the child to make their faith active! We must create an environment of learning and growing, instead of perfection. If a child senses that we demand perfection, he/she may not even want to try!



- a. **Freedom to fail** – When a child “fails” by making a mistake or not doing something well (getting angry, lying, cheating, fighting, etc.) we must gently “unpack” that experience and do all we can to encourage the child toward improvement. A true “failure” only exists when we don’t learn from the encounter. But, if we learn and improve from the encounter, then that encounter is not a failure. Peter’s “failure” around the campfire after Jesus’ arrest<sup>2</sup> was something that he never forgot! Jesus “unpacked” that encounter with Peter after His resurrection during a breakfast of fish and bread.<sup>3</sup>
- b. **Encourage success** – We must encourage children toward “success.” It is our conversations with, and consistent support of them that stirs them toward godliness!
- c. **Reward success** – We must look for opportunities to support the child’s attempts at faithful actions as soon as we can after a “failure.”



<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5: 17

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26: 69-75

<sup>3</sup> John 21: 15-22

4. **An actual beginning** (accepting Jesus, praying, parents' role, how/when/where)

It is important that the child has a specific date and time that he/she accepted the Lord and became a Christian. Without this specific date, the enemy can bring doubt regarding the child's salvation at a later time. Ideally, it is the parents who share this moment with the child; but if the parents are not willing, or aren't able, we need to establish a "beginning" for the child.



- a. **Ask simple questions regarding his/her relationship with Jesus** – Simple questions could be, "Are you a Christian?" or "Tell me about who Jesus is to you," or "Do you know that your sins are forgiven?"
- b. **Establish a date** – If the child says, "I've always been a Christian," or doesn't know the specific date, it would be good to establish a date and time. Work with the parents on this. This is not difficult to do; all that needs to be done is to pray with the child (and the parents) and ask the child to commit his/herself to the Lord anew.
- c. **Document / celebrate the date** – The date that the child gave his/her life to Jesus should be "documented" on a certificate or other "formal" paper. This "beginning" could happen at the child's home, or somewhere else that is memorable and not too busy (beach, lake, park, etc.).

5. **Realistic expectations with consistent rewards and consequences**

Children do well with clear, realistic expectations for behavior. God gives these to us in His scriptures. We should incorporate these standards in our ministry environments. Ideally, these standards or expectations should match those in the home as well. If there are differences, we can't really affect what is expected in the home, we have to make sure that our expectations are biblically sound.



- a. **Posted expectations** – These expectations should be written and posted on the walls of our classrooms. These can be as "simple" as: "Obey the teachers, help others, and be kind to others." The children should know the consequences for not obeying these standards.
- b. **Catch them being good** – We should do all we can to "catch them being good" (and reward them), rather than "correct them when they're wrong."
- c. **Public recognition of doing good** – Obvious, public recognition of good, faithful behavior is always good. This challenges the other children to rise to that standard as well.

## Baking The Cake

1. **Life-changing successes**

We all remember and learn by our rewarded successes! God has built into us all the desire to please and to succeed. We should look for and reward a child's faith-based successes!

- d. **When helping another child** – Look for ways to reward or encourage helping another child!
- e. **When praying for strength** – Look for evidence of the child praying for strength for him/herself or for another child.
- f. **When anger is controlled** – Look for times when anger isn't expressed in toward others.
- g. **When good choices are made** – Look for obvious good choice-making decisions.
- h. **When quoting or using scripture** – The use of scripture in situations or conversations is a powerfully important time for reward.
- i. **When defending God's standards** – Look for a time when the child "stands up for God" in an encounter with others.

At every one of these encounters, we should publicly commend the child (in the front of other children and in front of his/her parents). Jesus was a master at this! (Matthew 8: 5-10; Mark 12: 41-44; Matthew 16: 13-19). Hopefully, the child will enjoy the "sweet taste of success" and want more of it!



## 2. Elevating/increasing opportunities and challenges for growth

Involving children in service to others is critical in growing their faith. Faith is not grown in a classroom! Faith is grown through struggles, challenges, failures, and successes! We should be designing opportunities for service throughout the year. These opportunities should be designed to increase the challenge to the children as the children grow older.



- a. **Simple acts of kindness in the nursery / preschool area** – We can prompt for and reward simple things that these young children do.
- b. **Early elementary service projects** – Simple afternoon or day-long acts of service both on and off the church campus (picking up trash, painting, gardening, cleaning, etc.).
- c. **Middle and upper elementary advanced service opportunities** – These may take all day, overnight, or an entire weekend to accomplish.
- d. **Eventual short-term mission trips** – We should be increasing these opportunities until our upper elementary children, and their parents, are considering some short-term mission trips.
- e. **“Debriefing” after every experience** – There should be a time of “debriefing” after every service experience, during which the children, their parents, and service leaders discuss what was accomplished, and what the children experienced. We should challenge the children to talk about their “failures,” and successes. We should challenge the children to encourage each other toward deeper acts of faith! (Hebrews 10: 24, 25)

### Acts 1:8 Expanding Service Model

