Faith Formation is about Christ being formed in our kids!

“Faith is established when someone has a firm conviction (not just good information) and has chosen to personally surrender all rights & privileges of his or her life in submission to God, not just to good behavior.” - Dr. Michelle Anthony, Dreaming of More for the Next Generation

How do we partner with the Holy Spirit to foster Faith Formation in our kids so that Christ is being formed in them?

“We have counted on preaching, teaching and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer, and counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian. But, for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, let alone with others.” – Dallas Willard, The Great Omission

**Colossians 1:29b** “... Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

**Hebrews 12:1b-2a** “… let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith …”

**John 1:14** “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

**Psalm 127:3** (NLT) “Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him.”
“Children learn trust – the experience of faith – through their relationship with their parents. The emotional foundation for all of their latter spiritual growth has been laid, for better or for worse, during the first six years of life.” Dr. Larry D. Stephens, Your Child’s Faith

When it comes to Faith Formation, a parent’s focus is on two things when they pray and shepherd (respond to and guide) their children:

1. Christ being formed in them.
2. The child’s beliefs being marked by Biblical thinking.

How do we teach our children to discern God’s voice?

- Tell children how God is leading you, speaking to you, what He’s showing you in His Word.
- Read the Bible with children as a love story, not a rulebook.
- Train children to read and apply the Bible.
- Make time for children to stop and listen to His voice.

Developmental Stages of Spiritual Development:

Birth – 15 months: Initial Faith in God

15 months – 3 years: Internalizing God’s Unconditional Love

3 – 6 years: Internalizing God’s Grace
6-12 years: A Healthy Image of God

“The current Barna study indicates that nearly half of all Americans who follow Jesus Christ do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%).” - George Barna

12-21 years: Spiritual Identity

21 years and older: Personal Intimacy with God

Proverbs 18:21a  “The tongue has the power of life and death …”

For Further Study

Your Child’s Faith by Dr. Larry D. Stephens

Overview: What’s the secret to building a deep, lasting Christian faith in our children? With today's cultural pressures turned up high, how can we as parents instill convictions that will stand proof to the times at hand and the times ahead? Dr. Larry Stephens believes a legacy of faith isn't a matter of hit-or-miss. In Your Child’s Faith, he shows how to secure our children's spirituality for tomorrow’s world. Beginning at the roots, Dr. Stephens takes us for a close-up on the different stages of a growing, vital faith, from infancy to adulthood.
Why Christian Kids Rebel: Trading Heartache for Hope by Dr. Tim Kimmel

Overview: Author of Grace-Based Parenting and the best-selling Little House on the Freeway, Dr. Tim Kimmel helps Christian parents avoid the potential problems their well-meaning parenting styles could create. This book offers a new way to look at the “ideal” Christian home and shows why “cocoon-style” Christian homes don’t always work. Many parents have “done it all” when it comes to the checklist of good Christian parenting, only to see their son or daughter step away from their belief system and embrace other lifestyle choices.

Dr. Kimmel helps to increase the chances that your children will develop a vibrant faith early in life and stick with it on into adulthood. It will also provide help and hope for those already dealing with a rebellious teen and teach them how to lead the child back into a walk of faith.

Below is a Cliff Notes Version of what Dr. Stephens refers to as “Stages of Spiritual Development” in his book, Your Child’s Faith (along with some personal additions from Sherilyn).

Birth – 15 months: A child is developing their initial faith in God
Their greatest need is to develop the capacity to internalize God as an object of security and trust. In many regards you, the parent, represent God to the child so seek to do the following:

- **Meet your child’s physical needs**, which translate to emotional needs.
- **Be consistent**; repeat words, sounds, touches and of course, nurturing. Consistency gives the child a sense of security that comes from familiarity
- **Be available** for you’re the needs of your infant as they are in an egocentric stage so be instantly available to his/her needs.
- **Be patient** with your infant being sure to base the time you spend nurturing your them according to their need for you, not your need for them!
- **Be the primary caregiver if at all possible, or share that with your spouse**. A child bonds with their primary caregiver, and needs to consistently know and be reminded that one is there to meet their needs and bond with them, at least for the first 15 mo. of life.

15 months – 3 years: A child is internalizing God’s unconditional love for them. Their greatest need is to feel lovable and worthwhile to the parent, even while experiencing inner frustrations with the parent’s loving authority. They are learning that God’s love is unconditional, so seek to do the following:

- **Give your child love AND limits**; recognizing that toddlers need freedom but they also need boundaries.
- **Communicate unconditional love** no matter what their behavior is like. Let your child know often that they are accepted and wanted.
- **Balance your yes and no’s**. Seek to turn a “no” into a “yes” whenever possible such as;
instead of “no, you can’t play that game. You have to go to bed!” Say, “Yes, you can play that game tomorrow morning when you wake up. We’ll put it right outside your bedroom door so you won’t forget.” THEN BE SURE TO PLAY IT!

Seeking to control a toddler by constantly saying “no” will frustrate them and will risk making them chronically angry and internalizing a negative perspective in general.

• **Major on the majors** (“That stove is hot and will burn you!”) and **minor on the minors** (“This is not a good time to swim but we’ll go later.”) In other words, be flexible and understanding more than rigid and controlling.

• **Pray with your toddler**, as it is the beginning of their intimate relationship with God.

• **Be aware of your child’s spiritual perceptions**. Listen to what they say about God (“God will be mad!” or “God loves you, mommy!”). Be in tune and correct wrong perceptions about God before they take root within.

“Toddlerhood presents a need for a child to be independent, wanting to do everything himself. It is part of the toddler’s God-given drive to set himself apart as an individual. Avoid taking the toddler’s frustration, independence or conflict personally. React on an adult level, not the child’s level. Stay above the fray. If you trade anger for anger and frustration for frustration, you will evoke shame and low self-worth in your toddler.” - Dr. Larry D. Stephens

### 3 – 6 years: A child is beginning to internalize God’s grace.

Their greatest need is to continue to believe and trust God’s *unconditional* love as they learn to trust God for forgiveness and begin to see God’s world as good. This is the beginning stage of developing positive, early spiritual concepts. **This is the age when positive experiences with parents begin to shape a child’s positive image of God so seek to do the following:**

• **Make connections between the Bible and real life** as often as you can (“Mommy – isn’t that rainbow beautiful? Yes, God made the rainbow” and then tell them Noah’s story, etc.)

• **Meet their strong emotions with help** and guidance rather than scolding and shame by telling them (not expecting them!) what to do when they are angry, how to express that anger in a healthy and helpful way.

• **Offer preschooler child a lot of approval** whenever you have the chance. Encourage them to try new things and explore new things.

• **Be open and accepting** making it easy for your preschooler to come and say what makes them afraid or that they’ve done something wrong or that they are mad or sad, etc.

• **Avoid angry outbursts and open conflict** in your home, and in your marriage. Preschoolers are concrete thinkers so they can conclude the wrong thing. Someone once said that “children are great observers but lousy interpreters so protect them from what they hear and see. (And if your marriage can’t solve conflict without anger, seek Christian counseling!) This is age when your child is developing his/her attitude about life and family, whether positive or negative.

• **Be repetitive about rituals**; things like going to church, prayer time (dinner, bedtime), reading the Bible, getting ready for school, helping with dinner and more, it sets the stage for habits.

• **Teach them about God but focus on Jesus**, who lived, walked on the earth *(tangible)*. Again, according to experts, children age 2-6 are concrete thinkers so a preschooler might think the pastor is God who lives at church. This is one reason why I (Sherilyn) am not a big fan of
preschoolers taking communion or trusting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Most really don’t understand what they are doing, there are however, exceptions to the rule!

- **Use Bible stories to convey truth** by using interactive, playful, fun methods to tell the stories.
- Preschoolers LOVE stories so instead of reading the Bible story, tell it and use different voices for different characters, spray bottles and a fan for a storm, a big blanket for water, etc. Use your imagination, and a lot of prayer to make the stories come alive.
- **Use warm, happy memories to encourage your child’s spiritual development** as preschoolers are more emotional than cognitive and their memory is triggered by strong emotions. (For example, while on vacation and in nature, talk often about God the Creator.)
- **Be a good friend to your child**, enter into playtime with them. Early spiritual concepts will be received more-readily from parents who give their child TIME and ATTENTION.
- **Don’t use God as a threat!** Preschool age is the time to help your child feel spiritually secure so help them develop a positive attitude toward God and know they are a beloved child of God. Again, this is my (Sherilyn) opinion but don’t talk to your preschooler about hell or Satan, etc.

**6-12 years: A child is developing a healthy image of God.** Their greatest need is to view themselves as a positive spiritual being. They are starting to develop the motivation to **understand** God and learn about spiritual concepts. They are learning to trust God for guidance, support and spiritual experiences like worship, prayer and Bible reading as enjoyable. **Many children at this stage will begin their own personal relationship with God at some point so seek to do the following:**

- **Create a pleasant spiritual atmosphere at home**; a place where it feels natural to talk about God and spiritual things but is not legalistic boot camp.
- **Still play with your child** as it builds relationship and warm memories enhancing his/her view of God as a warm, relational being.
- **Let the Fruit of the Spirit mark your character**; be Spirit-controlled not emotionally controlled. Apologize when mess up!
- **Provide Christian Music for them to listen to** and set the precedence in their spirit as to what is appropriate and what is not, the spirit in the music.
- **Help them to begin the habit of devotions**. Come up with your own name for this time such as; God Time, my time with Jesus, quiet time, etc.
- **Regularly talk about and invite them to trust Jesus** as their personal Savior Lord. Invite them to make a decision to follow Him.
- **Discipline with love and consistency**, not anger and frustration! This is a time children are coming into their innate personality that might not get along with yours and consistent, affirming discipline is still crucial!
- **Continually reassure your child of your love for them** personally. Remind them that they are lovable and valuable because at this stage of development most children feel some level of being inferior, inadequate, incompetent and unlovable. Since they’ve not yet learned or matured enough to trust themselves, they look to the parent to reassure them. If their parent does not reassure them, or is chronically critical, they’ll look to peers to reassure them.
Heart-to-Heart
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12-21 years: A child (young adult) is searching for spiritual identity. Their greatest need is to find meaning and purpose in life through God/their personal relationship with Jesus. It’s important that the come to personal faith in Jesus Christ if they have not already. They will be maturing and seeking to accept themselves as valuable and worthwhile to God and to others as they also develop hope and faith for their unknown future. They slowly transfer their dependence on self and God over their dependence on their parents and other significant adults. Also, their conscience is being formed more completely during this stage so seek to do the following:

• **Be someone your teenager or young adult child can trust implicitly.** It will help them trust God as a good Father.
• **Be a reflection of the love of the Heavenly Father;** listen, forgive, love, be patient, never forsake, never force to believe, etc.
• **Be grace-based** as this can be a challenging stage of self-discovery, peer pressure and insecurity. God’s grace is the foundation for living life well and for self-love, in all the right ways.
• **Be sure to pass on relationship with Jesus, not religion!** Our sons and daughters are at a fork in road during adolescence and the more time and attention given to lay foundation for “Christ formed IN me” - the easier it will be them choose to follow Jesus over the many things and people that will beg for their attention and devotion.

“It is important that your teenager experiences you, the parent as a reliable source of help, wisdom, integrity and affirmation throughout the stages of his emotional and spiritual development, so that he will look to you and to God as a guide in his search for meaning.”  
– Dr. Larry D. Stephens, Your Child’s Faith

21 years and beyond: This is when one develops and enjoys their personal intimacy with God. At this stage, there is obviously little to no “parenting” except what is done on your knees. It’s at this stage that you become a sounding board, advisor and friend! When it comes to Faith Formation in all us, our greatest need is intimacy with God versus isolation from Him so seek to do the following:

• **Pray for them!** Be specific. Pray Scripture. Ask them what you can pray for. Tell them when you sense you are called to pray overtime for them.
• **Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit about your child and act** on what you hear!
• **Intentionally speak to them about spiritual things** but careful with the timing and always present your perspective as that, YOUR perspective.
• **Learn to ask good questions!**
• **Help them find a good church** if and when they ask for help. A healthy spiritual community makes a huge difference in their Faith Formation at this stage!
• **Pray some more!** 😇 Prayer Is where heaven meets earth!