

# Parents: Pay Attention

*“And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”  
Ephesians 6:4*

Paying attention over the long run is often difficult. At this moment, I cannot tell you the name of the road I drive every day on my way to work. I have unconsciously decided it is unimportant and therefore, have not paid enough attention to recall its name. Getting to and from work is a very important part of my day, but I tend to be much more focused on the destination rather than the drive itself. I must confess I often do the same in my parenting. Very often, my goal is to make it through the week or day and lose sight of what is going on along the way. We all have daily tasks to complete, and we can get so overly focused on this task completion that the path to those goals becomes a blur. Moving from one task to another can mean we often miss the clues that help us in the mundane and challenging role of parenting.

Daily parenting those entrusted to our care means paying attention to things we want to avoid as well as things we hope to provide. *Ephesians 6:4* provides specific instruction on this as it tells us to “*provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*”. While we know and can desire to follow these teachings, sometimes it can be difficult to know the how of doing so. Three things parents can be attentive to will help provide focus as we apply *Ephesians 6:4*.

These three things include: 1) your child’s behavior, 2) your child’s inner world such as their thoughts and emotions, and 3) your child’s developmental capabilities. These three facets are not Gospel truths to share with our children but can be helpful for parents as they practically consider the how, what, and when of sharing Gospel truth. By paying attention to these three aspects of our children, we gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses that then gives insight to help us avoid provoking them to anger while instructing them in truth.

In one sense, our child’s behaviors are difficult to miss and, in another sense, the behaviors can become like the sign we drive by every day but do not notice what it says. Slowing down to notice the nuances of your child’s behavior and what it communicates to you about them can be very helpful. Consider the following questions to do so:

- What does your child enjoy doing and what might this indicate about the strengths God has given them?
- How does your child interact in a social setting? Academic setting? Family setting?
- How would you describe your child to someone who has never met them?
- When they behave abnormally, what does that typically indicate?
- How does your child behave when they are sad? Angry? Happy? Hurt?

Paying attention to your child’s behavior also gives clues into their inner world of thoughts and feelings. These clues can help a parent teach a child to identify and articulate their thoughts and feeling. In addition, a parent can help a child see how their behaviors are often driven by thoughts and feeling. As parents help their child identify their inner world, they can help train their child’s inner world to align with scriptural teaching. Examples include:

- The child who is quick to feel hurt may need us to speak love and care while also teaching them how to walk through difficulties.
- The child who is easily angered may need to hear the truth of being able to experience intense emotion without lashing out. Children might benefit from teachings that help them know how to regulate intense emotions yet stay engaged in relationships during intense emotion.
- The child who is prone to fear might need help to identify the lies behind their fears and instruction on how to courageously step forward into scary things.

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The exciting and wonderful reality is that as a believing parent, we have the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit to direct our hearts and minds through this maze. As *Ephesians 6:4* instructs, we are to walk this journey in a way that is pointing our children to Christ.

The last aspect to consider is the important but often forgotten ability for parents to discern their child's actual capabilities. It is far too easy for a parent to lose track of where their child is developmentally. Sometimes our expectations are far too high and other times our expectations are far too low. Knowing what your child is capable of in different areas of life is far more than knowing their age. *Ephesians 6:4* tells us not to provoke our children to wrath. Expecting a child to do something that is beyond their capability is one of the sure ways to provoke wrath in them. One of the challenges is to discern the difference between what a child is not able to do and what a child does not believe they can do. Many times this is not a matter of asking less of a child as much as asking them to do the same task but lowering expectations for how well a task will be completed. Using the example of asking a child to do their homework, consider these few questions when thinking about your child's current developmental capacities:

- Are they able to know, remember, and complete all the steps that go with a task?
- What are realistic expectations about how well your child is able to do this task?
- How long will this task likely take your child?
- How many reminders might your child need?
- How much assistance might your child need?

Paying attention to your child's behavior, thoughts and emotions, and capabilities is helpful as we think about parenting according to *Ephesians 6:4*. These three road signs serve as a starting point for attentive parenting, but they are by no means an exhaustive list. There will always be areas to learn and grow as parents. However, raising our children to witness and embrace *Ephesians 6:4* as we "*provoke them not to wrath but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*" is a great charge and one that offers great hope in Gospel-centered principles. It is a charge worth paying attention to.