

Putting Parenting to Bed

The Leader's guide for Putting Parenting to Bed contains a notes for the talk input in outline form. We would like to encourage you to do your own talks and incorporate your own experience and illustrations into them. This will be by far the most effective way of leading the sessions.

However, to help you prepare, below are the verbatim notes that Ann Benton has used in giving the talks. Please feel free to use these to help you in your own preparation.

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Script for Talk 1

What is a child?

Introduction

I suppose that pretty high on the list of the ten worst things that can happen to a parent is the phone call from your child's school, summoning you to attend a meeting to discuss the poor performance or unacceptable behaviour, of your beloved offspring. All sorts of emotions rise up: anger, embarrassment, but most of all defensiveness.

In the film *Parenthood*, starring Steve Martin, the hapless parents are called to such a meeting, where the principal says,

"I think we are going to have to be very careful about Kevin's educational environment."

There follows a discussion of Kevin's 'emotional problems', and immediately the parents look for someone to blame.

"She smoked grass!"

"He lets them watch too much TV."

In any discussion of parenting we all find ourselves inclined to be defensive. Guilt lurks just below the surface; it is handy to find someone or something to blame. We feel personally threatened. The aim of this short parenting course is not to make you feel bad about your failures and weaknesses as a parent. There are no perfect parents. Rather the aim is to help us to face up to our fears in raising children, to disentangle from amongst the plethora of advice, what is really important, and to encourage us to take responsibility as parents and get on and do it. How hard can it be really? It is often pointed out that men and women have been successfully raising decent human beings for centuries and up until about twenty or thirty years ago, they never read a book on it or attended a course. Now we are awash with experts and we are nervous and confused. And all the evidence is that children are more troubled, less well-adjusted, more aggressive, less compliant than they have ever been.

Group discussion

Let's take a break now and talk together in our groups about our children. Around your tables take turns to introduce, as it were, your children to the others. Tell your group three things about your child that you find delightful or endearing, before mentioning one thing that you fear one day you might be hauled into a headteacher's office about.

What is a child?

I was interested in the animation on your faces as you talked about your children. There is hardly a subject which is dearer to a parent's heart or more likely to loosen the tongue of the shyest and least articulate of us.

It's obvious that the great majority of parents love and want the best for their children. But is it true to say that 'all you need is love'? Do parents fail, and do children grow up problematically, simply because there isn't enough love in a relationship? That's certainly true in some parent/child relationships, but does it explain every problem in a child's upbringing? And what is true love anyway? What does it look like in everyday life when a parent is showing true love to a child?

This course aims to highlight some things that we need to know and think about, that will inform and guide our love for our children. And the first of these is: **what is a child?** We are going to study a list of different commonly-held assumptions or ideas about children. Some of them are contradictory. Are they true or not? And if we hold them to be true, how will that affect our attitude to our children?

1. A random collection of atoms/ chemicals

Anyone who believes that the universe came about by chance and that human beings are the result of some genetic accident has no reason to attach to a child any significance beyond that of any other object in creation, a tree, say, or a cockroach. What I find really interesting is that we actually do not treat our children like that at all. If you have experienced the loss of a newborn child, you are all too painfully aware that what you lost was not just so much matter, as though it were a tooth or a finger. Even though the child was too young for you to be acquainted with anything you could describe as personality, yet you were aware that you lost a person. Instinctively we know that every single child on the planet has significance. But a cockroach we would crush with our shoe and never think of again. If a child is just a random collection of atoms or chemicals, why would we care or respond to film footage of hungry or sick babies in war zones or drought-ridden areas of the planet. Why indeed would charities exist to draw such things to our attention?

2. Uniquely created.

This is a profound point. And your response to it has implications for the way you treat your child. Think about your child and the way you have just described him or her. Many people recognise that even the smallest human infant has a unique otherness about it. There is a natural awe in the presence of a new-born infant. The Bible's way of talking about that is to say that every human being is a unique living soul. There is an essence to each one of us which is quite distinct from our

bodily parts; it is not located anywhere in particular, although sometimes we refer to it as heart, by which we mean much more than that organ which pumps blood around our systems.

Now this obviously gives immense significance to every child. In the days when I was a primary school teacher I looked forward to the beginning of September when I would meet my new class. There they sat before me on the carpet: 30 upturned faces and do you know what? At a cursory glance 30 7-year olds in the south of England might seem somewhat similar? But of course, as I delighted to discover every one was different, not only different from the other 29, but different from every other child I had ever taught. Unique, in fact. I called that the romance of teaching: you never meet the same one twice!

If you accept and, I hope, enjoy the fact that your child is both unique and significant, you will know that your child is therefore worthy of being treated with the utmost dignity and respect. And you will resist the temptation to make invidious comparisons between your child and his or her peers. Comparison is the besetting sin of parents, almost from day one. As mothers who shared the joys of ante-natal classes regroup for mutual support through the trials of infancy, toddler-hood and beyond, they are continually looking at what the other children are doing.

'Maisie sleeps through the night.'

'Harry is out of nappies'

'Araminta can write her name'

'Ambrose has got into Cambridge'.

3. Consumer item/ fashion accessory

Strolling down a High Street, I overheard a young couple standing outside Gapkids, the store which sells designer clothes for babies and young children. Admiring the cute display, one said to the other, 'It almost makes you want to have a baby, doesn't it?'

You've got everything, nice house in a good area, car, conservatory; your career is at a good point; you've done some travelling; let's have a baby. And a whole host of must-have merchandise is available to make sure your baby looks good in your arms or your living room.

Designer babies are a fact of life. While women of all ages, with or without a husband or partner, demand the right to reproduce and fertility clinics are multi-million pound businesses, close to 190,000 babies are aborted in England and Wales every year.

4. A gift from God.

There are many parents, on the other hand, who look on a baby, even where its arrival was not in their plans, as a most precious gift from God. They feel

something of the awe of holding in their arms a brand new person and a certain amount of trepidation at the task which lies ahead.

Apparently, only one in ten of us, on purchasing a new electrical gadget for our home, actually reads the accompanying instruction booklet before installation and use. The other nine of us muddle through and stuff the booklet in a drawer, where we may or may not be able to locate it, should the gadget malfunction.

You may or may not know that God our maker has given us written instructions: they are found in the Bible. And the Bible has a good deal of practical and sound advice for parents, advice which has stood the test of time and experience and which holds true for everybody in the whole world, whatever their background or belief.

If your child is a gift from God, to follow the maker's instructions would seem a sensible thing to do.

5. Innocent

Think about those big eyes staring up at you from the cot; think about that little hand which trustingly reaches for yours. Yes, there is an innocence about children, especially in the sense of vulnerability, but also in the sense of ignorance. There is so much they do not know. Their wide eyes open on a potentially dangerous world. They need the protection of adults. I think we are all aware of that fact. Child protection is high profile in our society these days. But the innocence of children not only demands protection, it demands guidance and instruction. And the first person who is meant to give not only protection, but guidance and instruction is you, the parent. Parents must not shirk that responsibility.

6. Naturally wayward.

It is quite possible to believe in the innocence of children in the sense I have described it, while at the same time observing a tendency which is less endearing. It is this: there is something in-built into the human race which is selfish and deceitful. No one has to teach a child to lie, to be mean or cruel. Especially once he or she finds out that you cannot see round corners. Oh, yes, self-centredness comes quite naturally and finds its expression in anything from choosing the biggest cake to wanting a toy as soon as little brother has started to play with it. Did they learn that behaviour from someone else? No! They thought it up on their own, (although they can learn more subtle and effective expressions of selfishness from studying their parents!) On the other hand you have to work really hard to teach your child to say please or thank you, or to share toys. A friend of mine told of the shock she experienced when having instructed her sweet little son to replace his toys in the toy box, and having been assured later by his solemn word that he had done it, she later found that the offending toys had been shoved unceremoniously under the bed. The Bible calls such

unnecessary waywardness 'sin'. It is a regrettable part of every single one of us. There is no need to be shocked or even mildly surprised.

7. A blank sheet of paper

We all know that parents have an effect on their children: that is the way it is meant to be, but to read some of the weekend supplements you might believe that a child is an empty jug which it is your job to fill, or a blank sheet of paper on which you must be sure to use only your best handwriting and make no smudges or blots.

Some statistical finding from somewhere you never heard of before suggest that eating beetroot in pregnancy enhances your child's agility, or that playing Bach's B-minor mass in the bedroom enhances mathematical potential, and suddenly parents are running to the supermarket or CD shop or else fretting over a complete lack of beetroot or Bach in the child's experience. (I made those examples up, by the way!) Seeing a child in this way can be described as the philosophy of psychological determinism; within this worldview everything you do and don't do has long-term consequences for the child. This is the road to paranoid parenting. It is risk assessment gone mad and parents are buying into it big-time. It is the reason why organic foods sell so well to parents of young children – people for whom organic was a non-issue before parenthood. It accounts for vast sales in the 'teach your baby to read' genre. It has parents taking their role so seriously, they nearly go 'bang!', exhausting themselves, spending a fortune to adjust every known variable to create the optimum product. Is that really necessary?

8. Genetically programmed.

At the other end of the nature/nurture debate is the idea that everything comes down to genes. Of course our genes determine our gender, the colour of our eyes and our natural abilities, but where would the most gifted tennis player be without a coach? A sane and detached view of this issue must lead us to see that the development of a human being is far too complex to even attempt to separate out the variables. Perhaps this desire to be so in control of our child's destiny is in itself a mistake and a very unhealthy one at that. Perhaps our child's destiny is best left to other, bigger, hands. What then should a parent be doing?

9. An arrow into the future

This is an idea found in the Bible and I think it brings a sane and helpful balance to the nature/nurture debate. Your child is what he or she is, a uniquely integrated personality with a range of potential. You, the parent, have the job of directing this arrow. Yes, of course, how you treat your child has an impact. You have the job of setting your child's course. How you do so will impact the future of

this planet far more than what you do at work or by how much you recycle your waste. It is not just a case of he or she could become an Adolf Hitler or a Mother Theresa, although that is true. On a smaller but no less significant scale this is an issue which affects us all whether or not we are parents. That is why the government is getting so concerned about parenting. The way people raise their children affects the whole of our society. There is huge concern about crime, especially youth criminality. A book published in 2005, 'Crime and Civil Society', suggests in its foreword (by a judge) that if we wish to create a more law-abiding society, the task can be summed up in three Ps: parenting, policing and punishment. Parenting is number one! Parenting is an awesome responsibility; it is also an exciting and enjoyable assignment.

[End of Session 1 for 6-session version of course]

Script for Talk 2 The trouble with parenting

Group Discussion

What sort of parent are you?

*Most of what we know about parenting we have learned from our own parents. Discuss around the table your own parents. What did they do that you liked and will imitate and what did they do that you will make sure you **never** do?*

Is there a super-parent inside you? No there is a collection of ideas (some of them conflicting) picked up from here and there. The trouble with parenting is that you can't get the staff. Even when you see what is the best way to proceed you are battling with your own lack of patience, bad temper, selfishness ... in fact you suffer from the same disease as your children. The problem is not that you don't love your children, but that the habits you get into while coping with your children can sometimes end up entrenching the problem or generating a new one. So we are going to take a look at:

An Alphabet of Parenting Pitfalls

Don't worry, we are not going all the way to Z! . This is a list of the kind of things we do as *loving* parents. Often they are coping habit but as long-term strategies they are decidedly unhelpful and can have serious consequences for the growing child. Let us look at them.

1. A is for Allow Anything.

Parents sometimes have an authority crisis.

Do I have the right to insist on a certain mode of behaviour?

I have heard parents ask themselves that question.

Am I inhibiting self-expression?

Will I damage the child's self-esteem if I frown and say 'no'?

The answer is 'no'. You are the parent and that gives you not only the right but also the responsibility to insist on certain things. Parenting is not a consultation exercise. It is a responsibility to protect the vulnerable, direct the lost, correct the wayward and instruct the ignorant. All of those things. And to do that, you are right to be confident and clear about what you will or will not allow.

I know a parent who finds it really hard to force her four-year old to wear a seatbelt. They have a fight every time they get in the car. But, why was not wearing a seat-belt ever an option? How does the fact that the four year old doesn't like it, make any difference to anything. The law is the law.

Similarly, GPs and practice nurses report a huge problem in giving immunisation injections, because the parent is afraid to insist that the child sits still on his/her mother's lap. The child runs and hides under the table and the parent says, 'she doesn't like needles... perhaps we'll try another day.'

Such parents are unwilling to confront because it is unpleasant. They have from somewhere picked up the idea that it is important to be positive and encouraging all the time.

Or they are tired, even lazy. Yes it is the long haul.

Or they are afraid their child won't love them.

The result of an allow anything long-term strategy is an anxious child who is badly behaved and generally unhappy.

Love enough to correct and insist. You not only have the right; you have the responsibility. The key concept here is authority. God has given you the parent authority over your children.

2. B is for Bribery

Some parents, desperate to achieve or to modify certain behaviour use reward systems to control their children. In other words they promise points stickers or prizes on presentation of certain desired performance or behaviour. Or they control by threat of sanctions. Following the publication of a long awaited *Harry Potter* sequel, the *Daily Telegraph* carried a *Matt* cartoon, showing a weary parent trying to get a contrary child to go to bed. It showed the parent holding a *Harry Potter* book over the fire and saying to the horrified child : *Go to bed or Harry Potter gets it!* These are desperate measures.

Bribery looks for a quick result. In the short term, bribery can be extremely effective. I know that reward systems come highly recommended in some circles; many of those troubleshooting parenting programmes on television recommend them, but remember that the children (or rather tearaways) that form the horrific subject of those programmes are extreme cases, where discipline has gone badly wrong. So the bribery strategy is an exercise in damage limitation. But they

are a poor strategy as a general handle on behaviour because in the long-term they do not bring about the result that a parent most wants to see, that is, self-discipline and self-motivation.

Extrinsic rewards, which is what this bribery amounts to, have been proved to be pretty feeble in the area of things like spelling; in the area of behaviour they are disastrous because they take it out of the moral framework. They make certain behaviour optional, a matter of negotiation. They are outward and any effect they have is on outward things: they do not produce inner things like kindness or consideration. They do not affect the heart. A child learns to produce just enough to hit off the reward but not to love good behaviour for its own sake. And yet children are moral beings capable of making moral choices. It seems foolish to ignore this inbuilt friend in seeking to instil in your child good patterns of behaviour.

Even more, why deprive children of the discovery that doing the right thing is its own reward. It doesn't need a sticker on a chart, or an extra 50p pocket money. Extrinsic rewards are insulting to a child. Would you do anything for a sticker? Or even for 50p?

The result of the bribery strategy is actually an unmotivated child, who is denied the discovery of the pleasure of doing things for their own sake and who thinks that behaviour is negotiable.

Base your behaviour management on a relationship and make sure that your principles are rooted in an amoral framework, not a cynical manipulation of variables to get what you want. Love enough to take the long-term view.

3. C is for Child-centred.

You want to be the perfect parent

It is entirely understandable that parents should be keen for their child to have everything. And then there is the habit picked up from when you first brought the baby home and your life was turned upside down. Everything revolved around that delightful but demanding infant and its routines, or lack of them of feeding changing, sleeping.. And so as the child grows, the parents organise their lives so that everything is right for the child or children.

A common sight in some parts of the country is the mother at the wheel of her 4-wheel drive, with two or more pampered offspring strapped in the back going from ballet to brownies to riding to friend's sleepover. Every evening, every weekend, it is the same: a full programme of activities to entertain or educate the children.

But the down-side is that you giving the child the mistaken idea that he or she is the centre of the universe, which is definitely not the case. You are raising a brat. Not only so, but such continual slavery to the needs of your children is extremely unhealthy. You might as well don a uniform and become a liveried servant at the beck and call of an imperious master.

The prize-winning children's author, Michael Morpurgo, was heard to comment in a Radio 4 interview that children do not spend enough time just messing about,

doing what looks like nothing, lying on their backs in the grass staring at the sky. He regretted the demise of imagination because everything is so organised. At a more practical level, fortunate indeed is the child who has learned the art of self-entertainment, who understands that it is his or her own responsibility to avoid boredom. And happy is the family who have cultivated this air of healthy neglect. The result of the child-centred approach to parenting is the helpless/selfish child who expects to be entertained and victimises the whole family. Organize family life so that you are not the victims of any one member. Love enough to avoid making them the centre of your life.

4. D is for Distant

The distant parent is a parent taken up with other things, other agendas. It might be work, career; it might be another relationship; it might be a hobby. In Dickens' Bleak House, there is a character called Mrs Jellyby, for whom Dickens invented the idea of telescopic philanthropy, wherein Mrs J has a huge heart for people a long way off (the orphans of Borrioboola-Ga), but ignores or is unaware of the fact that her children are tumbling up and down the stairs, in a state of appalling neglect.

Distant parents perhaps have had poor relationships with own parents and are thus afraid to get too close to their children

Or, more commonly in our culture, the distant parent can be the one who is so obsessed by the desired end-product for the child, so concerned about getting the best education for him/her, so determined that the child will get ahead of others and become rich, successful and accomplished, that he or she, driven by that ambition is working long hours and has no time left to spend just relaxing around the child, enjoying his or her company for its own sake. It becomes all about provision and assessment. It is all tutorial mode. This kind of parent can forget that there is a child in there.

The result of distant parenting is an angry child.

Come on down and get involved.

5. E is for Explosive

Picture the scene: the children are playing and it turns to bickering and squabbling. The temperature is rising. Suddenly someone screeches and it gets to you and you boil over. You go ballistic. Children are separated, shouted at, spanked, sent to their rooms; heavy duty extreme sanctions are imposed. In such a case you have been reactive not proactive.

The NSPCC has recently launched a new campaign. It is an anti-smacking campaign and its slogan is 'hit means lost it.' We will deal with the smacking issue in the next part of the course. But this much the NSPCC are right: smacking should never be about dealing with your own anger. Spot the signals in yourself and if you are angry put your hands behind your back and keep them

there. It is undoubtedly true that many parents hit their children when they are reacting explosively, and that is so unhelpful. And so is shouting and screaming or cutting down to size with a sarcastic or cruel remark. Being explosive may be effective but it may lead you to do something you really regret.

The result of using explosive behaviour to control your children is a child who has learned he can carry on until there is a scene. Only at a certain decibel level will the switch be triggered to modify his behaviour. This is a very long way from the desired self-discipline. It is also true that by being an 'exploding' parent you are teaching your child very negative ways of handling frustration.

You need to be a thermostat not a thermometer. Be proactive in a situation where the temperature is rising. Divert, distract, correct or remove. Do not explode.

6. F is for fault-finding

This is a parent who is always comparing his child with other people's children. This parent cares about the child's achievements or behaviour because he or she wants to impress other parents. We all enjoy a bit of reflected glory and we can be envious of others whose children always seem to be on top form. This can set up an unhelpful reaction. We start to become picky. Correction is one thing, but a continual stream of disparaging comments is another, especially when it has an unmistakable flavour of 'why can't you be more like Miranda?'

Putting a child down can even be seen as a joke or a tease by a parent, but inasmuch as it rubbishes the child/s efforts, it can be extremely damaging. Recognise effort, and find opportunity for genuine encouragement. Love them for who they are.

7. G is for Guilty.

Guilt may be real, false or imagined. Paranoid parent kind of guilt is imaginary. Parents sometimes suffer a continual sense of inadequacy, as though they could never be quite good enough, provide enough, prevent enough. This is nonsense and is to be shrugged off. Remember that God does not expect parents to be perfect, merely responsible.

But there is such a thing as real guilt, where you have behaved in a mean or unworthy manner. That needs to be faced honestly and squarely and dealt with. False guilt is where you feel guilty for things beyond your control. Perhaps you are on a low income; perhaps you are a lone parent. You feel bad about and probably are inclined to overstate to yourself the effect of these perceived inadequacies on your child.

Whatever the source of the guilt the parent needs to beware of seeking to compensate inappropriately. I have often noticed for example that less well off

parents, or single parents spend a far greater proportion of their income on their children's clothes and toys. It is the middle classes who tend to make use of charity shops, jumble sales and hand-me downs. Other parents whose guilt is to do with a consciousness of neglect try and make up for it by buying an expensive toy. It is a dangerous ploy which a child will soon catch on to, and, being a sinner, will exploit to his advantage.

The result of guilty parenting will be a manipulative child, one who learns how to use victim status, one who will blame you.

The answer to guilt is forgiveness, from the appropriate quarter – perhaps from the child, perhaps from God. Keep short accounts. Let your home be an atmosphere which says we are all sinners. Children are very forgiving and strangely enough, so is God.

8. H is for hedging

I use the word hedging to describe the inclination parents can have to surround and limit their children for their own safety, because the world is a dangerous place, or for the sake of a quiet life, because they know their child's capacity for naughtiness. Such a parent organizes the child's lives to avoid slippage, or scope for misbehaviour or danger. So everything is parent directed and controlled. The cupboard doors are tied with string to prevent them being opened. The plug is taken off the TV or computer to prevent excessive watching. The time between school and bedtime is strictly timetabled, to minimize opportunity for mischief. He or she is kept indoors or in mobile phone contact all the time.

I was walking in the park last autumn and noticed on the ground hundreds of beautiful shiny brown conkers. 'What is this?' I thought to myself. 'Why are these conkers not filling children's pockets and being baked or soaked in vinegar and then threaded on strings, for hours of fun in the street or playground?' Well, one reason is that children are kept too much indoors or engaged in adult-organised, adult-supervised activities. Not only are they not joyfully roaming the parks, they are not playing in the street, because parents perceive that as too risky. Sad, sad days we live in!

But children need to learn to use independence well. At some point they have to cross the road on their own. At some point they have to be trusted to spend time unsupervised. They need to learn the social mores of interacting with their peers out of range and earshot of adults. They need to learn to use free time as they need to learn to handle money. You need to be able to turn your back.

The result of too much hedging is a deceitful child, who will not manage independence well. He/she thinks it is your job to manage her behaviour.

As your children grow build in opportunities for independence. Allow them the freedom to fail, even sometimes to get hurt. This is how they learn. Love them enough to let them go.

9. I is for inconsistency

In some cases this can be the most serious pitfall of them all.

It happens because of thoughtlessness, or because you are more interested in the effects of his behaviour on you than on the behaviour itself. When your child lets you down in front of friends, there is one reaction; at home, you let it pass. You go to collect your child from a friend's house where he has been to play and to have tea. On the doorstep, amongst the goodbyes, you whisper to your child to say 'thank you for having me' to the child's mother who is standing there smiling benignly. Your child goes all tight-lipped and obstinate. So you whisper more menacingly into his ear. No response. You are embarrassed in front of your friend (whose child always has wonderful manners); you are also livid and on the way home you exact terrific penalties and promise extreme sanctions. But the trouble is that you have not been consistently insisting on the expression of thanks at other times when nobody's mother is watching. That is an example of inconsistency.

Sometimes you hear a hassled mother scream at her child as they struggle down the High Street, "Do that once more, and I'll kill you." You know, or you hope you know that mother does not mean it, and so does the child, which is why such attempts at discipline are so ineffective. That child has learnt that adults say all sorts of things but they are just noise and bluster. You don't have to take much notice.

Parents must promise only what they intend to deliver, and they must deliver as promised.

The result of inconsistent parenting is an unruly child, who becomes progressively harder to control.

Children learn that adults do not mean what they say.
Love enough to mean it and follow through.

Summary of this session.

The trouble with parenting is the parent. This is not meant to discourage you but to help you see that the key to tackling many parenting problems is not with the child but with the parent who might need to recognise some areas for change himself or herself. The point about pitfalls is that if you know they are there you can avoid falling into them or at least avoid falling into them again and again.

But secondly and finally for tonight you need to know that you do not have to be a super-parent (a perfect parent) to be an effective one. While your love for your child may lead you into some of the above pitfalls it is also true to say that love (ordinary affection and tenderness) covers a multitude of sins, that most mistakes can be corrected. The bad news about parenting is that there are no perfect

parents; the good news is that imperfect parents can raise delightful human beings, provided they are not afraid to grasp God-given authority and be parents.

Before we all go home, in your groups chew over the discussion questions in your coursebook. This will help you to summarize what you have learned this session.

There also some questions for you to think about at home before you come next time.

Next time we will tackle the subject which is the reason most people sign up for parenting courses: Discipline -the Big D-word.

Session 2: The big D-word.

Script for Talk 3 Communication

Key concept: *obedience*

Theological basis:

God's ways are best for everybody. His commandments are the most liberating, healthiest, happiest way to live. Human beings are responsible and accountable for their actions.

Gospel opportunity:

God wants a relationship with us. We back off because we know we are guilty. Sin must be punished but God has sent Jesus to pay for our sins so that we can be restored to a relationship with God.

You will probably at some time have seen the classic film of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical 'The Sound of Music'. It is a story of a misfit nun who takes up the position of governess to seven motherless children. Their father, Captain Von Trapp holds particular views about the raising of children. Fraulein Maria has quite different views.

A critical point in the film occurs when after a time of absence Captain Von Trapp returns home accompanied by the woman whom he hopes to make his new wife. He is somewhat embarrassed and annoyed when his children and Maria make a riotous entrance. They are dressed in 'play-clothes' which Maria has made out of old curtains; they have been climbing trees and playing in the river; they are wet, noisy and apparently disorganised. The Captain blows his whistle to restore order and tells Maria that she has let the children become wild. Maria for her part accuses the Captain of not even knowing his children.

Talk around your tables about this film. Let those who have seen it describe to the others Captain Von Trapp's style of parenting. How are the children turning out? What is it that Maria sees and what is it that she gives to the children?

Captain Von Trapp thought what the children needed was more discipline; Maria thought that what they needed was more love, a closer relationship. Captain Von Trapp thought raising children was all about giving orders and expecting them to be obeyed. He had rules and he had a whistle and he had seven angry and deceitful children. He could be described as authoritarian. But the antidote to that problem is not permissiveness, whereby a parent is incapable of setting and enforcing limits. Remember the key concept from the last session:

authority. We need to learn to be authoritative (because that is what parents are for) without being authoritarian.

Authoritative parents encourage good and discourage bad behaviour. Without being authoritarian, they have firm views about behaviour and give clear and consistent messages about right and wrong. That is your job as a parent; it is not bullying. You are responsible for the social and moral upbringing of your children. The question is how shall we go about it? That is tonight's topic.

And we will start with this little saying: ***Rules without relationship lead to rebellion.***

Tonight session is on the big D: discipline and it is easy and tempting to think of discipline as something in isolation, something you set up like a programme. But the truth the Captain had to learn was that discipline is effective only in the context of a warm relationship. It is not enough to be strict. In fact there is a magic triad of interdependent factors which are crucial to your aim of raising a delightful human being.

They are: **communication, discipline, relationship.**

You will see these three words in your coursebook printed in a triangular formation. I want you to take your pen or pencil and join the three words up to make a triangle with one of the three words at each of the three corners. Then on each side of the triangle I want you to draw two arrow heads, pointing in opposite directions.

My point is this: discipline, relationship and communication belong together: each one of these as it improves, enhances the other two. So good communication improves a relationship; it will also help in the area of discipline since you and your child will be able to listen to each other. Good discipline will enhance your relationship no end; not least because you will be free to enjoy the company of your child more and it will mean you understand each other better so enhance communication. A good relationship will also improve communication, because you will know each other better and as I started by saying, it is the only setting for effective discipline. We will talk about each of these three factors in turn. Let us start with

1. Communication.

In order for communication to take place between you and your child, four things have to be happening:- you are speaking, he/she is listening; he/she is speaking, you are listening. Each of these four is a complex psychological process, a skill which has to be learned and can always be improved. You have an idea or concept in your head which you want to impart to your child: what words, what tone of voice, what body posture will you adopt as communicate it? And will your

child be listening and understanding and interpreting those words in the way you intend? The same sort of thing applies when it is your child who wants to communicate something to you. All sorts of things can get in the way: external distractions, limited vocabulary, poor articulation, problems with decoding, thinking about something else, to name but a few.

Tone of voice is critical; it is something even a young baby with minimal grasp of language can understand. That is why we use a gentle soothing tone to calm a baby – it is not the words that they understand when they stop crying. On the other hand it is easy to make a baby cry by adopting a harsh tone of voice. It doesn't actually matter what you are saying. And it is an interesting exercise to note how the meaning of a word changes according to how it is spoken. Try all the different ways you can find of saying a word like 'sorry', for example. Spoken in some ways it can mean almost the exact opposite.

Then there is body language. How would you, without words, make the following statements?

"What you have to say is unimportant."

"That is inappropriate behaviour."

"You are very special."

Facial expression, posture, gesture, eye contact, or lack of it, all have their part to play in getting the message across. We can all improve, and as parents we will need to make the encouragement of clear speech and the extension of language a priority in order to facilitate clear communication. Put simply, this means spending time talking and listening to your child. Conversation in the realm of facts, opinions, feelings and fantasy should be an important feature of daily life in the home. Although there is a lot of language on television, children do not learn to communicate well by watching it. The evidence is that, if anything, the reverse is true, namely that children who watch a lot of television have a smaller vocabulary and retarded language skills.

But speaking is only half the story; learning to listen is harder. When our children are first learning to talk and we the enthralled and devoted parent are amazed at the genius in our midst, we get used to trying to interpret. 'Dink!' he shouts and we say 'oh, you want a drink.' 'Lollo!' – 'Yes that's a lorry, it's a red lorry.' That is how children learn English. The natural reaction of repeating back continues to be an effective tool in communication even when the vocabulary is apparently as large as yours. It is a way of checking that they mean what you think they mean. But we need to remember sometimes the meaning is masked by the words. What do you understand by these statements and how would you respond?

"I'm hopeless at reading"

"It's not fair. I never get treats."

"My team won at games today."

"I'm not playing with Katie any more."

The first is an expression of discouragement rather than an invitation for a discussion of literacy skills. The second is an expression of feeling cheated or

overlooked, the third of pleasure and the fourth of hurt. Sometimes we can be too literal in our response. It is the heart message we need to hear and respond to, not the detail.

In addition we need to teach to our children the skill of listening. In a televisual age, children are poor at listening – ask any reception class teacher.

Observe a reception class sitting on the carpet with their teacher. The teacher gives an instruction in words. Roughly a third of the children will hear, decode and follow the instruction (e.g. 'Fetch your writing book and a pencil). Another third will not hear and decode, yet seconds later they are complying with the instruction. How did they do that, without listening? They have learnt the skill of watching what other children do and copying what they are doing. The other third will not be even aware of the instruction nor of the activity of the other children because they do not understand even what instructions are for; they think they are just so much background noise to their lives. So approximately two thirds of four year olds are poor or very poor at listening. Teaching to listen gets much harder by that time as many children by the age of four have become habitual non-listeners.

There are lots of enjoyable ways of teaching young children to listen. Apart from plenty of one to one conversation, there are games like 'Simon Says'; there are songs, and there are stories. Although it is great to enjoy a picture book together, it is also excellent sometimes to just tell your child a story, a well known fairy tale for example, with eye-to-eye contact. Telling a story, as opposed to reading one, is like saying, 'come and play with me' and together you enter a world where words conjure up ideas and pictures in the mind. This is a great gift to a child. It is also salutary to give instructions to a child and see if they can decode and follow, *without the visual aid of you showing them*. As a child grows, practise giving two or three instructions at once. This can be turned into a ridiculous game, whereby you and your child give each other multiple bizarre instructions and see if you can remember them.

Put a cushion on your head.

Stand on one leg with a cushion on your head.

Stick your finger in your ear, stand on one leg with a cushion on your head.

Fetch a spoon, stick your finger in your ear, stand on one leg with a cushion on your head.

Listening is an invaluable life skill, which only you can teach. Many of you will be keen for your children to do well at school. The most important preparation for school is the ability to listen. The child who cannot listen, cannot learn. On the other hand, a child who can listen is set very fair indeed, whatever his or her natural ability.

In your groups talk together about each of the following statements and see if you can improve on them, by making them more personal, more specific, or more encouraging. Share with each other also any memories from your own

childhoods when something someone said made a lasting either positive or negative impression.

“That’s absolutely wonderful.”

“Look at Sarah’s work. Can’t you be a bit more like her?”

“I’ll find your book when I’ve finished making your sandwiches.”

“Don’t you dare play the recorder while I’m watching the news.”

“Look at this mess. Do you have to be so clumsy?”

“That’s four words you didn’t know on this page. You’ll have to work harder at reading.”

4. And so to the D- word. Discipline. Which is not the same as punishment. Discipline is a system of training which includes instruction, correction, encouragement, modelling and where necessary (and it will be) the application of sanctions. But let us start by asking this question:

Why do children misbehave? It could for any one or a combination of these five main reasons.

a) to get attention children quickly learn this way of saying, ‘hey I’m here. Take some notice of me.’ A classic scenario would be the toddler who finds his mother too taken up with attending to the needs of a newborn younger sibling. What does he do? He plays with the remote control or chucks his toys about the room or climbs on top of the cupboard. Any attention from Mum is better than no attention. ‘Elliot, get down from that cupboard, this minute!’ will do.

The answer to this problem is to catch them being good. Make sure your child gets plenty of attention and praise for doing the right thing. This is excellent training because it strengthens your relationship with the child while you are explicitly stating what kind of behaviour or attitude meets your approval. It is well known trick of primary school teachers. There is a class bobbling about on the carpet, 90% of them paying absolutely no attention to the teacher. Does she shout:

Wayne, sit still. Ryan, stop doing that. Georgina, be quiet!

Not if she has any wisdom. Instead she says,

Well done, Emma. You are sitting beautifully.

Instantly the rest of the class are curious to see what kind of performance on the part of Emma is meriting such a warm response from the only adult in the room. And the next minute 30 six year olds have their arms folded and are sitting in receptive mode giving their undivided to the teacher.

All done without shouting or tears. Behaviour management experts estimate that praise should outnumber correction by a ratio of 3:1, in order to encourage good behaviour.

b) to challenge authority.

This is the big one. This is where you have made it clear that the child is not to jump in a puddle but the child, with a cheeky glance over her shoulder does it anyway. This is a test for you. Do you really mean what you say? Are you in

charge or not? It is most important with this kind of misbehaviour to respond clearly and firmly. Set boundaries and do not budge. Do not mind seeming grim. Do not fear the child's displeasure. It does not matter if Sarah-Jane goes to bed thinking Mummy and Daddy are harsh. She will get over it. What does matter is that Sarah-Jane goes to bed knowing who is in charge. Therein lies her security. The challenge to authority can be manifested in small things. Watch out for attitude and pick up on the curled lip, the muttering under the breath, the cheeky answer.

c) to hurt.

Misbehaviour can be an expression of anger. It is frequently against you precisely because they know that you will still love them. You must still correct but be gentle; this is not a challenge to your authority. And be careful to deal with the issue not the hurt. Sometimes this kind of misbehaviour brings out a quite childish and retaliatory streak in us:

You've spoilt my day so I'll spoil yours, sunbeam!

So don't retaliate in kind. Don't make excuses for them either. (well, not out loud.) They may be tired or frustrated but actually that is not an excuse for bad behaviour even though it may be a reason for it. Don't create a victim. Sometimes I have seen even young children who have been awkward and rebellious, seeing coming wrath in the face of the parent, quickly put down a trembling lip and whine, 'I'm tired.' They hope for the sympathy vote instead of the word of rebuke. They are already learning the power of victim status. Do not be taken in. Always stand by the message that we must all take responsibility for our behaviour whatever the circumstances. But make a mental note to bring forward bedtime.

d) to win friend's approval

We all adjust our behaviour and speech to the company we are in. And sometimes a natural waywardness in one child can enjoy some mischief along with a like minded partner. In fact one can endeavour to impress the other in acts of bravado which are well known to be contrary to house rules. I remember my own two elder boys having a particular friend who brought out this side of them. One afternoon when they were playing quietly in the bedroom with this said friend, I discovered that they were gleefully in the act of emptying every drawer, pulling the bedlinen off the beds and the books off the shelves in order to make a colossal mountain in the middle of the room. Each participant in this mayhem blamed the other two for egging him on.

This is yet another reason why training in behaviour must always be placed firmly in a moral framework. It can feel good to impress your friends whether in demolishing a bedroom or smoking a joint. But we must always teach our children that behaviour is a moral choice. You can say 'no!' That is the answer to peer group pressure which is so strong in teenage years.

e) to signal inadequacy

Have you ever watched a young child with his parents in a posh restaurant? The child cannot cope with waiting for her food; she doesn't understand that the mores of such a setting demand talking rather more quietly than might be permitted at home. She gets told off for fidgeting, being noisy and messing with the cutlery and cruet. The fact is that she is in the wrong place. Children misbehave when given inappropriate tasks to signal or to cover their inadequacy. In a classroom where there is a normal range of ability, if all the children are always given the same task, there will be times when those who are less able will muck about simply because they cannot do what is required of them. They are set up for failure – perhaps the task requires reading but they cannot read, so they play the clown instead. The wise teacher pre-empts this unnecessary situation by means of differentiation. She gives children appropriate tasks. She gives them something that they can at least reasonably attempt.

A parent might enthusiastically buy a train set for his son. It says on the box that this toy is suitable for children over the age of 7, but the parent tells himself that his son is a genius and gives it to him for his fourth birthday. When the child plays with it inappropriately, or wrecks it, the parent is annoyed. But the task was too much for the child.

Equally, children sometimes misbehave when faced with too many choices. They can't decide or they waver and change their minds or they are unsettled and grumpy. A great virtue is made of choice in our society. But young children find them complicated. And they are in fact mostly quite unnecessary. A mother I know told me how breakfast had been transformed by just having one kind of cereal on offer.

Beware too many choices. Just Weetabix will do.

5. The parent's responsibility.

We now know why children misbehave and such knowledge, I hope, will help a parent to respond appropriately. But what, over all is a parent to do in order to encourage good behaviour and discourage bad? I am suggesting a three fold strategy:

- Expect obedience
- Decide on a particular focus
- Turn a behaviour crisis into a learning opportunity

a) Expect obedience.

If authority was the key concept of last week's session, the key concept this week is obedience. There has to be a general expectation of obedience. Remember that God's ten commandments include that little gem, 'Honour your Father and Mother.'

Recently there was a series on channel 4 rewriting the ten commandments; I don't believe they kept this one in. But actually, don't we all want to live in a society where children respect their parents and where parents take responsibility in raising decent and upright citizens? Wouldn't our streets be safer

and our schools happier if this commandment was the watchword of every family?

There is massive wisdom in this commandment also for the child's own protection and guidance. Is it not in your child's interest and for his own safety that he is taught to mind what you say, without challenge or delay?

The time to work on this is with a toddler. Once it is grasped that obedience to you is essential to their safety and happiness your discipline problems are over. He or she must do as you ask. It is not optional.

How do you make them do this? Here is a suggested strategy which if consistently and calmly applied will work in the end. Expect it to work. It takes time but it does not end in screaming. It requires your undivided attention, not giving an instruction and walking away, but the reward will be harmony in the home and an enhanced relationship with your child.

1. stop what you are doing and look at the child
2. wait until the child looks at you and stops. (That might mean getting down on the floor with them, so that you can be eyeball to eyeball.)
3. State what you want them to do, clearly simply and once. If you repeat, children learn not to listen.
4. Ask the child what he is to do. If he doesn't know say, 'take a guess'.
5. Stand and wait. (smiling) Resist the temptation to sit, slouch or tell off.
6. While standing and waiting notice and mention everything your child does in the right direction.

b) **Decide on your particular focus.**

While there is a general expectation of obedience, there will at any given time with any of your offspring a particular area of concern, or focus for training. Choose your battle. You cannot cure all the undesirable habits of your children at once. Pick on one or two at most, perhaps it might be table manners, or behaviour at bedtime or putting away toys, or sharing.

Have in mind the behaviour you want. Often we are all too aware of what is unacceptable but we need to think explicitly about what we would like to see. Agree on this with your partner, so that there will be absolute unanimity and consistency between you. Then.

- **Establish the focus** explicitly. Make sure the child understands what behaviour you are looking for. Don't grumble after the event: sometimes children only discover a rule after they have broken it. Open up a dialogue on the subject

This is how we are going to do bedtime from now on.

You need to learn how to look after your toys properly.

When establishing the focus it is important to be realistic, bearing in mind the age and maturity of the child. Choose a battle you can win. Small steps in the right direction are a triumph.

- **Explain the focus.** As far as you are able, that is. If appropriate ask the child why he or she thinks you are raising the subject. Usually children can be made to

see the benefits of a desired behaviour even if it only a quieter life for them! However, if that is impossible, at the end of the reasoning process there is always a 'because I say so'. And that is absolutely fine. You are the parent and your job, remember, is to protect the vulnerable, direct the lost and instruct the ignorant.

When you explain the focus, all that is required of you is that you are clear and fair.

- **Enact the focus.** Be a role model. If the issue is grumbling, do you grumble? If it is untidiness, how tidy are you. Drawing attention to your own weakness in this area and openly endeavouring to change can make the whole focus a joint project.

More tidiness in the home!

It's thankfulness week!

When enacting the focus, be inspiring and cheerful.

- **Enforce the focus.** It will do no good if the focus is a momentary whim which is forgotten half an hour later. This is why it is good to have only a couple on the go at a time. Remember that discipline includes instruction, correction, modelling and encouragement. You will use praise and encouragement as much as you can. But also use patient correction. It is possible to correct without yelling. Just say it.

Remember what we said about moaning? Tell me something you can be grateful for.

That is no way to leave your bedroom. What will you put away first?

In the face of rebellion, effectively a challenge to your authority, sanctions will underline your point. By definition this involves the infliction of pain or discomfort of some kind.

In applying sanctions you may have the choice of three types:

a) natural consequences . These are the things that can happen as a result of misbehaviour. The child who does not put his toys away will lose a vital part or, a precious toy will get stepped on and broken because it was left in the middle of the room. Natural consequences are your friend; do not protect your child from them. Do not rush to the toy shop to replace. When your school-age child loses or neglects her homework, do not rush around to bale her out of trouble. And do not be annoyed with the teacher who gives her a detention. Shake that teacher by the hand and say 'thank you very much'. That teacher shares your aim of making your child responsible for her actions.

b) logical consequences. Some misbehaviour suggests an obvious sanction. The child who is later than the agreed time returning from a Saturday afternoon in town, is not allowed out the following Saturday. The child who shows off has to spend time alone in his bedroom. The child who grumbles misses a treat.

c) direct action.- This should never occur when you are in a temper. It should follow promptly on the misbehaviour, be short and respect the child. Sanctions such as 'time out' or a withdrawal of privileges can be good. But I would say that with young children smacking has the advantage of immediacy and in my

experience improves a relationship. This could be a controversial point, but usually only with parents who are squeamish and have a problem with the whole idea of authority, or who have baggage to do with violent or abusive parents themselves. But to smack is not to brutalise. It should never be done in a temper, of course. It is a brief but clear expression by a loving parent that certain behaviour is unacceptable and must cease and not be repeated. Of course it is painful. What punishment would be effective if it were not? Time out and withdrawal of privileges have equally to be painful if they are to work.

Perhaps the question that bothers us is this: Is smacking responsible for the increase in violent behaviour in children? There is no evidence for that whatsoever. For generations, centuries even, parents have used corporal punishment to train and correct their children as they see fit (sometimes to excess, I acknowledge). But it is only in the last two decades that there has been this alarming rise in violence in children. And it is in the last two decades that the confidence of parents to sensibly and reasonably correct their children as they see fit has been undermined. Draw your own conclusion.

My own experience was that smacking was a useful way of enforcing the focus for my children between the ages of eighteen months and four years old. There was rarely if ever the occasion for physical punishment after that time. The groundwork on discipline had been done and the concept of obedience grasped. There are children for whom physical punishment would be neither necessary nor appropriate at any age. Some children are chastised and brought to repentance by a disapproving frown or a gentle rebuke. Many are not. It is for you the parent to decide about your own particular child, because every child is different from every other. And you know your child better than anyone.

c) Turn a behaviour crisis into a learning opportunity.

There are times in the lives of most parents when you sigh deeply over the behaviour or attitude of one or other of your offspring and picture yourself prison visiting. At such times it is helpful to remember that every time your child gets it wrong, you are presented you with an opportunity to teach. If you were to see a child's arithmetic book in which every page was covered with ticks in red pen, you might conclude that the child was brilliant. But closer examination and more information might inform you of an entirely different scenario: this child isn't learning anything! Getting something wrong is not such a bad thing, for it exposes a weakness or area of ignorance and opens up the possibility of growth and improvement.

The following five questions might be useful in a behaviour crisis and help you to see such a time as a positive experience, which enhances all three elements of the behaviour triad: communication, relationship and discipline.

These are the 5 questions, which should be addressed to the child, alone, following an incident of misbehaviour. The atmosphere must be calm and eye-contact must be insisted upon.:

Question 1: *What did you do?*

Children will always tell you what someone else did or what were the circumstances at the time. While those are not irrelevant, always bring them back to their own behaviour or response. This is the bit that they are responsible for.

Question 2: *Was what you did the right or wrong thing to do?*

Bring the discussion straight into the moral framework. If you are not angry and the situation is calm, the child will invariably admit that what he/she did was wrong.

Question 3: *How might you have handled it in a better way?*

The idea of this is to get the child to explore options in response. There are always options. Be patient and let the child think of them, but you may have to prompt a bit, if they are really stuck.

Question 4: *The next time a similar situation arises, how will you handle it?*

The child will choose one of the options outlined in question 3. What you are looking for is a commitment to changed behaviour. This whole discussion has effectively become one of establishing a new focus. See above.

Question 5: *Now if a similar situation arises and you fail to deal with it in the way you have agreed, what do you think would be a fair punishment for you not keeping your promise?*

Both of you are now very clear about what the issue is, what your expectations are and what sanctions will apply. You, the parent, have also been very kind, there has been no punishment this time, just a helpful problem-solving discussion. But, you must be meticulously careful to follow through on the expectations of behaviour and the application of sanctions, if necessary. Otherwise, your credibility is shot and all the child has learned is that words are cheap.

On the other hand, if you are careful to be consistent and always follow through, you may reach a level of understanding with your children whereby they accept that when they misbehave and are chastised it is 'a fair cop'. One of our children, being caught in an act of infringement declared ruefully and hopefully, as he struck himself on the bottom, 'I smack myself.'

To sum up for this time, try to remember three things:

a) The unrivalled partnership, truth and love. The Bible declares these to be the essence of healthy communication. Without love you will crush your child, without truth you will smother him.

b) The ultimate product: self-correction. When children are learning to sing, they get to a point where when their ears tell them they are singing a wrong note, they are able to move to a right one. What you want as a parent, is that your child takes responsibility for his/her own actions and is motivated to adjust his/her behaviour to the right course of action, whatever the circumstances.

c) The unashamed propaganda: Good boys are happy boys; good girls are happy girls. This is a self-evident truth and I would encourage every parent to teach it to their children. The unhappiest children in any classroom are always

the naughty ones. Badly behaved children are always deeply unhappy. It is not wrong to make the connection. It has to do with the way God made us.

Use the remaining time of this session to discuss what you have been hearing and to answer together the questions in your coursebook.

Next time we will discuss the third element of the behaviour triad, relationship. We will look ahead to school-age and teenage years and evaluate the kind of messages our children receive in the big wide world. We will think about what kind of human beings we hope our children will be.

Session 3: Live and Interactive

Key concept: *relationship*

Theological basis:

We were made for God and it is foolish to neglect the spiritual aspect of our nature. We all worship something. The thing that we worship will determine the kind of person that we become. God is a loving Father to all who turn to Him for help or refuge. He is also in charge of the universe and utterly trustworthy.

Gospel opportunity:

Where do we get our values? The Christian faith provides the only absolute foundation for the kind of virtues and values which we want our children to have. It must be worth investigating whether the claims made by Jesus Christ are true. Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. Those who trust Him become members of His family. He looks forward to receiving His family in heaven.

As a former schoolteacher I have always enjoyed films about inspirational teachers. One such film of the late twentieth century was *Dead Poets' Society*, set in an expensive boys' boarding school in 1950s America. The story centres around the impact of a radical and exciting English teacher on the lives of a group of boys in their mid-teens. But the film is not just about the pupil teacher relationship; it gives insight into the crucial relationship between parent and teenage son.

One of the most poignant scenes in the film is a brief interchange between two of the pupils standing on a bridge in the school grounds. One boy admits to the other that it is his birthday.

'What did you get?' asks his friend.

'They gave me this desk set,'

There is a pause and then the friend comments with cheerful irony,

'Yeh, well who would want a baseball, or a car, when they could have a desk set?'

They laugh and then the birthday boy adds with a real note of sadness:

'The thing is, they gave me the same one last year.'

Both boys consider the implication of this unhappy fact and are aware of the lack of attention, the lack of interest that it denotes. And these are parents who are paying big bucks for their son's education. But the repeated present, so carelessly sent, has the message, 'we don't really care to know you' written all over it.

The scene ends with a note of rebellious fun.

'Do you know – this desk set, it's kind of aero-dynamic; it wants to fly!'

And they throw it off the bridge and laugh as it scatters on the ground and in the wind.

'Don't worry,' says the friend, 'You'll get another one next year.'

Talk around your table about how well you know your child. See if you can answer these questions:

What did you give him/her last birthday?

What is his/her favourite food?

What does he/she like best at school?

What worries your child?

Where would he/she want to spend an ideal day out?

Last time we talked about the essential elements in parenting of communication and discipline. But remember that little saying: rules without relationship lead to rebellion. Remember the third corner of that magic triad. No less important than communication and discipline is relationship. The most well-thought-out, most excellent discipline strategy will fail if the relationship is poor.

Relationship is not something you can put in place, like plumbing in a washing machine so that it is fully functioning for years without you giving it any attention. It is more like the pot plant on the kitchen window sill: if you ignore it, it will die. Sometimes people want to talk with me about the troubles they are having with their teenage offspring. I am not exaggerating when I say that problems in the teenage years nearly always come down to a failure in relationship.

A parent may tell me ruefully how sweet James was when he was a little boy, how well they got on, going to the park, making airfix models, reading Asterix together, but now... What went wrong was that the parent did not work at keeping the relationship alive as the child developed different, less obviously accessible interests. And now James is fourteen, because the relationship is so poor, communication has been reduced to grunts and discipline is impossible to maintain.

So let's talk about making the relationship. And we will do this by exploding three myths.

1. The myth of quality time

The idea of 'quality time with the children' has become popularised:

'We're going to Bognor to spend some quality time with the children'

'I've taken the afternoon off to spend quality time with the children.'

Just time will do; quality is only recognised with hindsight. Of course there is nothing wrong with planning holidays and taking time off, but very often what lies behind such statements is the wishful thinking that you can maintain a healthy relationship with your child by having a week in Bognor, or by ring-fencing an hour a week in your diary. A growing child is not a car to be serviced or a lawn to be mown.

The other problem with the quality time idea is that it is rather intense and can become artificial, even unhealthy. Separated or divorced parents who have once a week access to their children are well aware of this problem. Taking a child to

the zoo or to Macdonalds is not real life; it does not replace the everyday-ness of meeting from school, having breakfast together, bedtime stories, finding the lost and vital bit of Lego, which are the stuff of real relationship.

Time spent with children doing ordinary things side by side is what will make a relationship. Shared household chores are superb at engendering a sense of belonging; equally good are doing parallel activities in the same room. You don't always have to be talking or letting the child set the agenda, although there is of course also a place for that in a healthy relationship. But just by functioning around each other you will be giving the message of easy-going friendship, availability and accessibility. Quality time, I repeat, is recognised with hindsight; it will not be at your convenience, probably, but it will be precious, the day your teenage son or daughter initiates a heart-to-heart talk about things that really matter. Such things cannot be planned in your diary.

2. The myth of 'educational'.

How do you talk to your child? Is it cafeteria mode?

'Would you like more orange juice?'

Or is it tutorial mode, always seizing on the opportunity to squeeze in a bit more knowledge.

'Ah – lovely fresh air! Did you know that air contains 78% nitrogen?'

Now I am the first person to acknowledge the value and pleasure of a trip to a good museum or other educational centres. But not every day of the holidays. Relationships can certainly benefit from the sharing of a stimulating ramble round the mummies at the British Museum, but they will flourish even more by frequent injections of chilling out together.

It is good sometimes to lighten up. With young children, weekend mornings in the parental bed are a good example of this sort of thing.

Do you know the game 'King of the Bed', in which the aim is to be the last person on the bed having forced the other members off (along with most of the bedding)? It is probably a Dad's game, as mothers tend to get anxious about the violence. Many families I know have their own variations on this theme: ours, for some bizarre reason, was called 'Tarzan and the crocodiles'. The main ingredients are noise and horseplay, getting down and getting physical.

Non-organised and spontaneous activities are great, as is the encouragement of individual pottering about in the house, garden, street or park, where the parent's role is supportive in a minimal supervisory sense.

Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at Kent University, wrote a book in 2004 called 'Paranoid Parenting'. One of the symptoms of the rise of paranoid parenting, he says, is the feeling that parents have to be continually organising activities for their children or interacting with them or both. The constant demand on parents to entertain and educate their children has taken its toll. A survey carried out by Nestle in 1998 showed that nearly half of parents with school age children felt that the summer holiday was too long. 60% fathers and 43% mothers wanted it shorter even though 85% of adults questioned had fond memories of

their own summer holidays. Those interviewed stated that they felt under pressure to organize events to distract, entertain or educate their children. They believed that children had to be organised into doing something and could not be left to just devise their own play activities or mess about. But relationships can thrive when you are all pottering about together. Use imagination to make ordinary events fun. Indoor picnics on wet August afternoons, an impromptu game of cricket down the hall, a rummage among the rubbishy 5p toys at the jumble sale in the scout hut, can generate hours of fun and strengthen the bond between you.

3. The myth of things.

Does life consist in what you possess? Young children certainly do not think so. Watch the pleasure a child can find in a cardboard box, some clothes pegs or a few saucepans.

We like to give to our children; buying for them is even more fun than buying for ourselves. But be careful about overloading with things. Although we may see it as an expression of the immense love we bear our children, that message of love is not proportional to the price of the gift. And frequent extravagance in this area can merely train them to be grasping little materialists. I was shocked to observe my toddler son, on the arrival at our home of doting Grandma, ignore her attentions and reach for her handbag. He knew there would be something for him in it, and she had unwittingly taught him, through her eagerness to give, to value the gifts more than the giver. We do this to our children when we buy them too much; we teach them to expect much from material things, which not only sets them up for disappointment, it actually diminishes the thrill of receiving.

Let me tell you about a Christmas nightmare. Some people we knew took great pleasure in buying their children expensive gifts at Christmas, Easter, birthdays and on any excuse in between. One Christmas day, their ten-year old son ripped the wrapping paper off the costly state of the art electronic game they had purchased, pulled a disappointed face and then looked up at his parents with annoyance and said, 'Is this it?' They knew then what they had done.

A good principle to bear in mind when shopping for presents for your children is the principle of one less. This means that whatever you planned to buy, take it down one notch. Instead of the super-duper set, get the super one. Your child will not know and it will help you keep the spending within bounds.

When your children are grown up and recall their childhoods I guarantee that the golden moments they recall will have little to do with the things you bought them, but everything to do with the things you did together.

Things rarely enhance a relationship; it is shared experiences that count. At the risk of sounding cheesy, I would refer you to an old John Denver song called 'Matthew', an endearing portrait of a happy man:

'Joy was just a thing that he was raised on;

Love was just a way to live and die;

Gold was just a windy Kansas wheatfield;

Blue was just a Kansas summer sky.

*In your groups talk together about how you each imagine your child, aged 21.
What sort of a person do you want him or her to be?*

Kind, hardworking, purposeful, cheerful, loving, independent, modest, confident, courageous, truthful, reliable: these are the virtues which most parents, doing that kind of exercise put on their list. Did anyone put rich? Did anyone put drop dead gorgeous? We know that these things are of little ultimate importance. But the question is: how is your child going to develop those sort of characteristics? Right at the start of that discussion, we must recognise two things about our children:

A. Your child is a receiver.

I mean receiver in the sense of radio receiver. From the day of his/her birth your child's wonderful and complex brain is picking up messages, from inside the home and from outside the home. What kind of messages are they? They include of course the things you tell them by your words and your actions, but as a child grows he or she is receiving all sorts of other messages as well.

Here is an example, reported in the Daily Telegraph in March 2005.

'Now girls as young as this five-years-old think they have to be slim to be popular. This is the claim of research published in the British Journal of Developmental Psychology.'

The study, conducted among 5-8 year olds in South Australia, showed that girls as young as 5 are unhappy with their bodies and want to be thinner. Most girls thought that being slim would make them more popular. Where did they get that idea?

Here is another example: Panorama in November 2004 investigated children and designer clothes. The programme reported and showed boys and girls of junior school age, in some cases encouraged by their parents, who were not particularly affluent, shopping for designer labels. Viewers saw groups of little children who could not yet read, recognising with ease certain commercial labels, like Nike for example. There were little girls who said they would not be friends with anyone who wore clothes bought at Tesco or Asda.

Your child is a receiver and the messages are not always benign. Your child is also an interpreter. Is a message about looking good going to make them into the person who has the attributes you chose as important? How will the messages of advertisers shape their thinking? Here are some other messages; a lot of them are conflicting:

- you are special – parents tell them this by words and smiles and hugs but on the other hand...
- you are just a random collection of neurons and chemicals – that is the message of evolutionary science, which denies that any particular individual has any absolute significance

- you are responsible – parents and teachers will frequently aim to instil a sense of responsibility and accountability, but on the other hand...
- you can't help it – a whole therapy culture surrounds them with the message that they are victims of other agencies, whether genetic, human, circumstantial. All their troubles are someone else's fault and they have a right to expect help, support or even compensation.
- be kind – many parents will seek to instil at the very least a 'do-as-you-would-be-done-by' attitude to others, but on the other hand....
- do what feels right – there is a very strong message in our culture that a person should be 'free' to choose what feels right for him, regardless of the impact of that choice on others.
- you are loved for yourself – instinctively we recognise that people have value regardless of how they perform, on the other hand....
- perform well- the message of the continual emphasis on tests and assessments is that a person's worth is directly proportional to her performance.
- everything must be fun – the emphasis on entertainment in our culture can lead to an expectation that a child has a right to find everything enjoyable and if it is not fun or if it is perceived as boring, it must definitely be rejected, on the other hand....
- life is beset by all sorts of pain, troubles and difficulties. Are these always to be avoided or is there any truth in the idea embraced by former generations that there is no gain without pain.

Before we go blaming everything on television or peer groups, we ought to remind ourselves that these double and conflicting messages are not only from outside the home. Often we adults are quite capable of holding contradictory views; maybe we ourselves are not quite sure what we believe about what a human being is, and how we should live.

B. Your child is a worshipper.

People love to worship. Some of you may have been present or have witnessed the scenes at the Queen's golden jubilee celebrations in the summer of 2002 – thousands of people in front of Buckingham Palace and thronging the mall, united in something they could not define. It was worship!

Think of football terraces on a Saturday afternoon – what are those people doing, shouting and chanting and cheering? They are worshipping.

Alternatively, consider young people at a rave. They are also worshipping. The band, Faithless, had a track which acknowledged precisely that fact; it was called 'this is my church'.

This propensity to worship is something unique to humans; you don't see it in the animal kingdom.

Our children will worship something or things. To put it another way, something will drive them, perhaps fuelled by the messages we talked about just now.

- money
- friends

- admiration/ approval
- success
- feeling good
- new experiences.

What will drive your child? That is the question for us as parents? What will our children worship? You can be certain that this will affect the people they become. We are all shaped by the things that we worship. Will you have their lives shaped by advertisements? Will you have them crave the supermodel looks? How will that fit in with your list? You can see where this is going can't you. We are talking about values. You thought you were coming to a talk about parenting. And now we are discussing values. But you cannot escape it, if you are serious about raising your child, and you are because you have given up three evenings to think about it.

In session 1, I referred to a book called 'Crime and the Civil Society' and the foreword by a learned judge, in which he says,

'The important thing is to deflect and deter young people from starting a life of crime, to catch those who do commit a crime and to deal with them appropriately. The task can be summed up by three Ps: parenting, policing and punishment. Many would add a fourth: piety. Selfishness is the forerunner of every criminal act.'

Now our job is on a smaller scale, but the question is not dissimilar. How will we teach our children to be unselfish, in a society which has abandoned its Christian heritage? Your child may say to you, 'Why should I not be selfish? Why should I not just look out for the best deal for myself?'

Our generation still understands and appreciates Christian virtues because we are still freeloading from a Christian heritage, even where by and large we are secular humanists. It is a problem, because we know the kind of human being we want to raise and yet have no reason to recommend it except that we like it.

Unless, we start reviewing all our values and the basis for them. This is big! But when you have a child, you need to start to review your values. Many people find that having a child, having experienced the miracle of birth and recognising the daunting task that lies ahead, presents them with a suitable time to explore some of the old certainties. If you have found these talks at all helpful, you may be interested to know that they are based on Bible teaching. Why not investigate what the Bible says about your place in the universe and how you can find peace with God. Why not find out if there is anything in this Jesus bloke, that Christians talk about. As I say, this is a good time to do it.

Your child is a receiver – what will he or she make of those messages pounding upon him or her?

Your child is a worshipper – what will be worshipped?

Balance the input

One thing we can attempt to do as parents, as far as our own input goes is to try to balance it.

The Bible tells us very little about the childhood and developing years of Jesus of Nazareth but there is this intriguing sentence:

Jesus Christ grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

There we are given four areas to keep in mind if you want to grow the rounded child: (these are unquestioned by most educational institutions) wisdom, that is intellectual development; stature, that is physical development; favour with God, that is spiritual development; favour with man, that is social development.

At any given time, it is a good idea as parents to review what is needed, where the gaps are and whether there is a balance between all four areas.

Let us unpack those four areas.

- intellectual. : this includes the encouragement of such things as curiosity, speech, language, literacy, numeracy, general knowledge in many areas, discernment, asking the right questions, how to learn and go on learning.
- physical : this includes co-ordination, agility, dexterity, dressing, toilet training blowing nose, cleanliness, games, healthy eating, control of sexual drives, exercise
- spiritual: this includes awe and wonder, and consideration of the big questions such as: Who made me? Who am I? How shall I respond to challenging experiences? What about death? What things are important? How shall I live? You might be one who thinks that you are neutral on such matters and do not wish to influence your child in anyway. But you need to understand that neutrality on these matters is a myth. Your refusal to discuss such questions is in itself a statement no less forceful than that of a parent who teaches her child to repeat the apostles' creed by rote.
- social: this includes skills such as relating, sharing, participating, serving. It embraces the teaching of manners, thoughtfulness, losing and winning at games, how to be a friend, how to deal with peer group pressure.

Of course, there are natural aptitudes in you and your child. Accept this but do not pander to it. The shy introvert has to learn courteous behaviour, the mathematical genius has to learn to tie his shoelaces.

And all this input is going on while you are developing and maintaining a healthy relationship with your child. Does it sound an impossible task? Probably it does. So this is a good time to check out all the resources that are available to you, the parent. And most of them will be useful for both input and relationship at any age or stage.

The resources:

1. There are games to play, indoor and outdoor, improvised or packaged.

2. There are activities to enjoy together with your child, projects to embark upon. Helping with chores should be an expectation by any parent of a child. It is not only good training in life-skills, cooperation and service; it strengthens the bond between you. Of course, allowing a child to help with a task you could accomplish in a quarter the time by yourself is a sacrifice on your part. But there are rewards.

3. There are stories to enjoy together. I hope you will make reading to your child a daily shared pleasure way beyond the time when he or she is capable for reading for yourself. This is a real relationship-strengthener as you enter a world together and empathise with the characters in the book. It is a valuable opportunity for input as you vicariously share the emotions, face the trials along with the hero. What will he do? What should he do? The same thing can happen when you watch film or TV together. Favourite stories then become part of the family mythology: songs, jokes, characters, even dialogue will often be recalled between you.

4. There is the wider family, if you are lucky enough to have one. Not only does this offer a range of role models and a pool of skills and talents; involvement with the wider family, with all its inbuilt stories and history engenders a sense of belonging, an opportunity for learning and caring across the generations and plenty to celebrate.

5. At some point you will choose a school, or you will choose to school your own children. In the former case, you are merely delegating some parts of their education to others. It is an important choice, but don't get too hung up about it. Convenience is a very good reason for choosing a particular school over others, since it is excellent for a child to be able eventually to get himself to school independently. It is salutary to bear in mind that your child will spend at least twice as many of his/her waking hours out of school as in it. Unless the government has its way, of course, with its ideas to start school before breakfast and keep children until nearly bedtime. I would encourage you to resist that as something unlikely to be in the interest of the child. Protect the time you have with your child and use it well.

6. Consider looking for a church, especially if you fear you may be neglecting the spiritual aspect of the input. (If you have no such fear, you are probably already involved in a church at some level) It is dangerous and unhealthy to neglect the spiritual side of a child. Many observers of the explosion in drug abuse by teenagers link it to the fact that most children are now raised in a spiritual vacuum. Neglect the spiritual at your peril. Many churches run wholesome, safe and enjoyable regular activities for children, which include an introduction to the Christian faith through stories from the Bible. This is a setting where children have an opportunity to think through the big questions. Perhaps you are anxious about exposing your child to propaganda, but think again about the human being

you hope to raise. Where are they more likely to hear about and meet the qualities you desire them to grow, from a Bible story or from adverts on television. Which would you rather shaped their lives?. When they are teenagers would you prefer they are clubbing or engaged in wholesome activities with sober decent people who will not be exploiting them for money or sex.

7. There are, of course, many other organisations or institutions to help you balance the input. There are clubs, courses and classes; there are libraries, parks and sports centres. Beware of overloading or over-organising however. Remember healthy neglect. A family trip to London to see some of the sights is a great idea; but so is playing cowboys and Indians in the kitchen with the table upturned and covered with a tablecloth to make a covered wagon.

8 The most valuable resource of all for evaluating, balancing and contributing to the input is the family meal table. It encompasses all four areas for development, as a forum for debate and exchange of information, a place to teach model healthy eating and table manners, an opportunity for social interaction of all kinds, laughter, songs, jokes, news and stories.

Sadly, many families do not recognise the value of eating together as a family. A study in March 2000, reported in The Archives of Family Medicine found that of the 16,000 school age children questioned, less than half ate with their parents on a daily basis. What was going on? Well, in many families, the children are fed separately, with a trough, as it were, placed before them. Some eat in front of the television or in their rooms. The same families are frequently surprised to find that relationships are strained and communication is minimal. Keep eating together as a family a daily priority. It is worth adjusting your work routines to preserve this simple and beautiful way of maintaining your relationship with your children.

9. The setting up of routines is not only excellent for discipline, it is also a wonderful way of identifying yourselves as a family. It is a way of saying, 'this is what we do or what we are.' There are daily ones associated with bedtimes or school or hygiene; there are weekly ones, like attendance at church or some other regular shared activity; there are annual ones which occur with the seasons and it is great to establish within a family those traditions which are unique and personal, - like the way you spend Christmas, for example.

10. But let routines occasionally give way to surprises: crazy things like getting up early to see the sunrise, going out for breakfast, appearing dressed as pirates at the tea-table. Build a bank of memories.

To sum up what we have learnt about the relationship we hope to always have with our children, there are two comments I would make:

1. Parenting is a burden

It is not all picnics in the park. You are the parent and you carry a responsibility much heavier than the child himself. Things in life do not always turn out as you hoped: dreams are shattered, hopes are unfulfilled. There are many variables you hope to control as a parent, especially in the area of input we have been discussing but two things are beyond your control. One is the future; you do not know what will happen. For example, you may sometimes say to your child 'I will always be here for you', but you may not be. You actually cannot guarantee it. There is only one person who has ever said truly 'I will be with you always' and that is Jesus Christ. Perhaps that is another reason for finding out about him, you and your child.

Secondly, you cannot control your child's response. For all your good intentions and careful training, for all your love and guidance, your child, as a responsible agent, may at some point rebel and live a life which is quite other to what you had in mind for him or her..

In that situation I have found it great to know that God is a father; he knows only too well the pain of rejection by those to whom he has given everything, - remember that story about the prodigal son in the Bible, who freeloaded from his father and then took off to squander it? God knows how it feels to be rejected that and he cares. It is a great comfort to be able to entrust your children to a loving and sovereign God.

2. Parenting is exquisite

There is hard work in parenting but I hope our three sessions have made you see what a delightful privilege is the raising of children. It is not all picnics in the park but it is raising people you would be glad to share a meal with anywhere.

You even you are perfectly capable and equipped to raise delightful human beings. Keep your priorities on:

- the inner, not the outer,
- the doing and being, not the having,
- the long term not the short-term.

And enjoy the assignment God has given you!

In your groups discuss the ways in which you find parenting an exquisite burden. And make some decisions about how you are going to enhance and improve your relationship with your child or children.

The home assignments will help you

