

PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER

RAISING
tiny disciples

ACTUAL ADVICE TO ENJOY THE PROCESS

AND *enjoy* YOUR KIDS

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phyliciamasonheimer.com

*To Adeline, Geneva, and Ivan.
May you grow in wisdom, stature,
and favor with God and man.*

“If only I could watch a mom for one day and see what she does and how she does it.” I must have whispered these words to my husband a dozen times when our children were still young. I longed to see what it looked like to disciple our little ones—in real, effective ways.

And this is exactly what Phylcia Masonheimer offers in her book, *Raising Tiny Disciples*. She shares the many small ways she discipled -- trains, teaches, and lovingly leads -- her children on a daily basis. Without formulas or a complicated curriculum, this short book is packed full of down-to-earth, practical, and encouraging advice from someone in the middle of mothering alongside you. I highly recommend this parenting book to anyone, whether new or experienced, as a wise and helpful resource for joyfully raising young children in the faith.

~ Lisa Jacobson

author, founder of Club31Women.com and mother of eight



What to Expect

As a mom of three who—at the time I am writing—are all seven and under, I am perpetually frustrated by the lack of *practical* parenting advice for the little years. There is plenty of theoretical content about “capturing hearts,” “raising disciples,” and “loving boundaries,” which I affirm with pumped fists and exclamation points! But at ten o’clock on an August Wednesday, what does it look like to capture a three year old’s heart? In other words: *How* do I raise tiny disciples?

I asked an older mom this question.

“Why is there not more *actual advice* for moms of young kids?”

“Probably because you can’t use the same advice for every family, child, and situation.” She replied. And because—with time—we forget the things we did.”

Oh. That.

It is true: no book could possibly give answers for the individual personalities in our homes, much less every situation we’ll face as parents. Add to that mix family lifestyle, discipline preference, church denomination, and ethnic culture—clearly no parenting recipe will turn out the same way twice.

But as Christian parents, we know there are objective truths that should guide our parenting. We know because we *are not just parents*: we are disciplers. In a very real sense, we are the “pastors” (shepherds) of the souls at home. How we raise these little ones to understand good, evil, right, wrong, people, and

God starts at babyhood. The values we teach at the youngest ages lay a foundation for who our kids will become in their teens and beyond.

The future is not all that matters, though. I don't know about you, but I want to *enjoy* my kids. I don't want to spend each day living for naptime. I don't want to have kids who can't be taken to a restaurant, who demolish other people's houses, or who make my life miserable as a mom. I want to both enjoy my children and see my children be a joy! This part of parenting the little years is often left out, forgotten, or deemed unattainable.

I am here to tell you it is not unattainable. It is possible to disciple your kids intentionally, enjoy the process, *and enjoy your kids*. Yes—even while they are still under the age of five.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

I was hesitant to write this book because writing about parenting turns a spotlight on your family and your flaws. I am very aware of both. Our kids are not perfect, we are not perfect, and we don't think we are. I have two girls and a boy. Each is a dear gift from God with unique giftings! One of my children is extremely high energy, a kinesthetic learner whose emotions run big. Another one is detail-oriented and creative, but struggles with perfectionism. And another is full of humor and joy but is particularly strong-willed. All this to say: I do not have “easy” kids. And while I have waited with bated breath for an older mom to write specifically about the under-five experience, the fact that I am still in it—walking WITH you—gives me a unique perspective. I am not looking back. I am waking up to this reality every day.

Given the advice of my older mom friend, this book is not so much a “how-to” but a “how-we-do.” In short chapters based on Deuteronomy 6, we will walk through how *our family* raises

tiny disciples. Your job? To filter this information into your own family culture.

One of the biggest questions I am asked is in regard to discipline. As you will see in this book, Josh and I believe discipline is just the other side of discipleship. The two words have the exact same root: teaching! You will also learn that parents who *don't* discipline (don't give consequences for misbehavior) are still disciplining, they are just teaching their child a different paradigm (misbehavior has no consequences). If you came to this book to find out whether spanking is biblical or if we do it, I am sorry to disappoint. We don't discuss that here. It is important for *your family* to come to a conclusion on disciplinary methods and their appropriate use and to implement those consequences lovingly and consistently.

My goal? For this peek into our family culture to give you a "how-to" without trapping you into a specific path.

LOVING THE LITTLE ONES

Between baby swings and pacifiers, phonics and potty training, these days with small ones can be arduous. But I believe Jesus' promise of joy, strength, and rest is not cancelled just because we are in a season of littles. Isaiah 40:11 says, "He gently leads those with young." As we lead our babies, He leads *us*. As we disciple these little souls, He is discipling our hearts.

First Peter 2:2 says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation." As we raise our tiny disciples, we must also be growing up in our own salvation: maturing, asking questions, and being willing to do hard things. Disciples create disciples.

Are you with me? I hope so!

Phyllicia Mazonheimer



The Framework *Teach Them Diligently*

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your 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 on your hearts. Impress them on your children.”

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7, NIV)

Crack the book of Deuteronomy open and you will find the nation of Israel standing on one side of the Jordan looking toward a new life in the Promised Land. Moses has gathered them together to reiterate the law of God. In fact, the very name *Deuteronomy* means “second law.” The truths first given to Israel at Mount Sinai were lost on the previous generation. Now that generation had died and this new one—who would have been very young at the Sinai law-giving—were inheriting the land God promised their fathers. Moses’ communication of the law for a second time equipped the rising generation to inherit the land.

David Guzik calls Deuteronomy “a book of reminding and a book of preparation.” As we read forward from Deuteronomy 1 this theme is visible, but its visibility is most clear in Deuteronomy 6. After Moses retells the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5—the “what” of the Law—he gives Israel a “why” and a “how.” He *reminds* them of the Law’s importance,

and he *prepares* them to teach it to their children.

My daughters, Adeline and Geneva, love Play-Dough. Minutes tick by as they cut out “cookies,” build lopsided blue snowmen, and roll out the dough for pie crusts. I have noticed how much they like to make imprints in the Play-Dough. If I give them a stamp or a cookie cutter, they will use it repeatedly.

Little children have minds like clay; they are impressionable. They are not born knowing God’s truth. Without intentional teaching and real-life examples, our little ones will look to media, culture, and non-parental authority figures to build a worldview. As they develop ideas of right and wrong, you are the one forming those impressions—and if you are not, their minds are still being molded by the cacophony of voices in this world. Our children’s Play-Dough hearts will be stamped by something. Will it be from us, and will it be true?

Moses knew the importance of a parent’s role. In Deuteronomy 6, he focuses intently on the parental *example* (“these commandments... are to be on your hearts”) and the child’s *impression* (“impress them on your children”). He has already rehearsed the Ten Commandments to Israel; he has given them the substance of the Law. He follows this up by explaining *why* the Law is so important:

*“These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, **so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God** as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and **so that you may enjoy long life**. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey **so that it may go well with you** and **that you may increase greatly** in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.”*
(Deut. 6:1-3)

Do you see the four “so thats” Moses supplied? He shared the Law with Israel:

- SO THAT... your children and grandchildren may fear the Lord
- SO THAT... you may enjoy long life
- SO THAT... it may go well with you
- SO THAT... you may increase greatly

We can infer from the text a fifth “so that”: SO THAT... *you experience the fullness of God’s promise.*

You might be wondering, “How does this apply to me today since I am not an ancient Israelite?” Good question! While Christians no longer observe Levitical law (there is no temple for sacrifices, and ceremonial laws were fulfilled by Christ) the moral law of the Ten Commandments still remains and is summed up in the person and teachings of Jesus:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:36-40)

The gospel of Jesus—His incarnation, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension as King of Kings—is the fulfillment of Abraham’s covenant, David’s line, and God’s Law.

The gospel is the “law” we teach our children. This does not save them—they must respond to the Spirit’s prompting of their own accord—but it does bless them, expose them to the favor of God, and give them a pattern to follow in the future. The gospel is the center of a godly family culture.

FAMILY CULTURE

You know when you visit a family for dinner and discover they all play a different musical instrument? Or that they hike on the weekends? Or they are voracious readers? That is family culture, and for believers in Christ such culture is about more than just hobbies and pastimes. It is about integrating biblical values into the foundation of the home. Because of this, most Christian families can unite around the basics of orthodox Christianity even while expressing it differently day to day. I divide family culture into “biblical foundation” and “pillars of preference.”

The biblical foundation is, as previously discussed, the gospel and all it entails. We will talk practically about how to integrate the gospel into your daily family routine later in this book. Deuteronomy outlines it for us though, and by keeping Christ at the forefront of our routines, meals, discipline, and decisions, we are showing our kids how to navigate the world through a gospel lens.

After those essential gospel principles, we have a lot of freedom in developing family culture. We have a preference in what music we play, what games become tradition, what activities we do at holidays, the meals we make, and the hobbies to which our kids are introduced. Not every family is going to host a high tea once a week. Not every family will play sports. I grew up on a horse farm and spent my teen years competing in shows and riding the trails; my husband went fishing and played soccer. The preferences we have as parents shape our family culture and, therefore, the childhood experiences of our little boys and girls.

When you are in the season of littles, so much time is spent changing diapers and handling the urgent that establishing a “family culture” can feel far-off or pointless. I promise you, it is

neither! The days are long, but the years are short. That baby will be nine before you know it, and establishing traditions, patterns, and routines of discipleship when babies are small is much easier than implementing them down the road (though it is always worth doing, and is never impossible!). Now is the time to think about what you want your family to look like. How will you personally integrate the gospel into your home in a fun, beautiful, meaningful way? What kind of culture do you want to cultivate with music, media, hobbies, and routines? Answering these questions will help you create a home life that is both gospel-oriented and individual to your parenting goals.

In our home, family culture includes:

- Eating dinner together, reading aloud, discussing family values, lighting candles, and praying together
- An emphasis on Jesus' kingship and an understanding of the big picture of the Bible
- A family team orientation regarding chores and work—everyone pitches in, and mom is not the family servant
- Appreciation for and respect of material things, both ours and others'
- Singing and playing piano together
- Engaging in the arts—galleries, art centers, and dance performances
- Care for animals and plants on our small farm
- Family games, whether board games or playing video games together
- Entrepreneurship: encouraging our kids to come up with business ideas and work alongside us in ministry

Josh and I are in continual conversation about the home and our children to determine what changes need to be made and whether certain routines are fitting for our season (during the weeks after our third was born there were no candlelight dinners happening!).

If you need more ideas, Sally Clarkson's *Lifegiving Home* is full of ideas for cultivating a home culture. We will not get much into that topic in the rest of this short work, but I do hope you will think and pray about it with your spouse! If we do not intentionally create the culture we want for our families, it develops anyway—and not always in a positive direction. Here are some questions to ask as you develop your own family culture:

- What do I want my kids to remember of their childhood?
- What is one of my fondest memories from childhood? What made it special?
- What is a constant stressor in my home? What could I do to alleviate that stress?
- Do I enjoy being home with my family? Why or why not?
- What hobbies or passions do I want to share with my kids as they grow?
- What hobbies or passions do the kids have that we could integrate into our overall culture?
- What kind of music/movies/art do I want my kids to be exposed to?
- What kinds of ideas and philosophies do I want my kids to engage with? How can I encourage that?
- What bad habits am I cultivating that prevent me/us from establishing the culture we want in our home?

TRAIN THEM IN THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO

We have all heard this proverb applied to parenting: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

I have heard it described as a promise (it is not; proverbial literature is often observant in nature, commenting on patterns of behavior and general principles for life). But I have also heard it taught—convincingly—that Solomon was not thinking of a child walking the exact path his parents set out for him, like a train on a track. Rather, Solomon depicted a training which played to the child’s natural bent; her skills, passions, and God-given abilities. The moral training is indeed the way she should go, but it is taught in such a way that meets her emotional needs and shows her the unique way she fits into the gospel story. When she grows up, she does not outgrow the moral teaching. She sees herself within its paradigm. She is part of the redemptive metanarrative, and because she knows that truth, she does not depart from it.

When I read this verse, the picture I have in my head is of the field behind our farmhouse. There is a spot where our neighbor drives his tractor. Every day, twice a day, he turns the tractor down that path to feed his cows. Because he comes there so often, the “way” is worn into the grass, a two-track anyone can follow.

In the little years, we are wearing a path for our children to follow. At this age, they probably are not choosing it themselves. We are leading them to the gospel, to truth, to a framework for right and wrong, just and unjust. The more we visit that path with them, the more clear the “way.” When they are older, we cannot force them down that road—but they will know right where it is, should they choose to walk it.

Discipleship of little kids is like driving down that path

twice a day to feed the cows. Except the cows are our kids, and the food is the Word of God! There will be days it is just *too early* or *too hard* or feels like it doesn't make a difference... but it does.

We are showing them the way. We are teaching diligently.



Mealtime Discipleship *When You Sit*

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home...” (Deuteronomy 6:6-8)

I used to wear a Fitbit every day. I loved watching my steps fill up and the confetti explosion when I hit 10,000 a day! Unfortunately, the days I hit 10,000 were only possible if I took a three mile walk outside. Between homeschooling and tending to the needs of little kids, I found myself sitting—a lot.

Most of us sit down with our kids for specific things: meals (especially lunch and dinner), read-alouds, schooling (if you are a home educator, or when assisting with homework), and church, if your kids sit in service with you. We also sit for game or movie nights or while nursing a younger child. While parenthood keeps us on our feet, we spend a lot of time on our laurels too!

Moses (and the Lord through him) saw the frequency of sitting down with family as an opportunity to disciple children in the truth. Back then you could not pull out an iPhone when you got bored; if you were sitting together, you were conversing together. Today’s world is a far cry from the days of Moses.

We must fight against our poor technology habits, personal laziness, and exhaustion to take advantage of these seated

moments with our kids. In this chapter, we will discuss some practical ways you can utilize mealtimes and reading to disciple your children. We will also discuss children sitting in church: the why and how to teach them to respect the church environment.

DISCIPLESHIP AT THE TABLE

The table is the easiest place to begin discipling your children in gospel truth. Every kid loves food (even if it is limited to chicken nuggets and mac n' cheese), and mealtimes guarantee togetherness between one and three times a day. If you are home all day with your children, you can use every meal as an opportunity to explore their interests, expose them to new concepts, and teach them about Christ. But even if you are working outside the home and your kids are in school or daycare, you still have one meal a day—dinner—to cultivate their little hearts! Here are a few tips for leading your kids toward the gospel at meals.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

If you make discipleship convenient for yourself, you will be more likely to follow through! If, whenever you sit down, you are rushing to the living room to get a Bible storybook or some character cards, you have added more work to your plate and will likely forget to grab them all together. Make this convenient for you!

In our home, we keep a tray in the middle of our dining room table. This tray holds all the materials we want to discuss over mealtimes:

- My Heroes of the Church cards—we use these to teach about the early church fathers and

mothers. Our girls love the pictures! Available in the Every Woman a Theologian shop

- September and Co. Creature Cards: We use these to discuss character traits like patience, obedience, and respect
- Answers in Genesis Book of the Bible cards: Each of these provide an overview of each book of the Bible, the main characters, and the gospel's role in the story
- Tiny Theologians Gospel Cards: we use these to discuss theological terms

Other times we have kept read-alouds on the table, like *The Jesus Storybook Bible* or *The Secret of the Hidden Scrolls* to read while the girls eat. Because the materials are visible and convenient, the kids themselves can grab them and remind us to read together!

DECIDE THE FOCUS

While our homeschool curriculum contains a Bible focus, it is not enough to teach the kids all that Josh and I want them to know about God. Even if your kids are in a Christian school, their primary discipler is *you*—not their teacher. A Bible class each semester is not how your child will learn to internalize gospel principles; he will learn them from your life! Watching you live these truths with intention will show him God is not relegated to a classroom or academic subject. He is real, personal, and invited into the home.

As the primary teacher of God's character and truth, you decide the focus of your mealtime discipleship. Do you want to discuss a different fruit of the Spirit each week? A theological idea? Memorize a verse as a family? Go around and ask questions? There is so much you can do, and it can start so

young!

It also does not have to be super structured. Some families do an entire family worship gathering more than once a week. Others, like ours, keep things very simple and mostly mostly disciple over meals and use life experiences to discuss theological ideas. Together with your spouse decide what the focus will be, gather the resources, and pick a meal that works best for you.

INVITING INTO PRAYER

We become comfortable talking to God by seeing it modeled, but even moreso by practice. Mealtime prayer is a fantastic opportunity to invite our children to participate and add to the prayer. Little kids' prayers are so fun and unique! We have found that our children's requests open doors for bigger theological conversations—like the time Adeline told us she *really* wanted to go to heaven, but didn't want to die. With some prompting, we learned that heaven's appeal was largely due to the amount of “shiny roads, unicorns, and cotton candy” that could be found there. Who knew?!

If a child *really* does not want to pray, we don't force it. Prayer is an outpouring of the heart, and we don't want it to become legalistic—but we continue to set the example of prayer, invite them in, and ask what requests we can bring to the Lord. That said, there is usually an underlying reason why a child doesn't want to pray. In one such situation, we found out (through several conversations when our child was relaxed) that her fear wasn't praying, it was the reactions to her prayer. She was scared of being laughed at. By talking through her fear and practicing “repeat after me” prayers, she got more confident in praying out loud.

A practice we have not yet integrated but would love to: once a week, tell the family all the *answers* to prayer you have

seen in your life and in the lives of others! Children need to see that prayer is not a crapshoot. By sharing God's faithfulness, they have a basis for thanksgiving and a greater paradigm for Christ's ability and love.

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH READING

The benefits of reading aloud to children are well established. Reading aloud gives children a wider range of vocabulary, improves their listening skills, cultivates empathy, and enhances imagination. From a gospel perspective, reading the principles of faith aloud connects that faith to a loving parent figure. Telling and retelling the story of God's redemption grounds our kids in the narrative of truth, but just as importantly, it ties that truth to relationship. As we cuddle our kids on the couch and read about God's faithful love, they have a physical experience with an echo of that love. When this is continued through older ages and parents engage with the tough theological questions teens and young adults bring, the risk of rebellion is much lower. Kids who were given gospel answers by loving, engaged parents rather than legalistic rules are far more likely to stay in the community of faith.

Of course, no amount of discipleship guarantees a child's salvation. They must own their walk of faith personally with the Lord. But it would be far better to set them up for success and understanding than to delegate discipleship to someone else.

Reading aloud from any book is an excellent way to connect with your children, and Sarah Mackenzie's *Read Aloud Revival* podcast is a great resource. Here, we will focus on reading aloud for the purpose of discipleship.

CHOOSE BOOKS THAT TELL THE WHOLE STORY

If you grew up with flannelgraph stories in Sunday School, you might be used to a biblical narrative that is chopped up, disconnected, and hard to understand. The Old Testament God seems arbitrary and mean; the New Testament Jesus is friendly and nice; and who on earth is the Holy Spirit?

But the Bible is not a disjointed account. It is a two-part epic, one long story that is *still happening*—and your kids are part of it! When you read aloud about God, the gospel, and the stories of the people God used to bring hope to the world, pick books that connect these accounts together.

Rather than just “David and Goliath”... how did David point to the coming hope of Christ?

Rather than Adam and Eve in the garden... what promise in Genesis 3 tells us the Redeemer is coming?

We want to be clear that these are not “fairy tales” but historical accounts about God’s interaction with mankind. The authority of Scripture is under attack today, and the earlier we can show our kids not just the “what” but the “why” of Scripture, the more prepared they will be to own their faith down the road.

A few resources we enjoy for “big picture” Bible stories:

- *The Jesus Storybook Bible*
- *The Greatest Story ABC*
- *The Greatest Story*
- *Bible Basics board book series*
- *Tiny Theologians*
- *Bible Belles (for girls)*
- *The Spirit of God Bible*
- *The Ology*

TEACHING SELF-CONTROL THROUGH READING

When kids are small, self-control is hard. They are energetic and fidgety—and that is to be expected! And depending on their age, it is developmentally normal. However, it is not unreasonable to begin teaching your children self-control, respect, and honor at a young age (we begin this as early as 12-18 months, depending on the child's development).

When I say that, you might picture a row of little chairs and my three kids sitting with hands folded while we read. Nothing could be further from the truth! We are often piled on the couch, hunched around a book together, or my girls are coloring while I read aloud. And especially when they were babies, there were fidgets and interruptions. But we USE these to teach our kids the skills to sit quietly, ask questions respectfully, and honor the people around them. Reading time is a fantastic way to begin teaching these principles because you have a clear focus and distraction from the difficult task of sitting still.

HOW WE TEACH SELF-CONTROL THROUGH READING:

- Start with a few minutes at a time—just one or two. Hold the child on your lap and read until they start to fidget or try to get down. When they do, hold them on your lap, hold their hands and say: “No, we aren’t done yet. We are learning to sit still.” Continue reading for another minute or so, then celebrate them for sitting so nicely!
- Each time you read, keep them on your lap a little longer. Celebrate and commend their patience! Choose times to do this training when the child is not tired (right before a nap) or

hungry. If it is a particularly temperamental day, save it for a day when things are going better.

- Continue this practice consistently, and practice it outside the home without books: in doctor's offices, at the park, anywhere the child needs to sit nicely on your lap. This training is very important for us since our children sit in church with us.

Why would teaching a two year old self-control be beneficial? Many reasons: first, for his own benefit. A child who learns how to be patient will carry that into his older years; he will be more pleasant and agreeable with his family, and happier overall. Secondly, teaching self-control and patience makes it easier to bring your kids with you to events, other people's houses, or play dates. We enjoy our kids more when we take the time to intentionally invest in their character. And third, these are biblical values and principles that will bless our kids when they are old enough to understand the Holy Spirit's role in producing self-control and patience. Until then, we set that example.

How do we explain this kind of training to the child? In our home, we explain this in terms of respect. Screaming, thrashing, or tantruming is disrespectful—not just to us as parents, but to the entire household. It is disrespectful to fellow siblings, to guests, and to grandparents. While there is a respect-authority connection in Scripture, we have chosen to frame respect around the *imago dei* in all people. In other words: we teach our children that disrespectful behavior is offensive because ALL people (including parents) are made in the image of God. Nobody in the home gets to use his or her behavior to hurt or offend other image bearers. Therefore screaming, hitting, disobedience, defiance, and the like are not permitted. One of the best ways to consistently explain this

was summed up by our marriage counselor as “connect, then redirect.” Connection looks like holding the child or getting on their level, taking their hands and speaking calmly but firmly: “James, I love you. I can see you are struggling to respect with your voice and hands. Because I love you, I cannot let you hurt people this way.” After this you might give a warning—“If you do this again, you will have the train taken away and will sit in time out.” If he does it again, immediately follow through on the warning. Frequent “warnings” is not grace; it is lack of follow through. We have found that consistent, loving boundaries, connecting, and then redirecting (warning or consequence) leads to happier, kinder, more connected kids over time.

“Lap discipleship” is not an overnight thing. It is a continual process of training our kids as they grow, challenge ideas, and establish a will. We use reading time (of all books, not just Christian ones) as an opportunity to teach respect and self-control. While it is not perfect (often!), we are carving that path of respect into their minds and hearts, hoping they choose to walk it when they grow older.

WHY KEEP CHILDREN IN CHURCH?

Our church has a fantastic children’s ministry, and yours probably does as well. For several years Josh and I were the college ministry leaders in our church home, and because of this, could only attend the 9 AM service. After that, we would head off to teach the class during second service and put our girls in children’s church for that time period. A few years later we transitioned church families to one closer to our home, retiring from college ministry in the process. Now our kids primarily attend the children’s church and only sit in service with us every few months. Even so, the years of training our kids to join us in service has paid off. We are not anti-children’s

church, but we do believe that having our kids in church with us was beneficial!

Benefit #1: A real-life way for the children to see the importance of respect.

We talk about respect in the home all the time, but having the kids sit through church gave us a real-life way to practice it—both via lap training and attitude. Before heading into the sanctuary, we would remind them: *We will be quiet and still because we respect our pastor, our church friends, and each other.* Were there times we had to take one or both out of the service? Absolutely. But we continued to be intentional, because training takes time.

*When utilizing the cry room—which we do!—we treat it just like the service. We continue training how to sit on the lap quietly just as if we were in a restaurant or other public place. We try not to use the cry room as a “fun space” that ends up being a reward for leaving the service. Often, other parents are in the cry room trying to hear the service, which is hard to do if it is treated as a play place (unless it is clear that is the intended use). So for us, if we are going to teach lap training for church (or anywhere else) we want to be consistent in our expectations even when we take our kids out of the sanctuary.

Benefit #2: We observed things we needed to work on at home.

Nothing exposes the weak spots in our parenting like the public sphere—at least that has been true for us! Sometimes having the girls in church with us revealed what we had been letting slide at home. It showed Josh and I how we could do better at teaching respect and cultivating relationship with the girls.

Benefit #3: They learn to listen to a sermon even when they can't understand it.

Church has not always been programmed for younger ears. In years past, children were expected to sit in church with adults, even if they did not fully understand what was being said. The idea that kids MUST have an age-appropriate lesson is a modern idea. Now, don't get me wrong: We love the lessons our girls receive in class, and we still have not had them attend. But we also don't assume our kids are unable to tolerate an adult sermon. Even though we provide bags with coloring items and small toys, we would learn at Sunday lunch just how much the girls had absorbed (from as young as ages 2 and 4).

I am writing this during the Covid pandemic, at which time many of us are either not in a physical church or our church attendance looks different. When we watch church at home, these same principles apply. We use that time around the TV to continue training our kids to listen and process the sermon even if they are busy with coloring books or toys.

Discipleship while sitting happens every single day if we notice the opportunities and take them. One of the best parts of this kind of discipleship is that it is often face to face, side by side. As we eat together, read together, and attend church together, we teach our children that the gospel is real, Jesus is good, and they are incredibly loved.

