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Pieter  
2.9.50

# A Little Child Shall Lead Them

**Hopeful Parenting in a Confused World**

"This book is beautiful...It is Arnold's reverence for children that I love."

Jonathan Kozol

A LITTLE CHILD  
SHALL LEAD THEM

*Hopeful Parenting in a  
Confused World*

J O H A N N C H R I S T O P H A R N O L D

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TO MY PARENTS,  
WHOSE REVERENCE FOR THE CHILDLIKE SPIRIT  
AND LOVE FOR CHILDREN  
HAS PROVIDED A ROCK FOR MANY  
TO STAND ON.

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## INTRODUCTION

Everywhere in society today we can see the fruits of an unguided and unloved generation. The problems need hardly be named: they are the daily fare of every newspaper, and, increasingly, they affect the homes of even the most protected, privileged children. Solutions to the crisis (for it is really nothing less) are abundant. Bookstore shelves groan with new volumes on parenting, family therapists are in high demand, and politicians of every party compete to defend our families and to lament the loss of “traditional values.”

Yet something is drastically wrong. Somewhere along the line we have forgotten what childhood is all about. In our preoccupation with adult solutions, we have lost sight of our children — of their vulnerability and innocence, their joyousness, and their love. We have lost touch with the childlike spirit.

Despite the words we use to describe the process of education — words like “parenting,” “child rearing,” and other such terms — it seems that in real life we grown-ups often learn as much from our children as they learn from us. In a certain sense, this is how it should be. Anyone who has raised children knows that education is a two-way street. By bursting the balloons of our theories, they constantly bring us back down to earth when we have become idealistic; and in constantly prodding us for answers to everything from “why is it bedtime?” to “what happens when you die?” they give us plenty of questions to think about ourselves.



In a world that has grown increasingly cold and unchildlike, it is no easy thing to raise even one child, to guide him or her through the early years and the turmoil of adolescence. Yet whenever we open our hearts to the little ones around us, and whenever we stop to listen to them, we will discover that the challenges and trials they bring with them are always outweighed by greater joys and blessings. Inasmuch as we allow them to guide us with their simplicity, humility, and love, we will find that they can give us new hope and new courage.

*J. Christoph Arnold  
Rifton, New York*

## I. THE CHILDLIKE SPIRIT

*Then children were brought to him so that he could lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them" (Mt. 19:13-14).*

It is hard to think of a more wonderful insight into the significance of children than these words of Jesus. Not only do they show his great love for every individual child, but also the importance of all children as the heirs to God's future. Yet what promise do they hold for us who are not children? Jesus' words become clearer to us when we understand what he means by "children": he is not speaking merely of immature human beings, but of every person who is willing to recognize that he or she is a child of God.

Once we have accepted the fact that we are children of God, our relationship to him will be like that of small children to their father and mother. Like children, we will open doors and enter them; like children, we will ask for what we need, and accept whatever is given to us; like children, we will not doubt the motives of others, but trust them.

In Matthew 7:7-11, Jesus says:

Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his child asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who











### 3. THE UNBORN CHILD

The nine months of waiting for a baby can deepen a couple's relationship and bring them closer to each other than any other time in their marriage. After all, the development of a baby in its mother's womb is far more than a biological process, even though that in itself is almost too great to comprehend. Especially for a young couple looking forward to their first child, there is a sense of excitement, the thrill of the unknown, a strange mixture of anxiety and expectant joy. There is also awe before the mystery of new life and the responsibility of parenthood.

In Psalm 139:13-16 we read:

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

In his book *Inner Land*, my grandfather Eberhard Arnold describes the unborn child not merely as a developing fetus, but as a little soul— a being for whom we must have reverence.

For the unborn as much as for the living child, a secure, loving family life is of great importance. Even while still in the womb, an unborn child can suffer if he or she does not feel nurturing love and tenderness. Psychologists





church service where their fathers and mothers present them to the congregation. In being “given” to the church, the children are given into its care and keeping. The church then returns each one to his or her parents to be raised by them in the love of God. To us, the act is more than symbolic. Ultimately, our children do not belong to us. They are gifts entrusted to us by God.

## 5. MOTHERHOOD

**A**true mother thinks day and night about the well-being of her children. She is the first to praise them and to comfort them, and also the first to protect them when she senses that they may be in danger. It is she who has carried them and borne the pains of pregnancy and childbirth, and it is she who now continues to carry them in her heart. Her intuition is often clearer than her husband's, and she will not let him make light of her concerns or reassure her too easily. She will also be the first to turn to God on a child's behalf. Perhaps that is what inspired the old Jewish saying, "God could not be everywhere at once, so he gave each child a mother."

When a child cries at night, it is usually the mother who will be at his or her bedside first. She feels her child's pain, instinctively, and she will bear it not only as a burden, but also as a privilege and a joy.

A mother's sensitivity and love is boundless. She will continue to keep her children on her heart long after others have given up on them. Like St. Augustine's mother Monica, who refused to disown him during his years of youthful rebellion, she will continue to have hope for a prodigal son (or daughter) even when everyone else has condemned him. Moreover, she will believe for him when he has ceased to believe.

I cannot thank God enough for the love of my mother, and for her deep relationship with my father. Even though they were sparing in their use of religious language (they never talked about their piety), it was obvious to us seven children that they loved God, one another, and each of us. And while it

was clear that our father was head of the family, he never tolerated the slightest disrespect from us towards our mother.

Many women in our time rebel against motherhood. They forget that it is not only a God-given task, but a God-given privilege as well. Motherhood was once regarded as the noblest calling of a woman; nowadays, it is pushed aside by more “desirable” careers and seen as an inconvenience or even an embarrassment. It is true that many women rebel because of the oppression and lovelessness of the men around them, but in the end their resentment, understandable as it may be, achieves little. How different family life could be if we admitted to our confusion about the role of man and of woman; if we sought to rediscover *God’s* plan for both, and regarded one another with respect and love!

In our communities, mothers participate in the daily work as fully as possible — as cooks and nurses, doctors and seamstresses, accountants, teachers, graphic designers, and secretaries. Yet when pregnancy requires it, their first priority is always motherhood. Far from regretting or resenting it, they feel, as all of us do, that it is a gift; that in God’s eyes, there is no sacrifice more worthy than that made for the sake of a child.

## 6. FATHERHOOD

Unbelievable as it may seem, half of our nation's children will spend at least part of their childhood without a father in the home. Never before in our history have so many men abandoned the children they fathered. Fathers are vanishing from their children's lives, not just physically, but legally as well. The number of paternity suits is steadily on the rise, and the problem of "deadbeat dads" is taking on the proportions of a national catastrophe.

Not surprisingly, many of the same people who complain about the loss of "family values" have abandoned wives and children themselves, often through divorce and remarriage. Despite their words, their actions send the message that fatherhood is simply not a priority to them. In some cases, even their words betray them. Instead of speaking about "deadbeat dads," they speak about "illegitimate children" and "unwed mothers"—terms that conveniently shift the burden of stigma and guilt away from themselves and onto the woman and child. Is anyone ever "illegitimate" in God's eyes?

As a nation, we have lost something precious. In previous centuries, fathers were seen as irreplaceable. They may not have been primary caregivers, but they bore the ultimate responsibility for the well-being of their wives and children. In the last one hundred years this has changed fundamentally. In a century marked by war, political unrest, and unprecedented opportunities for travel, more children than ever before have grown up without a father in the house.

True fatherhood, of course, entails far more than being physically present

in the life of a child. There are plenty of men who, because they do not relate to their children, are emotionally absent, even though they may live in the same house with them. How many fathers are there today who confuse their children's hunger for love and attention with the desire for material things? All too often, in an attempt to make up for long absences or to still a guilty conscience, men send home gifts, when what their children really long for is a hug, a smile, or a story at bedtime.

One of the things children need most in a father is someone who can see the world through a child's eyes. Author Ralph Kinney Bennett writes:

This is one of the most overlooked rules for a father. Go back to your childhood, and you begin to understand why so many things are mysterious, frightening, or even funny to a child...

Fathers who forget the child's point of view are nonplused, for instance, when they buy their daughter an expensive toy, only to see her spend hours playing with the box the toy came in — except that it isn't a box; it's a castle. Fathers would do well to remember when their wagon was really a stage-coach, or their bed a spaceship. [12]

In the first five years of my life, my father's work kept him away from home for a total of three years. Although I know this had certain negative effects on my early childhood, I have never doubted my father's love. We were separated physically, but he remained a positive presence in my life.

Any true relationship between a father and his child is deeply dependent on the father's relationship to God. It is God who made him a father, and he must feel an inner assurance that it is his duty to be the head of his family. A father who lacks moral character or is unsure of himself cannot provide his children with real security. This is not to say he should be authoritarian. Even when he needs to hold his ground on an issue—even when he is setting necessary boundaries and limits—he must always be sensitive and have a heart for his children.

Fatherhood begins before the birth of a child. During his wife's pregnancy,



## 7. CREATING A HOME

It is one thing to have children. To create a true home, a place of love and security, is quite a different matter. Unfortunately, many adults lack a sense of what this means. They have no time for their children and, if they are married, not even for their spouse. They are always “too busy.” Some parents are so preoccupied with their jobs that even when they do see their children at the end of a long day, they have no energy to be available for them. They may sit in the same room with their children, but their minds are still back at their place of work, and one eye is on the evening news.

Parents who love their children will be determined to be with them as regularly as possible—and to be there for them. Indoor activities like reading aloud, working on hobbies, and above all, eating together give vital opportunities for interaction and a sense of togetherness. So do outdoor activities like basketball, tennis, fishing, or backpacking. They provide the sort of positive experiences that children will not forget as they grow up, marry, and raise their own families.

Birthdays, graduations, and other similar occasions are a very important part of home life, too. Aside from simply being happy times, they are events that nurture and help children grow; times when we can thank God for them and let them know how much we love and appreciate them and celebrate their lives. In general, however, it is the priorities we set in our everyday lives that have the greatest impact on our children. A woman recently wrote to me:

My father, like most men of his generation, chose to immerse himself in his career: he was a naval officer. I can remember very vividly the times that he really took time to be with us. Because they were so few, each one was very special. We loved our father very much; he was so attentive and gentle when he was at home. At the time we didn't feel ignored; it seemed quite normal that he had to work every weekend or be away for a month to a year at a time. Now that I'm an adult I wonder what he sacrificed all that time for. A career? His country? Certainly not for the money. It strikes me as selfishness masked as duty. Yet I am sure that if my marriage had continued and we would have had children, my husband and I would have done the very same thing. It's considered "normal" in middle-class families to put one's career first.

Sometimes, creating a space for "family time" with your children will require putting your foot down, especially when they are playing outdoors with their friends, for instance, and you call them in for dinner. Once a routine has been established, though, children will look forward to it. Among my best childhood memories are the evenings our family would sit outside and listen to our father tell us stories about Jesus, about the early Christian martyrs, and about other men and women through the ages who suffered for their faith. We lived in the backwoods of Paraguay, in South America, and there was no electricity. When darkness came, abrupt and early as it does in the subtropics, we lit candles and continued to sit in the flickering light. Our house was not far from the edge of a forest, and often we heard wild animals in the distance. When we were frightened we sang together, and our parents told us of the courage that comes from having a personal relationship with God— something that became a reality for us.

No matter how a family chooses to spend its time together, a few minutes at bedtime are always crucial. Younger children need the security of a good-night kiss, a reassuring word, and a short prayer before they go to sleep. Children who are afraid of the dark or of being alone, especially those who are



## 8. THE ROLE OF GRANDPARENTS

**A**fter the mother, the most wonderful thing God created is the grandmother--at least many children think so. Everyone loves grandparents. It is over their roles that people begin to disagree. Many families are blinded by the common misconception that in-laws cannot get along together, and in accepting this stereotype as fact, they hurt what could otherwise be a meaningful relationship. Doesn't God want us all to live side by side in peace? After all, he meant husband and wife to be one, and naturally each of them has parents.

At the Bruderhof, where hundreds of children grow up with grandparents on both sides, we have found that the extended family can be a tremendous blessing. In my own family, for instance, six of our eight children are married and starting their own families. My wife and I have great joy in our eleven grandchildren. Yet it is clear to us that no matter how much we love them, we must let our children find their own way in bringing them up.

To other grandparents, let me say this: don't forget that raising your grandchildren is your children's responsibility first and foremost — not yours — and that their ideas may be different from yours. At the same time, though, young couples should be encouraged to turn to their parents for advice. Why shouldn't grandparents, who have raised children themselves, pass on their wisdom, even if much of it was gained through mistakes?

Though grandparents should feel free to advise, they should never interfere. (Obviously there are exceptions; for example, situations in which an ir-

responsible or abusive parent has left a grandparent with no choice but to intervene.) Often the best help is an offer to support in practical ways: when a grandchild is sick, for instance, or when the parents have been taxed to their limits for whatever reason. Every grandchild delights in some special attention — a story, a cookie, extra help with homework, or a walk outdoors. Grandparents who live far away from their grandchildren will need to find other ways to show love—an occasional post card or gift, or perhaps weekly or monthly phone calls. Regardless of a child's age, time spent with a grandfather or grandmother is always enriching. For the child, it provides an oasis of comfort and quiet, and for the grandparents, an opportunity to love and to be loved in return. It is a blessing for both.









## 10. TEACHING RESPECT

All of us are familiar with the biblical commandment that is the cornerstone of child rearing: honor father and mother. But what does it mean? On one level, of course, it simply means that children must learn respect. To small children, father and mother stand for God; if they do not honor them, how can they ever learn to honor him? On another, it places a burden on every parent: the responsibility of seeing that this commandment is obeyed.

Honor starts with respect for authority, with the “fear of God” and the similar “fear” of parents, who raise them in God’s stead. Obviously this is not to say that children should be afraid of God or their parents. It means that as they grow up they must overcome their inborn self-centeredness and learn to yield to others when the situation calls for it. They must find a willingness to submit that is born—even if they are unaware of it—of love and reverence.

If respect is achieved by authoritarian means, it will eventually breed anger and rebellion. Like any other virtue, it must be taught by example and fostered in an atmosphere of trust. It is something gained only with time and effort.

Yet because respect is a basic part of every wholesome relationship, it is vital that it be fostered from a very early age. In my experience, it must be established well within the first four years. In most families with young children the task will fall to the mother, since she is the one most likely to be at home with them during the working day. A husband should always do his part to support his wife’s authority, but it is imperative that she establish it in her own right as well,



## II. SPOILING YOUR CHILD

**D**espite the fact that millions of children around the globe grow up in acute poverty, most children in our western society still have far more than they need. We are raising a whole generation of what can only be called spoiled children. Parents are often quick to blame our materialistic society at large, or the steady diet of commercials their children see daily, but in actual fact the problems begin long before their children are exposed to these.

In my experience, pampered children are always the product of pampered parents — parents who insist on always getting their own way, and whose lives are structured around the illusion that instant gratification brings happiness. (Isn't that what going to the mall is all about?)

Children are spoiled not only by an overabundance of food, toys, clothing, and other material things. Many parents spoil their children simply by giving in to their whims. When they are still in the playpen, this is bad enough, but as they grow older, the problem gets much worse. Children who feel relatively sure that they will get their way are bound to put up a good fight, and soon their wishes and demands define their entire relationship with their parents. How many harried parents spend all of their energy simply trying to keep up with their children's demands? And how many more give in to their children just to keep them quiet?

Other parents pamper their children by giving them too many choices. A child should be taught to make decisions — there is nothing wrong with that



## 12. DISCIPLINE

**I**n an age when discipline of any kind is regarded by many as physical abuse, it is tempting to dismiss wholesale the Old Testament proverbs about sparing the rod and spoiling the child. All the same, I believe that even if we reject physical punishment, we can find sound wisdom in the ones that speak about the importance of discipline in a general sense: “Reprove your child, for in this there is hope” (Pr. 19:18).

Whenever children are conscious of having done something wrong and there are no consequences, they learn that they can get away with it. It is a terrible thing for a child to get that message. With younger ones, the issue might seem unimportant; their misdeed may actually be small, but the lessons they learn will have repercussions far into the future. An undisciplined six-year-old may only take cookies without asking, but at sixteen he or she may be shoplifting.

Discipline does not just mean catching children in the act and punishing them, however. Nor does it mean suppressing their will in favor of one’s own or criticizing them continually and arguing with them when they talk back. It should not be viewed as a negative part of child rearing, but as a positive one. The goal of true discipline is to nurture a child’s will for the good — to support and affirm him or her in choosing right over wrong. It means reinforcing the positive whenever possible by lending a helping hand.

Discipline must start early enough. Already in the first few months, babies find out that their crying summons attention and concern. A mother who







### 13. EXPLAINING LIFE, DEATH, AND SUFFERING

**I**n speaking about birth, death, and other riddles of human existence with a young child, it is always good to remember that these mysteries lie in God's hands. Children are quicker than adults to understand this. Their minds are simple and unencumbered by adult ideas, and their questions can be answered simply and straightforwardly. The main thing is to assure them that all life comes from God and goes back to God, and that, because of this, they do not need to fear death. In my experience that is usually enough; to try to explain more or to speculate further may only confuse or worry them. Emphasize God's power over life and death, and point out the many passages in the Bible that tell us how wonderful it will be when Jesus comes back — how the trumpet will sound and we will all be made alive, more alive even than we are now. As they grow up and demand further explanation, especially about birth and human reproduction, answer their questions honestly, but don't burden them with more than they ask for.

At a surprisingly young age, children may ask questions like, "Why does God allow so much suffering in the world? Why does he allow poverty, war, and evil? Is God powerless? Is the devil stronger than God?" Although such thoughts may never even occur to some children, they will cause considerable worry to others.

When children ask about suffering, impress on them that, despite sickness and pain, poverty, war, and injustice, God is all-powerful, and that in the end his love will rule. Explain to them that all need and suffering in the world is























## 16. THE SPECIAL CHILD

**I**n Mark 8:34 Jesus says, “If anyone wants to be my follower, he must deny himself, shoulder his cross and follow me.” Christ’s words were addressed not only to the people of his time, but also to us today: each of us who desires to follow him must be willing to carry the burden laid on us by God. Because the cross each person carries is different, we sometimes tend to look at others and compare our lot with theirs. When envy makes us dissatisfied with ourselves, we look at others and think, for instance, “He (or she) is so athletic” — or articulate, or musical, or easy-going — and we begin to wonder whether the person we envy has any cross at all to bear.

Every man, woman, and child has his or her own burden to carry. Even the Apostle Paul had a “thorn in his flesh.” He asked God to remove it, but God answered him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:8). If we accept the grace God gives us, we will be able to bear the heaviest cross. And, strange as it may seem, it can even become a blessing.

The discovery that a newborn child is disabled can be a deeply shaking experience for any couple. Unfortunately it is common for some, in their shock, to assume that they have done something wrong. I would advise parents to give no room to such thoughts. Rather, turn to God and seek to see the situation as from his eyes — as a blessing that can lead you closer to each other and to God. He comes close to us through every child, but especially through children with disabilities.

















## 17. ADOPTION

**A**side from the thousands of unborn children whose lives are snuffed out by abortion every year, thousands more are born but then left unwanted on our doorsteps. Some are rejected by parents who cannot face the demands of feeding yet another mouth; others are abandoned because they are malformed or crippled. In recent years, increasing numbers have been left in garbage cans and dumpsters by teenagers who cannot cope with the consequences of their sexual activity, or by adult mothers who are abusive, addicted to crack, or unable to survive economically.

Obviously, it is the biological parents of such children who bear the greatest obligation toward them. Yet at the same time, the abandonment of babies and small children is an indictment on all of us. We bear a guilt too — those of us whose privileged middle-class lifestyles have, at least in part, created the ghettos where every card is stacked against even those parents who do try to raise their children responsibly.

One concrete way in which we can fight the rising tide of child-abandonment is by encouraging young mothers to carry their babies to term, and then helping them to find adoptive parents. There are couples, also in our Bruderhof communities, to whom the joy of having their own children is denied by medical circumstances such as infertility. Many wait for years to adopt a newborn baby but are ultimately unsuccessful because of the endless tangle of legal requirements and the exorbitant fees that accompany the adoption process.

Although there are tens of thousands of children waiting for foster homes,























## 19. BUILDING CHARACTER

**W**e live in a time when “anything goes”; when there is the widespread feeling that we must never stand up too strongly for our beliefs, because we may hurt someone who does not share them. Certainly it is not right to be intolerant of other people’s convictions, or to force one’s beliefs on them by buttonholing them or trying to coerce them in any other way. At the same time, the fact that very few of us have ever had to stand up for what we believe has left us spineless. Many of us lack the depth of commitment that comes with being tested.

How can parents raise children with moral backbone — children who are able, as they grow up, to hold on to their convictions? First and foremost, they must instill in them a sense of moral courage, which is, very simply, an attitude of confidence, determination, and perseverance. In his book *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts*, my father writes how a person’s attitude to the difficulties of life determines his or her emotional well-being. This is just as true, of course, for children. They must learn to adopt an aggressive attitude to cold, heat, and fatigue, to apathy and indulgence, to fears, hurts, and disappointments.

Children need to learn to be plucky; they cannot dissolve in tears at every taunt or jeer. They must learn to withstand peer pressure and the humiliation of being despised for holding an unpopular idea. They must also realize that humility is no less vital to building character than the ability to think for oneself. It may take courage to hold an opposing viewpoint in a crowd of friends, but it takes just as much courage, if not more, to own up to a mistake or to













## 22. PHYSICAL WORK

**W**e live in an era when modern technology has relieved us of almost every task our grandparents once performed — from chopping wood to carrying water. Technology is not the only reason for this, however: attitudes to children and work have changed dramatically in the last hundred years, and to many children physical work is a wholly foreign idea. In many homes, parents simply do not expect their children to work, even to make their own beds, wash the dishes, or mow the lawn. A friend recently wrote to me:

I'm not sure my generation ever really grew up. We don't know what it is to make sacrifices, to give unselfishly in ways that won't ever be recognized. Many of us are still seeking the perfect partner, the perfect car, or some other kind of elusive happiness.

While no one in his right mind could desire a return to the days of child labor, sometimes it seems that the pendulum has swung too far the other way, that we have forgotten the value of work as an important tool of education. Physical work will not harm children; in fact, it usually does wonders for them. When you give a child a chore to do, you develop his or her ability to follow instructions. In helping to see it through to completion, you help the child build initiative and perseverance. Afterwards, you can praise him or her and instill pride in a job well done.

Where I grew up — the hinterland of subtropical Paraguay — hard physical work was part of daily life. One did not need to look for it. There was



## 23. FAMILY INTERACTION

Over the last three decades, study after study has shown that family life has a greater influence over a child's mental development and academic performance than anything else, even school. Without parental interaction, it seems, effective education remains an elusive goal. To most readers this should come as no surprise; after all, anyone who has been around children knows that they thrive on parental love and attention.

As I have emphasized in a general way throughout this book, anything that a family does *together* matters. Regular family meals are especially important. Research even shows a correlation between test scores and the frequency of meals taken together by the family. Eating together gives parents and children an excellent opportunity to talk about many things — school activities, plans for the weekend, or ideas for the next family trip. Mealtimes can also provide occasion for broadening a child's horizons through discussions about local and world news, current events and issues, and books they are reading at home or at school. Encourage your children to contribute their perspectives to the conversation.

Don't forget the significance of breakfast. When my six sisters and I were growing up, our parents used to eat breakfast with us every school day and then send us off with an encouraging word. They did this for years, until my youngest sister graduated from high school. Aside from providing a reason to get together on a regular basis, this beginning to the day often made all the difference at school.



## 24. THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

If you love your children, read to them. There is no better way to spend time with them. Whether fiction, biography, history, fairy tales, or stories from the Bible, anything you choose can bring you together in a way that will have a positive impact on your relationship for the rest of their lives.

It is never too early to read to a child. Even a baby enjoys the sound of his or her mother's or father's voice and the visual stimulation of a simple fold-out book. And an older infant or toddler, although unable to sit for a proper story, loves to flip through a picture book or colorful magazine. Reading to children is the first, most vital step in preparing them to read on their own: it develops their ability to sit still and concentrate, even if for a short time.

Albert Einstein said, "If you want your children to be brilliant, tell them fairy tales." Legends, tales, and folklore in general provide wonderful material for a child's imagination. Beyond that, they contain themes of great inner value: suffering and redemption, the victory of good over evil, the mastery of fear, the spirit of adventure, and the importance of a virtuous life — of humility, purity, generosity, and self-sacrifice. Of course, not only fairy tales, but all good stories, and in a special way the wonderful, simple stories of the Old and New Testaments, can help children to make sense of their lives and to affirm their childlike recognition of truth.

Reading and being read to are vital activities: they spark the desire to learn. If this desire is missing, no amount of parental effort will help. Once your children can read by themselves, continue to read to them, but encourage



## 25. ACADEMICS

In many school districts across the nation, the curriculum has become increasingly geared to the production of academic “superkids.” The stated intention is to prepare children to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and that in itself may be commendable, but the means by which this goal is achieved is worrying.

Many educators and public-policy experts press for higher academic standards because they are worried that the United States is losing its competitive edge in the international market. Their fear is valid enough. Already for years, the test scores of American students have lagged far behind those of students from other industrialized nations. Yet is the root of the problem really a matter of academics?

Many of today’s children deal daily with issues almost unheard of in their grandparents’ (or even parents’) day — from teen pregnancy and the accompanying fear of AIDS, to guns in the playground, widespread domestic violence, and homelessness. (Even in our suburban New York county, an estimated 400 students live in shelters for the homeless.) Is it really any surprise that SAT scores and literacy levels are down, that geographical knowledge is at an all-time low, that math and science performance continues to drop off? Isn’t it simplistic to think that change can be brought about merely by lengthening the school day or adding Saturday sessions?

It is well known that even as performance levels continue to drop, increasing numbers of high school and grade school children are being driven into





## 26. THE GIFTED CHILD

Sometimes it seems that certain children get all the lucky breaks, while others have a rough time simply coping with life. One child consistently brings home straight A's on her report card and goes on to become the valedictorian of her graduating class, another cooks with flair, and another has musical talent or athletic ability. Still another seems gifted in every way, with a handsome build, lots of friends, good grades on every report card, and the best throwing arm in the school. Then there is the child who struggles and slogs through his homework every night but never gets a good grade, the girl who feels she is all arms and legs, or the boy who's always getting into trouble. Obviously, every child — every human being — is blessed with different gifts and abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Children must be brought up to accept this fact. But parents must accept it themselves and refrain from comparing their children with others or pushing them to be people that God may not have intended them to be.

In my experience as a father and grandfather, a gifted child has a special burden to carry. It is the same with physical beauty, which has been called the “golden curse.” Too often parents tend to show off a beautiful or talented child, flatter her, or treat her with favoritism. Teachers are prone to doing the same. If only they realized what harm they are doing to the soul of the child! Not only do children who are made overly conscious of their talents or abilities have difficulty relating to their peers; often, they grow up forgetting that their gifts are not their own, but given to them by God to be used for his





## 27. TEACHING SCIENCE

**T**he root of the word “science” is “to know,” and its original meaning is simply the possession of knowledge as opposed to ignorance or misunderstanding. God gave us our brains and the ability to discover, to observe, and to learn. For us who believe, what we learn gives us reason for praise; it fills us with wonder at the omnipotence of the Creator and the beauty of everything he has made — from the sky at morning to the buds of spring.

In the same way that we can see the hand of God in the world around us, we can recognize it in the branches of science that analyze it: biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and mathematics. Far from weakening our faith, these can strengthen our awe at the power of God manifested in creation and strengthen our love for him.

Unfortunately, much of what is taught today in the name of science is characterized by a complete disregard for God. Naturalism — the belief that the physical or material world is all that exists — is treated as a basic fact, and anything that questions its assumptions is quickly dismissed as religious superstition. William Provine, a biology professor at Cornell, writes:

Modern science directly implies that the world is organized strictly in accordance with mechanistic principles. There is no purposive principle whatsoever in nature. There are no gods and no designing forces that are rationally detectable...

Second, modern science directly implies that there are no inherent moral







## 28. SEX EDUCATION

Sex education in the public schools began as an offshoot of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Like the revolution itself, sex education as it is commonly taught in our schools is based on the premise (even if not stated) that sex is primarily a form of recreation. Its goal, therefore, is to instruct teens on how to engage in sexual activity while avoiding pitfalls such as unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. It is unlikely that this goal will be openly admitted, even by the strongest advocates of sex education. Yet an honest look at the materials used in most schools can only lead to the conclusion that this is indeed the actual intent.

Most sex education, it must be said, takes place not in the classroom but outside of it. The message of the sexual revolution — “if it feels good, do it” — is broadcast more boldly every year on television, in movies and videos, and in popular songs, books, and magazines. Even if sex education were completely removed from our schools, our children would still receive the same miseducation from the entertainment industry.

As parents, we must ask, “What have thirty years of sex education in the public schools, and thirty years of increasingly explicit sex in the media, brought to our society?” The answer is: disaster. Sexual activity has increased dramatically among teenagers, and led to the highest rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and venereal disease in the world. The incidence of AIDS is rising higher among teenagers than among any other group. Meanwhile, marriage has declined to such an extent that 30% of American children are born out









## 29. ART, CRAFTS, AND MUSIC

**I**n spite of the fact that most school systems treat art as a sideline, more and more educators are coming to realize what the art teachers have been saying all along: art is not a frill, but one of the most important and enjoyable areas of a child's education. Art opens new doors of experience by helping children to see the world around them in new ways. It sharpens their powers of observation, heightens their sense of appreciation, and awakens them to the possibilities of their own hands, hearts, and minds.

Art can help children to develop socially and emotionally, too. When they are encouraged to give form to their ideas, they learn the value of self-expression. In discovering their ability to create, they become conscious of their imagination and their freedom to make choices. And in mixing colors or combining materials to make new ones, they can learn to think in terms of change.

As a means to explore shapes and textures, quantities, sizes, and proportions, art can also aid children's intellectual development. It helps them to grasp the concepts they will need in learning to read, write, add, and subtract; it stimulates inquisitiveness, critical thinking, and a healthy self-confidence. Physically, it develops fine motor control and hand-eye coordination. In short, art is a window to new horizons in every sphere of life.

Small children need and love daily chances to experiment and explore, to "mess around" at their own unhurried pace. Let them crumple and tear magazines or newspapers, cut and paste scraps, shape playdough or clay. Let them scribble to their heart's content: it is as natural and necessary a step toward

















## 31. HOME SCHOOLING

**H**ome schooling in the United States is no longer an insignificant or unorganized movement. Although almost nonexistent twenty years ago, it continues to spread rapidly. In the early 1980s there were 15,000 home schoolers; since then the number has escalated to about 1.5 million. [49] Home schoolers have not only become better networked, but are accomplishing many good results.

It is no accident that more and more people are educating their children at home. Despite the many dedicated individuals who teach in public schools or who care for children, today's schools and day care centers are in serious trouble. Fewer and fewer children are receiving the nurture, attention, values, and skills they need in order to flourish. Tied together with this is the fact that many children today spend very little quality time with their parents. Family life is becoming fast extinct. Home schooling is an attempt to return the family to children--children who desperately long for the loving authority that only parents can give.

There are many good reasons why parents home-school their children. Some couples feel that by giving their children one-on-one attention they are able to give them a better, more rounded education. Many home-school for religious and moral reasons. Learning from Mom or Dad can secure the child with an atmosphere of faith and a moral environment that fosters character and discipline.

Some couples home-school simply to solidify their own sense of family







## 32. THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

**I**t is a privilege to be with young adults; to work with them, to share their joys and struggles, to be a friend to them, and to guide them toward God as they enter adulthood. Granted, adolescence is not a smooth phase of life, and there are very few teenagers who pass through it without at least a few rough patches. For many, it is the most turbulent time of their lives.

Everyone knows that teens' bodies and minds develop and change tremendously during adolescence, yet we sometimes forget that this causes their whole outlook to change too. Suddenly they have left childhood behind and entered the adult world, and even though most of them may be relatively uncertain of their goals in life, they are determined to spread their wings and try out their new freedoms. On top of this they are faced at almost every turn with the unavoidable tension between submitting to peer pressure on the one hand and parental authority on the other.

Adolescence can be perplexing to fathers and mothers too. Try as they might to help their children enter adulthood without losing the values they have struggled to instill in them, it often seems that everything is set against them. Most teens spend precious little time with their parents, and in a very real sense "parenting" falls to high school teachers, classmates and friends, and the ever-present media.

Having said all this, I still firmly believe that adolescence can be a wonderful time, especially in the sense of providing parents with the last opportunities to cement family bonds before their children leave home and go their









### 33. MATERIALISM

**A**s mentioned earlier, I spent most of my childhood in the backwoods of South America, and during my first seven years our family lived in acute poverty. For food we sometimes had to be satisfied with the bare minimum: cornmeal mush with molasses. Bread spread with lard and sprinkled with salt was a treat. Yet in spite of the economic hardships, I would find it hard to imagine a happier childhood. Why? Simply because my parents loved us children, and our happiness depended on that — not on toys, treats, or money.

Today, despite the third-world conditions of many inner-city neighborhoods and the growing threat of financial insecurity to many middle-class homes, most families in our society enjoy unprecedented material standards. Ironically, however, their relative wealth seems to have brought them little happiness. That is because for many families, money, work, and the pressures of modern life have pushed children further and further into the background.

Many parents who allow their work to drive them, even at the expense of their children, feel that they have no other choice: they do so in the hope of providing a secure financial future for their children, and for themselves. In itself, this is not to be belittled. Yet if we look at our society (and ourselves, for we make up society) we must admit that all too often what sways our decisions is not really our children, nor even their futures, but money. Certainly it is impossible to live without money and material goods. Every family must earn a living and see to it that money is set aside for the future. In many cases,





























## 36. THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

If there is anything I would like to leave the reader at the close of this book, it is Foerster's simple reminder that with respect to education in particular, it is never the mere word, but the word become flesh, that frees. It is one thing to read (or write) a book about educating children, but quite another to actually do it. Words, after all, are easy to come by, and so are theories and ideas, anecdotes and suggestions. For that matter, so are PTA meetings, conferences, and forums. Workable solutions are much harder to find. Yet without them, without positive, practical outcomes, all of the many good things we do in the name of education are useless. In the end, each of us — parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, teachers, mentors, or friends — must find concrete ways to meet the individual needs of the children entrusted to our care and guide them toward adulthood.

To raise children is certainly a privilege and a joy, but it is also a great responsibility that demands prayer, patience, and hard work. These days it often seems a daunting task and requires courage as never before. According to an ancient saying that has become one of the most repeated educational slogans of our decade, it takes a whole village to raise a child. The thought is definitely a valid one: parents represent only two of the many factors influencing a child's development. The messages he receives from teachers, from those around him, and from society at large have every bit as much bearing on him as those he receives at home. For any of them to be effective or successful, they must work together. As William Damon, a noted author and professor





## ENDNOTES

1. Paraphrased from Eberhard Arnold, “*Der Kampf um die Kindheit*” (1928), (Archives of the Bruderhof Communities, EA 28/5).
2. Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842-1919), Lutheran pastor, author, and influential Religious Socialist.
3. From “*Nachschriften*”(Januarv 8, 1911), an unpublished collection of sermons in the Archives of the Bruderhof Communities.
4. Bruderhof Communities, eds., *Community Alive Today*, No. 14 (December 1995), 1.
5. Christopher Zimmerman, “A Conversation with Jonathan Kozol,” *Plough* 47 (Spring 1996), 11.
6. Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage*, quoted in John Leo, “Where Marriage Is a Scary Word.” *US News & World Report* (February 5, 1996), 22.
7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 42-46.
8. For further discussion of the themes in this chapter, see the author's eBook *Sex, God & Marriage*.
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10. Philip Britts, “Presentation of Margaret Ann Wright,” Loma Hoby, December 5, 1948 (Archives of the Bruderhof Communities S-257).
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12. Ralph Kinney Bennett, What Kids Need Most in a Dad, *Reader's Digest* (February 1992), 94.







## THE AUTHOR

People have come to expect sound advice from Johann Christoph Arnold, an award-winning author whose recent books on sexuality, marriage, raising children, facing death, forgiving, and finding peace have sold over 300,000 copies in English and have been translated into 19 foreign languages.

In thirty years as a pastor and counselor, Arnold has advised thousands of families and individuals, including the terminally ill, prison inmates, and teenagers. A native of Britain and father of eight grown children, he lives with his wife Verena in upstate New York, where he serves as senior minister for the Bruderhof - an international communal movement dedicated to a life of simplicity, service, and nonviolence. Arnold has been a guest on hundreds of talk shows, and a speaker at numerous colleges and high schools.

An outspoken social critic, Arnold advocates a consistent reverence for life and has worked together with other renowned peacemakers for reconciliation and justice in many of the world's conflict zones. Recent journeys have taken him to Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Central America - and into schools, hospitals, refugee camps and prisons.