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Are Christian Children Selfish?

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Are Christian Children Selfish?

Abstract

"Teaching right from wrong is a foundational task for parents and is an important part of moral development."

Posting about faith development in children from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/are-christian-children-selfish/>

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Disciplines

Child Psychology | Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Are Christian Children Selfish?

 allinallthings.org/are-christian-children-selfish/

Abby Foreman

This morning, I heard my preschool-aged daughter and three-year-old son fighting over a balloon. My son held tight to the balloon and was running to stay ahead of his pursuer. On my way to intervene, I heard my daughter yell “Don’t be like Thou! Thou stole and she was NOT supposed to steal! Don’t be like Thou! She was naughty.” After a few moments of initial confusion, I figured out that she was attempting to apply one of her Bible memory verses to this situation: “Thou shall not steal.” If you go to the page in her preschool ABC Bible Verse booklet and look under T, there it is. “Thou shall not steal” with a picture of a young girl. A girl named Thou. Thou the thief. We’re not a family that is in the habit of using “thees” and “thous”, so Thou must have sounded like a name to her.

I love this about parenting young children: the privilege of observing and guiding a child as they build their understanding of God’s world. It’s often beautiful and funny to watch them make sense of their world; at other times, it leads us to confront the most brutal realities of living in a broken world as they struggle to understand concepts that we ourselves also cannot understand fully.

According to Fowler’s¹ stages of faith development, my daughter is appropriately in line with Stage 2: Intuitive-Projective Faith (ages 2-6), where she is seeking to make meaning from her environment. She is attempting to use the language that we use at home, church, and school to teach herself about life and about God, religion, and faith. She is attempting to use the language that we use at home, church, and school to teach herself about life and about God, religion, and faith. In the Christian community, we recognize that “raising a child up in the way that they should go”² is one of our most important tasks. As a response, we model praying, we read or sing catchy songs about particular Bible stories, we bring them along to serve and volunteer with us, and we try to teach our children about right and wrong, good and evil, and God’s presence and redemptive grace in all things.

From a sociological perspective, these are the things that we do to nurture both religious and moral development in our children. As religious parents we see this nurturing as vital, and in general, these are also assumed to be good, positive things for society as well. However, a recent study³ found that children raised in religious homes are actually somewhat less altruistic and have more punitive tendencies than others without a strong influence of religion in the home. What that means is that the kids raised in religious homes were less giving and more judgmental of others. These findings are concerning, surprising, and also challenging for me as a Christian, an academic, and as a parent. This study calls into question our assumptions about the positive influence religion can have on individuals and society. It will be interesting to follow how and if these sorts of findings can be replicated and built upon with other research studies.

Going back to take a look at Fowler’s stages of faith development, there are some things that are helpful to understand about development and how it affects a child’s ability to understand faith and religion. A child is more literal in her understanding, is egocentric, and also lacks in-depth understanding of more abstract concepts. A child is more literal in her understanding, is egocentric, and also lacks in-depth understanding of more abstract concepts.⁴ Understanding clear rules for right and wrong might be relatively easy for children to grasp, but their ability to understand more abstract but essential concepts like grace, justice, and forgiveness are limited. As children mature and develop, their ability to understand concepts grows and develops more deeply.

The paradox of living in this broken world is that children are both achingly, beautifully innocent, and at the same time sinful: prone to disobey, exclude, or mistreat others. The sinful nature present in our adult selves is in our children as well. If we teach and give our children language and lessons about right and wrong and about who God is, we should be intentional that the language and lessons we give them are grace-filled and loving towards others.

We know that they will use that language and those lessons to begin to try to make meaningful connections with others and with the world. As the second stage in Fowler's schema suggests, their attempts to make these connections will often be more literal than the more nuanced approach we might take as adults.

With the study's findings, I wonder if some of that is at play—religious children using language and ideas that they do not yet fully understand, which results in them being less open and generous towards others. Teaching right from wrong is a foundational task for parents and is an important part of moral development. Let us not forget that as recipients of undeserved grace, we should also be teaching and modeling the central role of grace in our understanding of the world and in our treatment of people, all of whom bear the image of our Creator.

Perhaps I should have a conversation with my daughter about "Thou" and stealing. Knowing that stealing is wrong is only a small piece of a bigger story: a bigger, more compassionate story of how God loves us and how we should love His people. Stealing is wrong, but the best part of the story is that God forgives us if we are repentant; His grace covers it all. That's the best story. We as adults have a hard time fully grasping the depths of His grace, and so will our kids, but it's a story worth telling over and over again.

Footnotes

1. Zastrow, C. and Kirst-Ashman, K. (2016). *Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, p. 350-352. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning. [↩](#)
2. [Proverbs 22:6](#) [↩](#)
3. Decety, J., Cowell, J., Lee, K., Mahasneh, R., Malcolm-Smith, S., Selcuk, B. and Zhou, X. (2015). The negative association between religiousness and children's altruism across the world. *Current Biology*, 25, p. 2951-2955. [↩](#)
4. Zastrow, C. and Kirst-Ashman, K. (2016). *Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, p. 350-352. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning. [↩](#)