

Shaping the Hearts and Minds of Our Youth

*No written word nor, spoken plea
Can teach young hearts what they should be;
Nor all the books upon the shelves,
But what the teachers are themselves. ~ Unknown*

This poem is just another version of what many of us grew up hearing: children do what they SEE, not what we SAY. Parents are the first teachers from which children learn. So, be honest: *Do you want your children to imitate you?*

As parents, we spend a lot of time concerned about our children's academic success, physical development and social interactions, but too often, we fail to give equal weight to providing spiritual guidance in the home. One of the merits of guiding children in their spiritual development is to reach their hearts. If we are able to reach them at the heart level, we can prepare them for life from the inside out. While ultimately, it is Christ who transforms or shapes a child's heart—or *any heart*—parents can and should help lay that foundation.

As we send our youth and young adults off to school, the most that we can pray and hope for is that we have modeled a godly life for them and given them a solid spiritual foundation sufficient to help them navigate this journey we call life. We pray that that foundation has and will continue to ***shape the hearts and minds of our youth.***

Sending children to Bible Study and other church-related activities is a good start, but those things should complement the spiritual nurturing that they receive at home, under the leadership of godly parents.

Life can be challenging and—as parents—we want to spare or cushion the pain, mistakes, disappointments and difficulties that our offspring are bound to face. While we don't want to be labeled helicopter or 'Velcro' parents, we try to prepare our youth for life experiences as best that we can. However, in our quest to do so, sometimes that old saying '*what goes around comes around*' frequently comes back to haunt us. In other words, just as we didn't always heed the advice and counsel of our parents, our children don't always listen to us. At a certain age, most children start 'feeling themselves' and think they know everything. Sometimes we must let them discover or experience things for themselves, even when it means making mistakes.

These days, we hear a lot about millennials—who they are and what they are like. They are roughly 20 to 35 years old and many are now making their own mark in life. However, demographers have started watching another generation of youth. They are coming behind millennials and they have already been tagged as the 'Centennials' or 'Generation Z.' Centennials were born starting around 1996, making them 5 to 19 years old now. In contrast to millennials, most Centennials have had their eyes open from the beginning. They were born in the aftermath of the New York Twin Towers' tragedy, global terrorism and the Great Recession of 2008. They number approximately 60 million, outnumbering millennials by one million, according to census data.

Generation Z is technologically savvy and while they take in information quickly, their interest wanes just as fast. Simply put, if we don't communicate quickly and succinctly to

this generation of emoji-users, we lose them. While millennials pioneered Facebook, Generation Z—which is depicted as more cautious, silent and fearful—prefers other social media platforms like SnapChat, Secret or Whisper.

That said, how then do we reach, teach and help shape the hearts and minds of our youth? One thing that remains steadfast—*throughout ALL generations*—is that preaching and nagging youth do not work. Kids are people too, so while we must maintain boundaries with our youth, we should also find positive ways to relate to and love them individually. There is no ‘one size fits all.’ Shaping the hearts and minds of our youth requires us to engage with them—*frequently and honestly*. It requires us to find out ‘what makes them tick’ and use that as an ‘ice breaker’ or common denominator. The goal of parents should not be to become their children’s best friend, but to earn their respect, listen to them, guide them, love them and give them our undivided time and attention, and expect—even demand—the same in return.

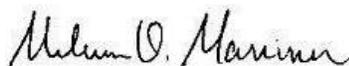
Parents naturally love their children, but in our busy lives, it’s sometimes difficult to translate that love into action. One of the most important ways children spell “love” is T-I-M-E. Spending intentional time with youth helps unlock the heart of a child; they sense whether they are a priority in their parent’s life. None of us is perfect and there are priorities that will sometimes compete with our ability to spend time with our children, but open and honest communication helps foster good, solid relationships with them.

Raising children without boundaries and giving them everything they want often backfires. Many youth raised in this manner, grow up expecting the world to be their oyster and they crack or buckle when they learn that the ‘real world’ can be cold, cruel and callous. They don’t know how to handle failure and disappointment, and more importantly, they may forget to put that spiritual foundation into practice. John 16:33 tells us that “*In this world, you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*” Therefore, if we have shaped the hearts and minds of our youth, they should not be surprised; they should know to call upon the Word of God, pray and even seek godly counsel to help get them through life.

Shaping the hearts and minds of our youth is an awesome and sometimes difficult responsibility. While I don’t agree with his religious philosophy, the Dalai Lama’s words ring true: *Give the ones you love wings to fly, roots to come back and reasons to stay.* If we have laid a good spiritual foundation for our youth, we should allow and even encourage them to fly. And, even if they stray—just like the prodigal son—they will return.

Let’s celebrate our youth and never stop praying for them knowing that we have done our part to shape their hearts and minds.

Peace and power,



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