

## Influence by Relationship

By Robin Fossum

Recently, our parent-toddler Sunday morning class discussed a DVD teaching series called *Parental Guidance Required* that offered valuable insights into the nature of the parent-child relationship as being the critical context for parents having and maintaining a significant influence in the lives of their children. In his opening session, "Experience Isn't Everything," Andy Stanley talks about how, in today's culture, parents often feel pressured to give their children just the right package of experiences, such as ensuring they are on the right teams, making the right grades, getting into the right schools, involved in a myriad of activities. Just listening to the parents' discussion, I am reminded of how true this is. Many reason that they want their kids to have the things they didn't have, or they may feel compelled to enter the brag-a-thon with other parents about their child's dizzying array of commitments.

We reflexively follow the cultural cue that says if our child is involved in the right activities, he or she will turn out fine. William Doherty and Barbara Carlson in their book, *Putting Family First*, refer to this phenomenon as "overscheduled kids, underconnected families" stating, "Parenting has become a competitive sport, with the trophies going to the busiest."<sup>1</sup> Andy Stanley makes a grave observation: "As a result, many children grow up experience-rich and relationship-poor. This is a strategic mistake because relationships, not experiences, are the key to success . . . it is the ability to develop mature and rich relationships that makes life worth living."

*Parental Guidance Required* describes the three key relationships in a child's life and the pivotal role parents

play in "dialing in" or "dialing out" these influences. The three relationship "dials" are relationship with parents, with God and with others outside the home. Stanley and co-presenter, Reggie Joiner, spend each video session describing the critical importance of guiding and nurturing all three relational dimensions. One could argue that the most important relationship in a child's life is the one with his or her parents because that relationship determines the degree of influence the parent will have on their child's development and their ideas about God and others.

Stanley makes a strong case for parents investing heavily in building a relationship of trust and respect with their children. He urges parents to "re-engage or continue to pursue a relationship with your child because when it matters most, *the quality of relationship will determine the weight of your influence*" (editorial emphasis).

When our children are very young, our influence is largely based on what Stanley terms a "size and position advantage." In other words, "I'm bigger and I'm the Dad" or "I'm the Mom." But, he points out, eventually this advantage goes away about the time kids are in middle school, or certainly high school. The principle, he explains, is this: Parents must make the transition to influence by relationship with their child *while* they still have the size and position advantage. If they don't, then the temptation will be to continue to influence using size and position, long after it is no longer relevant.

Stanley conveys in no uncertain terms that if parents continue to act from the vantage point of size and position when that influence no longer exists, they will erode what is most important—their relationship with their children. Then the tragedy is when their children need parental guidance the most, at the point of making life-changing decisions, they



will often have the least influence because they didn't invest in the relationship.

As our Sunday morning discussion was winding down, someone drew a parallel between our parenting influence and God's relationship with us. God will always be "bigger" than us (He's almighty) and He will always have the position advantage (He's

God). God never abdicates His place as God. At the same time, He has invested Himself in a relationship of love with us through Jesus Christ such that it invites us to seek His absolute influence in our lives. God does not influence by control—even though He clearly could do so—but by relationship. It seems parents would do well to imitate God's model.

<sup>1</sup>William J. Doherty, Ph.D. and Barbara Z. Carlson, *Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002, pages 1,10.

Andy Stanley is the senior pastor at North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga. For purchase information for *Parental Guidance Required* and other DVD teaching series by Andy Stanley, go to [www.resources.northpoint.org/store](http://www.resources.northpoint.org/store).

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"We live in a culture where we are so busy. Along the way we grade ourselves on the experiences we give our kids. . . . The day will come when we would trade all that in for influence—because where there is no relationship, there is no influence."

■ Andy Stanley  
*Parental Guidance Required*

# Keys to a Nurturing Relationship with Your Child

By Diane Moore

The culture is working overtime to influence our kids. The most powerful and gifted marketing geniuses of the world lay awake nights thinking how to win the hearts and loyalties of our children. But all the brilliant minds and billions of dollars have to battle fiercely to compete with one wise, engaged, encouraging, and nurturing parent. While the Bible has little to say about parenting directly, once you realize God is our heavenly Father, the whole Bible becomes a parenting book and God becomes the ultimate pattern for parents. The two keys I've cited for developing a nurturing relationship with your child come from the example God sets in how He builds a nurturing relationship with us.

## Seeing and Knowing Your Child

I define intimacy as knowing and being known. A parent who sees and really knows his or her child can experience a relationship with that child at a much deeper level. Do you know your child? Do you know what he is interested in? What motivates her? What makes him angry? What makes her excited? Do you know how he or she processes information? Does he like routine or risk? Quiet or loud? Lots of friends or a few very close friends? Does she express her emotions easily or does she hold them in? Do you know what your child's dreams are? Past hurts or fears? The more you really know your child, the more capacity for relationship you have.

A child who does not feel known or seen will not receive nurture the same as a child who feels known and seen. Think about it. What if a stranger, someone who does not know you, stops and tells you how wonderful you are. It would be meaningless! But what if the person who knows you the most, who knows your gifts, your strengths, your weaknesses and flaws, takes the time to tell you how wonderful you are—it makes all the difference in the world. Seeing and knowing your child makes your nurture personal to them.

## Be the "Pack Leader"

The term "Pack Leader" comes from the "Dog Whisperer," Cesar Millan. He defines it as "calm, assertive leadership." One of the most important aspects of the parent/child relationship is the wonder that the child is seen, cherished and nurtured by a formidable force, a significant person. Parents may be tempted to set up a relationship with their child which is more like an equal friendship. When that happens, the child loses the security of being cared for by someone much more powerful than themselves. They lose the self-esteem building gift of

being seen and admired by someone of consequence.

Our culture is authority adverse. We read parenting books through a skewed filter or maybe the parenting books are written with a skewed filter. Either way, our vision of the authority role is twisted. The basic principles of dog training transfer beautifully for effective leadership with children. When a parent is a calm, assertive leader, they lead with calm, assertive energy. It is asserting yourself and your boundaries (what is OK and what is not OK), in a very calm way. A calm, assertive leader has nothing to prove and doesn't perceive challenges as threats.

While a *dominating* parent communicates, "You must do this," a calm, assertive parent communicates, "This is what you are going to do and if you don't, that's OK, I know my role as a parent is to train you, I will make sure it happens." A calm, assertive parent sees the bigger picture and understands their vital role in leading a child successfully to maturity.

I once worked with a young couple who had a strong-willed 3-year-old. He had been kicked out of preschool, and the parents had been told he would eventually be diagnosed ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder). When they described how they managed his behavior, I was impressed. They were consistent, had good boundaries and a good structure for enforcing those boundaries. However, they were not being calm and assertive in their leadership. I worked with them on the subtle nuances of being calm instead of intense. They learned to enjoy the training process, instead of getting frustrated at his defiance.

In a matter of days he discovered he could no longer put a concerned look on his mother's face or raise the energy in the room with inappropriate behavior. The father called me the next week and said, "We have a totally different child!" A year later I met with his aunt, a child therapist, who admitted she had tried in vain to have a relationship with her nephew, until his parents became calm and assertive. She described her surprise at how profoundly the change affected his interest in having a relationship with her—much to her delight.

The reason being a strong pack leader is so important is that it keeps a child in the secure position of being a child. If the leadership in the home is weak, and the personality of the child is strong, the child will work to fill the leadership vacuum. Being in control and struggling for control can be exciting to a child, but it is not good for them. When a child has discovered the thrill of power and control, they strive to get more and more of it. All the energy they would expend building a relationship with you is instead used to pursue control. It destroys their capacity for relationship with you, until your leadership is consistently asserted again, and they eventually give up

their quest for control. Once the pursuit of control is over, you can once again engage your child and nurture a close relationship.

*Diane Moore* is the host of *Parent Talk Radio*, a call-in show for parents who want to turn every problem into an opportunity for character development. Parents can talk live with Diane any weekday from 1 to 2 p.m., Pacific Time, by calling 1-800-845-2162. Visit Diane's Web site at: [www.parenttalknw.com](http://www.parenttalknw.com).

## BONUS . . .

### Know Where Your Children Are

**P**eg Smith, CEO of the American Camp Association, says camp makes a difference:

*"A quality camp experience provides our children with the opportunity to learn powerful lessons in community, character-building, skill development, and healthy living—a meaningful, engaged, and participatory environment."*

The ACA-sponsored Web site, [www.campparents.org](http://www.campparents.org), provides a wealth of camp information where parents can learn more about the benefits of a camp experience, discover tips for everything from finding the right camp match for your child to how to deal with homesickness, search for ACA-accredited camps by location, type of activity, organization and religious affiliation, particular cultural or specialty focus, length of session, cost and age of child, and much more.

Looking for a life-building experience for your child?

Check out [www.campparents.org](http://www.campparents.org) and ACA's sponsoring Web site: [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org).



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