**Godly Parenting in a Structured Environment**

As Biblical counselors we have heard from the beginning of our training no one can blame their environment for failure to walk the Christian walk. We cannot blame our home, family, or friends, our culture or country of origin, our church, school or teachers, even though these do impact every child’s early formation.

As parents, however, we must look at the need to structure the environment for better parenting of our children. As counselors, we must be prepared to help parents understand the principles of effective parenting. Structuring the environment is a key factor in successful parenting.

A structured environment is fertile soil for Deuteronomy 6:2-9 parenting. Ephesians 6:4 directs fathers to train their children effectively by balancing nurture (structured discipline) with admonition (heart training for godliness). In today’s “Christian” culture, children hear a lot of admonition to do right, but often lack the structure to put that admonition into practice! Structure will be the emphasis of this article.

***Modeling after God the Father***

Hebrews 12:5-13 encourages all of us to accept our Heavenly Father’s discipline as that which helps us to grow and to peacefully and productively walk the straight and narrow path of righteousness. Likewise, the goal of good parenting is to help children mature in wisdom and moral judgments in the context of a disciplined and holy lifestyle. Effective parenting structures a child’s environment to encourage maturity in every sphere of the child’s life.

The home is where this all begins. We are talking about an environment where discipline means more than just giving consequences when the child does wrong, but also establishes a structured environment where there are controls to help prevent temptations and wrong doing. These parental consequences and controls progressively diminish as a child matures. The goal is moral maturity, not just an age or physical maturity.

Parents represent God’s authority to their children. Parents must live under the authority of God just as they want their children to live under their own biblically directed authority. 1 Timothy 3:4 requires a godly man to manage his own household well. His children are under control with all dignity. He knows how to structure the environment of his home so his children will live in submission to an organized environment. Children tend to flourish in a structured environment guided by parents who model a life that honors God and that their children want to emulate.

Proverbs 22:6 is a principle reflecting this, though we as counselors must be careful not to beat up parents with this verse when a child chooses a prodigal lifestyle. Children can choose to go against God the Father’s model and their own parents’ authority. After all, God’s very first children, Adam and Eve, chose rebellion over obedience, and it was not God’s fault! As parents, we are responsible for the training; the child is responsible for his response to the training.

***So what does that modeling look like?***

Godly parents reflect Christlikeness in their own life, placing controls on their child to facilitate and provoke biblical maturity in a structured environment. Luke 2:52 reflects upon Jesus’ maturity in mind and body, as well as spiritually and socially. Children who feel safe and protected within structured boundaries are free to develop as God designed each of them in all spheres of their life.

We are warned against allowing children to structure their own environment with foolish standards. Proverbs 29:15 contrasts how discipline produces wisdom, but lawlessness brings shame to parents. The child left to structure his own environment will find out that all the freedoms he thinks are really cool and satisfying often result in ultimately painful consequences and enslavement.

When we structure the environment for our families we must be aware of the shaping influences in the child’s experiences. His environment may either provide temptation to sin or fertile soil for godliness. His response will be wise choices or foolish choices. This in turn gives parents opportunity to evaluate the need for greater structure, or freedom to transfer responsibility to the maturing child.

Matthew 6:13 reminds us that our Heavenly Father does not lead us into or leave us in situations that would encourage us to sin. We are to pray for deliverance from evil. A consistent and structured environment at home guides a child who is out in the community with temptations all around, but whose parents have modeled godliness and have given him instructions on how to deal with the temptations within that environment. This is how we deliver our children from evil!

Our Heavenly Father calls upon us to control the shaping influences of our own environment. We are told to control our thoughts and behaviors because what we think about and act upon influences the environment around us. Also we must control our thoughts about and behaviors toward an environment that is beyond our control (2Cor 10:5, Php 4:8). We have a responsibility before God to respond Biblically to all the circumstances of life, and to trust Him in the midst of difficult circumstances (1Cor 10:13-14; Jas 1:2-4). We teach and model this in every day life.

***So how do parents help children develop character?***

Just as our Father helps us through difficult circumstances, we should build character-shaping opportunities into our children’s environment, giving them a chance to practice making right choices still under the tutelage and guidance of parents. Then we celebrate their victories and success and teach them through the struggles and problems.

It is essential that parents structure the environment to guide children in evaluating friendships. At times parental controls on those friendships are a necessity. Always a watchful eye is prudent, as Paul warns in 1Cor 15:33 about the deception of thinking that our children can have any type of friends, saved or unsaved, and that those friendships won’t impact them either for good or bad. Evil companions corrupt good character. Failure to structure friendships of our children allows for choosing close friends who are not walking with the Lord and who encourage rebellion to authority.

Another area needing structure is entertainment and activities. Our Heavenly Father calls us to purity, to not set our hearts and eyes on worthless things. We guide our children to be careful of the activities and entertainment in which they participate (2Cor 6:16, Ps 102:3, Eph 4:3, Php 4:8).

A big part to structuring the environment is determining who will teach the children and what their educational opportunities or limitations will be. Our educational approach is to train thinking children who choose to walk in the way of wisdom, who can articulate what they believe and why. Education must challenge them to think clearly and to embrace what is true. One size does not fit all! Every parent must evaluate their child’s needs and gifts and then choose what best fits the child. Structure will encourage developing the mind to the best of that child’s ability, holding him responsible for his own schoolwork.

God commands us to separate from false teachers, to not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, to not be taken captive by empty philosophies. Our structure must include encouragement to hunger after the pure milk of the Word of God. This structure includes both home and local church. Youth ministry must be more than just social. Youth must be challenged to live out their faith (Ps 1, Col 2:8, 1Pe 2:2).

Parents need to be asking themselves a few very important questions. What ungodly influences are your children exposed to that you must wisely control and limit? What godly influences do your children need to be more exposed to? What are you specifically going to do about it?

A well-structured environment establishes routines to help the children develop disciplined habits. God is a God of routines; He is not a God of disorder. God has a purpose and He works it out just as He wills (Eph 1:11). We help our children set goals that will produce structure and discipline in their routines, such as making their beds first thing upon arising each morning. The first two chapters in Genesis show God's routine, both in an orderly creation and in His communication with His children. His Word accomplishes His purposes in a very systematic way.

All children need routine and habits, and it is the parents’ responsibility to establish those early, as in bedtime routines, eating habits, care of the body, exercise, study habits, habits of personal hygiene and rest times (1Tim 3:4). Children need responsibilities such as household chores or care of family pets. All of these routines help develop godly character. As he matures, the child takes on more and more responsibility for maintaining this structured routine. These habits help the children to be better stewards of their time and to faithfully develop all their gifts and talents.

Children must be encouraged to use those gifts to love God and to love their neighbors in a timely and structured way (Eccl 3:1). Human nature is naturally bent toward selfishness. Yet, when a family develops organized projects together, the whole family benefits and enjoys each other while producing great service to the church body and community. One family may pack lunches for a group like *“Feed My Starving Children”*, while another cleans house for an elderly widow in their local congregation. Both are serving God and others!

Another structure is to develop routines accomplishing personal responsibilities or habits of personal sanctification. A routine of spiritual nourishment includes times of individual Bible study and prayer, family worship and Scripture memory that become a normal part of a disciplined life. A family who serves God and grows together becomes a strong and stable structure that the winds of culture cannot blow down!

Structuring extracurricular activities, like sports, hobbies, talents, and other interest that the child may have all need to fit within the routine of a structured environment. Sometimes, families overfill the schedule and routine turns to chaos! Being too busy creates stress and stress destroys the benefits of those chaotic activities. As in all of life, there is a healthy balance to be maintained. Rest, relaxation, and “down times” also are part of a good structure.

One great motivation is that God rewards faithfulness with greater opportunities and future usefulness. Parent should be sure to teach their children the parable of the talents, encouraging each child to use his/her talents whether two talents or five. The result is that everyone who develops what he has will be given more in abundance. Wise stewardship of time is a factor. Those who faithfully use and multiply their talents will find the rewards that God has for their faithfulness.

In conclusion, God controls everything in life to promote change in our lives (Rom 8:28,29). The controlling and shaping influences He allows give us opportunities to mature. From the beginning He established routines; parents are called to do the same with their children. "Parents, do not provoke your children, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,” (Eph 6:4).  We structure the environment as best as we can to promote opportunities for our children to mature.

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