

The Three Things a Child Needs To Grow

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When spring comes, our backyard becomes a bit lively. When I step out the door to our backyard, I would see a tiny lizard skipping away. The lizard is still a baby and smaller than my pinky, probably only a couple days old.

We have a pet hamster at our house. Our hamster is female and we only have one so she can't have pups, but hamsters are known to breed many children. When a baby hamster is born they are about the size of a quarter, but in less than a month they become the same size as their parents, and after a few months they can begin reproducing.

The same is not true for us humans. We don't start walking 5 days after birth or begin bearing children the year after we are born. That is not how God created us and for this I am thankful. We take longer than any other creature to grow into adulthood.

A child is nourished inside the mother's womb until birth. During this stage a special organ called the placenta develops inside the womb. This organ is needed only while the child is inside the womb and is expelled upon birth.

The placenta provides oxygen and nutrients from the mother to the baby and removes waste products from the baby's blood. The blood types of the mother and the baby may be different so there is no exchange of blood.

While inside the womb, babies can't breathe through their lungs. But the moment they are born and start crying, their lungs are filled with air and within 2 minutes their blood starts to flow the same way as an adult.

The baby's mother did not design these complex bodily functions and she does not control them. Nor does the baby inside the womb regulate their blood flow from interfering with each other. But the Bible says that God is the one who designed and controls these complex functions within our bodies.

In Psalm 139:13-17 it says:

13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 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. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!

Here we see a picture of how God formed us and gave us life inside the womb and watches over us with the desire to see us grow. By God's desire each of us was born.

In chapter 1 of 1 Samuel, we see the story of a woman named Hannah. For a long time, she has been childless. So she cried out to God saying,

"Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head" (1 Samuel 1:11).

Notice here that Hannah asked the Lord to "give" her a son. She used the word "give" because she knew that if she were to bear a child, the child is a gift given to her from God.

But we tend to forget that our children were entrusted to us by God, and begin to think of them as our own property, and treat them as if they are there to enhance our own self-worth.

But children are not their parents' property. Though they grow up under the care of their parents, they are individuals with their own mind and character. Each child has their own originality and unique qualities given by God.

There is a popular song in Japan by the group SMAP, and the song compares people to flowers, and tells us that we are all one of a kind.

As parents we have a responsibility towards each of these one-of-a-kind children that is entrusted to us by God. And although it is important for these children to know that they are one of a kind, we need to teach them that they are also one among a multitude of one-of-a-kinds. In other words, it is our duty to help our children grow as individuals.

As I mentioned earlier, apart from humans, there are no other creatures that require more time and energy in the process of growth. We experience many joys as well as struggles in this process. Children don't start living on their own and commute to work at age 5. A 10 month old baby can't go to the bathroom by themselves.

When Jesus was born in the manger, He voluntarily placed Himself within this human process of birth and growth. Just like us, it took Jesus many months and years to grow into an adult. There are very few passages that tell us about Jesus' childhood, but Luke 2:52 gives us a brief description of how Jesus grew up as a boy:

"Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man".

This is a very simple verse, but it gives us a very accurate description of a child's development. The verse lays out three things that parents and adults need to focus on as we raise our children, these three things are the intellectual, physical, and moral development of a child.

So today I would be speaking on these three types of developments. First let's take a look at a child's intellectual development.

In our world today, we place great importance on a person's educational background. And in order to pursue a higher education, often times it is required to pass a test. In the U.S. we have the SAT, and there are courses that teach specific subjects within the test so that students can get a good score. In Japan there are many cram schools that prepare students for college entrance exams.

A while ago I saw a news report which said that in recent years, there has been a dramatic decline in children's ability to learn. The report said that what is most notable in children today is that they lack the ability to adapt and solve problems in different situations.

And this is not something you can learn in a SAT prep class. As we all know we live in a world where this ability to adapt is crucial, because most of the problems we face in this world aren't as simple as selecting option A or B on a test sheet.

Instead we are required to look at things from different angles and come up with creative solutions. In an ever-changing world we must teach our children how to adapt and apply what they have learned to real life situations.

When we read Jesus' parables we see that He had an amazing ability to apply His wisdom to different situations. Through each parable He explained difficult truths using everyday scenarios. To do this He had to have a thorough understanding on the subject and be able to explain it in a way ordinary people could understand.

Jesus was able to see things objectively. We too can develop the same ability by seeking to see things from God's perspective, and this is what the Bible calls true wisdom.

The Jewish people have a deep relationship with the Bible. Though their total population may be few compared to most other ethnic groups, many prominent figures in various fields of discipline are Jewish.

Some have suggested that the reason they are successful is because they have been taught to see things from a higher perspective. As a bird in the sky is able to view the whole landscape, they are able to see the big picture and see things in its entirety.

There are many successful Jews in the fields of finance and computer science, where the flow of money or information is not easily seen with the naked eye. Although they cannot see it with their eyes, they have the ability to grasp what is going on in the world, anticipate what will happen, and determine what actions to take in the present and the future. Also their influence on art and music outweighs most if not all other ethnic groups.

Why are the Jewish people able to excel in all these areas? It is said that this is because they are taught to be conscious of an invisible God. Since their childhood they have been trained to be aware of a God that cannot be seen or touched.

This enables them to see things objectively and think logically. We cannot ignore the great impact it has on a child's intellectual development when they focus their minds on a God who cannot be seen.

This nurtures our children's ability to think creatively and not be stuck with the idea that there is only option A or B, and enables them to find solution C, D, or E. Needless to say the world needs people with this kind of problem solving skills. And this kind of wisdom is gained when we fix our thoughts on God.

Now let us move on to the topic of the physical development of a child.

A child's body grows. Food and exercise play an important role in their physical development. Though the saying "a sound mind is in a sound body" may not be entirely accurate, we cannot deny the fact that our mind and body are interrelated and cannot be separated.

Most if not all children like to play and it could be said that it is their primary job to play. They learn many things through physical activity.

Today we don't see this as much, but in the past children would run around barefoot, and we can imagine how much this kind of physical activity stimulates a child's brain and influence their emotional health.

As I get older I understand the importance of physical fitness. Jesus Himself grew in stature as He ran through the streets as a boy and helped His father Joseph's carpentry job.

Many paintings depict Jesus as this pale and skinny, weak-looking figure, but the real Jesus was a carpenter who had to do heavy physical work out in the sun so He must have been physically fit.

Because He was physically fit we was able to handle His busy schedule and travel long distances, and in an age where there were no microphones, He could deliver His message loud enough for the entire crowd to hear. For this He needed not only wisdom but physical strength. And with this body, He endured many lashes and carried the cross up the hill to Calvary.

Lastly I would like to speak on the moral development a child.

The verse says that Jesus grew "in favor with God and man". This verse shows us that our moral development is directly related to being favored or loved by God, which means that children need to know they are loved by God in order to have a true understanding of morality.

How does society try to teach ethics or morals to our children? They may suggest things like doing volunteer work. When I was growing up in Japan, we had ethics class in school. But it is not possible to know what true morality is without acknowledging the existence of a Supreme Being.

Japanese Christian author Inazo Nitobe published his book “Bushido” in the year 1900, around the time when Japan had ended its war against China and was about to go to war against Russia.

In the preface of the book, which was originally written and published in English, Nitobe describes what led him to write the book. Nitobe recounts a conversation he had with a Belgian law professor who asked him why they don’t teach religion in Japanese schools, and if so how moral education is taught to children. So Nitobe decided to write about the moral qualities found in bushido which are justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, truthfulness, honor, and loyalty. He explains in the book how moral education has been taught in Japan, and the book is still read today all over the world.

But Nitobe says that there is something found in Christianity and not in bushido. What is this thing that’s missing from bushido? Nitobe says that it is love. He says that justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, truthfulness, honor, and loyalty can be found in bushido, but only Jesus can give us love. He says that if Christ’s love and the qualities of bushido can be combined something great will come out of it.

Why did Nitobe mention love? He was a Christian, so he must have known following words from 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

“1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing”.

If I were to put it in modern terms, it would go like this: even if I could speak Japanese, English, Spanish, and three other languages but don’t have love, I would be a loud gong or an annoying cymbal. Even if I could predict the future of our economy and am an expert on a broad range of subjects, or if I have a faith that can create an oasis in the middle of a desert, but don’t have love, I am nothing. Even if I give up all my possessions and donate it all to charity, even if I were to give my own life for someone, but don’t have love, it all amounts to nothing. No offense to Mr. Nitobe, but it could be said that even if I have all the qualities listed in his book bushido, but don’t have love, it amounts to nothing.

When we think of this, it makes us wonder how our children could receive this kind of love. Is it through their father, mother, grandparents, teachers, or other adults around them? This may be

true to some extent, but in reality their love is not perfect. I cannot say with complete confidence that my words and deeds or the way I treat my wife are a perfect example of the love taught in the Bible.

What we must realize is that the love that Nitobe is referring to is not the kind that comes out of our own self-centeredness, but He is referring to the love of Christ.

The love of Christ is unconditional, a love that seeks our best interest and never wavers no matter who we are or what we've done. And it is not possible for us humans to have this kind of love towards each other without Christ.

There's a church called Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside. It is one of the largest churches in the U.S. The senior pastor there is named Greg Laurie.

During his childhood, he had 5 stepfathers. Being in this kind of environment did not have a good effect on him. Because of the emotional pain he went through and he grew up with a great distrust towards adults. During his teenage years, the hippie movement in California was in its heyday, and the city of New Port Beach where he lived was at the center of the hippie drug culture. Naturally he was drawn into the hippie culture and started using pot and any other drugs he could get his hands on.

But during this time, Greg Laurie met Jesus Christ. In Christ he found true love, a perfect love that none of his 5 stepfathers could give. He eventually got married to a woman named Cathy and is now a grandfather, and today he is an evangelist who travels all over the world to tell about this love of Christ.

This is the kind of love we truly need, and we must teach our children this love of God.

When I was in Japan this past January, among all the commuters at the train station I saw a child who was probably around 7 or 8 years old. He was carrying a large backpack, probably on his way home from tutoring.

These kids are required to cram as much knowledge as they can into their brain. Acquiring knowledge is important, but if their knowledge does not lead to true wisdom, and if they do not know that they are truly loved unconditionally, all the knowledge in the world cannot fill the void inside of them.

If we really care for our children, we would want them to grow to be loved by others. And this becomes possible when they are surrounded by God's love. When they know God's love, they will be able to love and be loved by others.

The same question that was posed to Nitobe is being posed to us right now. That question is, how could we raise our children without teaching them about the God who created the heavens and the earth and about the unconditional love of Jesus Christ?

Before God the Father, we too are children. Let us receive wisdom from our Heavenly Father, take good care of the body He has given us, and live each day within His loving care. And with the love and wisdom we receive, let us teach our children to walk in the same way. By this they will be equipped with the inner power that is needed to face this world.

Let us pray.