

Tips for Instilling **For Life** Values in Children & Starting **For Life** Conversations

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Tips for Instilling **For Life** Values in Children

So many people want to raise a family that supports life. Let's explore ways we can help our children and grandchildren, students and neighbors, grow up with life-affirming values. The following is a practical guide for each age level, from toddlers through middle-school-age children.

Toddlers

Because they love to imitate the grown-ups, encourage them to practice living in a family. Watch as they care for their baby dolls and take on "grown-up responsibilities." Consider play-acting that you are Great-Great-Grandma and need them to help take care of you. If they don't have good models for certain life-affirming behaviors, you can show them as you play.

"Why?" is a favorite question of toddlers and preschoolers. If they ask why a baby is in Mommy's tummy, for example, realize that they are not asking for all details of conception. You can find out what they already know and what they actually expect by first asking them, "What do you think?" Use their answer to give them a bit more information.

Find reading materials that support life issues. There are plenty of picture books that talk about family and unborn babies. Be sure to include these in your reading time to give them an easy, solid foundation for learning about families. In fact, you will find that many storybooks have some life-affirming values in them. As you read, notice them and repeat them. You can even point to pictures and help the toddler notice the babies, the moms, the grandpas, etc. Play a game of "see all the people God made" or "find all the people God loves."

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Preschool/Kindergarten

Children this age may show more interest in the opposite-sex parent than in the same-sex parent. This is your chance to model positive relationships with them. It will give them clues as to what to expect from a future spouse. They will also be watching the same-sex parent for cues about their own identity.

Although some may have noticed it before, they become more aware of double standards. “That’s not fair” may pop up over any perceived inequities, so use this stage to show how God values life at all ages. For example, you can notice, together, that it’s not fair to say a grown-up person is more valuable than a tiny baby or an older person.

They continue to be curious. “Why?” and “What?” can drive conversations, as well as be annoying. **Try to have patience and help them satisfy curiosity, especially in regard to God, life, and faith.** Children this age like to categorize and sort, so help them to define and categorize people. Who is a person? What makes someone a living person? Some children may not be quite ready for this abstract thinking, but you can keep it simple and elaborate more as they grow older.



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Elementary-School Age

Play is still important to learning and development, so encourage children to be sensitive to others' needs as they play. Be cautious of media input (video games, internet, TV, etc.) since it is also helping form their values. If something happens during play or entertainment, this is the perfect time to stop and discuss it. Often children consume media as neutral or positive, not realizing that they may go against the family's (and God's) values. It's up to you to point these things out and reinforce what is right.

Children are developing an even deeper sense of identity at this age. Give them examples (through real people, books, and media) of the wonderful variety of people God has made and loves. For example, girls can love playing rough and boys can be sensitive—that does not make them something different. God's creation includes people of many different personalities and talents.

Family togetherness is important at this age, so do devotions together. Read and watch movies together. It's a great time to bond and to discuss how it all fits into God's world. This is a crucial time to establish family values. Whatever you choose to spend time doing will be perceived as a family value. If it's truly important to be together, be sure to set time aside for that—intentionally. It becomes harder and harder as children get older.



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Middle-School Ages

A natural time of challenge, this is when preteens and teens may actually ask, “Did God really say that?” They may seem argumentative, but they genuinely want answers. They’re thinking more abstractly and understanding more deeply, so go as deep as you are able with your answers. They may seem to resist your guidance and authority, so leave books sitting around the house that they can discover and read on their own. Sometimes suggesting they read it can mean they never pick it up, but letting them take the lead can work better.

Many middle schoolers struggle with feeling compelled to grow up while resisting growth at the same time. You may see them sleeping with an old stuffed animal but experimenting with too-mature or too-risky behavior at the same time. It’s a struggle that frustrates them as well. Remind them of your family values. Invite them to join you in Bible study, devotions, etc., to keep those biblical communication lines open. Talk about your vulnerabilities and your faith.

With an advanced tech culture, your middle schooler could be seeing and doing things you never imagined. Keep tabs on their online activity. Be ready to insist on boundaries. Even better, talk about boundaries before they are needed. If the middle schooler can help set boundaries, it is empowering to them; they take ownership.

Children this age often like to join clubs and groups. **Encourage them to join groups that are life-affirming. As they become teens, their desire for social justice can be used to help support suicide prevention and prevent elder abuse, for example.** If they like to lead, you could suggest they start a group that makes baby hats, visits nursing homes, or throws baby showers for teen moms. Use this time of extra energy and creativity to serve God and serve others.

Starting **For Life** Conversations

A personal reflection ...

Recently, a friend asked me for a list of pro-life children's books. I immediately drew a blank—and then ideas flooded my brain. But not ideas for books that have an obvious bent toward life-affirming ideas. Instead, I thought of books, movies, and TV shows that had stirred life conversations with my students and family. I realized that I could view many books as “pro-life” that others would not, simply because I was looking at every piece of media as something to be consumed through a “For Life” worldview lens. And that can't be put into a simple list. Instead, let me explain it a bit.

When I read a picture book, I look at the illustrations and notice the value of the humans (or animals with human qualities). Many books show the value of babies before they're born because we anticipate them being cute newborns. I go beyond the potential cute factor and point out the humanness of the baby and how God values them when they are not yet born as much as when they are grown up. Children readily agree, and the idea of caring for unborn babies as much as born babies is an important concept for all people.

Many picture books and chapter books these days focus on human rights and social justice. I read those and confirm that all humans are loved equally by God, no matter their race, their job, their gender, or their age. That love leads us to action. When we believe in caring for the unborn, the disabled, and those nearing death, we may find ourselves wanting to change laws and hearts to see their value. That is a Christian worldview that many can understand.

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I watch for little sayings in picture books because picture-book authors choose every single word with care. I watch for themes in novels and movies, and I point them out or help students notice them as well. I can see when the student understands. But then I may take it a step further. I share how the concept has shown up in my life or the community around us. Then the child has a more personal understanding. As they keep reading or watching, they really feel like they are experiencing what is happening in the movie or book and see how it relates to their worldview.

Sometimes what we read or watch may have a contrasting worldview. It could be one choice a character makes, how they live, or how a bad situation has encouraged them to continue in poor choices. Often I turn it off, but sometimes I use it as a discussion point. When the child realizes that we all have choices, including sinful ones, then he can also see that we have consequences. We may talk about the commandments, God's will for us, free will, and consequences. That's a life lesson we all learn, so why not guide them through it by watching or reading about someone else? It can give them some foundational thinking for the future.

As parents, relatives, friends, and teachers, we have opportunities to speak into the lives of the young people around us. I caution you not to make every single book, movie, or TV show a morality lesson. Youth and students will tune you out or avoid you, if you do. But do speak up, especially when your worldview lesson is Gospel-motivated. Learning that God forgives and loves each one of us is something that we can never hear too often.



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