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INTRODUCTION

Do we need another course on parenting?

Advice for parents is everywhere. Just have a look in any high-street bookshop, or ask a health visitor. So why another course? This parenting course is different in a number of ways:

1. It runs for only three sessions

Most parenting courses run for six or even ten weeks, and demand a high level of commitment from people at a very busy time of life. If both parents attend—and ideally that is best—a lot of baby-sitting will be needed. Past experience shows that many parents are more willing to commit to a course which takes only three sessions. And although each session covers a lot of ground, parents won't mind being stretched a little, as long as there is a good sense of pace, purpose and achievement.

This course aims to help parents to be confident in their role. A lengthy parenting course can give the impression that raising children is a difficult thing, which requires extraordinary expertise, like growing prize dahlias or upholstering a sofa. But if we make the whole process unnecessarily difficult and mysterious, it will only undermine any confidence that parents might have.

It is also possible to run this course in six shorter sessions, and this could certainly be more practical if the course is held during the day and accompanied by a crèche.

2. It follows simple, common sense principles

Many longer courses contain a lot of 'popular psychology'—insights or ideas that pur-

port to show why we do things. This might be fascinating to some people, but it's not essential for successfully bringing up children; many parents have raised perfectly decent human beings, without any instruction in 'anger management' or 'self-esteem'.

In fact, one of the aims of this course is to show that raising children is an ordinary, everyday process, which depends on following just a few common-sense principles. This course is based on three of these principles:

- parents should have **loving authority** over their children
- parents should exercise **loving discipline** with their children
- parents should enjoy a **loving relationship** with their children

3. It is not afraid to be directive

This parenting course looks to the Bible and the Christian faith for principles. It is shaped by the fact that Christians are quite comfortable with the idea of receiving wisdom from outside ourselves—this, after all, is precisely how people become Christians and receive God's salvation. So this course will be directive when it comes to principles; it will say that this is the best way for everybody because it reflects the way our Maker built us. We are made in God's image, so good parenting will reflect how God parents his own children. He does this with loving authority and loving discipline; all in the context of a loving relationship, which he calls people into through Jesus Christ.

By contrast, most parenting courses, although they contain a lot of good sense, do not tend to use 'ought' and 'must'; they are 'non-directive'. Rather, they argue along the lines of 'how would you like it?' Advice is usually based on reflection and self-evaluation, and aims to prove that a particular route feels nicer all round. This course, while recognising that such an approach can sometimes be helpful, refers far more frequently to the idea that some things are right and others are wrong, in a way that is quite independent of our feelings.

Interestingly, even people who have no belief in God willingly accept this kind of 'wisdom from outside', even when they may not believe in anyone 'outside'. That is something that the course will gently point out as one piece of evidence that we were made by God and for him.

Past experience shows that parents who are confused by all the advice available today are quite glad to learn some received wisdom, and will accept that the Bible is at least as good a place to get it from as anywhere else.

4. It is biblical in its content

From the discussion of the definition of a child, through references to the fifth commandment (Honour your father and your mother), to the model of the fatherhood of God, the teaching of this book is drawn from the Bible. Course leaders needn't be afraid of saying where the ideas come from. After all, through many centuries and across many continents and cultures, the wisdom of the Bible on parenthood has proved to be an invaluable guide. So course leaders can have confidence in the content of the course, since it is not of human origin.

As this course is designed particularly for those who don't belong to or attend a church, chapters and verses of the Bible are rarely mentioned, but there will be the occasional Bible quotation to think about (these have been included in the Study Guide). Those who want to check out Bible sources might find it helpful to read my short book entitled, *Aren't they lovely when they're asleep* (Available from www.thegoodbook.co.uk), which covers much of the same ground as the course, but with more explicit theological and biblical references.

5. It aims to make people think about bigger questions

Parenting does not exist in a vacuum. Today there seems to be a widespread failure of parents to raise the kind of responsible citizens that both the government and all people of decency and good sense would like to see in the rising generations. And it is no coincidence that we also seem to have a down-grading of attitudes to standards in marriage, manners, and all kinds of social, public and private behaviour. There are many factors at work in this. But surely, the root of these trends is an unquestioned acceptance of 'moral relativism'—the idea that truth, right and wrong are whatever you believe they are, or whatever works for you, and not something that others can impose on you.

To talk about raising children without mentioning values is nonsense. What are we aiming to achieve in raising a child? It is of the utmost relevance to encourage people to think about their values and where they come from. Hopefully, this will encourage people to set out on a spiritual quest to answer these questions.

This is what makes the course pre-evangelistic; at the end of it, there may be opportunity to engage in discussions about faith and about Jesus Christ—the way, the truth and the life.

6. It enables churches to serve their local communities.

Many churches are keen to share the gospel with the people who live nearby. But twenty-first century people tend to be suspicious of ‘religious institutions’, and are quick to reject church and its message as irrelevant to their lives. By contrast, parenting courses are believed by many to be positive and even necessary; most people you speak to will know someone who would benefit from one. So this is another way in which the church can say ‘we care’. The whole community (and the whole nation) benefits when parents bring up their children well.

Many local churches already have contact with parents via youth groups or toddler groups. This course offers an opportunity to develop and strengthen those relationships, with the possibility of future openings for informal or formal sharing of the gospel.

Who is this course for?

This course is for parents (ie: mothers and fathers), particularly for those who have no church background, although church parents may find it equally beneficial.

It is suitable for parents with children of any age (it can even be undertaken during pregnancy), although the younger the children, the better the opportunity for parents to put into practice what they learn.

Parents often struggle with teenagers and, at that point, start to look for help—way too late! That can be a little like a lost person, who stops someone in the street to ask for directions, and is told: ‘Well, I wouldn’t start from here.’

Having said that, the principles of this course are applicable to any age. The pitfalls outlined in Session 1, the advice on handling a behaviour crisis in Session 2, the material about relationships and evaluating input in Session 3 are all relevant to the teenage years. There is much that a parent of a teenager can learn and put into practice, but there may be pain as they face up to a longer period of error or failure. Even there, however, the Bible gives us scope for hope—we believe in a God of grace.

So you can invite parents of any age, and ‘parents to be’ to come to the sessions in the confidence that they will all hear and learn something that will help them.

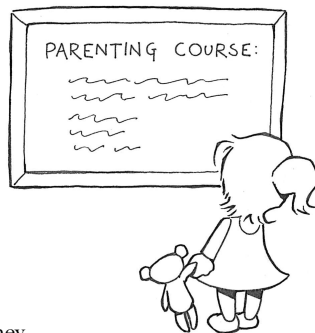
How to use this course

1. Advertising

Advertise the course to parents who are linked with the church, or whose children attend any of the regular activities. As this is 'pre-evangelistic', encourage members of your congregation to invite their friends, neighbours and any other family contacts they might have, with the assurance that they will not be 'preached at' in an inappropriate way. Feel free to advertise the course in your local newspaper, church noticeboard and any other way that you might be able to draw in or make contact with people in your community who are struggling with parenting issues. You can be a real help to them.

Make sure you give the key information on the advertising: place, date, time *and duration* (eg: 7.30–9.30pm).

You can download some images to make your own advertising leaflets and posters from www.thegoodbook.co.uk



2. When to hold sessions

The course can be run in the daytime, in which case a crèche would be a good idea, but evenings are more useful if you hope to attract both parents, which is preferable.

The leader will need to decide whether to run the course in three sessions (this means parents need to make fewer childcare arrangements) or in six sessions (this means the sessions will be shorter, which may be helpful if a crèche has been organised). The sessions could be held weekly or fortnightly.

3. Planning the session

You will need a comfortable room in a church building or other public venue, with the seating arranged to facilitate discussion and interaction in small groups. Or you could run the course for, say, six or eight people in a home.

You may want to provide a meal; coffee and cake are certainly a good idea, with extra supplies being served during one or other of the breaks. It can be effective to get groups to sit at tables of 4, 6 or 8, and have refreshments available throughout.

You need to allow about two hours for a session (one hour if you are doing a 6-ses-



sion version of the course). This includes allowing people to have a drink and settle down comfortably.

If you have some Christian parents attending, spread them around the groups. It is not essential to appoint a leader for each small group, but it might be helpful if people don't know each other. The leader can help to get the ball rolling in the slots for group discussion. It is not usually a problem to get parents to talk about their children.

The Leader's Guide

Session summary

Each session has a key concept, stated at the beginning of the leader's notes for each session. This is followed by a summary of the theological basis for the material covered in the session, and the gospel opportunities that the subject matter can open up. The course leader can decide how explicit to be about introducing the gospel into each session.

Information notes

These notes should be read well ahead of time, to ensure that the leader is well-prepared for the sessions. The information notes for each session contain the following:

- practical tips on how to prepare for each session, including timing for each component;
- the aims of each session;
- an overview of what is included in each session and a description of each component.

Presentation notes

These notes are a guide for everything that needs to be said throughout each session.

Talk outlines

The presentation notes include outlines of the talks that take up a large part of each session. These outlines aim to give leaders a clear structure to follow, but also give them

the opportunity to make the material their own—for instance, space is provided for leaders to insert their own illustrations, either from personal experience or from current events. If the course leader is confident enough about speaking publicly, the advantage of using an outline (as opposed to a script) is that the talk is more likely to be spoken, rather than read to the audience.

Scripts of these talks, as originally given, are also available for download from The Good Book Company website. The person who teaches this course may use these scripts verbatim if they prefer.

It might be good to have two speakers, one male and one female, at each session, and to divide the material up between them. Some men may be more receptive to the voice and experience of a fellow dad. Mothers and fathers each bring something special and different to the home, not least a perspective which is gender-linked. While the Bible clearly teaches that there is a difference between male and female, husbands and wives, and mothers and fathers, that is not an issue on which this course majors. For an excellent treatment of the specific role of fathers see *Fatherhood* by Tony Payne, available from The Good Book Company.

Group activities and discussions

Every session includes a number of discussion slots when the parents are encouraged to answer some questions together. Where a larger number of people attend (more than eight, say), it would be helpful to arrange small groups around a number of tables. This gives an air of informality, allows everyone to be included, and automatically provides a structure for group discussion.

The first of the interludes in each of the three sessions is very much an ice-breaker. The discussion relates to an extract from a film; the three specifically suggested in this course are *Parenthood*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Dead Poets Society*. All of these movies are still available to hire, buy or download. However, as a course leader, you might find better or more current examples to use in place of those recommended. A resume of the extract is included, so that the leader will be able to locate it in the film. These extracts last only two to three minutes, but they are an enjoyable way to begin and introduce the concept of the session.

The Study Guide

Each person attending the course should receive their own Study Guide, which will include a few questions to be thought over at home. Where both parents attend, they should be encouraged to discuss their parenting together, and to come up with a combined approach. The leader need not refer to the homework, but may want to allow time at the beginning of the session for parents to share their homework thoughts with the rest of their group, if time allows.

Where to go next

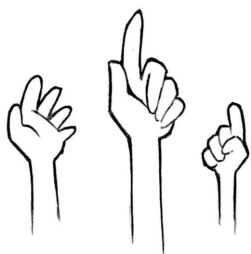
This course is designed to be pre-evangelistic. As such, it should be used to establish relationships with non-Christians, and to raise their interest in spiritual things. Pray that lasting relationships will be made through this course and that these relationships will provide opportunity for Christian witness, whether during the course or beyond. You will want, however, to think through how you will create a 'next step' for people who have found the course and the company of other Christians enjoyable and stimulating. Think about offering one or more of the following:

1. An evangelistic course

Some churches time the running of a pre-evangelistic course like this just before an outreach event, or the start of an evangelistic course like *Christianity Explored*. This makes a natural opening for invitation when parents are encouraged to examine their own values and priorities in Session 3.

2. A question and answer session

Although the course has just three sessions, some churches have found it worthwhile to offer a follow-up 'question and answer session'. If you have a number of experienced parents in the church, you could have a panel, provided that each member understands and agrees with the principles of the course, to avoid any unhelpful contradiction. On the other hand, when parents ask for advice on practical issues, eg: potty training, a range of ideas and experiences would be helpful. If people write down their questions during Session 3, it will give the panel time to think and prepare their answers.



3. Reunion

We hope that the environment of fun, care and discussion will result in closer friendships. Many new parents make friendships on NCT courses with other parents that last for years. If by the end of the course, you can see that the ‘students’ get on very well, it may be worthwhile to suggest a reunion several months later. Apart from being socially enjoyable, this would be an opportunity to discuss how people’s experience of parenting has changed since the course, and may highlight further problems or needs—and therefore further opportunities to help people.

4. Family events

As part of your commitment to helping parents develop good relationships with their children based on positive memories and experiences (see Session 3), you need to think through what your church offers to families. There is an obvious place to mention the importance of spiritual development, and the help that your Sunday School could be. But what about putting on family events throughout the year? Some popular ideas include:

- a family service or café-style Sunday morning meeting
- special Christmas and Easter events
- alternative Halloween parties
- holiday clubs which include a barbecue for parents
- a themed children’s Sunday tea

Make it a priority to think through the range of contact events you can organise. Be realistic about what you have the energy to sustain!

5. Evaluation and contact details

It is common practice for people on a course or conference to be asked to complete an evaluation form at the end. So have one ready as a way of learning and improving the course, and as a way of continuing the relationship begun with those who have attended. An example is included at the end of the Study Guide. Or you might prefer to devise one that is more appropriate to your church situation.

The form needs to ask for a rating in terms of content, style, arrangements, timing etc, and some feedback on how it could be made better for next time. But it should also include a question which probes whether the parent would be interested in hear-

ing about other activities or courses which the church offers.

Because there are always new parents in the community, it is worth considering running *Putting Parenting to Bed* on an annual basis.

It is the hope of those who have produced this course that many parents will not only appreciate and follow the wisdom of the Bible, but that they will come to know Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, as churches, we need to be ready to receive seekers (and their children) among us, with all the implications which that may have for resources, manpower and patience.

To God alone be glory.

Ann Benton, February 2008