

"Practical Ideas For Growing Kids' Faith"

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How Faith Is Grown

A Common Misconception:

"A person's faith is developed as a result of rigorous Bible memorization, consistent attendance in religious education classes, adherence to strict behavior standards imposed by ever-present authority figures, an absence of exposure to the "world" through media and television, a disciplined vocabulary which is rich in biblical terminology and void of "empty chatter," and the presence of a promise to remain pure and holy throughout one's adult life."

- "Wickedpedia"

Faith Is **Introduced** "Organically"

A child's faith is developed over time as a result of his/her home, church, or life experiences. This is what God describes in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. There are two basic ways a child's faith grows "organically":

1. A child is born into a "faith environment" in which God is honored and faithfulness is encouraged. The child "adopts" his/her parent's views about God and faith through observation and discipline.
2. A child is born into a "faith vacuum" or an anti-faith environment where no faith is encouraged or modeled. The child "adopts" his/her parent's faithless views about God and faith. He/she may be left to "work it out" alone. This is a situation in which a child may make a personal decision regarding faith later in his/her life.



Faith Is **"Personalized"**

1. As the child grows, he/she begins to ask questions; and may or may not blindly accept his/her parent's views regarding God and faith. This begins in the mid-elementary years and becomes a personal venture by middle school or high school. The child may become more "dedicated" to his/her own view of life and values. This "dedication" will be the foundation for lifelong choices apart from God's influence.
2. The child may be introduced to "faith influencers" other than the parents. These "influencers" are encountered at church, camp, in the neighborhood, or at school. These people may enhance the foundations that the parents have laid or introduce the child to Jesus for the first time. These "influencers" challenge the child to think, question, and seek God on their own.
3. **Negative Possibility** – If a child didn't have significant godly "influencers" or godly parents, the child may be influenced by other "influencers" who don't lead the child toward God. If a child does indeed "fall away" for a while, there is hope that he or she will "return" to the Lord later. This is what is mentioned in Prov. 22:6, and also in the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" that Jesus told in Luke 15:11-32.



Faith Is Established

1. As a child becomes an adult, the faith that was introduced and personalized as a child becomes visible in choices, actions, words, and life plans. He/she may “break away” from the parents’ views slightly but will do all he/she can to bring honor to the parents while still following God’s unique calling and path.
2. As a child becomes an adult, he/she will look for ways to teach or influence others’ faith. His/her faith in God becomes a passion to serve others, and lead others to God.
3. **Negative Possibility** – A child grows into a confused adult whose “faith” is not focused on God, but rather on his/her own needs and interests. His/her choices, actions, words, and life plans may or may not be “acceptable” by the parents or by society. Rebellion is a strong possibility. The child becomes an adult whose rebellious lifestyle influences others “negatively.” The “passion” to rebel against “normal,” drives this person to very creative expressions and behaviors that may or may not be acceptable by society. (In these cases, the adult may “return” to God later in life and begin to “personalize” his/her own faith as an adult.)

Whose Job Is It Anyway?

“The role of the parent in faith development is a concept that died with pay phones and typewriters. We can no longer expect parents to care enough about their child’s faith development to make a difference. It is now the role of the church, Christian school, or online communities to develop a child’s faith. If we expect parents to do it, the children are going to be more confused than they already are.”

- “Wickedpedia”

Biblical Principles

1. Parents have always been given the scriptural responsibility to develop their own children’s faith.
“These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe...so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ...Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6: 1-9)

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6: 4)
2. People other than the parents may also influence a child’s faith.
“The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. ...The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ...The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” (1Samuel 3: 1-9)

“He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ...But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18: 2-6)

The Work of Growing A Child's Faith ("STARFLOP")

Growth Through Observing

- **Their parents' actions, standards, decisions, etc.** – Ideally, the parents are setting, and living by, godly/scriptural standards at home and in their personal lives. Ideally, the children are observing how these standards “work,” and the positive results of abiding by them.
- **Our examples in class and in the hallways** – The concept of “more is caught than taught” applies here. We need to realize that the children are watching us to see if what we teach is a valid lifestyle or not. If we teach love, we need to model it in our actions and words in the classroom and in the hallways. If this consistency is difficult, we need to seek God for the reason, and possibly step away from the children until we can be a consistent example in front of the children and in the hallways.
- **Our examples in our own personal life** – The children are very curious about our personal lives. They want to know what we do when they are not around. Hopefully, our personal lives are examples of “what you see is what you get” truth. Our personal lives should be invited to come into the classroom as “object lessons” for the correct way to follow the Lord. Talk about your personal life, and how you are finding victory in Jesus!
- **Being “salty”** – Let everything you do “ooze” with God's love, and all the other fruit of the Spirit. When given an opportunity to talk about your good example, let the children know that you “work” on it by making sure you are not blocking the Spirit from producing this fruit in you. You can talk about the importance of confessing sins, asking for forgiveness, and then asking the Holy Spirit to empower you to be more fruitful!



Growth Through Listening

- **Their parents' words** – Ideally, the parents are speaking words of faith and expressing positive examples of how to find God, connect with God, and trust God.
- **Our stories** – We have to do all we can to share our “stories” with the children. This includes our testimonies (edited for the age of the children), and our day-to-day thoughts, struggles, and victories in the Lord. We have to remember to always be positive (about God, His care, our trust, etc.) when sharing our stories.
- **Our prayers** – As we pray for the children and ourselves, we need to “bathe” our prayers with praise for God's presence, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We should be an example of how to talk with God (a comfortable, yet respectful, conversation), and how to lay our questions, needs, and challenges at His feet and praise Him for the outcome (“...not my will, but yours...”).
- **Being “salty”** – Let your words to the children, and about others be “seasoned” with examples of faith and respect. We should deal with life and situations in the presence of the children that will make them consider, “Some day I want to be like you,” or “How can I be that kind of a person?”



Growth Through Struggles

- **How their parents deal with personal struggles** – Ideally, the children will watch their parents struggle with life, bills, disappointments, and discouragements in light of their growing relationships with God. Ideally, the children will learn how to be “angry and yet not sin,” or to “acknowledge” God “in all their ways.”
- **Help with dealing with their own personal struggles and challenges** – We need to go beyond the curriculum or lesson and pay attention to the children’s needs. We need to acknowledge their struggles (listen and understand), and “walk” them through the process of dealing with them faithfully (rather than giving them “canned” answers like, “Trust God, it will be fine.”).
- **Being helped to see God at work** – In keeping with the concepts of “God’s ways are not our ways,” and “God can use/cause all things to work together for good,” we need to understand and feel their pain and struggles, while letting them “see” what God might be doing. In extreme loss, we shouldn’t try to discount the pain, simply affirm God’s presence.
- **Accepting trials, growing through them** – As in the case of a divorce or family break-up, which can’t be “fixed,” we need to assist the children in hanging onto God’s “hand” as they walk through the struggles. We should underscore the concepts that “God is with you,” and “He will give you the strength to endure this.” Our presence and support in the middle of struggles is vital. Remembering to pray for, and inquire about, them each week is powerfully effective! We are representatives of God, and if we care, they may believe that He does too.
- **Learning to worship and honor God in spite of troubles** – Assisting the children to focus on God’s presence, “character,” and promises, instead of the troubles is a critical step in faith development. Saying, “I love you, God. I know you are helping me go through this,” or “Thank you, God that you’re with me,” in the middle of a struggle may “feel” strange at first, but they should begin to recognize, and feel, the power of praise in the middle of trouble.



Growth Through Reading

- **Savoring God’s Word** – Ideally, God’s Word is read and used in the home. The children should be influenced to “savor” God’s Word at home. We can continue that example as we respectfully read and “savor” God’s Word around the children. As you read God’s Word, ask for a respectful “feel” in the room, etc. during the reading. Stop periodically and comment on how powerful and beautiful it is to read God’s Word. Comment on your own use of God’s Word throughout the week when you meet with the children. Let them know that you “savor” God’s Word in your own life.
- **Memorizing scripture** – Once again, what we do should enhance the example of the parents’ memorization of the scripture at home. The children “should” understand the value of memorizing the scripture when we meet with them. We should memorize scripture ourselves! This is for our own benefit as well as a benefit to the children. As the children see us quoting scripture from memory, they will be inspired to do the same thing. We should talk about how God’s Word “pops” into our head when we face life’s challenges. This can only happen through memorization.

Growth Through Prayer

- **Trusting God in spite of their feelings** – Ideally, their parents should be modeling this principle. Whenever you can, verbalize this process in front of the children (with limits). Obviously, you must be careful about verbalizing feelings that are too personal such as, “I trust God for the love I need for my husband/wife; right now, I don’t feel the love!” Working through your feelings in prayer is an important thing to model for your children. Use examples such as, “Sometimes I think I can’t teach this class. I don’t feel like I’m smart enough. But I pray for God to help me, and I have to trust Him that He will. It always works out fine!”
- **Casting their cares on Him** – Ideally, their parents should be modeling this principle. We should model the process of giving God our cares. We should say things like, “I really care about _____; but I know God is able to help me with this. I’ve given it to Him, and I just have to trust that He’ll take care of it.”
- **Talking with God throughout the day** – Ideally, their parents should be modeling this principle. We should say things like, “I was talking with God the other day about _____; I asked Him for wisdom to guide me. I’ll have to see what He tells me.” You can also say things like, “It is so great that we can talk to God anytime we want! He loves to hear from us!”



Growth Through Fellowship

- **Choosing the right friends** – Ideally the parents should be addressing this issue as well. Depending on their age, children will choose friends based on common interests, similar aptitudes, or common dislikes. Younger children will choose friends because they like them, but older children may choose friends because of what those friends “give them.” This is a “hot topic,” and children need help navigating the dangerous “waters” of peer pressure. We need to be very vocal about the effects of bad friends! We need to quote I Cor. 15: 33 often, “Bad company corrupts good character.” We should highlight good examples of others whose friend choices encourage goodness and Godly character. We need to be very vocal about examples in the news (carefully edited) in which bad company corrupted good character. We should carefully share our own personal stories of triumph and defeat in this area.
- **Inspired by “stars” at church** – As much as possible, we should turn the “spotlight” on “stars” in the church that the children know or can know. We need to build a sense of “awe” around these people who make good choices. Some of these “stars” can become mentors for the children, and some of them will simply be influencers to the children’s choices. Based on the principle of “Iron sharpens iron,” it might be good to create a “big brother/sister” connection between the “stars” in the youth group with some of the children. This is a good thing for all involved.



Growth Through Actions

- **Clearly identifying what is “wrong” and what is “right”** – Ideally, the parents should be instilling a clear sense of “right” and “wrong” in their children at home. This is a “politically-correct” nightmare today. We need to clearly identify “right” and “wrong” based on scripture, not on what society says. We need to clearly state that we’re standing on God’s Word about this, and that if we get criticized for it, that’s fine with us. The more we stand firm, the more we’ll inspire the children who are watching us.

- **Encouragement and rewards for doing the right thing** – We need to use the words, “Great job, you did the right thing,” or “I’m so proud of you for doing what you knew was the right thing.” The more we identify, encourage, and reward the “right” thing, the less we’ll have to deal with the “wrong” thing. Although, we can’t be afraid of talking about the “wrong” choices. BUT, we must never publicly (in front of other children) discuss a child’s “wrong” choice. That’s something that should be done privately, but it should be done.
- **Plenty of opportunities to serve others** – Ideally, the parents should be modeling and rewarding serving others to their children. We need to provide, monitor, and support opportunities to serve others. This should be started as early as 2 or 3 years old. It can be as simple as sharing toys, cleaning up others’ messes, or as complex as ministering to homeless people, participating in service projects in the community, or serving on a short-term mission trip with other families. We need to build service into the curriculum and weekly program as much as possible. Serving others forces us to “get over ourselves” and to seek God for help doing unpleasant things.
- **Surrounded by a “culture” of obedience** – Most parents deal with obedience in their children. Ideally, this concept is taught in such a positive way that the children “automatically” transfer their desire to obey their parents to a healthy desire to obey God. We should emphasize this concept in all of our lessons or encounters with the children. It is important for the children to hear us say things like, “It doesn’t matter what I think or feel, God wants me to obey (my boss, my pastor, the police, the rules, etc.).” We need to instantly reward those who do obey in front of other children.



Growth Through Teaching Others

- Ideally, parents should have begun this process of encouraging their children to “teach” or influence others. We should be simply “polishing” what the parents have started.
- **Helping others with a task** – We should look for ways to “invite” children who have conquered a task to help others with that same task. When we do this, we should do all we can to compliment and reward that behavior, without “puffing up” the child and making him/her feel more valuable than those whom he/she is helping.
- **Encouraging others to do their best, or to succeed** – We can empower children to become “Encouragement Partners” with us. Whenever they see another child either struggling to do his/her best, or working hard to do his/her best, they are empowered to verbally compliment that child (if we don’t get there first). Complimenting and encouraging is a great “back door” to becoming successful.
- **Leading others** – We need to look for children to elevate to “leadership” positions. This should be a private challenge, with a public announcement (if the child agrees). Most children will “shy” away from such a position, but with a little encouragement, they may agree and enjoy the “taste” of leading others. This “leadership” can be as simple as leading the rest of the class out of the room, to as complex as leading other children in a lesson or study. We must always “debrief” with the child afterward. This “debriefing” should include an out-of-balance measure of encouragement vs. suggestions for improvement.



- **Telling others about Jesus** – We should encourage the children to tell others about Jesus. This can be done at school, or in their neighborhood. Children are braver than adults, and they can sometime be much more effective witnesses. The most comfortable way to tell others about Jesus for a child is through “normal” conversations during lunch or during recess at school. It might be a simple response to another child’s question about the child’s attitudes, choices, etc. We should model how to do this, practice it, and then “debrief” after they’ve tried it. We should spend some time talking about their successes or “failures” among the whole class. As we talk about it, the other students will be encouraged to try it themselves. Witnessing is one of the greatest ways to strengthen a child’s faith!

“STARFLOP”

If we take the initial letters from each of the “Growth Through...” areas above, we can arrange them to make the “STARFLOP” acronym. (**S**truggles, **T**eaching, **A**ctions, **R**eading, **F**ellowship, **L**istening, **O**bserving, **P**ray = **STARFLOP**).

A good way to remember the “STARFLOP” acronym is to remember that we don’t want the children’s lives to “flop” like so many Hollywood “stars” lives!