

EXCERPT



Teach Your Children Well ***A Step-by-Step Guide for Family Discipleship***

August 2, 2022 | \$18, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0380-0

How do we parent our kids in ways that lead to lasting faith? Sarah Cowan Johnson unpacks how parents can have an active discipleship role in forming their children's faith. Filled with exercises and activities for families to do together, this handbook is an essential resource for discipling children with confidence and creativity.

Lean In to the "God Moments"

Long before you learned you were expecting a child or saw that first photo of your foster- or adopted-child-to-be, long before you held your grandchild in your arms, God was at work in your child's life. As we say yes to this discipleship journey, it's important to remember that God has known and loved our kids longer and more deeply than we ever will. I was never a "baby person" before I had my own. I remember walking around my neighborhood at forty-one weeks pregnant with our first son, crying my eyes out to my mom, worried I wouldn't know how to love a baby. My mom, though full of motherly empathy, couldn't suppress the amused sparkle in her eye as she said, "Oh honey, just you wait." And, as usual, Mom was right.

That overwhelming, gut-wrenching, irrepressible love I feel for my kids—that you undoubtedly feel for yours—is just a hint of an echo of a shadow of what God feels for them. And this is significant because it means that no matter how badly we want our children to know and follow Jesus, we can be certain that God wants it more. And no matter what we do to aid and assist them on this journey, we can rest in the fact that Jesus has already done, and will continue to do, more than we ever could.

In Matthew, Jesus uses the imagery of a yoke: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29). A yoke is the shoulder bar that binds two oxen together as they pull a plow. It keeps them in step with one another, helps them move at the same pace, and is also used to train young oxen by pairing them with an older, stronger, and more experienced ox. When it comes to being yoked to Jesus, I love to remember that Jesus is always the older, stronger, more experienced ox. We may throw our weight into that yoke, pulling our hardest against the plow, and we may be encouraged by the progress we see as we move forward step by step. But in reality, Jesus is the one shouldering most of the load. His body bears the weight, his leadership guides our steps, his power moves us forward.

As you teach your kids to follow Jesus, I hope you will remember this image. You are the baby ox. Jesus is the one doing the work. Stay close to him, yoke yourself to him, and remember that he bears the weight.

One way we can remind ourselves of this reality is to learn to recognize and engage two different types of discipleship. One type of discipleship, the one probably most familiar to us, is what I would call proactive discipleship. These are the discipleship moments that we plan for and are intentional about—the habits, practices, and rhythms we invite our kids to engage with.

But before we do that, let's start by learning how to be responsive to discipleship moments we can't plan for—because they are moments that only God has planned for. The order here is important: starting with responsive discipleship before we move on to proactive discipleship is a small but meaningful nod to the fact that God is the primary initiator of spiritual growth.

Have you ever experienced a moment when you were sure that God was going out of his way to get your attention? God does this all the time with humans. From dreams to visions to signs and wonders to words spoken directly from his mouth to our hearts, God has been initiating with human beings since the beginning of human history.



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Sarah Cowan Johnson is a ministry trainer, consultant, and coach who works with church planters, pastors, and ministry leaders across the United States. She leads seminars for parents on family discipleship to help their children walk in the way of Jesus. She served with the Evangelical Covenant Church as the executive pastor for Sanctuary Church in Providence, Rhode Island, and previously was a staff trainer and an area director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She is the cohost of *The People of the Way* podcast.

These moments are sometimes referred to as “kairos moments.”

When I talk to my kids about these moments, I call them “God moments”—moments when God interrupts life as usual, gets our attention, and invites us to respond to him in some way.

Sometimes God moments are dramatic and profound. A good example of that would be Moses with the burning bush. Moses, one of the great heroes of the Judeo-Christian story, was living a normal life as a shepherd. (Well, let’s say relatively normal. Actually, he was hiding out after murdering someone. But, other than that, he was living a normal life.) And then one day, his status quo was dramatically interrupted. He was walking along with his sheep, minding his own business, when,

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:2-5 NRSV)

Moses’ experience at the burning bush was a quintessential God moment. God interrupted Moses’ life-as-usual; Moses “turned aside” to see what was happening and ended up having a profound encounter with God. This was the moment when God called Moses to return to Egypt to deliver God’s people from slavery. This God moment shaped the trajectory of Moses’ entire life—and, arguably, of human history—transforming him from a man hiding out in fear to the great deliverer of the Israelite people.

So sometime, God moments are epic and over the top. But often they come to us in more subtle and unassuming forms: a thought that strikes you out of a clear blue sky, an experience that impacts you in some unique way, a conversation that sticks with you long after it’s over. With our kids, God moments can look like a surprising question they ask, a connection they make about God or the world, a dream they have, an experience of intense emotion they can’t quite explain (such as happy tears), an experience of guilt or forgiveness, an experience in worship—the list goes on.

One of the clearest examples of a God moment I can remember when our younger son, Silas, who was four at the time, had received his fourth time-out in a row for questionable behavior during dinner. After apologizing and being forgiven for the fourth time, he returned to the table. His shoulders slumped over his plate, and he looked so sad. I asked him what was wrong, and he said, “My heart feels yucky.” All of a sudden, I realized this was a God moment: I sensed God was trying to get our attention.

Whether these God moments will be powerful change-agents in our lives depends on our response to them. If we recognize the God moment, we have two choices: we can either ignore the moment and continue on with life as usual, or we can “turn aside” like Moses and explore the moment with God. As we do this, we will discover discipleship opportunities hidden like buried treasure within these moments. In each God moment we will find specific ways that God is inviting us—and our kids—to be shaped and transformed by his Spirit.

—Adapted from chapter four, “Responsive Discipleship”

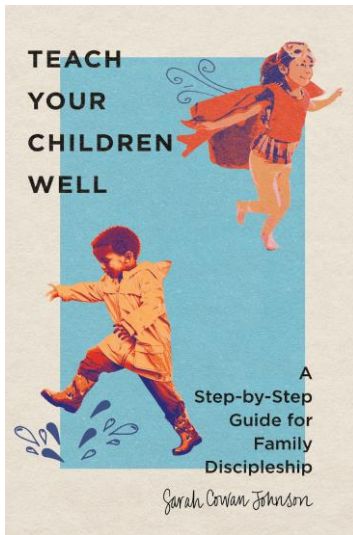


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ENDORSEMENTS



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"A grace-filled reminder that when it comes to discipling children, there is no substitute for a parent. Amen to that."

—Justin Whitmel Earley, business lawyer and author of *The Common Rule*

"Theologically Sound and Developmentally Savvy"

"Sarah Cowan Johnson's instincts are absolutely right: parents can be the most important pastoral presence in their child's life. Our children need something real to grab on to—from our own life with God, from their own encounters with God, and from the everyday moments when God is close. God is always very close to us. This book is a very practical guide helping parents facilitate the practice of encountering God in the tiny moments of everyday life."

—Jared Patrick Boyd, author of *Imaginative Prayer: A Yearlong Guide to Your Child's Spiritual Formation*

"If we're honest, we've long outsourced much of what it means to raise our children to familiar institutions: schools, media, and churches. We don't mean to do this; it's simply the norm we've come to accept. As a result, even well-intentioned parents miss opportunities daily to form the hearts, minds, and faith of our children. In *Teach Your Children Well*, my friend Sarah Cowan Johnson offers a better path. Drawing on experiences from Johnson's pastoral and parenting life, this book provides strategies that are theologically robust and incredibly practical. This is a timely resource that will give parents the clarity and confidence to be the primary disciple makers of their children."

—Shaun Marshall, pastor and author of *Transition Decisions: How to Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Make Your Next Move Now*

"While aimed at parents, any adult who shares a passion for leading children into an adult relationship with Jesus can benefit from this content. Sarah understands the influence parents have on the direction of their children at every age and stage of their development. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter for parents, pastors, and church leaders provide a process moment for immediate practical application."

—Virginia Ward, dean of the Boston campus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"I'm so grateful for a resource that coaches parents on how to approach spiritual parenting with lots of challenge, grace, and invitations to freedom. It's not anxiety, fear, or shame that motivates, but the real hope of Jesus being present to our children, no matter their age, and in all the ways they are uniquely made. May we all be better equipped to love our children so that they may know the God who loves them, their friends, and their communities."

—Sarah Shin, author of *Beyond Colorblind*

"This is not about making the 'ideal Christian child.' It is about how you receive the child you were given so you can partner with God in growing, training, and celebrating this child. If you are looking for a theologically sound and developmentally savvy resource in your parenting, *Teach Your Children Well* is for you."

—Doug and Adele Calhoun, coauthors of *Spiritual Rhythms for the Enneagram*



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