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**Presentation Transcript**  
**Parenting for Faith – Relationship**  
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The title of this presentation is *Parenting for Faith*. It's about *Relationship*.

Years ago I was taught that God calls children independently from their parents. Parents would look at their kids and, maybe, one or two of them would become a part of the church, and another one wouldn't. They would say, "You just can't figure it. You know, God is the one that calls people." And that kind of implies that parents really don't have any part in the process. But, you know, I just never believed that, because of what I could read in the Bible. I saw that a calling from God is kind of like an invitation, isn't it? I mean, an invitation contains information – where the party is, what time it is, what everybody is going to be wearing, what the occasion is. That's what a calling from God is. He lets us know about Jesus Christ and there is all this information that we have to absorb. And, with all invitations, we are always free to accept or not. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it. When some people invite us some place, it feels like a command performance, but it's always our choice if it is an invitation.

Even Paul, as he stood blind in the middle of Damascus Road, had a choice. Christ reasoned with him. He said, "Why do insist on kicking against the goads like a stubborn mule?" But that was a question – not a command – wasn't it? And you may say, "Yeah but, just two verses later, He says, 'Well, I'm telling you, you're going to go to Damascus.'" But that was after Paul said, "What do you want me to do?" And that's his acceptance of the invitation.

So an invitation is something that comes from God. It does. And it has information in it. And most of the time, that information is delivered to us by other people. Right? Even if it was by the apostles, as they wrote in the Bible.

Another scripture I read in Deuteronomy tells parents to teach their children. So parents are involved in doing God's work with their kids, according to the Bible. That's what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to teach them about God. That's how the invitation gets sent to them.

Then, in the book of Acts, we're told that, when a husband and wife are called, their children are sanctified or set apart. So what's different about them all of a sudden? Well, they're now living with people that have also been invited and have access to the information through them. So how well is the information delivered? Well, that depends on whether we're going to do our part or not? Perhaps the most instructive scripture of all we can read in Ephesians 6:4, where it says:

**Eph. 6:4** – *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.* So we learn here that God bestows on parents the responsibility to treat children the way He would. And He provides that ability by the Holy Spirit and it's up to us to take advantage of that. If we do that – if we treat them the way He would – then they're not going to be angry with us, and so the door will be open for them to accept the information that comes with the invitation – respond to the instruction about God if the relationship is good.

So, how we parent really, according to the Bible, is tied to how our children respond to God. So, in this series, we're going to talk more specifically than we ever have before about how to conduct a relationship with our children so that they can accept God as they grow up.

Now, the things that we're going to talk about today, specifically, are about *relationship*. But, in the weeks that follow, we will branch out to other things that follow along as by-products of the relationship. So, maybe the things that we're talking about today are fundamental.

When we think about our relationship with our children, and with helping them develop a relationship with God, what should we be trying to accomplish? Well, all the things that God is trying to accomplish with us, because we're standing in His stead as we deal with them. We want them to know that we *love* them. We want them to know that there are *rules of life* and that there are *consequences* – both positive and negative, depending on how we follow or don't follow those rules. ...to know that *with God* we can do anything. We want them to have *faith*. And there are many other things, too, aren't there? But all of these flow naturally out of a relationship with God. And the same is true of our relationship with our children. If we represent God well to them, then the information from the invitation goes in.

Let's look at some things that are part of that. I've called this first one *presence*. You can have a relationship without being *in* a relationship. We have to *attend* to people and *atune* to them in order to relate. What does that mean? Well, it means, sometimes, to put down the pen or the book we're reading, or to turn off the television, or hang up the phone and make eye contact, and listen, and then respond to them.

There's a little guy that comes to my office every week. He lives with his grandparents because his mother is an addict. He likes to play with video games on my computer. So we follow Grandma's rule. That is, if he talks to me, maybe the last ten minutes of the session, he gets to do something that *he* likes to do. So he gets to do that. So, I'm sitting

on the couch, and he's got his back to me at the computer playing, and one day he turned around and he said, "What do you do while I'm playing on the computer?" He wants to play with the games, but he also wants connection. I said, "Well, I take notes and I think about you." He said, "Oh," and then he turned back around. So, for most of the session, I'm glued on him, and I'm tuning and attending, and then he wants to play. But he still, also, wants to know if I'm involved in some way.

I think, too, that we need to understand the need for attention when we talk about presence. Sometimes they come up with things – even to them, things that are insignificant – you know, they make things up, even – to have our attention. Sometimes they'll even tell lies to get attention.

I had a boy once, who was kicked out of middle school, and he had to go to an alternative school, because APS wouldn't accept him because of his behavior. And his parents didn't like that, because they had to take him to school in the morning and bring him home everyday, and that *really* put a cramp in their plans. He was suspended for fighting and for drawing gang symbols on his homework paper. His grades were mediocre. So I kind of developed an image in my mind of what this kid would look like as I talked to his mother. He came in and he was really clean cut. He was polite. He was friendly. He was likeable – not like any of the boys I had seen with similar problems. So I invited his family to come in. He had two sisters – one older, one younger – dressed really nicely, really polite, doing well in school. So then we did this thing called *family sculpting*, where the kids get to move everybody around in the room to demonstrate the family relationships and how they work.

Well, both girls placed themselves right beside their father and mother. He placed himself as far away from his father as he could get. So you begin to see the problem was a lack of attention from dad. He was doing things that were out of character to draw attention to himself. His father needs to be more present with his son. I noticed some of that when they were in the room – a *lack* of it, actually.

The principle is that children's security in their relationship with us increases when they know we care enough about them to be present and attend to them. So how would you demonstrate the ability to present with your children? What would you do? What could you do? It's something to think about.

Second principle: *listening*. Well, it's sort of obvious, but this is a special kind of listening. It's *listening without judgment*. We have to get out of the interrogate-judge-fix mode. That's what we do with kids. We listen just long enough to figure out what needs to be done. We ask questions and interrogate. Then we make a judgment about what needs to be done. And then we start fixing. That doesn't create a sense of being heard. It creates a sense of being steam-rolled – overridden, ignored.

There was a middle-schooler who told me, after warming up in session one day, that one of her teachers put her name on the board, along with the names of a number of other students, to denote various projects they were assigned to. So everybody, I guess, had

their name on the board. But she wrote this girl's boyfriend's last name instead of hers. This boyfriend thing is all new to her at twelve years old. So she was mortally embarrassed at what this teacher did. My job, at times like that, is not to try to contextualize that and "Suck it up, get over it, it's not a big deal, what are you worried about?" All that came to mind, but that's not what you need to say. So I just reflected back the embarrassment she felt. "That's *so* embarrassing! It draws attention." So after a few rounds of that, she said, "You know, it's not really that big a deal. She does things like that to everybody." "Oh, so you're not really left out, at least." She said, "Yeah." You could tell by the body language, then, that she'd kind of processed that. In the process, she somehow felt understood and closer, actually. She wanted a hug at the end of the session. And that doesn't happen every week with her.

The principle there is that being understood – from listening – heals negative experiences. And listening helps children *feel* understood. And that helps them feel closer and safer. We'd like our kids to feel closer and safer, wouldn't we? That's one way to do it. So, how could you listen to your child more effectively? What could you do? When would you do that? Sometimes we can't always do it, but there are ways to kind of set up times for things like that. Unless it's a crisis, it can usually be put off for five minutes – something like that.

Another thing that I often think about is the importance of names. Kids friends are important to them. So, if you remember their friends' names, then that tells them that they're important to you.

When I meet a new child, I always get them to the table with a piece of paper at some point during the assessment. And I ask them to help me draw a diagram of their family – all the relationships and the ages and all of that. Sometimes, with all these blended families, it gets pretty complex. So it's very helpful to know those things. But then later, when I hear them mention any of these people, I can let them know that I remember who they're talking about. "Oh, he's your uncle," or "He's this or that." Sometimes I have to look at that chart before we have the session, because it's so complex. But that helps them to know that I'm involved and I know what they're talking about, and that creates a sense of connectedness – relationship.

So the principle is, when we know the names of the people who are important to children, that means that they are important to us. What could you do to show children that you remember the names of their friends? How could you manage that? What could you do to make that happen? You may already. Some people might not think that it's that important, but it's amazing what little things like that do. It's all these little things that make up a relationship.

*Mutuality* – healthy relationships are mutual – give and take. Listen – talk. Right? It isn't just one way. It isn't just listening, but it's also some disclosing on our part, as well.

When I was in my counseling training, I somehow got the idea – probably from my analytical friends – that I wasn't supposed to do any talking. But I later learned from

experience that it was helpful to my clients if they knew something about me. So now I address that from the beginning with them – especially with children.

I remember telling a young teen once that it might get a bit lopsided if she tells me a lot about her, but she doesn't know anything about me. So I suggested that she could ask me anything about me that she wanted to. I rattled off some stuff about myself, like I'd been married for X years and have X children – that kind of thing – so that she'd kind of know a little bit about who I was. Then I said, "Is there anything that you'd like to ask?" She said, "Yeah, I have a question." She said, "Why do you keep your mustache trimmed so short?" I said, "You'd like it to be longer?" She said, "Well, my grandpa has a mustache and it's a lot longer than yours." I learned that she lives with her grandfather and mother, and she really loves her grandfather. I said, "So, that's kind of what you're used to." She said, "Yeah, it's not a big deal or anything. I just wondered." I said, "Well, I'm honored that when you look at my mustache you think about your grandfather. And I know he loves you. And I'm thinking that maybe you're hoping for a good relationship with me, too." She had to kind of roll that around a little bit and then she nodded her head. So she's feeling the connection. She's relating me to her grandfather on the first session. It's all good. It's working. Right?

Do you remember when your kids come home from school – this is a long time ago for us, so I have to remember. For you it might be an everyday deal, but for us, I have to remember. You have to listen to all their complaints and frustrations. They have to get all that out before they can go forward with the afternoon – process the injustices of the day – the evil math teacher, whatever. Sometimes, though, it's good to let them know that we haven't had a perfect day either, or that we have some frustrations in our lives, too. That way they don't feel like all they ever do is complain. And it lets them know that we're human beings and we have things need to be talked about, too. It helps them to get to know us a little bit and feel closer to us.

The principle here is that children feel connected when they know we're willing to share something personal about ourselves. So how could you be more mutual with your children?

*Similarities* – pointing out similarities is a way to connect. I can also remember my daughter's loved stories about my childhood. And I can remember loving stories about my dad's childhood and my mother's. I don't think I really realized, until they were adults, that they were finding themselves in those stories. They wanted to know where they fit in the family, and where they came from, and to make a connection – "Yeah, I'm like that. I know what that feels like."

Sometimes, now, when I see a child in my practice that is struggling with some feeling or issue, sometimes I can come up with a story that lets them know that I went through something similar. That's probably the most helpful kind of talking that I've found that I can do with them.

I know there was a boy who was telling me that he wanted an X-box for Christmas and his mother said that she didn't have the money, so he could find a way to get one for himself. That "That's not fair" thing came out. "She's mean." So I told him about the time that I told my mother, when I was a teenager – older than he was actually at this point, but it still worked – that I wanted a bug-eyed sprite. Those of you from my generation know that a bug-eyed sprite is an Austin-Healy sprite with the headlights set up on the hood – looks like bug-eyes. My mom said, "Yeah, they're really nice cars, but I don't have the money for one, so you can save up yours and get it." I can remember feeling bummed out about that. But then I went and got a paper route and started having some money of my own. It wasn't enough to buy a bug-eyed sprite, but I was able to buy some other things. So, I told him this story and then I said, "You know what? What I realized years later was that my mom was trying to help me find a way to get what I wanted. She was teaching me how to get what I wanted in life. He got it! He understood it at that point.

So the principle there is that a child's sense of belonging increases when they realize that they have similarities with other people. Very important. They talk about not being too disclosing in therapy, but what I'm finding is that, if the disclosure *connects* to what we're working on, quite often it's helpful.

So what could you do to emphasize your similarities with your kids? What are the similarities and what can you focus on?

Another thing that I think about is *preparation*. There is a child that I worked with whose father died before she could remember him when she was very young – a couple months old. One day, after I'd been seeing her for quite a long time, I asked her what our relationship was like. She said it was like having a really good friend. But it's just so obvious in working with her that it's so much more than that. When it was her birthday, I bought a slice of cake, put a candle on it, wrote her a card, and when she came in for her session, I gave it to her. The look on her face let me know – that expression – it took some preparation; it took a little time to pull that off – not much, but some – meant a lot to her. It meant to me she's special, and that I remembered her birthday, and that I care about her. A girl who grows up without her father's approval and attention can have doubts about herself. And I'm *not* her father, but I remember that when she was nine she asked the intake coordinator, at the clinic she was being assessed at, for a man therapist. She can be a bit dramatic at times. There's always something going on to talk about. But that really is peripheral. Her therapy is about being around me. That's really what it is. That's what she's getting from it.

It's often good to have some planning and preparation with children. Sometimes I see so many children in a week I don't have time to do that with all of them, but one of the things I've found out that seems to be helpful is, I will say, "I was thinking about you after our last session and I was wondering about something you said." So it kind of brings it back to that. It lets them know that I have been doing some preparation by thinking about them. It's not as good as a cake and a candle, but it's sometimes the best I can come up with, because of the circumstances. Anytime you can put a little extra effort into

your relationship or an activity with somebody – a child, especially – then that is very meaningful. That helps.

*Special places* – another one. Occasionally I schedule time with kids away from the office.

I had a client who was disabled. One Friday, when I didn't have people to see, I invited him to his favorite restaurant for lunch. His mother told me later that that was a total highlight for him. He was so excited to get to go out to lunch. We got to see each other in a real environment, instead of just the office. I noticed after that that our sessions became much more about what was really concerning to him. He felt closer. He also had no father to do things with him, so that kind of magnifies the effect of it.

The principle there is to participate in a special experience with a person who is important to them. It helps children to understand that they are valued and special. It boosts the relationship.

I thought about leaving this out, because, in America, we think buying kids stuff and taking them places is a substitute for relationship. It isn't. It can be *part* of a relationship. But if that's what you are counting on to create closeness and you don't have any of these other things, forget it. It's a whole lot of little things that build up that create relationship.

So where could you take your child that is special? What could you do? It doesn't have to be Disneyland. It doesn't. It can be a walk.

We have a ditch running outside back here – outside of our office. It comes ultimately from the river. There are houses on either side of it. I discovered that I can walk down that ditch and come out at a road. You can take a nice long walk there. So that's become the *adventure* that people get to go on sometimes.

The final thing I wanted to mention is *to be real*. Be real with kids as much as we can – to share our feelings with them. There are probably some parents and some therapists that would probably have their toes curl in their shoes at the thought of being genuine with their child or a client.

One of my elementary school clients told me that her mother's good friend died. I asked, "Were you close to your mother's friend?" She said, "Yes, he was kind of like an uncle to me." And I said, "So your mother is sad and you're sad, too." She said, "Yes." "What was your friend like?" She told me some of the things that they had done. He had come over and they'd do this and that and the other. Sometime later, after she disclosed this, one of the young people that I knew from church died. I learned about it shortly before this child was to come in for session. So I said, "Do you remember when your mother's friend died a few months ago? Well, I had a friend die today and I'm really sad just like you were." She was *instantly* attentive and wanted to know more about what happened and who she was. So that eventually led back to her experience with her friend and it came out that the day before her friend died, she had been really mean to him – got

mouthy, “gave him attitude” – I believe was the term. So she was feeling very guilty. She said, “It was like I died when I found out that he died, because I didn’t have a chance to make up.” So that created a really deep connection between the two of us. Since then, she’s been able to talk a lot more about the things that really matter to her.

Now we have to be careful not to make it all about us when we disclose – just enough to help them feel connected. That’s the purpose of it.

I had a little girl whose father was put in prison quite some time ago. It seemed she was stuck in the grief. She had a lot of intrusive thinking, even though he’d been gone a long time. I asked her what it was like for her. She didn’t know what I meant by that, so I said, “Is it like mildly sad? Or is it like really sad? Or is it like brokenhearted?” She said that it was like being brokenhearted. Later when I was explaining how therapy works, I told her that our relationship was going to be a big part of her therapy, and that, if she could just trust me to take care of her, then that would help things go better. Since I’m an older man, she could learn a little bit about how her father might take care of her. Then, “Coming back from me to you,” I said. “when you tell me you’re brokenhearted, I just can’t help but think about how my daughters would feel if I were to die or go to prison. It just breaks my heart to hear you say that you’re brokenhearted.” So when I said that, her eyes were just locked on me. And as I said that, she slowly started to nod her head as she took that all in. She now knows that she has the real me there with her, doesn’t she? And maybe she can get to a better place. I think that’s what she’s hoping for. She knows that she can be open with me and that I can understand her. But that comes because of disclosure about something similar or about her.

So the principle there is that being real with children suggests that they can be genuinely honest about themselves. One of the things that God tells us is that we’re not very honest about ourselves, doesn’t He? So, if we can help a child with that, how good is that?

So how could you be more open and authentic with your children? It’s something to think about.

I went through those pretty fast. What are those things? Presence, listening without being judgmental, remembering names, mutuality, equality in relationships, focusing on similarities, taking some time to prepare to do something special, special places, and then, being real.

We’ve talked about how to connect to children and how to increase their sense of security. And why do we do that again? Well, because all of these things – all of these close feelings and things that we’re trying to create in this relationship – gets transferred to God once a child develops the ability to think about God as they grow older. We’re human parents but He is our spiritual Father. The King James says in Ephesians 6:4 that we’re supposed to bring them up in the *nurture* of the Lord. This is how you nurture children – some of the ways. God has put parents in His place to prepare kids for faith and relationship with Him.

Now I realize that many Christian people hearing this would rather hear about some point of doctrine, some prophecy, something with Greek or Hebrew in it, but I don't know enough about Greek and Hebrew to talk to you about those things. But I do know this. I know that in 1 Corinthians 13 we are told that prophecy ultimately will fail and that Bible knowledge has its limits, but the really important things are faith, hope and love. And of all those eternal, unlimited things of God, the greatest one of them is love. And our job here at LifeResource Ministries is to explain what the love of God is as clearly and specifically as we can. And we leave those lesser issues to other folks.