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Presentation Transcript
Parenting for Faith – Extension
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The title of this presentation is *Parenting for Faith, Extension*. The title of this one we called *Extention*. I struggled over the name of it – in this aspect of Parenting for Faith development. I thought about calling it *Bridging* or *Transitioning*. It has to do with helping a child grow into new attitudes, skills, etc. that they need. So why is that important in faith development? Well, all human beings are biologically wired to develop in stages. I think we know this. And when parents can support that growth in stages, it feels really good to children. And when we don't, it feels to them like they are being held back. A lot of the teenage rebelliousness that we see in our children is, actually, not as much their problem as it is ours – in not being able to deal with and help them move through the stages of growth that they need to move through. When we restrict them from doing that – whether it's intentional or accidental – it, generally, makes them angry, or upset, or it depresses them. So love grows in children when we know enough to help them do the things that they need to accomplish in their development – when we get out of the way and stop fighting biology.

So today we're going to learn some things about how to help children transition through the developmental stages, and learn the developmental tasks that they need to accomplish and then move forward – putting particular emphasis on learning how to venture into the world and find the *good* that's there for them. Some of us have a really hard time with that. We always talk about the “present evil world,” right? And all the bad things that go on. But there are also good things.

My daughter recently sent me a picture book about each one of her children. In it there is a picture of my grandson at the end of his kindergarten year with his beloved teacher. She has dropped down beside him – her face right next to his in the photo – and I can see, by the smile on his face, that this young woman made a *huge* contribution to him and his life. She knew just what to do to help him accomplish the tasks that a five-year-old needs to accomplish. You could tell that he really felt close to her. So, that's a *good* thing, isn't it? Yes, it is. It's a very good thing that happened.

So, point number one, as we talk about good things that we can do for children, is to *invest ourselves in our kids*.

I saw a little girl, once, who was alienated from her mother and she was isolated at school. She took a lot of static from kids at school, because she was a little different. When she came to my office, at eleven, she was negative. She was withdrawn. She was discouraged and beaten down by life at eleven years old. Besides all of this, her father went to prison when she was five. He was in California and they moved here, so she doesn't get to visit or see him. I'm not sure she would anyway, but they moved away. She never grieved the loss of her father fully enough to get past that, I don't think.

So I tried to do fatherly things with her in that forty-five minute a week window that I had. I wanted to know all about her school accomplishments. I was interested in her friends. I encouraged stories about her everyday life. When she would tell them, I would really engage her. She would tell me about incidents with teachers and other kids at school. And I would try to step into that situation and feel what she was feeling. I would help her make plans to take care of those problems. I was really interested in her father and encouraged a lot of talk about him and asked her to bring in pictures, so she could talk to me about him. When she expressed a desire for me to come to her school and to watch her play in the orchestra, I went – invested myself, a little bit. She was learning to reach out to me. And that was really a huge step for her. So, the question was, “Would I also disappear?” That's what was going on. So, for her to summon the courage to invite me to an event like that was a really big thing. So that kind of helped her *extend* herself into a relationship that she had been fearful of. So she was *growing* as a result of that encouragement and my participation in her life in a small way.

Now I had to invest myself in her. I had to care about her. I had to spend some time with her. I had to think about her and what she needed. I had to spend time working with mom to help mom give her daughter the things that she needed from her. I noticed that, as our relationship blossomed, she became a lot more confident and positive about life. What do you know? One person can make such a difference!

So, the principle there is that, when we invest something of ourselves in our children, it gives them courage to deal with the tasks of childhood – when we put ourselves out there and make an emotional investment.

While I was working with that child, I came to care very deeply about *her*. So that's an emotional investment. And, you know, we therapists always know that there is going to be an end to that at some point. A lot of times we get fired by the child when they've accomplished what they need to accomplish. But we know that's a good thing. I didn't actually get fired in that case. I was just kind of gently let go of. She was a whole lot better off as a result of the therapy. And she taught *me* a lot, too, while we were working together.

We, also, besides investing ourselves in our children, we need to *include them in part of our world*. I saw another little girl, once, who was nine. She also had no father in her life – rather closed, not really that expressive about her feelings. One day she had to miss the next session. Her big sister invited her to go down to the lake and go camping for a week during the summer. While she was explaining to me why she was going to miss, she

asked me if it would hurt my feelings if she went on vacation. That's when I realized that she, somehow, needed to make a difference. And she wanted to make a difference with me. So I started, right then, to involve her a little bit more in my world. I started to talk a little bit more about how I felt about *her*. I did things to let her know that I was thinking about her. I had a surprise birthday celebration in my office when it was her birthday. I started putting some of the pictures, that she took of herself and gave to me, on my My Space page – blocked, of course. And, since she's the only friend I have on My Space, she's the only one that can see them. When I went on vacation, sometimes I would call her just to let her know that I was thinking about her. And I'd usually try to call her at the time of my session with her.

So when we allow children to modify, or influence, us – this is the principle – it helps them know that they can make meaningful contributions to people.

So, *sharing ourselves with other people* is another one that I like to think about. Here's the third girl who had no father. One day, when I opened my door to receive her into my office, there was another girl out in the waiting room. I was told, "This is Mary. She's my best friend." Well, I'd heard lots of talk about Mary already. "She's going to wait for me out here." I said, "Oh, that's nice. Nice to meet you, Mary." And then I looked at my little client, and I said, "I'm wondering if you would like to invite her in?" – which, of course, was the whole reason she was there. She said, "Really? Can I?" I said, "Well, it's your choice. It's your time." "Okay!" Interestingly, I discovered that Mary, also, was a girl without a father. He died when she was seven. She was quite a bit older than my client, too, so she was twelve, I think. So she'd been without him for awhile. So, "why not bring her to see the guy who helps me feel better?" – right? "Let's let my friend check him out." She wanted my read on her and her read on me, I think. So we had a fun time. They told me stories about all the girlie stuff they do and, also, about the boys – that kind of thing. So that went pretty well. Then two weeks later, she called me up and wanted to know if her older sister could come. Now, her older sister is her closest relationship. I said, "Would you like her to come?" She said, "She really wants to meet you." Being interpreted means, "I really want you to meet her, because she's important to me." So I said, "Well, excellent. You've told me so much about her that I just can't wait to meet her." So that week, big sister came in. She spent time with her little sister every week doing something. So she was a really good big sister for this child, who lost her father when she was four months old. My little client was grinning the whole time that we were together in there. She was *sharing* me with her sister – is what she was doing. And she shared me with her friend. It's kind of like letting other kids play with your puppy. "See what I have. He loves me." That kind of thing. So, I kind of have become an extension of her in that way. When children share us with others, it builds a sense of connectedness. It helps them realize how important they are to us and we are to them.

The fourth thing to talk about here is not just sharing ourselves and letting them share us with others, but also *sharing our stuff with them*. I had a middle-schooler who was very social. She had no computer, so she couldn't work on her My Space, except at the library, which is a huge pain. So, when she came to my office, we followed Grandma's rule, which is "work first, then play." So, we'd talk. Then I would let her sit at my desk and

use my laptop to update her My Space page. It always started out with me sitting on the couch while she sits at the desk with her back to me, and then, after only a few minutes, she would call me over to see what she'd done. I would kneel on one knee beside her chair while she would tell me all about how she had just downloaded her phone pictures, My Computer, or changed her profile – or something like that. She would let me read the comments that other kids would make about her pictures, which is really quite a privilege. A lot of kids *couldn't* do that because of all the terrible things that kids say to each other, but she didn't seem to worry about letting me see what other people, that she knew, were saying about her.

So, sharing my stuff with her helped her feel close and safe, I think. And she never failed, at any time, to thank me, with a great big smile, for letting her use my computer to do this very important work. See, we think, “My Space – who cares about that?” Well, they do! Kids do. Teenagers do, because that's how they connect a lot. Boys like to play with my computer, too, but they want to play games. But they want me to *watch* them play games, which is the most boring thing in the world – but not to them! So that's what we do. I've had kids want to put on my coat and my hat. I've had kids want to take something home and bring it back the next week – something of *mine* – to stay connected.

So, children feel closer by holding or touching something of ours. I know, after my father died, we went out there and my mother asked my children if they wanted something of dad's. My youngest one picked one of his pipes – but that's what she remembered of him. I think she still has that to this day. But that was something that she could touch. I think the smell of it probably reminded her of him, because she was not around smoking growing up, except when she went to Grandpa's. Children feel closer by holding and touching something that's ours. That helps them take us with them, I think, sometimes.

Helping. Letting kids help us is very important. I have worked with an eleven-year-old boy, who was home-schooled. If you know a lot of home-schoolers – and there are always exceptions – I'm not trying to say that everyone is like this, but – most of the ones I run into are usually behind with peers and way ahead with adults. They can talk to adults very well and not so good with peers. That's a pro and a con, right? The problem is, when they're teenagers, all their developmental wiring is about peers. So if they can't accomplish that when they're teenagers, that sometimes becomes a problem for them. This guy was...I think he was eleven at the time. He was troubled because of a family breakup. So it seemed to me that we were kind of floundering in our work. He was listlessly drawing one day, and I pulled out the Legos and asked him if he wanted to help me sort the Legos. Why would anybody want to do that? Well, in every Lego set, there is all the utilitarian kind of blocks. But then there are wheels and windshields and all that cool stuff that everybody needs to build the stuff they want to make. So I try – vain effort though it may be – to keep those separated so they can find what they need right away and the play moves along better. So I asked him if he wanted to help me sort the Legos. I explained that I try to keep the cool stuff separated. So he was all over that. I mean, he dropped that drawing like a hot rock, and he was elbow deep in Legos in no time at all. We sorted Legos and it was amazing what happened within just thirty seconds or so of him starting on that! The first words out of his mouth were, “My mom and dad....” And

he started talking about his feelings about their separation. It amazing, but that just helped him feel like he was a part of what was going on, I think.

I have a girl, who, I'm told, can't focus. I have this box of beads that you can string, you know, and make necklaces and stuff out of them. I don't know how many there are in there. There's got to be a *ton* of them. I said, "I have all these tiny beads and they're all mixed up, and I've been wanting to get them organized. Do you think you could help me with that?" It's amazing how a kid with ADHD, who can't focus a lick at home or at school, can focus when there is something important to focus on! I mean, she went through that stuff like gangbusters. She liked to help. A child like that gets so much negative feedback at school about their poor performance. So here was something that she could do, and do quickly, and she got lots of strokes for it. It's just so affirming to children when we consider them worthy of helping. And that is exactly how they take it. It's not just an invitation to help. It's an invitation to be *competent*. That's how, I think, they receive it.

This next one I've called *being a conduit*. When a child or teenager is not allowed, for whatever reason, to accomplish developmental tasks, they can get stuck. I was talking to a sixteen-year-old recently, who was depressed. She, over the last few years, had lost all of her friends, including her brother. She was so stressed that any kind of pressure would send her into a tailspin. All she could do, without freaking out, was to stay home and watch movies, she told me. Her parents had tried to put her in several public and private schools, and after many attempts, they just gave up and started home-schooling her. Her mother told me that the way she did that was to give her the assignments at the start of the year – and the pile of books – and just leave her to it. She would do it that way. But if you pressured her at all, she wouldn't. It had to be her idea. So she'd had a lot of sickness in her life. She had serious digestive problems and real bad hormonal imbalances. What she was afraid of was she was afraid she was never going to have a life, because she wasn't going anywhere. She wasn't making any progress.

When you run into that, my job is to enter into their world where they *are* – kind of get there with them – and then help them move to a different place mentally. She said to me one day, "I was thinking that my intestinal upset is partly because of my depression." I said, "You suspect that, if you didn't feel so bad in your gut, you wouldn't be so depressed?" She said, "Yeah. You know, it's really discouraging to feel sick all the time." So, okay, that's what she's thinking, right? She's thinking that the intestinal problems are *causing* the depression. People who do get sick do get depressed. So there's probably some truth to that. So I said that. "It's discouraging to feel that way all the time. It just feels so bad that you can't go and do what you want to do because you're stomach hurts all the time when you try to do things." She said, "Yes. Do you think that's right?" I said, "I was thinking that I might think a little bit differently about that." So, here comes the stretch, right, to see if she can take this in. "I don't know for sure – you would know more than I about how you feel – but I have seen people who are physically ill *because* of the stress that they are under." She said, "You know, I never thought of that. You mean, maybe, by the way I'm thinking, I'm making myself sick?" I said, "How you think about it might be a *part* of it, but also what's happened to you in your life. I think most girls

your age would feel pretty upset if what has happened to you happened to them. So I don't think you can say it's *all* about thinking. I think a lot of it has to do with what you've been through." So you can see the wheels starting to turn there. Now she's starting to think that, if she can just change her circumstances, she'd could feel better. And that's exactly where we want to go. Right? Because that's exactly what needs to happen.

There's this thing in the business we call *learned helplessness*. And that makes people depressed. So she's somehow learned that she can't get out of the rut she's in, and there's nothing she can do about the way she feels and all of this. So, it's going to be a long trip to the other side, and there are a lot of challenges there for her, but I'm going to try to be there to help her along the way. And, if she'll hang in there and not give up, she'll get there. If we just noodle it around long enough, she'll figure it out.

So helping children be successful with growth helps them feel loved, because the achievement of developmental tasks is paramount in all of us. Sometimes we can think of ourselves as a conduit – a tube that we pass through – and we kind of modify them as they.... They modify themselves, actually, but we add input and information that helps them make sense of what's going on.

Sharing strengths. I had a little guy sometime back, who was being bullied at school and constantly disappointed by his irresponsible father. He started out by showing me how good he was with his mind. He saw my Legos and didn't play with them because they weren't as good as his. He brought his in to show me all these amazing things he'd built. One day I tossed my Nerf basketball at him and he caught it with one hand – just like that. So I made a big deal out of it and we started playing H-O-R-S-E with the Nerf basketball. Because I play all the time, I'm pretty hard to beat. Even if I am in my sixties, I can still beat those fifth graders. When he finally did beat me, it was quite a big thing for him. He began taking pillows off my couch and hitting me with them. So I'd hit him back, and he'd say, "Hit me harder." So I started wailing away on him. I have big, big, big cushions on my couch. He'd bury himself under them. Then I'd jump on him. Pretty soon we were wailing away on each other pretty hot and heavy.

He then invented a game. I have this toy – it's like a stuffed animal, except it's a black widow spider. Black velvet is the material. That has to be the toughest stuff I've every seen, because of the abuse it's taken over the years. He wants me, all the time, to throw this at him. So I throw it at him. He calls the game Dodge Spider. He uses a pillow to deflect my hard thrown shots. He's gotten so good at it that I have to take the spider by one limb so I can really get some leverage on it. If I don't throw it hard enough, he tells me about it.

So, we've done that, and we've had tusseling on the couch, and, actually, at one point throwing him onto a pile of pillows, and we play Nerf baseball with a pillow as a bat. We have all this really rough play. One day he came in and told me he got suspended from school. Now he's very small for his age. His mom is really petite. His older sister is very small. He's a small kid for his age. He came in and told me he got suspended. I said, "Oh,

how's that?" He said, "I got in a fight." I said, "Oh really?" "Yeah," he said, "we were playing football at recess, and this kid, that always picks on me, was filling my new shoes with sand." I said, "You took your shoes off?" He said, "Yeah, so I could run better." Most of the playgrounds in New Mexico don't have grass. They have sand. Too much of the school system goes into the pockets of the administration and not to the kids. So I said, "Well, what did you do?" He said, "I got so mad I ran at him and knocked him down. And then I punched his face until the duty pulled me off." I said, "Oh, how did that feel?" He said, "For him, pretty bad." So I said, "That felt bad for him. How did it feel for you?" He said, "Kind of bad and kind of good." I said, "Oh really?" He said, "Yeah, it felt bad because I got suspended and that I hit him so hard. And it felt kind of good, because I don't think he's going to bother me anymore." I said, "What makes you think that?" He said, "Well, he told me he was sorry."

So I think what all that throwing around and rough play was – and "Throw it harder," and "Throw me harder," and "Hit me harder," and all that – just developing his sense of self – building his ego strengths. (And don't mistake that word *ego* for arrogance. Ego just means *yourself*.) So he's just building a better sense of himself. So I think doing all those rough, risky things together helped him feel strong enough to stand up for himself finally. So he's doing much, much better now – and he had a great time doing it. Isn't it great when you can take your kid to the counselor and they *like* to come, instead of having to drag them there?

So the principle here is the child's sense of self can be enhanced if we share our strengths with them. I used to be athletic, so I use that quite a bit in my work with kids that want to be that way.

Life stories is another thing that is another way to help kids transition through their developmental issues. A fifth grade girl was telling me about a girl at school that was bullying her and threatening her. Did you know that happens in schools today at the elementary level? I mean, when I was a kid, girls were really mean to each other, but nobody ever *hit* anybody! But it's not like that anymore! So this child was really upset about this. So we sat down and I laid out some options. I said, "Here are the things that I can think of that might be helpful, and you can see what you can think of, too. Which options do you think you might want to do? You could stay away from her. You could not do things that irritate her." This kid tends to be a little on the mouthy side sometimes – or use to. "You could tell on her if she won't leave you alone. – get her in trouble. Or you could punch her right in the nose hard enough to make it bleed." She didn't like that idea – which is *good*, right? She decided that what she was going to do was all of those other things – in that order – stay away from her, deliberately avoid trying to cause her problems, and then if she won't leave her alone, just tell on her – get the adults involved.

So while all this was going on – after a bit – I told her a story about a boy that was picking on me when I was in school, and how we got in a fist fight, and how I lost, but he never picked on me again. So it didn't matter whether I lost or not, I won. He quit bothering me. And I told her – and I think this might have been important, too – now I don't even think about that. It's over. I just wish you all could have seen her face as she

was watching me tell this story. You could tell that she was soaking up every word. It was going right in. When I was done, she asked me questions about how I felt – more detail. Somehow, just knowing that I had been through a similar experience, and that it was kind of normal, and that I survived it, and that I got beat up – all the wounds healed and I didn't die. It just seemed to take the steam out of that for her. It didn't bother her so much anymore – never brought it up again.

So I asked her a few weeks later, “How are you and so-and-so doing?” She said, “Well, she's just as mean as ever, but I ignore her.” So she moved. Right? She shifted. She got past that.

So the principle here is that children often distort the world. They dramatize things. They catastrophize things sometimes. So our normalizing stories can help bring things back into perspective for them. A child told me once about losing a friend to a disease and I told her about losing a friend to an auto accident. She looked at me with compassion, and she said, “I know how that feels.” So there's that connection again.

So those are some things that we can do to help kids extend themselves – to reach out, to move to a new place. Do you notice how *inclusive* all of these things are? How investing? It's all about drawing them to us. That's what causes the shift to take place. It's about the relationship.

Let's go to John 12, and verse 32. God – He created people. He let the devil talk to them. And the devil got everybody turned away from God. How's He going to get us all back? We know He's going to win in the end. How is He going to turn everybody back to Him – without touching any of us, without controlling us, without *making* us do anything? How's He going to do that? Well, Jesus tells us right here.

Jn. 12:32 – *But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.*

The disciples went out and they told the story of Jesus' birth, about His life, about His death, about His resurrection, about how His death paid for our sins, how He saves us from our sins. They told that story. And people have listened to that story and they've been moved by it – by the millions. They've been *drawn* to Him, because of what He did for us. So He draws us to Himself by the *care* that He has for us, doesn't He? That's how it works. And in doing that, He invites us up to a higher level, doesn't He, of spirituality. So should we think it would be any different for us with our children, whom God has placed in His stead with them? I don't think so. In the West, we think we help kids with youth programs – a distinctly Western idea. God draws us by including us in *His* plans, and *His* work, and *His* thoughts. And if we do *that* with our children, then we'll have the kind of relationship that will, eventually, draw them into relationship with God.