



Teaching Children Discernment

CMC Workshop Notes • presented by Michael & Heidi Martin, TruthQuest Children's Ministries • www.truthquest.net

Introduction

In a world of increasing evil, it is vitally important to train children to discern between what is right and wrong. All of us will have contact at some point with children. Whether you are a parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, teacher or counselor, each of us has a responsibility to help children in their walk with Christ. TruthQuest and Return to the Word are dedicated to ministering to the needs of the whole family by equipping parents to raise their children to follow after the Lord. We are commanded in Proverbs 22:6 to "Train a child in the way he should go..." With this in mind, TruthQuest is dedicated to equipping children as well as adults to apply God's Word in our post-Christian world. TruthQuest is a children's ministry committed to teaching and equipping children with a Biblically based, God-centered world view. For more information about TruthQuest, contact Return to the Word at 1-888-God'sWord, or visit our web site at www.truthquest.net.

Part One: Shielding Children from the World through Discernment

Part one of these notes deals with training children to discern between godly entertainment and worldly entertainment. Since our children are surrounded by and influenced by today's hyper-media market, it is vitally important to teach children, as well as adults to think critically in light of God's Word about the influences that surround them. With this in mind, let us begin by discussing what influences children are surrounded by.

A: The Problem We Face

Have you walked into a toy store lately? Walk down the aisles, and you will be sickly amazed at what are considered the hottest toys on the market. I recently walked down the aisle of the toy department in a popular discount store. I was disgusted with toys such as action figures for the World Wrestling Federation. Many toys promote the occult, such as Ouija boards, Pokemon (short for pocket-monster), Digimon, Dungeons and Dragons, and Harry Potter paraphernalia. Add to that the assortment of toy guns, swords and knives which have always appeared on toy aisles, along with the increasingly violent video games that are available, and these toys, once thought to be harmless, take on a new meaning. No wonder we have problems with children committing horrible acts of violence. We surround them with toys, games, TV shows, books, etc., that all promote the very things we should be protecting them from.

Many of the toys that are sold today are nothing more than promotions for the latest TV show or video game. Toys, games, TV shows, and books are so intertwined today that you need to be informed about all these areas to help your children discern between good and evil. You can't tell a child to not watch TV and hope that your warning alone will protect them. They are bombarded everywhere they go, including school. That TV show you told the kids you don't want them to watch is promoted in your local discount store, clothing store, grocery store, shoe store, and more. For example, look at the phenomenon of Pokemon. It's not just on TV. It's at Burger King in the kid's meals. It's on the grocery shelves in children's snack foods. It's in the shoe and clothing stores with characters imprinted on kid's wear. It's at school because other children wear pokemon clothes and bring pokemon toys to school. With the media bombarding our children from all sides, how do we protect them? We can't be with our children every moment of their lives protecting them from evil

influences, although we would like to. Since it is impossible to shield them completely without locking them in a room and throwing away the key, the other alternative is to train children to evaluate what they are listening to, watching, playing, and reading.

You may be saying at this point that children are too young to know the difference between right and wrong. Unfortunately, many people have swallowed the lie that children can't understand the difference between right and wrong until they are about eight or nine years old. If you are waiting until then to teach children to know the difference between good and evil, you have lost a good portion of the battle, because the world has been training them for evil from the time they could speak. It is time that we as believers in Jesus get up and fight for our children by training them from day one to think Biblically. But how do we do this? How can I explain to my four-year old that his favorite TV show contains some ungodly elements in it? How can I show my six-year old that his best friend's video games are ungodly? How do I tell my three-year old that they can't have the toy in their kid's meal because it isn't a good influence on them? How? How do we show children that the world is full of evil that they must protect themselves from?

B: The Beginning of the Solution

STEP ONE: TELL

The answer is simple, but not easy. You must do your homework. First, explain to a child in words they can understand that not all things they see or hear are good things. Explain to them that you are trying to protect them from bad things, so you don't want them to watch a certain program. But don't stop at telling them you don't want them to watch it. Tell them WHY you don't want them to watch it. You can avoid a lot of resentment from a child if you will take the time to explain "why" to a child. Obviously, you can't always explain "why," but do it as often as you can.

STEP TWO: ASK

Telling children what is right and wrong and why is the first step in developing evaluation skills in your children, but you must go further. Don't just rely on the method of TELLING them why something is bad. Start ASKING your children why something is good or bad. By making them answer, rather than giving them the answer, they will begin to see for themselves why something is good.

Let me give you an example, most of us would agree that Andy Griffith is a relatively safe and wholesome TV show to watch. I remember a time when I was watching an episode of Andy Griffith with my father. After the show was over, Dad turned off the TV and looked at me and my siblings and asked us what was wrong with the show. I thought to myself, "Dad, this is Andy Griffith. What could be wrong with Andy Griffith?" My dad then asked us how Andy solved the problem he was facing. The light began to dawn on me. Andy had lied to Barney so as to not deflate Barney's ego. He hid the truth and let Barney think something that was false. Because Andy was unwilling to tell the truth to Barney, Barney often thought more of himself than he should, which often got him into trouble. Dad asked us that night what God would want us to do in the same situation. I realized that God would want me to lovingly tell the truth even if it may hurt someone's feelings. I have never forgotten that discussion. Although our family continued watching Andy Griffith because most of the show was wholesome, I learned to watch TV with a discerning



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eye. That discussion has influenced my way of thinking about TV for a long time. By asking your children questions, you will make a greater impression on them, and will also train them to begin thinking for themselves. The more you train them to ask questions about what they read, watch, play with or listen to, the more they will be able to protect themselves in the war over our minds.

STEP THREE: SHARE

Training children to ask questions is not enough by itself. For children to ask the right questions, and for them to learn the right answers, you must build a foundation on which they can base their answers. This base is God's Word. Share with and teach your children Scriptures that will help them build a godly framework on which they will base their decisions. Help them to memorize these Scriptures. Go over Bible stories that apply to the situation they are facing and discuss with them what people in the Bible did who were in the same situation. Show them true heroes they can believe in by making the Bible come alive to them. Inundate them with God's Word. This is not an option as a believer in Jesus Christ, this is a command. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, it states, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates." God has commanded us to teach and train our children about God every day in every situation.

For you to do this, you also have to spend time in God's Word learning and memorizing. It is our job as adults, whether we have children or not, to teach children to love the Lord with all their hearts, with all their minds, and with all their strength.

Part Two: Study Guide

To help you begin this process, we have included discussion questions and Scriptures to help you develop a training session with your children. We hope that you will take the time to look up these verses and prepare yourself in whatever ministry you are involved with to train others to think critically. Below are discussion questions that will help you begin the process of developing a Biblically based world view with the children you work with. These questions will help children to start to discern what is wholesome for the mind.

As counselors, teachers, and parents, we need to keep in mind that it is up to each individual family to make the decision on what they choose to influence them, but as we are the teachers and trainers, we need to equip parents and children with the weapons they need to fight the battles for the mind. Encourage parents and those who have influence in a child's life to research the popular toys, TV shows, video games, music groups, and books before allowing children to be involved with them, as many of them send wrong messages and teach things which are ungodly. Like it or not, the people behind many of the entertainment products your children watch and play with, are out to teach them lies, and they do it with slick, flashy, brightly colored and musical methods which can have a big impact on the young and impressionable minds of our children. This is our competition for the minds of our children, and only God's Word can properly equip them to discern which things to accept and which to reject. As you

encourage parents to make decisions on what their children watch or listen to, remember what it says in Psalms 101:3; "I will set before my eyes no vile thing." This is a command not only for children, but also for adults. Let us warn you, children follow by example. If you want to train children to evaluate things in light of God's Word, you have to do it in your own life. You also must evaluate what you read, what you watch, how you spend your leisure time, or what you listen to. You must also keep vile things from your eyes. If children see you evaluating the things that surround you, they will more likely begin to evaluate the things around them as well. May God bless you as you endeavor to train your children in the godly way they should go.

Please go through this list of questions with your children to help them to understand what is good, and what is vile.

- Q. What are your favorite toys, TV shows, songs, books and games?
- Q. What are your friends' favorite toys, TV shows, songs, books and games?
- Q. What subjects do these things talk about? Would God be happy about the things your favorite TV shows, movies, songs, games, books and toys talk about? Why or why not?
- Q. What kind of clothing do the characters in these TV shows, games or books wear? Are they wearing clothes that cover them in a way that Jesus would be happy with?
- Q. Do these characters like things that God would not like? Do they like to talk about spells, witchcraft, or violence? Do they make fun of others such as parents, teachers, people in authority, Christians, or God?
- Q. How do characters in these programs solve problems? Do these programs solve problems by lying or doing something wrong? Do characters get in trouble for doing something wrong, or not?
- Q. Do the things you play with, watch, read, or listen to affect you in a positive way or a negative way? How do they affect you?
- Q. Would Jesus watch or listen to or play with the things you like? Why or Why not?

After the discussion, go over the following verses, then ask how these verses relate to the discussion.

- Matthew 6:22-23 (Make sure you keep your eyes pure.)
- Psalms 119:34-37 (Focus on what is good, turn away from evil.)
- Proverbs 4:23-27 (Guard your heart.)
- Romans 12:2 (Renew your thinking.)
- Ephesians 4:29 (Do not talk of bad things.)
- Colossians 3:1-2 (Think about Godly things.)
- Psalms 101:3 (Keep evil things away from you.)
- Philippians 4:8 (Keep a pure mind.)
- Deuteronomy 18:10-13 (The Lord detests witchcraft and spiritism.)
- I Timothy 2:9-10 (We should dress modestly.)
- I Samuel 15:23, Romans 13:1-2 (God hates rebellion.)
- Ezekiel 45:9, I Timothy 3:3 (Try to avoid violence.)
- Proverbs 12:22, Exodus 20:16 (Do not lie.)
- Q. How can we keep our minds pure and do what is godly when so many popular things around us are bad?
- Q. What are some good things that we can play with, or watch, or listen to, or read that are pleasing to God?



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Part Three: The Benefits of Providing Alternatives

It is still not enough to only train kids on what to avoid. We as believers need to go further and provide things that are godly, healthy, and life-changing. As church leaders, we need to raise the standard of our children's ministries and provide more outlets for families. Families need a safe haven they can bring their children to that their children will enjoy. We need to go beyond the hour of Bible stories we provide on Sunday mornings. Just as adults have to face the world during the week, children also have to daily face battles with the enemy, even if that enemy happens to be a cute toy. We as the leaders of our church should consider providing more than just a Sunday School program for our children. One hour of godly influences per week is not enough! Children need places to go and learn about Jesus throughout the entire week. This begins with the parents, but the church needs to come alongside the parents to offer support and resources.

Ideally, most churches would like to provide more for their children that meet their needs. Many churches would like to provide mid-week programs, Christian schools and day-care, and many more things for their children. Realistically, most churches only have limited opportunities to impact their kids—usually on Sunday mornings and a mid-week club such as AWANA. So, what can churches do when we have so little opportunity to reach children?

Alternative: New Sunday School Programs

First of all, make the most of every opportunity. Most Sunday School programs have a much lower attendance than regular church services. One of the reasons is because children often find Sunday School boring. This is not to say that Sunday School is not helpful. Indeed, many wonderful teachers have impacted countless children through Sunday School programs, but often times, resources are very limited for Sunday School classes. How can a Sunday School class compete for the attention of a child when the competition can offer flashy TV shows, toys and games?

Another problem is that children in Sunday School classes are not consistently challenged. Some are taught the same few Bible stories week after week. After about two years in Sunday School, the kids have heard it all. They know the stories of Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, Jonah, The Five Loaves and Two Fish. They know how these Bible stories go, but they don't necessarily understand their relevance in their everyday lives. To have a lasting impact, we feel that Sunday School should consist of more than simply reading a few of the most famous Bible stories and then doing a coloring sheet. These things do have value, but we need to do more.

We are not saying that these stories are not of value, but the Bible is more than these few exciting stories. The Bible is full of so much, yet we limit what we teach the children. We as churches need to start demanding better quality materials from the publishers of Sunday School material. You need to challenge them to raise the standard. Spend more time evaluating curriculum. There are several new publishers with great materials that are Biblically accurate, full of truth, and full of new ideas on how to make a Sunday School program exciting. Don't buy Sunday School curriculum because it has the best price. Buy curriculum based on who has the best message.

Most importantly, though, is to make Sunday School fun. If it is not fun, children will lose interest and will not want to come. Many Christians believe that we should not cater our programs to the

standards entertainment. We have been asked, "Why does everything have to be fun?" The answer is simple, if we do not provide a place that the children enjoy coming to, the world will. If church is boring, they will look for other places to go which may not be a godly influence. Unfortunately, our society is entertainment driven. We must try to make things fun and enjoyable for children to want to listen to the message we want to convey. Besides, we believe the Lord has come to give us an abundant, joyous life. Proverbs 17:22 says "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Provide a ministry where the hearts of children are cheerful, and not crushed. In Psalms 100:2, it says, "Worship the Lord with gladness, come before him with joyful songs." We can have fun in children's ministries without compromising our message. Provide a program that will minister to the needs of the children that will also minister to the desire of children to have fun.

Alternative: Children's Worship Services

Another alternative and opportunity that churches can provide for children is to create a children's worship service. If you have the facility to have the children in a separate room during the Adult Worship Service, then a children's worship service is a wonderful opportunity to create a love for God in our children.

Observe the children who sit in a Sunday morning worship service, and you might notice something. Are they really paying attention? Are they learning anything from the sermon? Often times, the answer is no. At the most teachable time in a child's life, kids are often faced with adult sermons which are over their heads. Other children simply don't seem to have the attention span to sit and watch a preacher, however well-qualified he may be, standing at the pulpit preaching. For children who aren't getting anything out of these worship services, a priceless opportunity is missed! Children's Worship Services provide an alternative for kids during your church's worship services, offering children a special worship service designed especially for them! There are several programs that you can look into for ideas. Our ministry, TruthQuest, is a ministry geared to teaching children to love God and to train them to discern between truth and false teachings. Loaded with fun characters, skits, puppets, worship music, and more, TruthQuest makes church services fun and exciting for kids, holding their attention and making an impression, all while providing Bible teaching and application they can understand! If you would like more information on TruthQuest, please contact us at www.truthquest.net or call us at 1-888-God's Word.

Alternative: Mid-Week Bible Clubs

Provide a time during the week that children can come and be ministered to. Programs such as AWANA, One Way Street, and our own TruthQuest program can provide another opportunity to reach children with the gospel. Once again, make sure that whatever program you decide on, it is a program children will want to attend and invite their friends to.

Alternative: Christian Schools and Day-care

Many churches do not have the ability to operate a ministry of this magnitude. Providing a Christian School may not be possible, but your church can research the schools available in your area and recommend schools that are Biblically based with a high academic standard. Also, research the local day-cares in your area. Many families have to rely on child care. Provide a list of places that provide godly teaching. Even if you can't have a program at your



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own church, you can help others in your area by researching the programs in your area. Many parents do not have the time or the knowledge to adequately check the doctrine of child care and school facilities. Provide a rating system for them so they can make an informed choice.

Alternative: Regular Social Functions and Training Sessions for the Whole Family

Provide activities for the family. Have church picnics, concerts, home Bible studies, parent training seminars, and more. These will help families to train their children to love the Lord. Many churches require Pre-Marital Counseling before couple gets married. Why not provide parenting classes for young married couples, newly expectant parents, etc. before a child arrives in the world? Set up a mentoring program where new parents can call mature and godly parents for advice. Provide social functions where parents and children can connect to build lasting godly friendships. In other words, create in your church ministries and opportunities that turn the church body into an extended family.

Alternative: Provide Parental and Child Resources for Your Church Body

Start collecting resources for the family that the family can trust. Create a rating system or standard to rate the newest toys, books, and videos. Many parents don't even know where to begin when they are looking for wholesome entertainment for their children. Help them by doing research yourself. Create a list of recommend books and videos for children. Have books available for parents to purchase for their own benefit. Teach the parents what to be aware of, then they can teach their children what to be aware of. If you provide books and videos that you have researched for content and doctrine for parents to buy, they know that they are not wasting their money on unwholesome books. Unfortunately, the local Christian Bookstore can not always be trusted. Many of the new "Christian Books" are not Biblical, including many children's books and videos. Several "Christian" books are now promoting poor doctrine, theistic evolution and psychology. If you provide things at your church that you have researched, you will tend to have more parents look into what they buy at other local stores.

Alternative: Be Creative. Come Up with New Ideas that Work for Your Local Church Body

The best alternatives are the ones that will work for your church body. What works for one church may not work for another. You may need to come up with new alternatives that haven't been explored. Maybe you have a large park in your area. Have a carnival for the day to invite children of the neighborhood to your church. Maybe you would like to provide a play area that is safe and supervised for families to bring their children to instead of the local McDonald's play place. Maybe you want to write your own curriculum. Maybe there are people in the church who have unique skills such as magic tricks, circus talent, or crafting ideas. Put those people to work to create a ministry that will reach out to your children. The sky is the limit. Use what the Lord has provided you to help children learn discernment.

Changing the Method--Not the Message

Our point on this issue is simple. In our world today, it takes more to hold our attention and more to impact us than it took in the past. For example, if given the choice between watching an old BW movie with poor sound quality or watching a new, digital-quality, full-color, surround-sound, effects-loaded picture, most would choose

to watch the new film instead of the old, provided that the stories in both films are similar. The simple things that once impressed us have given way to newer, more flashy, more complex and seemingly more impressive things. Children aren't more sophisticated today, but their entertainment forms are, and with all this flashy competition, the Bible is often left behind.

So, what shall we do? Let us be clear. We are not saying that the messages of God's Word should be changed or altered in any way. God's Word is perfect and unchanging, and we must be true to it at all costs. What we can change, however, is our delivery of God's Word. If learning about God is fun, then children will want to learn about God. If church is fun, then children will want to go to church. And, if our teaching methods are simple, interactive, hands-on and entertaining, children will learn and remember the lessons from God's Word. We must never compromise the message of God's Word, but if we are to effectively teach the Scriptures to children today, we must find creative methods of teaching our children.

Conclusion:

Teaching children discernment must begin in your life. You need to train yourself to discern between what is Godly and what is not. You need to be the one to start the change in your local body. You need to train your own children, then mentor and counsel others on how to train their children. Discernment begins with you. If we want to win the battle for the minds of our children, we must begin to train them for godliness. We must provide the tools and weapons for them to withstand the world. And we must provide Godly alternatives for children to turn to when they need a safe haven from the world. It begins with you, and it begins with us. Begin to fight. Do not surrender, do not compromise. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." (Ephesians 6:10-12)



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Useful Scripture References

Guarding our Hearts and Minds:

Proverbs 4:21-27 We are to guard our hearts, our minds, our eyes, our mouths. In essence, we are to guard every part of us and protect ourselves from the evil influences of the world.

Romans 12:2 We are not to be like or think like the world. If we renew our minds for godly things, we will know what God wants us to do.

Ephesians 4:17-5:15 We are to put off the worldly mind set and actions, and put on the godly mind and lifestyle.

Philippians 3:17-4:1 We are to follow after godly examples, not worldly examples.

Philippians 4:8 We are to focus our minds on what is pure and holy, not on what is evil and ungodly.

Colossians 3:1-10 We are to set our minds and hearts on Christ. We are to get rid of all moral filth if we are to renew our minds.

Deuteronomy 11:18-23 We are to fill our minds and our children's minds with godly things.

Romans 8:5-8,12-14 This passage describes those who have a spirit led mind verses a fleshly driven mind.

Discernment:

Proverbs 1:1-7 These scriptures reveal to us the source of all wisdom, the Lord. To gain understanding and discernment, we must first "fear the Lord," and study his Word. This passage is the prologue to Proverbs. The writer of Proverbs is explaining why he is writing this book, namely, to teach discernment. Below are several references in Proverbs that speak about discernment.

I Kings 3:9,12 Solomon prayed for discernment and the Lord granted his request. The Lord had told Solomon that he would give him anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom and discernment. Our desire should also be to have spiritual understanding. We should follow Solomon's example and pray for understanding and discernment.

James 1:5-8 Just as Solomon asked for wisdom, and God gave it to him in the previous passage, so too, we who ask for wisdom will be given it, according to James. God promises us that if we ask for wisdom, He will give us wisdom. We are also warned that those who doubt when asking for wisdom will not receive what he asks for.

Psalms 119:124-125 Once again, scripture teaches us to pray for discernment. Discernment is found by studying God's Word, as shown in verse 124 and also in our Proverbs 1 passage.

I Corinthians 2:10-16 The Spirit teaches us discernment. Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot understand spiritual truths. Without Christ in our lives, and without a daily walk with the Spirit, we cannot have discernment.

Acts 17:11 The Bereans did not accept Paul's teaching until they confirmed it with Scripture. We also must use Scripture to discern if what someone is teaching is true or false.

Hebrews 5:14 The discipline of discernment is a daily battle. You cannot be discerning unless you train yourself through constant use of the Scriptures.

Philippians 1:9-11 Discernment must be accompanied with love so that your life can become more holy. Also, Paul gives us the example to pray for others that they will have a discerning heart. Pray daily for your children that they will have a discerning heart.

Deuteronomy 32:46-47 We are to obey God's commands, because they are our life. Without God's Word, we cannot learn discernment.

References in Proverbs Concerning Discernment:

Proverbs 3:21	Proverbs 8:9	Proverbs 10:13
Proverbs 14:6,33	Proverbs 15:14	
Proverbs 16:21	Proverbs 17:24,28	
Proverbs 18:15	Proverbs 28:7,11	

Commands to Train Children in the Lord:

Deuteronomy 4:9	Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Deuteronomy 11:18-21	Deuteronomy 32:46-47
Psalms 78:1-8	Joel 1:3
Proverbs 22:6	Proverbs 22:15
Proverbs 29:15	Matthew 19:13-15
Mark 10:13-16	Luke 18:15-17
Ephesians 6:4	I Timothy 3:4-5