

When our first child was delivered into our arms, it was obvious that he was very vocal and expressive with his emotions, both positive and negative. Extremely active, Justin tuned up his lungs nightly to protest being confined in his high chair at dinnertime. At only eighteen months old, he exuberantly climbed up onto the roof at the first sight of a ladder. If he saw something he wanted from a top cabinet, even the off-limits medicine shelf, he persistently climbed up again and again. Now in his twenties and still adventurous, he recently completed a rugged fifty-mile trail run.

When his little brother, Chris, came on the scene almost three years later, we couldn't believe how different the two boys were. Chris was calm and happy. He was entertained by quietly observing the mobile in his crib or by watching the dog swish her tail in the family room. Resourceful and creative, Chris could be content whether he was playing with other kids or making his own fun.

Alison, our daughter, lit up our lives two and a half years later. The pediatrician's first words right after Alison's delivery proved prophetic: "She's one of the feistiest babies I've checked in years! Alison won't be a doormat; she has plenty of spunk—which I think she'll need with two big brothers." Sure enough, our precious daughter held her own with her older brothers and stood up to the kindergarten class bully. Yet if anyone was hurting, she was the first to comfort that person. At only five years old, she said, "I'll do my hair myself, Mom," and she did.

Our three children are also wired with different ways of learning about the world around them, and naturally, each is endowed with unique gifts. Justin has tremendous communication and "people" skills, and he gravitated to history, English, and later, business and marketing. He now serves as an account manager for a surgical equipment company. His brother, Chris, took every science course offered, majored in humanities, and went on to medical school after college. Alison, a hands-on learner, had foreign language talent and mastered information best when she got involved in doing, making, or experimenting. Enormously creative, she designed her own greeting cards, and when she found an ad for an art school in fourth grade, she inquired, "Could I just drop out of regular school and go to this art school in St. Louis instead?" She's now working part-time as a hair stylist while attending college and expecting her first child.

Our children's spiritual journeys have been just as individual. While all three of our kids grew up in the same churches and heard the same *Little Visits with God* devotions and Bible stories at home, their growth in knowing and walking with God has been quite different. Spiritual growth happened on their own timetables.

Alison, our youngest, had a very real encounter with Jesus in seventh grade. But while she helped lead worship for youth group from junior high on and taught a girls' Bible study, she struggled to believe and wrestled with doubts. Alison always loved God but didn't like religion, rules, and things that alienated people outside the church. The only thing that motivated her in her faith was the example Jesus set—not a doctrine from a denomination or church but how he touched people no matter their brokenness or outward appearance. Her faith became real in her early twenties after she challenged everything she'd been taught when she was young.

Older brother Justin attended church throughout childhood, but in adolescence he found the party scene at his high school much more interesting than youth group. He wanted his faith to be his own and, until then, wasn't interested in borrowing ours. But at the end of his sophomore year of college, he got tired of the emptiness and stress of living life without God and realized God hadn't moved—Justin had. He had a definite spiritual turnaround and has followed the Lord ever since. Now he is the father of two young children, praying with and for them, wanting to teach them in such a way that they'll know Christ and be able to touch others' lives with his love, and endeavoring to reflect Jesus in the corporate world where he works, whether that means praying for someone or listening to them.

Chris was the first to profess his faith in Christ, as a nine-year-old, and continued attending church with us and mandatory chapel services at the private high school he attended. His analytical nature, however, caused him to doubt the Bible when it didn't line up with scientific knowledge he was learning. College provided the opportunity to explore conflicts and contradictions of religion apparent to Chris as he struggled to make sense of the shared yet remarkably varied human experience. As he sifted through the theories, stories, and worldviews accumulated throughout cultures and ages, a personal conviction emerged which was not memorized from a lecture on "isms" or learned from a Sunday school workbook.

Chris discovered the *actions* of Jesus and made Christ the cornerstone for a life of affecting the world in a powerful, compassionate, and humble way. He found that faith and empowerment through Jesus, realized in a deeply personal and individual sense, enables his quest to touch people's hearts, improve their condition, and perhaps leave the fingerprint, rather than the academics, of God in their lives.

For decades, psychologists have debated whether children are born with a clean personality slate or whether much of their basic makeup has already been determined. My husband and I have debated the issue as well. Just when we would get one of our kids figured out and on the right path, one of the others would completely baffle us. The reason? God made each of them unique. Someone said raising kids is like nailing Jell-O to a tree; we have plans for our kids and are ready to nail them down when suddenly—oops! Slosh! There goes the child with a will of his own, sliding down a path different from what we'd envisioned. Maybe it's God's way of keeping us parents on our toes—and on our knees in prayer.

As psychologists debate such issues, so theologians debate the spiritual development of children. Why do some "catch it" early in life and others not "get it" until their twenties or thirties? Why do some run toward God and others run as far away from him as they can? Is it a function of "strong willed" versus "compliant"? Will children be stronger spiritually if the husband is the spiritual leader, or if the wife is? Or does the influence of a praying, involved grandparent really make the difference? Is it the pastor? The youth minister? The style of worship? Christian schooling?

The variables are legion.

Just as children have critical windows of opportunity for learning language, music, and logic, as my book *Opening Your Child's Nine Learning Windows* discusses, they also have important spiritual windows of opportunity. These windows are pathways to your children's hearts during their growing-up years, when their hearts and minds are most open to experiencing the wonder of God's creation, coming to know him and his ways through the Bible, talking and listening to him through prayer, serving him, and participating in the church community. These windows are best opened early in life, though as you'll discover, if a child's personality or circumstances keep her from a specific stage in the process, any time in life can be the right time to catch up.

It's essential, however, that a parent start early. Why? The early years are the time when children are most receptive to spiritual nurturing and training. According to Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who spent over twenty-five years studying the spiritual life of children, kids spend a lot of time thinking and wondering about God, pondering questions like, "What are we?" "Who made us?" and "What are we here for?" As he explains, they are natural seekers, as eager to make sense of life as we adults are. They are seekers marching through life with an important mission and spiritual purpose.¹

The first six years are important because children are most open then to encounters with God and the enjoyment they derive from those experiences, says Sofia Cavalletti, a pioneer in spiritual formation.² Because they are more contemplative in early childhood and more inclined toward intellectual and moral interests in later childhood, it is a critical time for spiritual development. Moreover, studies show that 85 percent of kids' attitudes about God, church, and the Bible develop in the preschool years. And the fact that the vast majority of people who follow a Christian lifestyle received Christ between the ages of four and fourteen reveals the importance of nurturing a child's spirit early in life.³

Young children are seekers and have a God-shaped vacuum inside just as we adults do. As parents, we have the awesome privilege of leading them to the only one who can fill that vacuum. "The most excellent end for which we were created is that one should teach another about God, what He is in His being, what His will is, how He is minded towards us," said Martin Luther.

A Perspective on Spiritual Development

While I'm aware of theories on the spiritual development of children and include explanations of several in the appendix, I don't rely heavily on such theories in this book for two reasons. First, in the majority of cases, adults tend to underestimate the enormous spiritual capacity of children. Children, even at a very young age, have much more potential to know God and connect with him, listen to him, and have a relationship with him than we imagine (or sometimes than even we can experience ourselves). So we can't presuppose that just because preschoolers are in the phase Piaget describes as magic or fantasy, their ideas about God are in the realm of pretend play and they're too young to really experience God. Or that it's only teenagers who think through what people have told them throughout their lives about God. Or that kids can serve God only after they've gotten a lot of Bible knowledge and gone to seminary or college.

The second reason is that each child is unique, so a cookie-cutter approach to spiritual development would be erroneous. Every person's spiritual path is different. Most spiritual development occurs in the heart where we can't measure the progress. God sees the heart, and we see just the outside, the external person. A child or teen can seemingly be in a spiritual slumber for years and then, in a matter of a few days or weeks, speed ahead in spiritual growth. As much as we'd like to, we can't control the acceleration and we can't force it. For the most part, spiritual journey and development are a mystery.

Just as one child may be one to three years ahead of another child of the same age in language development or physical development, so a child's spiritual development can be fast or slow. There are many variables: the spiritual foundation in the home; the love or lack of it in the child's early life; what his life, family, and church experiences have been; whether there have been encounters with death, struggles which have propelled him to ask hard questions and search out meaning, or traumatic events that derailed him from his path or caused him to draw back from God.

Fortunately, God is not keeping track of who reaches what stages of spiritual growth the fastest. He doesn't face the pressure parents put on themselves to make sure their child is born again before she graduates from high school. And he's not giving out ribbons and prizes for the spiritual sprinters or putting the spiritual slow learners in the corner. His view of the playing field is bigger, so he is extremely patient. His ultimate mission is to draw children to his heart and show them that he loves them with an everlasting love. He longs to have an intimate relationship with them, to live through them and have them abide in him, and ultimately, to mold them into the image of Christ.

For these reasons, I have approached spiritual development in a different way. I've discovered that healthy spiritual progress occurs when the child is helped through a series of key spiritual windows.