

**Nurturing the Faith of Children at Home:
What the Church can do to Support Parents**

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Introduction

Recent research by the Barna Group showed that of the young people who grew up in Christian homes, only 10 percent became resilient disciples of Christ.¹ That means that 90 percent had either lost their faith, did not go to church anymore, or went only out of habit. That is quite a sobering finding. The question of how that could happen easily arises. After all, these young people all grew up in a Christian environment. And yet, only a small percentage of them still follow Christ into adulthood.

The faith of children does not grow or mature by itself. Only faith that is nurtured has a chance to develop. There are a variety of ways to nurture the faith of children. When we reflect on the process, we can ask many questions. For example, how does faith actually develop in children? Is faith related to the development of children in general? How does the world in which children live impact their development? What are different approaches available to nurture faith in children? Does it matter which one we choose?

The aim of this paper is to discuss faith development in children, how faith relates to other domains of child development, how faith can be nurtured, and how parents can be supported in their role in the formation of faith at home. The first part of the paper argues that the development of faith in children is an integrated part of the development of children. This

¹ David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 33.

development has cognitive as well as experiential components and needs to be understood in the context in which it takes place. The second part discusses faith formation and the role of parents in this process. The paper will then end with principles and practices for supporting parents in this important role.

Child Development in General

Having some understanding of different theories of child development is important since they also inform theories of faith development in children. I have chosen the theories developed by Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson. After introducing these theories, I will point out some of their shortcomings and propose a model that provides another perspective on child development that will suggest how best to nurture faith in children.

The first theory is the one developed by the psychologist Jean Piaget, who developed his theory of the cognitive development of children in the middle of the last century. Piaget studied his own three children, identified different stages of cognitive development, and discovered that the way they thought and the logic they used changed qualitatively throughout their childhood.² The four stages Piaget distinguishes are sensorimotor or practical intelligence with the goal of object permanence (from birth to 1.5 or 2 years); preoperational or intuitive intelligence (from 1.5 or 2 to 7 or 8 years); concrete (intellectual) operations characterized by symbolic thought (from 7 or 8 to 11 or 12 years); and formal operations or abstract intellectual operations (starts from age 11 or 12).³ According to Piaget, all people go through the same order of stages, although the pace at which they do so might differ. The acquired skills in one stage form the basis for the next stage. Besides identifying stages of cognitive development, Piaget also studied what causes that development.⁴ He distinguished four factors, namely

² Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 73, Kindle.

³ Piaget, Jean, "Part I: Cognitive Development in Children: Piaget Development and Learning," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 2, no. 3 (1964): 177-178.

⁴ Piaget, "Part I: Cognitive Development in Children," 178. Stonehouse, *Joining*

heredity and maturation, direct experience, social interaction, and the process of equilibration. By understanding these causal factors, a child's development can be facilitated. Piaget also studied the moral development of children.

Lawrence Kohlberg was a psychologist who built on Piaget's study of moral development in the second half of the twentieth century. Kohlberg discovered that children think quite differently than adults when it comes to moral decisions. Like Piaget, he found that there is a sequence of developmental stages to moral reasoning.⁵ He studied different aspects of moral reasoning, such as the source of authority, the person's definition of right and wrong, the motivation to do right, and the awareness of intentions.⁶ Kohlberg distinguished three levels of morality: level one is called pre-conventional morality (younger than six years old) and is based on reward and punishment. Level two is called conventional morality (7-11 years), during which moral reasoning is based on external ethics. And level three is called post-conventional morality (11 years on) when moral reasoning is based on personal ethics.⁷ For each level, he distinguished two stages. For instance, level one consists of the stages (a) punishment-obedience (whatever leads to punishment is wrong) and (b) rewards (the right way to behave is what is rewarded). An understanding of the different stages can be instrumental in facilitating moral development in children. Developing a context where discussion about values, views, and attitudes is encouraged and where children and their perspectives are taken seriously is most conducive for moral development.

The third theory was developed by Erik Erikson, a German American psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist who lived in the twentieth

Children, 82.

⁵ Lawrence Kohlberg, "Development of Moral Character and Moral Ideology," in *Review of Child Development Research*, ed. Lois Wladis Hoffman and Martin L. Hoffman, vol. 1. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964), 394-395.

⁶ Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 95.

⁷ Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages and Aging in Moral Development—Some Speculations," *The Gerontologist* 13, no. 4 (1973): 499.

century. Erikson developed a theory of psychosocial development of children.⁸ He saw the child in a holistic way and believed that biological and psychosocial development were inseparable. Whereas Piaget focused mainly on the development of the child itself, Erikson found that development was more complex because of interactions with others and their history. Erikson, like Piaget, used stages of development, and the stages follow the biological development of children. He distinguished eight stages.⁹ Each stage is marked by certain challenges in developing new skills and a new sense of self in relation to others. For example, the first stage is about trust versus distrust (and takes place from birth until the age of one year).¹⁰ In this stage, the challenge for the baby is to develop a healthy sense of trust. Whether or not that happens depends on the quality of the relationship with the mother. Erikson includes in his theory here the child-mother relationship instead of just looking at the child itself.

These theories have helped us enormously in understanding how children develop. The main focus of all three theories is on the “normal” development of a child, assuming a child grows up becoming a well-balanced and fully developed person. These insights are helpful when working with children. For example, if we work with a toddler, we cannot expect that child to function as a teenager. What is lacking in the work of Piaget and Kohlberg, however, is the impact of the environment on a child’s development. Piaget wrote some things about the causes of development, but this was not the main focus of his work. Erikson paid more attention to the way in which close people influence a child’s development. For instance, the quality of the mother-child relationship impacts the sense of trust or mistrust a child develops. Seeing the child in its context and considering the impact of that context on the development of the child are important. A

⁸ Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, ext. version ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998); Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 45.

⁹ Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, chap. 3.

¹⁰ Examples of other stages in childhood are the second stage which is about autonomy versus shame and doubt (ages 1-3), and the third stage (ages 3-6), in which the child learns about initiative versus guilt.

story will illustrate this.

When I was working in Asia, I worked with a girl whom some local Christians had taken under their wing. Let us call the girl Lili.¹¹ Lili came from a small rural village and had a complicated family history. When her mother was pregnant with her, she was mentally ill. In order to escape life with an abusive husband, she started roaming the streets and eating from rubbish bins. We can only imagine what that must have done to her unborn baby. After Lili was born, her maternal grandmother took Lili and her mother under her care. However, when Lili was about three years old, her father claimed her back. Instead of finding a safe and caring home, Lili was subject to severe neglect and abuse for years. When some local believers heard about Lili's situation, they decided to start caring for her. This was the point at which I was asked to assess Lili and provide intervention. I have never seen a life so broken. Lili's development was stunted. She could not communicate, did not understand basic language, and had great difficulty focusing on anything.

Although the story of Lili's life may be an extreme example, it helps to illustrate what is lacking in the child development theories introduced so far. Basically, they pay relatively little attention to the impact of the context or environment in which a child grows up. As Lili's story shows, the immediate context of her family, the wider context of her village, and even the greater context of the country where she lived led to very unhealthy development or even a lack of development. And so, in her case, the focus on normal child development by these theories is insufficient. A non-American scholar, who was communicating with an American scholar in the middle of last century, said that it seemed to him that American researchers are constantly seeking to explain how the child came to be what he or she is, while this scholar was more concerned with discovering "how the child can become what he [or she] not yet is."¹² This is a fascinating insight.

The American scholar who was listening, Urie Bronfenbrenner, wanted

¹¹ Not her real name.

¹² Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development," *American Psychologist* 32, no. 7 (1977): 528.

to learn more. Bronfenbrenner developed his initial theory about the ecological theory of human development in the 1970s. Instead of focusing on a specific domain of human development, such as cognitive, psychosocial, or moral development, Bronfenbrenner considered not only the person (the child) but examined the interrelationship of different processes and their variation in different contexts.¹³ Throughout his career, Bronfenbrenner made a few major adjustments to the model.¹⁴ His work can be divided into three phases.¹⁵ During the first phase (from 1973 to 1979), he spoke of his emerging theory as “an ecological model of human development.” In the second phase (from 1980 to the mid-1990s), he added biology and chronosystems¹⁶ into his ecological framework. During the last phase (from the mid-1990s to 2006), he developed the PPCT-model, which stands for Process – Person – Context – Time. This last version of his model has been less used but is more comprehensive. The following looks at the different parts of his model.¹⁷

¹³ Bronfenbrenner, “Toward an Experimental Ecology,” 513; Nancy Darling, “Ecological Systems Theory: The Person in the Center of the Circles,” *Research in Human Development* 4, no. 3-4 (2007): 203.

¹⁴ Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Gary W. Evans, “Developmental Science in the 21st Century: Emerging Questions, Theoretical Models, Research Designs and Empirical Findings,” *Social Development* 9, no. 1 (2000): 116.

¹⁵ Malin Eriksson, Mehdi Ghazinour, and Anne Hammarström, “Different Uses of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory in Public Mental Health Research: What Is Their Value for Guiding Public Mental Health Policy and Practice?” *Social Theory & Health* 16, no. 4 (2018): 418-421.

¹⁶ See below under the heading “time.”

¹⁷ Bronfenbrenner, “Toward an Experimental Ecology,” 514-515; Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela A. Morris, “The Bioecological Model of Human Development,” in *Theoretical Models of Human Development*, ed. R. M. Lerner and W. Damon, Handbook of Child Psychology, vol 1. (New York: Wiley, 2006), 795-796; Eriksson, Ghazinour, and Hammarström, “Different Uses of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory,” 419-420.

Process – In this last model, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the importance of “proximal processes,” also called the “engine of development.” These refer to reciprocal interactions between a person and a significant “other,” which could be a person, object, or symbol. These processes happen over time and are viewed as the main mechanisms producing human development.

Person – This focuses on individual characteristics and how they influence the proximal processes, including dispositions, resources of ability, experience, knowledge and skills, and demand characteristics. This can include characteristics such as age, intelligence, gender, personality, and so on.

Context – Within “context,” Bronfenbrenner refers to four interrelated systems: the microsystem, which is the direct environment of the person such as the home or classroom; the mesosystem, which refers to the interrelations between different microsystems of a person, for instance, interactions between family, school and peer group; the exosystem, which refers to systems that have an indirect impact on the person, such as the neighborhood, the mass media, government agencies, and so on; and the macrosystem, such as the culture and subculture, social, educational, legal, and political systems. Bronfenbrenner compares the context or ecological environment as a series of nested structures, like a set of Russian dolls, with each structure nested within the next and with the immediate setting with the developing person at the center.¹⁸

Time – This points to the specific time in history as well as changes over time. In an earlier model, Bronfenbrenner referred to this as chronosystems. The changes in government financial support can impact the family and then have an indirect influence on the development of a child. Government funding might change, though, when considered over a longer period.

Throughout the development of his model, Bronfenbrenner moved from an emphasis on the ecological environment or context to a focus on

¹⁸ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

the proximal process, which plays a more prominent role in his final model. The main insights that Bronfenbrenner brings to child development theory are his emphasis on the context in which a child develops and how processes between different contexts have an impact as well. When we think back at Lili's life and consider her development with Piagetian glasses on, we do not get very far. Although she was seven, she still operated at the level of a much younger child. We could say that besides biological development, hardly any development had taken place at all. However, when we look at her from a Bronfenbrenner perspective, we understand not only how she had become who she was at that time but also how she could start developing. It provides more pointers for intervention and nurture.

Spiritual Development

After looking at theories focusing on the cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development of children, we will next look at the domain of spiritual development. Over the years, Christian scholars have studied the development of faith in children.¹⁹ This next section introduces two different approaches to faith development: Fowler's stages-of-faith theory and the work of Rebecca Nye, who focuses on spirituality.

James Fowler did extensive research in faith development. His theory of the stages of faith is built on the work of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg.²⁰ Fowler followed the pattern of stages and applied this to faith development, calling his theory "a structural-developmental theory of faith."²¹ Fowler stated that when compared to Piaget's or Kohlberg's stages, the stages of faith deal with different domains of knowing, and Piaget (cognitive domain)

¹⁹ Donald Ratcliff, "The Spirit of Children Past: A Century of Children's Spirituality Research," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 21-22. Ratcliff has written a helpful overview about perspectives and approaches in different eras. See also note 25.

²⁰ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

and Kohlberg (moral domain) tried to avoid those modes of knowing. In Fowler's theory, each faith stage is made up of "integrated sets of operations of knowing and valuing."²² As with Piaget's and Kohlberg's stages, Fowler's stages of faith are hierarchical, meaning that mastering operations in one stage is a prerequisite for the next stage.²³

The first three stages cover most of childhood.²⁴ Before stage 1, Fowler identified a "pre-stage." This takes place in infancy and concerns *undifferentiated faith*. In this stage, trust, courage, hope, and love are fused together in an undifferentiated way. There are also threats of abandonment, inconsistencies, and deprivations if the parent or significant others are not responsive and do not provide a safe place. *Stage 1* is called *Intuitive-projective faith* (ages 2 - 6 or 7). In this stage, the child starts using speech and language to organize his experiences into meaningful units. The child cannot yet see different perspectives, and so projects its own understanding as the only perspectives there is. Understanding comes about predominantly through perceptions and the feelings caused by them. Thoughts of God are concrete, and the child reasons from its own experience. At this stage, children mix reality and fantasy or imagination; they love faith stories, and by capturing the imagination of children, a basis for commitment to their faith might start.²⁵

In *Stage 2, Mythic-literal faith* (ages 6 or 7 to middle school years), the child has mastered the capacity for concrete logical thought and understands cause and effect as well as the sequencing of events. Children start seeing relationships and can now logically link together different pieces of information. They can consider other people's perspectives and are concerned with fairness (seen as reciprocity). Faith stories are at the heart of faith development in this stage and are an expression of theological thought

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-213. This is the part of the book that describes the different stages of faith in detail.

²⁵ Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 156.

for them.²⁶

In *Stage 3, Synthetic-conventional faith* (ages 11-15), children are capable of formal abstract thought and can reflect deeply. Expanding social contacts brings them in contact with master stories that are different from their own. Through reflection, children start constructing their faith by coming to a synthesis of meanings, beliefs, and values that they have gained from different parts of their world.²⁷ They have a deep desire to know God personally and to be accepted by him. The remaining stages (*individuating-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith*) start with young adulthood and are outside the scope of this paper.

Fowler acknowledged the limitations of Piaget's and Kohlberg's work. One of these is the disconnect between emotion and affection, and that is quite a significant challenge when it comes to faith and its development. This is related to what Stonehouse mentions, namely that if faith development only focuses on a cognitive knowledge of God, then the experience of God is overlooked.²⁸ Related to this is also Fowler's critique that there is a restrictive role of imagination in the structural-developmental approach. Fowler stated that the concept of cognition needs to be expanded and include an imaginal type of knowing if it is to work for the discussion of faith development. Interestingly, this is where the research focus has shifted to in more recent years.²⁹ Ratcliff and Nye state that Robert Coles' groundbreaking book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, published in 1990, marked a change towards a new trajectory.³⁰ The focus shifted from religious or faith

²⁶ Ibid., 161.

²⁷ Ibid., 164.

²⁸ Ibid., 127.

²⁹ Ratcliff, "The Spirit of Children Past," 21-22. Ratcliff gives an overview of the history of research on spiritual development in children. He distinguishes four phases during the past century. The early holistic period (1892 – 1930). Then a period that placed less emphasis on experience (1930 – 1960). The third period was a time in which cognitive stages were emphasized (1960 – 1990). And the last period places an emphasis on children's spirituality (1990 – present).

³⁰ Donald Ratcliff, and Rebecca Nye, "Childhood Spirituality: Strengthening

development in children to spirituality of children.³¹

Rebecca Nye is one of the main scholars who has focused research on spirituality. Her research involves experience instead of a cognitive type of knowing.³² According to Nye, spirituality is not something that is easy to grasp or articulate.³³ It has to do with a way of knowing that is not concerned with proving how one knows. She sees spirituality as powerful, inspiring, and a shaping force for our being.³⁴ Several scholars state that there is no widely accepted definition of Christian spirituality, which, according to Boyatzis, is caused mainly by the longstanding history of looking at spiritual development from a cognitive perspective.³⁵ Nye explains that spirituality can be defined from different perspectives: theological, educational, and psychological. She herself comes up with several definitions that could be used, some more extensive, articulate, and academic, and others shorter

the Research Foundation,” in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, ed. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagener, and Peter L. Benson (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005), 475.

³¹ Ratcliff, “The Spirit of Children Past,” 35. Note that the spirituality was seen in contrast to religious development. It was not necessarily Christian. And moreover, spirituality was not necessarily seen as a religious spirituality. There is also a so-called non-religious spirituality. Ratcliff states that religion, although it includes spirituality, also encompasses theology, creeds, and other content.

³² Ratcliff, “The Spirit of Children Past,” 35.

³³ Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), chap. 1, Kindle.

³⁴ Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, chapter 1.

³⁵ Holly Catterton Allen, “Exploring Children’s Spirituality from a Christian Perspective,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 11; Michael J. Anthony, ed., *Perspectives on Children’s Spiritual Formation*, Perspectives, ed. Leonard G. Goss (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 6, Kindle; Chris J. Boyatzis, “Children’s Spiritual Development: Advancing the Field in Definition, Measurement, and Theory,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 46.

and simpler, such as, “Children’s spirituality is like a child.”³⁶

Nye considers spirituality essential to faith, childhood, and being whole. Instead of analyzing childhood development in different components or compartments, she states that children see their world in a holistic way; they are open and curious, have a natural capacity for wonder, perceive things in a mystical way, learn in a natural way by discovering new things on a daily basis, are emotional as much as intellectual, and are comfortable with things greater than themselves that they cannot express in words.³⁷ Mystery is a close friend to them, and they naturally respond in awe and wonder. These insights from Nye shed a different light on faith and what it entails.

Faith and Nurturing Faith in Children

Faith has been described in different ways. For instance, a famous quote by Henrietta Mears, a Christian educator in the first half of the twentieth century, states, “Faith is caught rather than taught.”³⁸ Walter Wangerin describes faith as a “dance with God,” a drama, or a story.³⁹ Faith has to do with trust, relationship, and wonder about God’s greatness, with reflection on God’s story of salvation. It includes reveling in who God is and the mercy and grace he offers in and through Christ. Faith is a gift, journey, and process of growth that takes place in community and engages the whole child. As Nye states, it is as much emotional as it is intellectual. Others affirm that view. For instance, Westerhoff states that faith is given as a gift and has a

³⁶ Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, chap. 1.

³⁷ Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, chap. 1. Nye (together with Hay) uses the term “relational consciousness” as the central category of spirituality, and have developed three categories of spiritual sensitivity: awareness-sensing, mystery-sensing, and value-sensing. Unfortunately, I do not have enough space to expand on their research in this paper.

³⁸ From lecture notes. Henrietta Mears was one of the founders of the National Sunday School Association in America.

³⁹ Walter Wangerin Jr., *The Orphean Passages: The Drama of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 20.

cognitive as well as an emotional component.⁴⁰ Fowler saw faith as a “relation of trust in and loyalty to the transcendent about which concepts and propositions—beliefs—are fashioned.”⁴¹ Again, this includes feelings, decisions of the will, as well as intellectual beliefs.

Although spirituality is an innate capacity in a child from birth, and the journey of faith or the “dance with God” starts at the beginning of life, yet in order for faith to develop in children, nurture is essential. The Bible is clear about the importance of nurturing faith. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:4-5,⁴² the *Shema* reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” These two important verses are directly followed by an instruction to the Israelites to impart them to their children:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deut. 6: 6-9).⁴³

The act of impressing these commandments on children is supposed to happen in different settings but mainly in the context of the family.⁴⁴ So the

⁴⁰ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), Afterword, Kindle.

⁴¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

⁴² Patrick D. Miller, “That the Children May Know: Children in Deuteronomy,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle. This chapter focuses on children in Deuteronomy

⁴³ NIV translation.

⁴⁴ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 151, Kindle; Miller, “That the Children May Know,” section “The Nature and Character of Deuteronomy.”

main responsibility for this instruction or formation is placed with the parents. The call to parents (or fathers) to train children up in the faith is also found in other verses of the Old and New Testament, such as Proverbs 22:6, which reads, “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray,”⁴⁵ and Ephesians 6:4, which says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”⁴⁶

In the Christian tradition, important theologians have also written about nurturing faith in children and, in particular, the role of the family in this process. For instance, John Chrysostom (347-407 CE), an early church father, called the family a “little church” or a “sacred community.”⁴⁷ Martin Luther wrote the “Small Catechism,”⁴⁸ also known as “Luther’s Little Instruction Book,” in 1529 for parents to teach their children (and servants) the main truths of the faith. Luther placed a high value on the vocation or “divine calling” of parents to raise their children in the Lord.⁴⁹ He wrote that parents are “apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel.”⁵⁰ Horace Bushnell (a pastor in the nineteenth century) also considered the family a little church, in

⁴⁵ NRSV translation.

⁴⁶ NIV translation.

⁴⁷ Marcia Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and ‘Best Practices’ for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 351; Marcia Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives: Resources for Raising Children in the Faith,” *Lutheran Partners* 25, no. 4 (July/August 2009), 17.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism with Explanation (1529)* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986).

⁴⁹ Don S. Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 90; Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 351.

⁵⁰ Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 352.

which the daily routines and practices of faith can be modeled by parents.⁵¹

Through these biblical passages and theological writings, we see that faith formation is primarily the responsibility of parents.⁵² But not all parents feel comfortable or confident in taking up that responsibility. I was surprised recently when a friend's child told me that they do not read the Bible or pray at home. I also know of parents who like to "outsource" their child's faith formation to the Sunday school or to the Christian school their children attend.⁵³ However, nurturing faith in children still remains a role that Christian parents need to take up. As churches and people who are trained in children's ministry, we should ask ourselves if we provide enough support to parents to assume that responsibility. Bunge states that few churches actually engage parents or support them in the area of faith formation.⁵⁴ This is a sad observation. This is also a gap that we need to fill.

If we are willing to support parents in nurturing the faith of their children at home, then the next question is *how* we can do that. In the previous sections, we looked at child development in general and spiritual development in particular. We learned that if we want to nurture faith in children, we need to pay attention to the cognitive as well as the experiential way of knowing God. From Fowler, we also learned that it is important to provide nurture that is developmentally appropriate. From Nye, we learned that faith has to do with mystery, wonder, and awe, so children need opportunities to experience that. And finally, from Bronfenbrenner, we learned that child development takes place in context, and therefore it is important to look also at faith formation in its social, cultural, and historical setting. Based on these insights, I will present principles that are important when

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵² George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, 2nd ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2013), 88, Kindle.

⁵³ Karen Marie Yust, "Being Faithful Together: Families and Congregations as Intergenerational Christian Communities," in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012), 225.

⁵⁴ Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives," 349.

we support parents in faith formation at home.

Principles and Practices for Faith Formation at Home

Supporting parents is important and can be done in different ways, such as through training, church-based parent support or small groups, children's ministries, and Christian schools. When we support parents in faith formation at home, there are some principles we can keep in mind.

Principle 1: Nurturing faith in children is a biblical mandate, and it is essential that it happens in the home

Parents need to know the biblical basis for faith formation in the home. This is not some new trend but a biblical mandate. It is also helpful to introduce to parents what theologians throughout the ages have written on this topic, especially within their own faith tradition. The following two suggestions are not so much what parents could do but what could be done to support parents.

- a) Workshops, seminars, or webinars for parents about biblical foundations for faith formation in the home.
- b) Developing a booklet on faith formation in the home.

Principle 2: In nurturing faith in our children, we need to pay attention to a cognitive knowing as well as an experiential knowing of God

This means that we need to teach children the facts of our faith while at the same time we nurture their spirituality. There are several practices that parents can use, such as Bible reading, prayer, giving, and serving others.⁵⁵ It is important to note that some practices, such as Bible reading or Bible storytelling, can be done in different ways. Some ways encourage learning facts about stories, while others also encourage children to engage with their feelings. This is also true of prayer. Some suggestions for parents

⁵⁵ Marcia McQuitty, "A Qualitative Understanding and Application of the Deuteronomy 6 Commandment for Parents," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 252-265.

are:

- a) Reading the Bible to or with the child and discussing the content.⁵⁶ Stonehouse proposes that the emphasis should be on THE story, the metanarrative of the Bible,⁵⁷ and Nye provides practical suggestions of how this can be done.⁵⁸ One way in which the feelings of the child can be engaged and how the child can engage with the story reflectively is by using the “I wonder . . .” statements.⁵⁹
- b) Times of worship and prayer.⁶⁰ Here again, the focus on spirituality needs to be mentioned. Children need to learn that they can interact with their heavenly Father in an intimate way. This includes corporate worship and prayer on a Sunday but also praying at home. Prayers could be formal or spontaneous prayers.
- c) Celebrating traditional festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, keeping family traditions for Advent (such as the Jesse Tree), and Lent and family rituals are very powerful in spiritual formation.⁶¹ They

⁵⁶ Marcia Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 355.

⁵⁷ Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, “THE Story and the Spiritual Formation of Children in the Church and in the Home,” in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 366-372.

⁵⁸ Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, chap. 5. In chapter 4 Nye provides six general criteria for ensuring spiritual foundations, which she captures in the acronym S.P.I.R.I.T.: space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, and trust. In chapter 5 she applies these to Using the Bible.

⁵⁹ Stonehouse and May, “THE Story and the Spiritual Formation,” 371; Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 88-89; Michael J. Anthony, “Children's Ministry Models, Learning Theory, and Spiritual Development,” in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 190-191. Anthony calls this the “contemplative-reflective” approach.

⁶⁰ Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 355.

⁶¹ Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's*

bring together the cognitive and experiential modes of knowing.

- d) Opportunities for children to serve, for example, through community service and missions projects.⁶² Through serving, they can grow in their relationship with God and grow in their love for other people.
- e) “Faith talk.” Helping parents to feel comfortable in discussing faith at home and providing them with specific ideas of how to start faith-talk.⁶³ Parent-child conversations concerning faith can enhance children’s spiritual growth.⁶⁴

Principle 3: Nurturing faith in children has to be developmentally appropriate

Basic knowledge of child development is important when we aim to nurture the faith of children in a developmentally appropriate way.⁶⁵ For instance, an understanding of Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development can help us know the developmental challenge a child faces at a certain age. Or, if we know that younger children cannot consider the perspective from another’s point of view, we have more realistic expectations of them. If parents have more than one child, they might have to use a different approach with each child in order to provide developmentally appropriate content. This can be challenging, but it will help each child to grasp the truth more

Spiritual Lives, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), chap. 3, Kindle; Ivy Beckwith, *Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 76.

⁶² Jane Carr, “Equipping Children for Ministry,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 205-206.

⁶³ Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 130.

⁶⁴ Chris J. Boyatzis, “The Co-Construction of Spiritual Meaning in Parent-Child Communication,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 182.

⁶⁵ Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 66.

easily. And if parents have a child with disabilities, they might need additional support to provide nurture in a developmentally appropriate way, a way their child can “hear.”⁶⁶ What we can do to support parents includes:

- a) Run a workshop or webinar on child development theories, like Erikson’s, Piaget’s, and Kohlberg’s, to help parents understand how their child develops in general and how spiritual development takes place. Also, help them realize they might have to use different ways for different children depending on age and stage of development.
- b) Write a brochure or booklet for parents on this topic.

Principle 4: In order to nurture the faith of a particular child, we need to consider the child’s context.

The environment in which a child grows up impacts that child enormously. The different ecological systems in which a child grows up interact with one another and change over time. One example is the use of computer games and electronic devices that our children grow up with. We never had those during our childhood, and they bring different challenges with them for our children and for us also as we try to raise our children in the Christian faith. We can distinguish different types of contexts. The home is the closest and most immediate context. The faith community is the wider context. And a secular society with its culture and subcultures is the macrosystem or the context that impacts the child more indirectly. It is important to be aware of the impact of secular culture and context on our children and create a culture in which children are accepted and valued.⁶⁷ And if we minister in different countries or different types of contexts, such as rural versus urban, or across denominations, we will have to consider how to adapt our practices of faith formation in a way that is appropriate and relevant. We

⁶⁶ MaLesa Breeding and Dana Kennamer Hood, “Voices Unheard: Exploring Spiritual Needs of Families of Children with Disabilities,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 306.

⁶⁷ Keeley, Robert J., *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith: How the Church Can Nurture the Spiritual Development of Kids* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 115, Kindle.

can teach or inform parents about the following things:

- a) Model or live out faith at home and nurture the faith of parents if that is needed. Stonehouse states, “The spiritual formation of children should begin with the spiritual formation of their parents.”⁶⁸ How parents live out their faith at home is one of the most important aspects of nurturing faith. Children observe if their parents walk the talk. If parents are unsure of their own relationship with God or Jesus, then it will be hard to nurture the faith of their child.⁶⁹
- b) The role of the community of faith is important as well. For instance, intergenerational churches are important for children as they can learn about God and life together with believers of all ages.⁷⁰ And within the faith community, children have role models and mentors from whom to learn.⁷¹ Children can also learn from older generations within the family context, such as their grandparents, who can model the practices of faith.⁷²
- c) Starting parent support groups where they can discuss the issues they encounter and be supported by others in the faith community.

⁶⁸ Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 65.

⁶⁹ Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 124-125.

⁷⁰ Holly Catterton Allen, “Nurturing Children’s Spirituality in Intergenerational Christian Settings,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Application*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 266.

⁷¹ Barna, *Transforming Children*, 112.

⁷² Holly Catterton Allen and Heidi Schultz Oschwald, “God Across the Generations: The Spiritual Influence of Grandparents,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008); Catherine Stonehouse, and Scottie May *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010): 126.

- d) “Fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage.”⁷³ This has to do with the world in which we live, which concerns the social, cultural, and historical context. Every day our children face challenges in the world in which they live. It can be hard for parents to know what youth culture or school culture is like or to deal with challenges that they have never experienced themselves.

Through these four principles, we can support parents in their responsibility to train up their children in the way of the Lord. These practical suggestions can provide more concrete direction for our combined efforts. Also, depending on the context in which we nurture our children’s faith, we might want to place more emphasis on certain aspects than others. And we might have to adapt the ways in which we present our content.

Conclusion

Throughout the years, we have learned a lot about the development of faith in children. Fowler based his theory about the stages of faith on the theories about the stages of development of children, such as those presented by Piaget. In recent decades, we have seen an increased interest in spirituality as an approach to understanding faith. Having these different types of models and theories makes us aware of the complexity of faith development. From the ecological theory of child development, we learn that development happens in context and that ecological systems impact the development of a child, including the development of faith.

When we look at faith formation, the Bible, as well as theological traditions, teach us that nurturing faith is in the first place the responsibility of parents. Churches, however, can and should support parents in faith formation. How they give parents support depends on their specific ministry context. The principles and practical suggestions provided in this paper may assist them in moving forward with this task.

⁷³ Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 357.

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