

Educating Our Kids in What Matters

For seven hours a day, 180 days a year, and for 13 years we build into the lives of our precious children in public education. Multiplied out, this results in well over 16,000 hours of schooling. Such an enormous investment is certainly worth evaluation. As the father of eight, the education and training of my kids is of great importance. I'm also a certified teacher and taught eighth grade science for a year at an academically recognized public middle school. Let me cut to the chase. I don't think public schools are the best option for most Christian parents. A public education does not adequately equip the vast majority of kids in key areas of Christian development, and it does not leave enough time for the average parent to do so.

Is the purpose of school to prepare children for life? It seems to me that it should be. Isn't that what education is about? Early in the morning, when we send our children out to the curbs in mass and watch the yellow bus rumble down the street, we are doing so with some grand purpose, are we not? We are not just getting them out of our hair, but we are trusting and hoping that the seven hours a day they spend out from under our influence and eye are hours of instruction, guidance, and training. We send our kids away, entrusting them to others, and believing they will come home better. Well-rounded. Socialized. Educated.

How is that working for us? Are schools really preparing our children for life?

One could argue the effectiveness of public education overall, but for the Christian parent there is a unique twist. We do not have the same goals as the rest of society. Our desire is not simply to produce well-educated children, but men and women of God.

Let's consider five areas of Christian development that are critical for our children and consider how to best foster growth in each area:

1. Loving God
2. Loving others
3. Self-image
4. Character
5. Skills

Loving God

We all know that Jesus said that the greatest command is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This is the ultimate goal of the Christian, and likewise, the greatest goal in our parenting. Everything else pales in comparison to whether or not our kids love Jesus.

It's not that kids who go to public school can't love Jesus—many do. However, as we consider our educational choices we must ask ourselves whether or not public school helps our children fall deeper in love with our Savior. Do they promote the love of God? Of course they don't. They are not allowed to.

We begin the process of education by having a clearly defined goal for the development of our children: that they would love God. Then, instead of putting our kids in a place where God is taught and exalted, we send our kids to be trained at a place where God is, at best, tolerated. Does that seem incongruent? It's like saying we want our children to be concert pianists and then training them seven hours a day to play soccer. It's not that soccer is bad, but it doesn't help realize the goal of becoming an accomplished pianist.

Loving others

Jesus said the second most important command is to love others. This should be our second most important goal in parenting. Our kids need to learn to consider others more important than themselves, to live lives of sacrifice, and to dare spread the message of salvation at the risk of personal cost.

On the positive side, public school does offer the opportunity to interact with other peers. However, it is important to remember our priorities. How big of a priority is it to you that your kids develop a genuine love for others? It is your second biggest priority, right? Now, how big of a priority is it to your child's teachers and administrators? Let me tell you from first-hand experience. It is not a significant priority at all. As long as students get along well enough to not cause a disturbance in the class, that is good enough. Teachers are evaluated on their students' academic performance, not how well the youngsters get along with each other. Most teachers *do* care about the greater well-being of their children, but practically, they just don't have the time to frequently address such issues.

Although everyone thinks loving others is a wonderful ideal, the reality is that in school this is not at the forefront of very many people's minds. It is not on the school mission statement. It is not reflected in the training that happens in the classroom. It's just something that is expected to be taught at home.

Self-image

"As yourself," is an interesting part of Jesus' teaching to, "Love your neighbor as yourself." In one sense, we all love ourselves—usually far more than enough. However it does seem like there are healthy and unhealthy views we hold of ourselves. People with correct views of themselves understand grace and forgiveness and strive to live lives worthy of the Lord without walking around all the time stuck in the depths of unworthiness. People with incorrect views of themselves struggle with their self-worth and their place and purpose in life.

I only have two words about public education and self-worth: junior high. Just kidding.

Students in a school setting are surrounded by an unnatural number of peers. Instead of providing a stable and nourishing environment in which to grow and learn about life, it creates an unnatural environment where students scramble to find a place of acceptance. They battle for peer approval using their dress, looks, attitude, athletic abilities, and academic prowess. If they compete well they may find a place to fit. If they don't they keep searching or perhaps worse, give up.

If I was entrusted with the task of reshaping the identity of a child with self-image issues I cannot imagine choosing school as the place to work out those issues. Peers do not build self-image; they tear away at it.

A correct self-image comes from God. When we understand that we are created in the image of God, that He loves us, and has adopted us into His family, then we have a healthy view of ourselves. We know this because it is God's view, and His perception is the correct opinion.

Character

There are so many facets of a person's character that it defies simple definition. Honesty, purity, integrity, courage, kindness, and moral strength, all make up a part of who we are. Yet for any list that is composed, some important trait is bound to be neglected. As we know, God looks at the heart, and that heart is what we are shaping in our children. This is important to grasp: we are not just shaping behavior; we are shaping hearts.

As a school teacher I cared deeply about the character of my students. I loved "teachable moments" more than anything else. However, the vast majority of my energy went to behavior. When kids are falling asleep in class, writing obscenities in the books, failing the exact same test six times in a row, copying off each other, and trying to do their homework for their next class, there just isn't a lot of time left over for character training. How can you turn the hearts of the kids while struggling against a continual flow of behavioral issues?

Even if teachers had the time to shape the characters of kids, would you want them to or let them? Considering that God has given *you* your child to raise, is character training something you want to delegate to

someone else? And if you feel that this should be your primary responsibility, can you make enough ground in character training during evenings, weekends, and summers?

Many parents find that it takes all of their energy just to combat the negative influences that occur during a typical school day. Much of what happens in the classroom is morally neutral, but the influence of friends is profound in the development of a child's character. If our kids are spending the majority of their time with their peers, we, as parents, are put on the defensive when it comes to character development. We need to be on the offensive, not struggling to hold ground!

Skills

We are preparing our children for life. That is the purpose of education. Simply put, our kids need to have the skills to be useful to society. They need to be able to hold down jobs, and provide food and shelter for themselves. Because of our love of people we have a higher goal. We want to have skills that are practical ways of loving and serving people. We want our children to be needed, not needy.

Certainly of our five areas of Christian development, this is the one where public education is the strongest. School gives our kids the academic skills they will need in the workforce. It may not be the best possible education, we may be falling behind other nations, and we may not be producing as many quality graduates as we would like, but overall, I do believe a worthwhile academic education is there for those who want it and work for it.

It should be mentioned that not all skills learned at school are those we value, and not all the skills we value are taught at school. If I were hand-picking an academic curriculum, there are certain school subjects I would leave out. There are other skills that I would like to equip my kids with that I would put more emphasis on than the school does like. For example, I would emphasize learning and applying Scripture to life, learning an instrument well enough to play in a small group, and learning how to teach children in Sunday school. Simply put, time spent learning subjects I don't care as much about takes time away from those I do. That's not the worst thing in the world, but that is a microcosm of the problem.

The majority of our intentional educational development is merely preparing our kids for a very small part of life. That means that if the goal of education is to equip our children for life, we are not meeting that goal. For hours a day the focus in the public school is on preparing our kids for the work force, and no significant effort is put into teaching them to love God, love others, grow in character, and develop a good self-image. That means we are not getting the results from education for which we are striving in the public school. The question is obvious: can we supplement school with additional training and instruction and still achieve the influence we desire? Let me ask the question more bluntly: can we sacrifice 16,000 hours of time with our children, and have enough time left over to combat the negative influences and exposure and train them in the critical areas that the schools do not effectively cover? I think that is an immensely difficult obstacle that most parents will not overcome.

The reality for many is that we've assumed that someone else has thought this all through and figured out what constitutes a good education. For a complexity of reasons, the product we've ended up with does not accomplish the goals of a Christian family. Now we are left with a tough decision. How do we equip our children in a truly well-rounded way and prioritize the areas of development that are most important to God?

My wife and I have chosen to homeschool for the majority of our children's education. This has allowed us to focus intensely on all five areas of development. We do not believe it is the best option in every situation, nor do we feel those who choose a different path are somehow missing God's best. Some public-schooled kids become great men and women of God, and some home-schooled kids fall away from the Lord. Some public-schooled kids are spiritually wounded and some home-schooled kids are spiritual rocks. We can

find examples that demonstrate the weaknesses of all positions. However, that is not the point. The point is: what do *you* think will be the best for equipping *your* kids in the areas that are important to God?

Some people may wonder about other schooling options like private, Christian, Montessori, and charter schools. Some of those options will certainly be better than specific public schools in some cities. I do not doubt that. However, I would still challenge parents to look at all five areas: loving God, loving others, self-image, character, and skills. What is your best option at helping your children develop in each area? What is the goal of the school? How much time and effort is put into helping children grow in each area, and are we, as parents, left with enough time to complete whatever is lacking in their development? These questions must be addressed or we risk making a poor investment of thousands of hours.

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