

# Don't do it

## Counterproductive Strategies in Christian Parenting and Education

*Even with the best of intentions it is possible to cause harm that it may take a lifetime to heal.*

### Introduction

Healthy nurture of children encompasses unconditional love and acceptance, safety, predictability, and healthy boundaries. Another affirmed strategy involves affirming desired behaviour that has been clearly explained in advance. Criticizing children for not achieving uncommunicated or unreasonable standards or focusing on what they failed to achieve, will instead create feelings of failure and insecurity. Where it is necessary to address negative behaviour, it should be with as few words as possible and in an atmosphere of love and care.

Children are born helpless, they depend on our care, love and support to survive. As parents, it is our duty to make decisions on their behalf with their best interest in mind. Children are not human becoming's but human beings with same basic human rights as adults including freedom of thought, conscience and religion. They have the right to express themselves and to be heard as well as the right to privacy.<sup>1</sup>

A majority of Christian parents yearn to pass on their faith and the values which they themselves treasure. The guiding principle in this process is *Influence with Respect*.<sup>2</sup> Adults may respectfully influence and confront, but never manipulate or overwhelm. Adults must respect children as they develop and express *their own* opinions, also in matters of faith.

Parents influence their children, whether it happens intentionally or not. It is just as unfortunate to abdicate the responsibility to influence, as it is to do so without respect. To be ambiguous or vague is also a form of influence, but when done with respect, being clear and intentional, does not make it harder for the child later to choose differently. Both acceptance, revision and rejection are made easier by clarity. However, if such influence crosses the border to unhealthy manipulation, it may cause damage. When damaging strategies are clothed in "god", healing may for some involve distance from that "god".

The aim of this document is to raise awareness around what happens when counterproductive and hurtful strategies are cloaked in Christian faith. Below is a description of Ten strategies that has the potential to harm both children and their faith.

Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions it is possible to cause harm that it may take a lifetime to heal. Therefore this fervent call to awareness and caution!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights>

<sup>2</sup> This book outlines and models this principle: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Influence-Respect-Carsten-Hjorth-Pedersen/dp/1725256606/>

## Ten strategies that may harm both children and their faith

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## 1: Instilling concepts that cause fear and anxiety

*Satan, demons etc.*

*Hell, eternal damnation, judgment etc*

*End times, time of trouble, etc.*

Causing fear in children is generally defined as psychological violence, and some countries have laws against it. Causing fear through religious teaching may also constitute a form of spiritual abuse that may cause life-long damage. Early associations between fear/anxiety and faith may later make it necessary for some to distance themselves from faith altogether in order to heal. If faith is to be a positive resource in a person's life, fear cannot be a driving force.

Be careful *what* you communicate to children as well as *when* and *how* you do it.

## 2: Using a child's faith to induce shame

*"Now the angels are crying"*

*"Jesus must be so disappointed in you now"*

*"Do you really think anyone behaving like that belongs in heaven?"*

Shaming is never a good strategy. Shame targets the whole person, not just the action. The implied message is: "What kind of person are you to . . . There must be something fundamentally wrong with you". Some countries have laws to protect children from receiving such verbal abuse.

To use a child's faith to induce shame does double damage, as it harms both the child and his or her faith. Early associations established between faith and shame may later make it necessary for some to distance themselves from faith altogether in order to live a good life. Jesus never shamed anybody.

Focus instead on developing your child's feeling of self-worth and self-esteem. The ratio between positive and negative feedback should generally be at least five to one, ideally much higher. If, however, you need to address unacceptable behaviour, make sure your language distinguishes between action and "actor". The way we talk to children becomes their inner voice. Children need to know that their emotions are ok, though their behaviour may be unacceptable. A child is never good or bad. Instead of saying "He's good" or "she's so bad" we need to address and talk about good or bad behaviour. Behaviour may be unacceptable. A child never is!

## 3: Using a child's faith to induce guilt

*"You know Jesus doesn't want us to make fun of others"*

*"You know God says in the Ten Commandments that you shouldn't lie"*

*"But Jesus says we shouldn't retaliate"*

The implied message is that if Jesus/God wasn't there with his rules (and his punishment?) the behaviour would be acceptable. This is of course not what we wish to communicate, so why use Jesus at all? With this strategy, Jesus is the one who heaps guilt on us, instead of being the one who carries it away – He becomes the "reason" for our troubles, rather than

the solution. When children learn to associate Jesus with feelings of guilt and failure, we should not be surprised if they later feel the need to disassociate themselves from their faith altogether.

Instead, help the child to stay connected to his or her own emotions as well as helping them to empathise with the feelings of others. Jesus himself summed up the interpersonal ethics of the entire Bible with these universal words: "Love your neighbour as yourself". "Do to others what you want them to do to you".

Actions are wrong when they damage people and relationships and cause suffering and grief. Actions are good and right when they repair, reduce or do not contribute to suffering and grief. It is not Jesus but our actions that generate guilt. Present Jesus as a solution to guilt, not the cause of it!

#### **4: Painting the world as either - or**

*"The whole world is under Satan."*

*"If you are not wholly with Jesus, you belong to the devil"*

*"Is it Jesus or Satan who rejoices when you act like that"*

Language that consistently paints the world in black and white, good and evil, either ... or, will sometimes have unwanted effects. Firstly, this may cause a child to fear their own questions and doubts in a way that hinders a healthy inner growth. *«If I question this, if I don't agree, I place myself on the dark side. I become one of those that Mom/Dad/the Church rejects»*. Such fears may also shut down important conversations, as a result you will no longer know their inner struggles.

Secondly, a black-white language may damage your credibility as soon as the child grows old enough to realise it is not that simple. There is darkness within the Church and true love and godliness beyond the Church doors. When he or she realises that something painted as dangerous or demonic isn't quite that bad, the reaction will be: *"What else have I been told that is not true? Why should I believe anything they tell me"?*

Research shows that faith is much more likely to survive if young people experience that everything is not black or white, that not all questions have easy answers, that there is room for growth and changing perspectives, and that we love and accept each other despite our disagreements. This is what we should model, if we wish to cultivate a sustainable faith.

#### **5: Elevating obedience as a religious virtue!**

*"You saw what happened to Adam and Eve when they disobeyed?"*

*"You are aware what God told Moses should happen to disobedient children?"*

*"You know it is Satan who is behind every instance of insurrection?"*

Children, who have been taught to obey authorities, simply because it is right to be obedient, are more likely exposed to abuse. Adults who know how to exploit other people's faith to get their way may harm both them and their faith.

Children should instead learn that they can expect respect also when saying no. Practice

with your children saying *no* or *stop* if they should experience something that is not right. Teach them that they can always let you know, also if other adults cross their boundaries. Affirm them when they tell you about negative experiences and let them experience that it is safe to express their opinion and that it is unnecessary to scream or get mad in order to be heard. Be therefore happy when they display the ability to think for themselves, as the last thing we would like is for our children to become uncritical followers of those with most power or charisma. God's closest friends in the Bible were those who argued with Him the most.

What we really want is not blind obedience, but respect and trust. We instil respect when we ourselves model respect towards child by not overwhelming or manipulating them, but instead challenge them—friendly, age appropriately, lovingly, curiously and respectfully. Give them space and freedom to shape their own opinions and to make their own choices within safe limits.

Trust is something we earn by being consistently trustworthy.

## **6: To hold a child responsible for God's emotions**

*“Do you think God is happy when you behave like that?”*

*“Do you really want to make Jesus sad?”*

*“Do you think God is angry or happy when you behave like that?”*

To hold a child responsible for the happiness and wellbeing of adults reverses the roles between adults and children, and lays on the children a responsibility they are not meant to bear. To hold a child responsible for *God's* negative feelings or absence of positive feelings is equally unwise. It portrays God as needy, moody, unstable – dependent upon our perfect performance, instead of being the strong and safe Father who will always be there for us, even in our worst moments.

Be careful and wise when shaping the child's image of God. Words and images matter, as does your example as a father or a mother.

## **7: To hold the child responsible for the salvation of others**

*“If they do not accept Jesus they will end up in the lake of fire.”*

*“Imagine, they could be eternally lost, just because you were too afraid to say something.”*

*“What do you think heaven will be like, if you know you could have saved your friend?”*

Even adults cannot carry a burden like this and if they believe such statements to be true, they will find ways to distance themselves emotionally. For some children it may become a burden too heavy to bear. It is not only incomprehensible why God would not accept their good and loving friends and their families into eternity, in addition, it will be their fault?!

Jesus said: Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest . . . . My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). Jesus is the good shepherd

searching for his sheep. Hence, it is he, not we, who is the saviour of the world.

## 8: Speaking with contempt of those who believe or live differently

*“How can they be so deluded?”*

*“It says in the Bible that many shall be deceived”*

*“We should pray for them, poor fellows”*

*“It is disgusting! People like that will never inherit the kingdom of God”*

What you inadvertently may teach a child is that it is ok to treat others with contempt, as long as you do it in the name of faith. Contempt is however not an attitude you would like to instil in your children. Nobody should have to be met with contempt. If your child, one day, maybe identifies with one of whom you, by your words, have demeaned, they are most likely not going to confide in you. They may even despise themselves because they hear your words in their minds. To speak of others without showing them respect just undermines our own future influence. Jesus condemned contempt directly when he said: “anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matt 5:22).

When commenting on those who think and choose differently, speak as if they are present. For maybe they are!

## 9: Speaking with contempt of science

*“Those deluded scientists. Those poor people think the earth is billions of years old»*

*«Always millions and millions of years. Those people have no idea. We are lucky. We have the word of God.”*

Scientists don't have the answer to everything and neither do they claim to. However, the Bible does not provide the answers to every question either. If we teach our children that they must choose between science and the Bible, reason and faith, we have laid the foundation for the most common reason young Christians in the West lose their faith: In some areas, the Bible may seem to conflict with modern science.

Christianity does not stand or fall with the age of the earth or the extent of evolution. Therefore, instead use your time energy to model curiosity and critical investigation that opens the door for a God behind and through it all. For every mystery the scientists apparently solve, they unlock several new ones. The universe becomes more and more awe-inspiring with each new discovery and science has not given us fewer reasons to believe in God since Darwin. Quite to the contrary.

## 10. Being overly idealistic

*“Time is so short. Why would you spend the few remaining years on something so meaningless as . . . (sports, arts, education, other projects) when instead you could be doing something for God?”*

*“It is not about this life. Jesus told us to lay down this life and follow him. The least you can do is to give up something that has so little eternal value as. . .”*

*“Put those thoughts aside. They are not from God.”*

Life cannot be lived in a constant “state of emergency”. It is neither sustainable nor healthy to live only for eternity. *This* life is also precious to God. The fact that many Christians have great grandparents who were told time was too short to get married, should give pause for thought.

God has created each and every one of us uniquely, with bodies, senses, sexuality, hormones, personality, talents, abilities and the capacity for pleasure. We put our hope in “God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim 6,17).

It is devastating for a child or youth to be told that god-created interests, joys, dreams, talents, feelings, hobbies, projects or pleasures are worthless in the eyes of God, or - worst case – that they are a snare of Satan. Some, exposed to such idealism in their childhood and youth, later mournfully explain that they suppressed their own desires and feelings for so long, they “lost themselves”. They no longer know who they are apart from the group and its cause, and that it has taken much time and effort, and often therapy, to get in touch with their own will, wishes and feelings again. Parents and leaders who in the name of Jesus demand suppression of individuality for “the greater cause” carry a heavy responsibility.

Jesus implied we have to love ourselves in order to love others. You cannot love what you suppress.

“Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself?” (Eccl 7:16).