

Don't do it!

Counterproductive Strategies in Christian Parenting and Education

Short Version

As parents and educators we want the best for our children. Therefore, we need to carefully consider what constitutes a healthy, sustainable, life-giving faith.

1. Don't frighten the child with Satan, demons, end-time, hell or condemnation

When faith equals fear, many will later need to abandon their faith to have a good life. To live in fear is not sustainable.

Examples: "Do you want to be left behind when Jesus comes?" "Satan is so incredibly smart and he is chasing you all the time to harm you."

2. Don't use faith to shame the child

Shame says: «You are UN-acceptable the way you are». Never communicate this to your child. And should you use Jesus to create such shame, do not be surprised if your child later leaves the faith. Communicate instead that your child is unconditionally loved and accepted and that "the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these».

Examples: "Now the angels are crying." "Do you think children who act like this belong in heaven?" "Imagine how disappointed Jesus is in you right now."

3. Don't use faith to induce guilt

Guilt-driven faith is not a healthy faith. If children need to be "threatened" with Jesus in order to behave, they have not learned moral reasoning. Instead, anchor moral development in Jesus' teaching on empathy and compassion. Model the behaviour you want. Present Jesus as the one who carries away our guilt when we repent and make amends.

Examples: "What did Jesus say about calling others stupid?" "What do you think Jesus feels about what you just did?" "It is because you do such bad things, Jesus had to die on that cross."

4. Don't paint reality as either-or

If everything outside of the Church and its doctrines is Satan's domain, children will be afraid to explore, develop, question and critically examine their faith. It will never be their own faith, and may therefore easily be lost. Once the child experiences goodness outside of, and even evil inside of the church, she may conclude that everything she was taught was a lie.

Examples: "The whole world belongs to Satan." "If you don't belong to Jesus, you belong to the devil." "Is it Jesus or Satan that is happy when we act like that?"

5. Don't make obedience a spiritual virtue

Children who don't dare say no to adults, are more exposed to abuse. Show respect for their no's even when you cannot accept them. Practice saying «stop» and setting boundaries.

Examples: "Remember what happened when Adam and Eve questioned God?" "Remember what God told Moses to do with disobedient children?" "Satan is behind every instance of rebellion."

6. Don't weaken the inner compass

Beliefs in the inherent depravity of man often breeds a deep distrust of one's inner compass, harming self-image and fostering unhealthy dependence on religious authority.

Examples: «There is nothing good in you, except for Jesus» «The Bible says the heart is incurably deceitful. You must never trust your feelings» «Your feelings are where Satan attacks you the most.»

7. Do not make the child responsible for the salvation of others

Children do not have this responsibility. Even if you should believe that you do, and has found a way to rationalize this responsibility so it becomes bearable, children will not necessarily be able to do the same.

Examples: «If they do not accept Jesus, they'll end up in the lake of fire.» «What if they'll be eternally lost just because you were too much of a coward to warn them.»

8. Do not speak with contempt of those who are different

Should your child grow up to identify with those you have systematically demeaned, she will stop talking to you and the relations you have invested in half your life, will be in danger.

Examples: «How can they be so foolish!», «Jesus told us many will be deceived.» «We must pray for those poor people.» "It's disgusting. The Bible says people like that will never inherit the Kingdom of God."

9. Do not speak with contempt of the natural sciences

The most frequent cited reason young people leave their church and their faith, is that they have been given the impression that they must choose between faith and reason. There is nothing science teaches that hinders a living faith. Feel free to dialogue with the sciences. Foster curiosity and independent thinking. But do not treat them with contempt.

Examples: "Oh those poor scientists. They believe the world is billions of years old... those idiots have no idea. We are lucky to have the word of God."

10. Don't be overly idealistic

To be living in a constant state of emergency where normal activities like sport, hobbies, art, education etc. is put on hold because «Jesus is coming soon», is not sustainable over time, and often creates bitterness and distance later.

Examples: "Time is so short. You don't want to use the last remaining months on something as useless as.... (sport, art, education, travel, friendships...) when instead you could hasten Jesus' return?" «Just forget those dreams of yours, they are not from God."