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Presentation Transcript
Spiritual Growth and Human Development 02
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In the first message of this series we began with the concept of congregational spiritual health. No discussion of congregational health can really be complete at all without considering the spiritual health of the children in the congregation. And regarding this premise, I'd like to draw your attention to three points.

First of all, the example that's been set for us by Jesus Christ is one of *including* children. He would stop along the way and pick them up in His arms and focus His attention on them and bless them. And while He was doing that He issued a strong warning at one point, telling all those around Him not to offend children and attend to their needs. So if we ignore that warning, then we can be sure that things will not go well for us.

Secondly, it's clear that no congregation lasts over time unless its children embrace the faith. A congregation could, I suppose, be marginally satisfying for the adults right up until the last member gets too old to attend anymore. And if there's no renewal – no children growing up to replace those who are older – then the congregation ceases to exist.

And thirdly, working to improve the spiritual health of adults in a congregation does not necessarily improve the spiritual health of the children in a congregation. But, working to improve the spiritual health of a congregation's children will contribute *greatly* to the spiritual health of the adults in the congregation. I don't have time to explain why that's true in this sermon today, but I promise, before this series is over, we will explain how that works. Suffice it to say that, if we hope to help our children develop their own vibrant commitment to Jesus Christ, we need to think about that. We need to make plans. And then we need to implement them.

So this series is about the kind of plans that we need to make, what we need to do, how we need to change in order to help our children develop a relationship with God. Now, in the first sermon that we gave on this subject, we saw that Jesus Christ said that living things grow in stages. We talked about the stages of child development that God has hard-wired into the human mind. And we saw that the first stage of human development lasts from birth to about

two years old. And during that time a child is hard-wired to learn to trust parents. And if parenting is consistent, dependent, nurturing and attuned to the child – if parents are in sync with their child – then that trust just develops all by itself, because that's what a child is hard-wired to learn at that age.

We also saw in that first sermon that trust is the bedrock component of a relationship with God. If we can't trust God, then we really can't have a relationship with Him. So, amazingly, the most important thing that a human can ever learn about God can be learned easily and naturally in the first two years of life.

So today we're going to move to the next stage of human development, which is two to four years, to see what a child is hard-wired to learn easily and naturally about God during that stage. And we'll also consider how congregations can use the information to promote spiritual development in the children that attend.

So let's turn our attention now to children between two and four years of age – toddlers. That's the term that is put on that age group by the developmental experts. Let's look at some of the developmental tasks of that age group. In the first two years of life babies, begin to develop gradually the ability to move around – to manipulate their environment. They elaborate on locomotion. Last time I was talking about my grandson, who by the way is here visiting with us today...his efforts to put a little ball of carpet fuzz in his mouth. Picking it up was an effort. Getting it into his mouth was an effort. And he wanted to do it because he was hard-wired to explore and become one with his environment – just like he was one with his mother in the womb. And that desire to become one with his environment propelled him to try to *do* things that he wasn't really able to do at first. But he tried and tried, and his little brain began to wire itself to where he could follow through on those efforts that he was making. And that effort continues on in the two-to-four stage. The term toddler is a clue to the importance of learning to move around, because once they can move around, then they can explore their environment a lot more. And we can attest to the fact over this Thanksgiving weekend that they are definitely better at moving around than they were six months ago when we last saw them. And I can tell you that they're getting better at it. And that takes a lot more effort on our part to monitor various activities that go on.

The second area that babies start to develop between two and four is the ability to fantasize play. During this age children develop a capacity to understand that one thing can stand for something else. The word "cat" can stand for the family pet. I saw Ethan pick up the TV remote and hold it up to his ear and say, "Hello." So he's pretending that that's the telephone. And he's picked up a lot of things and pretended it was the telephone, because he's also learning to talk. And so talking on the phone, which is something he's seen adults do, is a good way to practice talking for him. So as this occurs children develop the capacity for mental images, for symbolic drawing, for symbolic play – pretense. Children at this age may lack vocabulary to express strong feelings, but they can act them out in play and that's how they soothe themselves a lot of times. I see that a lot in my private practice, where I work with children in a tray of sand and toys. They'll work through something that's scary or traumatic to them over and over again, just like people who've been through a traumatic event and have to talk about it all the time until it gets boring to them. And when it gets boring, then they've processed it enough and moved it far enough away from themselves that it's no longer the big

thing. It's just something that happened to them. So children learn that very early. They develop the ability to do that.

You know we don't often think much about it, but the ability to substitute one thing for another in your mind is *very important* in a person's relationship to God, because God often communicates with us at this very fundamental level, doesn't He? He uses a lot of images when He communicates with us. And the Bible is just *full* of word pictures.

Let's look at the third area – language development. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this, because it's a pretty obvious thing that we observe in children. While all the mental stuff is going on, children also rapidly learn to communicate in words. And everybody can see and experience that. One of the things that I've been impressed with over the last few days is the process by which they do that. They say the same thing over and over again. And I think some of that is because we don't get it and they know we don't. They're not making themselves clear and they know it. But I think some of it also is just how they learn. You know, human learning isn't one time, got it, and then move on to something else. It's do it over and over again until it becomes wired into the brain. So they do that. There's a lot of repetition.

Last night Ethan...he's got a little book with numbers in it, and there's three Bs and four something else, and he was making the rounds to all the adults, showing them the same page of the book and pointing at it and saying the same things. Maybe he was trying to find somebody that could understand what he was saying, but I think probably, too, just the repetition was helping him learn what those things meant.

Okay. And then the fourth thing that we think about in this age group, as far as the tasks that need to be accomplished, is the beginning of self-control. Let's go to Proverbs 25, verse 28.

Prov. 25:28 – *Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down without walls.* There's lots of scriptures showing us the importance of self-control. The beginnings of this skill are learned at this age – between two and four years old. This is when kids start beginning to learn how to control themselves. They learn how to control their impulses. They learn how to modulate their emotions. They learn to control their bowels and their bladders. They learn to control their movements. They learn to control the tongues in their mouths so they can say words distinctly. And they also become able to understand the concept of boundaries at this age. Now they do this earlier, but it's really starting to become something that they can really get a grip on as they get into this age. And that's so important for us, isn't it, when we approach God. We have to know where we stand with Him. And He lays down certain boundaries for us so that we *do* know where we stand with Him. And that begins at this age.

And we take this all so much for granted. It just happens all by itself if you put a kid in a good nurturing environment. But you know we talked last time about the people in prison who don't know how to trust, and never had appropriate boundaries set for them when they were younger. They were either abused or constricted, or else they were ignored and allowed to do whatever they wanted. Either way feels unsafe to a child. So when appropriate boundaries are set for a child, they have to start learning to control themselves to stay within the boundaries.

We devised this fence to put up in our family room so the kids couldn't get out. And that's where we sit most of the time anyway, so they're just kind of fenced in there. We've got a big table covering the doorway out of the family room. So they're in there with us. And, of course, the big attraction is the TV, where you can see your face in the reflection. Ethan immediately headed for that to put his face on it and leave a big mark on it (chuckle). The first time his dad saw it, he was told, "No, don't do that." And so he made a couple of runs by there, did it once more and got told not to do that. But then after that, he'd look at it, and you could see he was thinking about it, but he didn't do it anymore. He'd cruise by several times, you know, but he was able to control the impulse to do that. And without the boundary, there's no need to control the impulse. So that's a good thing for him. He's learning how, one thing at a time, to control himself. How important is that in not only our relationship with God, but just in dealing with other people? When I go to school everyday, there's lots of times I'd like to say some things to people that I just really realize I shouldn't say. And if I say it I know I'm going to be sorry. So I have to control that impulse unless I want to feel sorry a lot. We all have that. We have to be able to control ourselves, and that begins early in life. Between two and four years old is when it really becomes an important thing when we learn to do that easily and naturally.

Now you talk about those people in prison that don't know how to do that. They have a hard time all their lives, don't they? They never learn this. And what terrible results! Just to show you how bad it can get, I was listening to a lecture several weeks ago by Bruce Perry, who's an attachment expert – renowned in the nation. And he was talking about his conversation with an upper-middle-class teenage boy who'd been incarcerated because he instigated a gang rape of a mentally retarded girl. And this boy was telling Dr. Perry that he really did her a favor because nobody would want to have sex with her anyway – not in a habit of controlling himself. Somehow he got to be a teenager, and he thought that whatever he devised or came up with was an okay thing to do. He had no conscience, no ability to modulate his impulses. It's a disgusting thing to think about it, isn't it? And a terrible thing when you see an adult who didn't learn what he needed to learn when he was two to four years old.

In my private counseling practice two weeks ago, I had a brand new sixteen-year-old boy client come in one day. And I said, "Why have you come here for counseling?" And he said, looking rather sheepishly, "I threw a rock at a police car." And I said, "Oh, is this court ordered counseling?" And he said, "No. I just thought I should talk to somebody." And I said, "What would you like me to help you with?" And he said, "I think I need you to help me learn to think before I do stuff." And I said, "You know, you're half way home. If you know that you need to start thinking before you do stuff, you're in a pretty good place. What we need to do is just practice doing that together." It was kind of funny to see how bad he felt, because he realized that at sixteen he probably should have a better grip on that ability. But at least he recognized what the problem was. Now he probably learned that from hearing mother tell him, "Think before you act," quite a bit. So he was working on it.

You may know adults that haven't learned to control themselves yet. And those are the people that always think everything is about them, and what they want is more important. The Biblical example that I always think of is King Saul. He would always tell God, "Yes, I'll do what you want me to do," but then when it got right down to it, he always did what *he* wanted

to do. What *he* wanted was more important. You remember that God told him that, when they took the Amalekites, they weren't supposed to leave any of them alive, and to kill *all* the animals because they were such a corrupt society. And he was telling God's prophet, Samuel, that he had done everything God said, when Samuel said, "Well, what's all this bleating that I hear in my ears – all these animals making all this noise?" Well, he just wanted to do what he wanted to do. And never really got over that. He *never* understood that his way wasn't the most important – very self-centered person, and saw no need to control himself! And probably never had to growing up.

Let's look in Isaiah 66.

Isa. 66:1-2 – *Thus says the LORD, heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. Where is the house that you will be for Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made and all those things exist. So, "I made everything. Are you going to build a house for Me? No, I already own everything. I use the earth for a footstool." But on this one thing will I look, on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit and who trembles at My word.* That's not the way Saul was, was it? God wants people who can subdue their own impulses, who can realize that they're not the center of everything, and that God knows more than they do, and who have themselves under control – who don't think that what they want is most important and think they're always right. He wants people who can realize that God is supreme, and that He knows more than anyone else. And when He talks, we better listen. And these are the people God says are going to have success with Him.

So the beginnings with that relationship with God start out with us being able to control ourselves and put ourselves in second place and listen to God. That's the beginning of a relationship with Him. And it's learned at birth first, by learning to trust and to connect, and then, from two to four, it has to do with learning self-control – a large part of it.

And yet, that's really not the most important thing that's learned about a relationship with God at this age. While all this stuff is being learned there's something else going on with children that's even more critical and more fundamental to their development than any of these things. They talk about, in the development literature, the crisis that occurs, or can occur, between whether the child is going to be a child of autonomy or one what that's filled with shame and doubt. Those are the two poles of the crisis. And they talk about a central process called imitation.

Let's talk about autonomy. Once an infant – that child between birth and two – develops a sense of oneness with its environment – when it feels loved and secure – then that makes it ready to move into the next stage of development. And that stage is one of learning that it's separate from its environment. Once you learn to connect to it, you have to start learning to differentiate from it. And children at this stage have enough brain wiring to begin to realize that parents don't always *know* what they want, or don't always understand their feelings. And so they begin to differentiate themselves from parents and from others.

I remember when my oldest, who was just two...she was at church one day with her hand in her mother's hand, watching her mother as she talked to another lady in the church. At some

point in the conversation, my little two-year-old – or three-year-old – daughter looked up at her and said, “Mama, who is that lady?” You know, “She’s not a part of our family. I don’t know who she is. Who is she?” Starting to differentiate between people and herself, and knew that she hadn’t seen her before, and wanted to know who she was. Starting to pick out the faces in the congregation and attach names to them at that age, instead of “we’re all one.” “Oh, I’m separate from you. We’re different.”

So they start realizing that they’re separate and that puts them in a place where they strive to become their own person. In the TV series *Star Trek-Next Generation* – and I know nobody here watches that anymore – it’s in syndication and on its way out of that, I guess – but there is this phenomenon in *Star Trek-Next Generation* called The Borg. And I really don’t know much about that. I saw one movie where I saw The Borg and I never saw it in any of the TV shows, but I know that The Borg looks like a group of individuals, but in reality each person is totally controlled by one mind. And The Borg is always trying to assimilate other people. Its way of growing is to capture more individuals and assimilate them and kind of rob them of their identity and their autonomy and sort of meld into one big thing called The Borg. And yet they all look like different people. And I want to ask you this question. Is that what being in the family of God is really going to be like? Are we all going to be like The Borg – just kind of assimilated by God, and just sort of automatons to His will? Or will we all be free spirits, with our own identity, connected by the love of God? I think that we all know that the latter is how it’s really going to be, isn’t it? And if the latter is true, then it’s vital that we all have our own personality, our own sense of autonomy, our own independent mind if we’re going to be successful in the spirit family of God. Now it’s true we’re all going to be bound together by God’s love, but God doesn’t want us to be yellow pencils. He wants us all to be autonomous individuals with our own minds and our own personalities and to be unique in all the universe.

So how do children learn this? How do they learn that independent sense? Well, they learn it by doing things and feeling a sense of mastery. You can see it on their little faces while they’re learning things. Every time they learn something new, it’s like, “Ah!” And that all begins – some kids start a little earlier – but roughly between the ages of two and four. And the way they go about developing this sense of self is kind of primitive at first. They may say, “No,” a lot even when what you’re offering them is what they want. But it’s just, “I can say, ‘No.’” And dealing with them is kind of difficult at that time. But it seems to work for them in doing what *they* need to accomplish, which is becoming their own person, as opposed to the way they were when they were first born, which is become one with everything around them.

So this is all very frustrating for adults and parents. It’s hard to reason with them. And at the same time they’re developing this ability to move around. And that also is something that gives them a sense of mastery, because they can do stuff they never could do before. Now they were kind of tied to the playpen or the crib or on the blanket. But now they can really scoot around. I was in my office working this morning when our two came down the stairs, each in the hand of a parent. And they were successfully navigating the stairway down, and you could just see the look of pleasure in their faces as they learned how to navigate these stairs. And they didn’t have to hold onto the rail. They just had one hand to steady them and they were able to walk down the stairs. It was like, “Look at me! I didn’t know I could do

this! Wow! This is fun.” And that sense of being able to accomplish and do things is what helps them realize they’re independent, they’re their own people.

But it is wearing on adults, who already know how to move around, and who have to vigilantly monitor the never ceasing, toddling, exploring, showing what they’ve found, what they can do, what they can say, all of that. But this is where adults need to use their empathy skills to understand the state of the child. It is so hard for us to remember back when we were that age and how much fun it was to make the rounds from one adult to another with the book, or to walk down the stairs, or to push the button and make the toy make all the racket over and over and over again! If we’re going to be successful parents and be attuned to our children, then we have to get in touch with that and see how much good it’s doing them and how much fun it is for them. And realize that we were once in that state too, and that we did all of that as well. Those of us who are into power are tempted to simply overpower. Children are supposed to be obedient. That’s the thing that was big many years ago, and with some folks still is. Now let’s talk about the other side of that. Let’s talk about the shame and doubt side of it. We talked earlier about boundaries and self-control, so it’s easy to think in this stage of development that there’s a tension between autonomy and self-control. I’ve heard people say, “You don’t want to control them so much that they never learn to control themselves.” And they think, “Oh, it’s between controlling them and their own ability to control themselves.” If you think about it that way, then you’re missing the main thing that God is doing in the life of a child between two and four years old. Thinking that the tension is between autonomy and obedience is *not* really what’s going on at this age for them. The tension is between being an autonomous person with a strong sense of mastery or a fearful person who doesn’t think he or she can accomplish anything. The negative pole is shame and doubt.

Think about King David. If he had been a fearful person by nature, would it have been easier or harder for him to trust God when he faced Goliath? There it is. So he mentioned in there – in that passage – that he had killed a lion and a bear – that God had helped him kill a lion and a bear, and God was going to help him kill this giant. So God was in the picture early on with him. But before we can think about God, these things can be put in us or removed from us. And between two and four the ability to have a sense of mastery can be learned easily if conditions are right. God does want us to have a sense of confidence in our human abilities. And He puts that – He hard wires that – into all of us – the ability to learn that. And then, when we become converted, He builds on it. That’s why He has created in each one of us a time of life when we can learn that easily and naturally if conditions in our life are right. And it’s the same thing – like we were talking about in the first stage – where if a child learns to trust parents, because he’s given good caregivers, then it’s so much easier for him to trust God when he becomes an adult. It becomes much easier.

I’ve had so many people tell me over the years that I really have a hard time with the concept of God as a Father because of the way my father treated me, or because of the way my parents treated me, or whatever. And all of that stuff early in life gets translated to authority figures later on, and eventually, when we become converted, it gets translated to God – or transferred to God. So what we need to be doing with our children during this stage is helping them feel a sense of mastery and autonomy and refraining from shaming them about things. When we feel shame we feel small and ridiculous and humiliated. So we need to help our children not feel

that way while they're learning all this stuff. And it's so easy to shame them. But we really need to avoid that. We need to build up their confidence and their capacity as a human being.

Okay, so we mentioned self-control earlier. Where does that fit in then, if it's not the core thing? Well here's how it fits in. And this is *very important*. People feel shame from being ridiculed, but we also feel shame when we violate our own conscience, when we violate our own inner concept of what we ought to be like. And that's true with toddlers too. If a child is toilet trained, and he has an accident later on after he's been trained, he's going to feel a sense of shame or embarrassment, because he sees himself as somebody who doesn't need to wear diapers anymore. So that's another way that children can grow up with shame and doubt, even if they're never shamed externally by others. They can feel shame if they don't have a good sense of mastery and can't accomplish the things that they think they should do. If they see other kids riding a tricycle and they don't know how, it makes them feel small. So toddlers really aren't that much different from adults in that. Kids this age are developing a picture of what they ought to be like. They're developing a conscience. And when they violate that concept of themselves that they have in their minds, they feel shame.

So teaching children how to control themselves is a way to help them avoid feeling shame – inner shame. Healthy boundaries set by parents helps children feel safe and it helps them feel good about themselves internally. You know, when Ethan came up and put his face on the TV screen and was told he shouldn't do that, and then he did it a second time and was told in more forceful terms he shouldn't do that, the third time, when he cruised by, he wasn't wanting to be corrected again. He just wanted to touch the screen. And so he had to weigh between the two and when he cruised by and didn't touch it, he was told, "Good job!" And you could see that that made him feel good. It's all a part of it.

So boundaries are extremely important. But they are not the central issue at this age. I can tell you this from first-hand experience. We have a new crop of kindergartners every year, and they've just passed through the two to four year old stage. They should already have developed a good strong sense of mastery. Okay. Those children that don't have that are much harder to teach confidence than it is to teach them boundaries. The boundaries – they're learning that at that time – but that's not core for this age. They can learn that later. I take kindergartners all the time and in just about twelve sessions, working with them and a sand tray, they've got it. They know how to stay out of other people's stuff, and they know where the boundaries are, and they understand personal space and good touch, bad touch, and all of that stuff. They can learn that real quick after they get into kindergarten. But if you make it to kindergarten and you don't have a strong sense of yourself, you can get it, but it's way harder to learn. And most of the time people that don't learn that between two and four have to work on it all the rest of their lives. They have to fight feelings of inferiority or ineptitude or whatever. So it's very important for children to learn that at that age. And it's very important to God to have children learn that at that age, because He wants us all to feel like we can be successful with Him.

One of the things I always ask when I begin working with a new child is, "How were they toilet trained?" Was it an issue of control? Were they made to feel masterful when they were

successful? Or were they shamed when they failed? It has a lot to do with how a person grows up.

Let's move on to the central process of imitation. This is how things are learned. This is how mastery is learned. This is how kids learn at this age. The central process resolving the shame-autonomy-doubt issue is imitation. They listen to us and they imitate us. They watch us walk and they imitate that. They watch us love each other, or hate each other, and they imitate that. When they learn something new, even if they just watched an adult and learned it, then it becomes theirs and they feel masterful about it. They've mastered it, and they have made it a part of themselves.

Empathy, or insensitivity, is learned fundamentally here. Two nights ago, Ethan was having a grumpy evening. He woke up early from his nap and didn't get all the sleep he needed, and so he was doing whiny crying on the floor in the family room. Remember whiny crying? And his sister came over and laid down beside him and looked into his eyes. So that's her effort to try to make him feel better. She knew something wasn't quite right, and that's what she knew to do, and that's what she did. So what we're watching there is the beginnings of a sensitive adult who understands the experience and the feelings of other people. And how did she learn to do that? Well she's watched her mother and father cuddle him, and she's been cuddled that way, and so she's getting a sense for how that works. And that's a good thing. There are a lot of families where that isn't learned, because it's not present.

Let's move on from that. You think about imitation and how children soak up what they see adults do and say, and they soak up their feelings and their reactions to things. And then we ask the question, "What can the church do to help these children?" because that is what we're talking about, isn't it? This really isn't so much a parenting series as it is what can the whole church do to help all the kids? And we discussed in the first message on this series that, when children are first born, the church can only *indirectly* help children, because children aren't really aware of people outside of their own immediate family at first. Most of the work is done by parents. As children get older, they are influenced more and more by people outside the family. And that means that the whole congregation has an opportunity for good or for bad, for health or for sickness, for faith or for rejection of faith, in the children of the congregation.

Everywhere I go I talk to people about this. I see a few people really interested in doing what they can do to help, and a larger group who seem to studiously ignore the issue. Really, in the church, until that changes, the congregations are not going to be a healthy place for kids. Adults need to become aware of and be concerned for the children in the congregation, just as Christ was interested in them when He walked the earth, and is interested in them still. And that's why I'm taking the time to go through all these stages. If we want to help the kids around us, it helps to know what is going on with them at whatever age they are at.

So let's just think a little bit about what adults and teens and congregations can do to promote the spiritual development of those who are two to four years old in the congregation. One of the things that we can do is we can teach children by showing. And this is mostly, even at this age, a parental thing. You can say, "Don't do that," or you can say, "Do it this way." One is

affirming and helping and directly going right at the drive that they have, which is to learn to do things masterfully. And the other is going toward the negative pole, which is to shame. So we can teach by showing when we have the opportunity – and with this age group, perhaps not too much of a chance. I can think of the main way that might work is if somebody in a larger congregation, where they have these daycare centers for the little kids, somebody working with them can teach them by showing instead of telling them what not to do. Instead of always saying, “No,” we can say, “Try this.” And believe me, there is a place for no, but it’s so overused with us. If you’re toddler is about to walk out in the street, you definitely want them to know what no means, and to follow it. But there are so many other ways to deal with it. Save that when it’s really needed if we can do that.

I watched my daughter and her husband work with them and they use distraction a lot. If he’s got something he’s not supposed to have, then something else will get substituted that’s not so bad. It may take some time to convince him that that’s just as interesting, but it can be done. Teaching them to do something else is good and works because they want to learn things. They are like little sponges and if they’re trying to learn something you don’t want them to learn right then, you can substitute something else and they’ll go that way. It just works like that.

The second thing we can do is to be sure that when we do have to set boundaries we set them for safety and growth rather than our convenience. When children have space to explore new things, they’re doing what they’re driven to do at that age. And so that makes their frustration level go down. But if you try to constrict them, then that just makes the frustration level go up, and it’s so much harder to deal with them.

I really wish we had a place for the little ones to play here before and after services. And maybe we can have some thought as to how to make church a safe, fun place for them. When a little child is old enough to say, “Who is that lady, Mama?” they’re also able to remember – they’re old enough to remember – what that person was like and how they treated them. And they’re old enough to remember all the rest of their lives what church was like and whether it was a fun place or a drag. So when they have space to explore and learn things, then taking care of them is a lot easier. Expecting them to sit still and be quiet is, a lot of times, more for our convenience than it is for their growth, and it’s also unrealistic at that age. You can teach a child to be quiet and sit still, but it takes times for that to happen, and it’s never going to happen perfectly because you’re violating a major drive of their development at that age. So we need to be realistic about what we can expect.

Just think about that four-year-old who’s learning who the adults are at services. They know who’s kind to them and who’s grouchy. They know who likes to see them and who’s bothered by them. Think about their earliest memories at services and when they’re going to grow up. Where are you going to fit into that picture? We have a couple of little ones that come to church here occasionally. Where are you going to fit into their picture? Will you be the warm accepting person that helped them? Or will you be the disapproving or distant or grouchy adult to be avoided? As kids grow up an impression is formed in their minds about the house of God, and each of us helps to form that impression – parents most of all, and then the rest of us kind of follow along.

The next thing I want to talk about is to acknowledge toddlers at their level of comfort. Toddlers are gradually becoming aware of others outside the family, but their main ties are still primarily at home. Sometimes it's hard for them to connect to others, so we do what we can to build connections as they are accepting of them. Now we watch the comfort level on their faces to see how much they can comfortably handle, and we give them as much space, or as much interaction as they want and need. We're friendly, but we don't overdo it with them, because that's not really what they're necessarily ready for.

So when I meet new babies or toddlers, I usually say, "Hi," and then I kind of let them make any overtures – and this includes my own grandkids. When we met them on this visit, they didn't remember us from six months ago, so when we were all in the family room for the first time, I just kind of let them warm up to me, rather than demanding their attention. And that way, when they crawled up in my lap, it was their idea, not mine. And that works.

And the final thing I want to talk about – and we could just rattle on about this all day long. This is by no means a complete list. But I'm trying to put out some idea material here. And just as a general principle, we need to honor their drive for autonomy – you know, that "I'll do it myself." "I'll do it myself." That's not an insult. That's not a rejection. It's just an inborn, hard wired, absolutely vital thing that everybody needs to learn, and we can learn it the easiest between two and four. We don't need to think that when a toddler is doing things that are annoying that they're being disobedient. We need to think, instead, that they're doing their work of development, and are not aware that they're being disruptive. And even if they are sometime, as they get toward four, the urge to become masterful overrides the urge to not be disruptive, because that's what they're wired to do. We shouldn't expect parents to have them under perfect control. Self-control is a task that takes a lifetime. There's nobody here that has perfect self-control yet. So we shouldn't expect kids that are just starting to work on it to have that.

Now, I am a big believer that everybody who comes to church should be able to hear the sermon. Okay? I'm not "kids at the expense of adults," or anything like that. And I think that's a reasonable expectation. But there are so many ways to work on that situation. We have a little room at the back. We have a bathroom down the hall. If we think somebody is liable to make noise and disrupt us, the adult thing to do is to sit on the other side of the room. There's lots of things we can do as adults. Kids don't get to pick where they sit. But we do. And parents can be working with the little ones so they start to develop a sense of self-mastery at services. We used to have church practice with ours. And we got them gradually used to being quiet at church. And putting them on a blanket begins to mean it's time for them to play quietly or go to sleep. You just have to keep after it. Consistency works. They're smart. They can learn. And they even begin to be masterful about that. So, it's good for them to learn those things, because they develop that sense of self-mastery. And it's especially beneficial for them as they get toward three-and-a-half or four, because they're starting to become aware of how others see them. And they have radar for whether people accept them or not. So it's good to socialize our children and teach them how to do things that are pleasing to others and how to fit into the boundaries of church services and other areas of life.

Okay. Let's sum this all up. Children at this stage have relatively little to do with others outside their home. They have more than they did when they were between birth and two, but between two and four, they still have relatively little to do with other people at church. Parents are the primary shapers. Still, as they get toward four, they can start to become aware of and are developing the ability to relate to people outside of their family. And those of us in the family of the church can have a positive impact on them by being a warm and accepting community that understands their needs, drives and limitation.

I want to leave you with one thought. The concept of an unwanted child is one of the concepts that people outside of western culture point to – at our society – as a sign of a sick society. The idea of an unwanted child is foreign in most tribal cultures. They don't understand that concept. In western culture we slaughter millions of them every year before they're born. Has the concept of the unwanted child penetrated your thinking, as a person who is a part of western culture? Does it show itself in the relationships with the children in your congregation? Something we all ought to think about, because we are western people.