PRAISE FOR
TRANSFORMING
CHILDREN INTO SPIRITUAL
CHAMPIONS

Remarkable! George Barna has done it again. America’s expert number
cruncher has analyzed the data and translated it into his most relevant work
yet. Barna makes a compelling case that our hope for the future lies in our
ability to help young people experience spiritual transformation.
*Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* will encourage and empower
you to take a fresh look at our generational responsibility to grow
our children into champions for the Lord.

**Tommy Barnett**
Pastor, Phoenix First Assembly of God

The role of the church is to spiritually mentor parents; the role of parents
is to spiritually mentor their children; and the legacy of faith continues from
generation to generation. The theme of *Transforming Children into Spiritual
Champions* is as old as the philosophy in the book of Deuteronomy and
as fresh as today’s newspaper. George Barna blends his incredible ability to
research modern culture with his own passion to energize the
spiritual life of children. It’s a great book!

**Jim Burns**
President, YouthBuilders

George Barna’s new book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, is
exactly what is needed today in youth ministry. More and more I find our
staff wanting to know how to produce real life-long followers of Jesus.
This book will be a great help! I’m particularly glad he addresses the
evangelically sensitive topic of evaluation.

**Roger Cross**
President, Youth For Christ/USA
Most people who trust Jesus as their Savior do so before the age of 15. Driven by this reality, George Barna invites us into the greatest harvest field of all time—children. In *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, he boldly and faithfully calls on churches to seize the opportunity to impact their communities—starting with the children.

**JACK D. EGGER**

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, AWANA CLUBS INTERNATIONAL**

It is clear that the Lord is raising up a generation equipped with more knowledge, mobility, finances and communication than the world has ever seen. This generation occupies a unique place in history to be used by the Lord in amazing ways for His glory. The Church will miss this fantastic opportunity if we do not begin strategic ministry to children now. George Barna once again challenges the Body of Christ to take measurable action to equip this generation in *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*.

**MARK MATLOCK**

**WISDOMWORKS MINISTRIES**

George Barna’s point flies straight to the heart of every parent, teacher and pastor. Invest early. Get them while they’re young, or they may miss knowing Jesus altogether—and thus, so may our world. *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* is a troubling read, requiring reconsideration of our priorities and focus in ministering to children—and their parents.

**ELISA MORGAN**

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, MOPS INTERNATIONAL**
In *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna reveals how we can be a vital part of the single most strategic ministry in God’s kingdom, and in the process revolutionize life and faith in America. Without question, every pastor, leader and parent must read this book.

**STEVE RUSSO**
Evangelist
*Author, The Seduction of Our Children*
*Cohost, “Life on the Edge Live!”*

Nothing has grabbed my attention more in the last two years than the Church’s need to strategically focus our energies on children and youth. George Barna’s *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* serves to underline this urgency for our local churches’ allocation of time and resources.

**MIKE SLAUGHTER**
Pastor, Ginghamsburg Church
Tipp City, Ohio

Few other communicators have the ability to paint as accurate a picture of the state of our children today as writer and researcher George Barna. By providing an assessment of both where we are and where we need to be in teaching and training the next generation, his book does indeed have the potential of transforming children into spiritual champions.

**ED YOUNG**
Senior Pastor, Fellowship Church
Dallas, Texas
TRANSFORMING
CHILDREN
INTO SPIRITUAL CHAMPIONS

GEORGE BARN A
Regal Books is a ministry of Gospel Light, a Christian publisher dedicated to serving the local church. We believe God’s vision for Gospel Light is to provide church leaders with biblical, user-friendly materials that will help them evangelize, disciple and minister to children, youth and families.

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Missed the Ocean</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The State of American Children</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Spiritual Health of Our Children</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Why Kids Matter</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What Kids Need</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Taking On Appropriate Responsibility</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How Churches Help to Raise Spiritual Champions</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Better Performance Through Evaluation</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It’s Time to Produce Some Spiritual Champions</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

Finally! I have been waiting almost 30 years for someone to put into book form what I have known to be true nearly all my ministry life: Children matter! They matter to God and to their parents, and they ought to matter more to the church.

With surgical precision, George Barna has cut through the veil of denial that most church leaders have lived in for far too long—the belief that we are doing enough in our churches to transform the average kid in our congregations into a spiritual champion. Painfully few churches have paid the price to break out of decades of status-quo ministry to children. Those that do break out soon discover a kind of anointing from God that suggests He might just favor churches that focus on and build up little ones.

We owe George a huge debt for writing this book.

Bill Hybels
Senior Pastor
Willow Creek Community Church
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincere thanks are due to the core research team at the Barna Research Group during the period while I was writing this book. The team—Lynn Gravel, Cameron Hubiak, Pam Jacob, David Kinnaman, Jill Kinnaman, Dan Parcon, Celeste Rivera and Kim Wilson—kept things running smoothly while I was focused on this project.

I am grateful to the dozens of pastors and church leaders who allowed us to conduct interviews, pore through church documents and poke around their ministry while we conducted the research for this book. I hope the time you invested will assist many other churches in becoming ministries that produce children who mature into spiritual champions.

I appreciate the patience and assistance of the team at Regal Books. In particular, thanks go to Kim Bangs, Deena Davis, Bill Denzel, Kyle Duncan, Bill Greig III, Bill Schultz and Rob Williams.

I am indebted to my family for letting me abandon them for a couple of weeks to put this book together. My wife, Nancy, and my daughters, Samantha and Corban, deserve a lot of credit for flexing with my intense schedule requirements. I pray that Nancy and I will be better able to raise our girls to be spiritual champions thanks to the insights we have gleaned from the research and the writing of this book.
Introduction

I MISSED THE OCEAN

Few people would have guessed that one day I’d become an impassioned advocate for ministry to children. Until recently, not even I would have bet money on that.

In my mind, children had always been part of a package deal: We want to reach adults with the gospel and then help them mature in their faith in Christ, so we have accepted the kids as a “throw-in.” The paramount importance of serious, top-priority ministry to kids was not something I had ever taken too seriously.

My mind-set was not attributable to a lack of involvement in kids’ lives. Over the years, I have had constant and satisfying interaction with young people: teaching in a public school, coaching basketball at a Christian school, serving as a youth leader at a church, being an elder
overseeing Christian education, studying the beliefs and behavior of young people through primary research, working as a board member for ministries focused on the needs of kids and being the father of two girls.

In fact, young people have always been on my radar screen. Ever the diligent researcher, I was capable of quoting the statistics related to the number of children in the United States, their quality of life, their behavioral and attitudinal patterns, how many have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, the nature of their spiritual beliefs and even their importance in drawing adults to churches. I knew a lot about kids and their plight in the local church, the schools, the marketplace and the home. I even wrote several books about teenagers, based on our nation-wide studies.

Yet somehow the wisdom and necessity of seeing children as the primary focus of ministry never occurred to me. In that regard, perhaps I’ve simply been a product of my environment. Like most adults, I have been aware of children, fond of them and willing to invest some resources in them; but I have not really been fully devoted to their development. In my mind, they were people en route to significance—i.e., adulthood—but were not yet deserving of the choice resources.

Like many Christians, my life is committed to knowing, loving and serving God to the best of my ability. My focus has been to increase the spiritual health and cultural influence of the local church and the lives of individual believers. There is nothing I covet more than to someday hear the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” My assumption—never seriously challenged either by my own reflections or by the arguments of others—has been that the most efficient path toward receiving such an accolade from God would be through intense focus upon the moral development and spiritual transformation of adults.

I had never given alternative approaches serious consideration. After all, aren’t adults the ones who call the shots in the world and determine the nature of our current and future reality? If the family is central to a healthy society and a strong Church, shouldn’t we invest our resources predominantly in the adults who lead those units? When it comes to grasping the substance, the subtleties and the implications of the
Christian faith, don’t adults possess the greatest learning and intellectual capacities? Strategically, isn’t it more important for us to equip adults so that they can use their gifts and resources to advance the Kingdom?

No, no, no and no. In retrospect, my view was so far off the mark that I didn’t just miss the boat—I missed the entire ocean!

**A TRANSFORMED MIND**

Having spent the first two decades of my ministry engaged in research and leadership that targeted adults, the Lord has recently accomplished an extraordinary thing in my life. He changed my mind about the nature of effective ministry in our nation today.

For 20 years, credible and convincing information regarding the centrality of children to the health and future well-being of the Church was right in front of my eyes. During that time I’d consistently, although by no means exclusively, been working with ministries whose success could be traced to their wholehearted devotion to the needs and development of children. However, from the moment I’d accepted Christ at age 25, I’d been seduced into believing the great myth of modern ministry: Adults are where the Kingdom action is.

Somehow, God managed to lift the veil from my eyes long enough for me to gain wisdom. During the past couple of years, as I have been rethinking the foundations of church-based activity and seeking to understand how the Church might revolutionize life and faith in America, it became painfully clear to me that I had been operating on the basis of some very faulty assumptions.

Upon reprioritizing ministry to children, my perspective on ministry in its entirety has been revolutionized. My perceptions regarding worship, evangelism, discipleship, stewardship, community service and family—in short, just about everything related to ministry—have been altered. That is not to say that suddenly I know everything there is to know and you should therefore listen carefully and fall in line. Rather, this shift has enabled me to understand both situations that previously seemed too perplexing to comprehend and challenges too massive to voluntarily confront. Ministry will always be a difficult and sacrificial
journey, but placing children in a more appropriate place in the landscape makes the journey more comprehensible and hopeful.

**God’s Method**

I have often heard Bible teachers claim that God meets you where you’re at and leads you where you need to go, if you’re willing to follow. I believe that is exactly what God has done in my life these past two years.

Almost every book I write is based on the same process: After considerable observation, discussion, prayer and reflection, I conduct primary research and analyze the results. Armed with the data, I seek confirmation of my interpretation through the real-world ministry experiences of churches and individuals. Confident that there is something valid to present, I then share the results through the written word.

It was through this standard practice that God opened my mind and heart to ranking ministry to children at the top of the priority list. He could have used any number of unusual tactics, but He chose to grab my attention not only in a way that made sense to me but also a way that would not allow me to deny the message. True to form, He contextualized the message for my consumption.

For this book, my company conducted a variety of nationwide surveys: a half-dozen surveys among adults and parents, a couple among teenagers and adolescents, four surveys among Protestant pastors and one project with church-based youth workers. After living with the data and placing it into a coherent perspective, we then conducted in-depth studies of the children’s ministries in several dozen churches from across the nation to see if my hypotheses held true and to glean additional insights into effective ministry among kids. The contents of this book represent the tested and refined view from that two-year effort.

**The Mission Revealed**

What does my epiphany have to do with you? I am not interested in simply informing you about the state of children and the opportunities to
minister to them. Allow me to describe my prayer and goals for this book. My dream has five facets:

1. *Reach agreement.* If you do not share my view that ministry to children is the single most strategic ministry in God’s kingdom, then I hope this book will challenge your prevailing notions. My thesis is that if you want your life to count for God’s kingdom, there are many viable ways to use your gifts, talents and resources. However, if you want to have the greatest possible impact (i.e., to achieve a lasting legacy of spiritual dividends), then consider employing those resources in ministry to young people.

2. *See spiritual development as primary.* I have been discouraged to discover that most American adults—including most parents—see spiritual development of children as a value-added proposition rather than the single most-important aspect of children’s development. You are invited to reconsider the priority of spiritual growth in the lives of children and to accept it as being more important than intellectual, physical and emotional development.

3. *Motivate to action.* It makes sense for us to reallocate the resources God has entrusted to us to those ministries and toward those people whom we can affect most positively for God’s purposes. There is no group in greater need of such investment—or one that pays greater dividends on such investment—than children. Cognizant of the fact that most adults prefer to devote their ministry resources elsewhere, my desire is to challenge your current preference in favor of putting more into children’s ministry.

4. *Facilitate the appropriate linkage.* In the course of reflecting on children and their spiritual growth, it is imperative that we understand God’s expectations of how children should be nurtured. The local church is crucial in this process, but a child’s family is central. Gaining a proper perspective on the partnership between parents and church in the mutual effort to raise God-loving and God-fearing children is paramount. Enabling you to
embrace that perspective and to support it is yet another objective of this book.

5. See what it looks like. Having studied many ministries, I want to describe the principles and models that we found to be common among the churches that effectively develop spiritually whole young people. I do not believe in prescribing a one-size-fits-all model for everyone to embrace; I have seen that approach undermine too many ministries. However, one of the processes that has served thousands of churches well in the past has been to identify common principles and best practices among effective churches. My hope is that those elements can be adapted to your ministry context without creating the need to accept and adopt an entirely foreign set of ministry philosophies, structures, values and programs.

Ultimately, the purpose of this endeavor is to enable the Church to engage in the process of transforming mere children into spiritual champions. It can be done. I know, because I have seen it firsthand, studied it closely and personally benefited from it. My earnest request is that you have an open mind long enough for me to make the case and then that you give this perspective your honest consideration. Let God lead you in your response—we may confidently trust that He knows how best to guide your life.
Chapter 1

THE STATE OF AMERICAN CHILDREN

They are more numerous than the entire Hispanic and African-American populations of the nation combined. They have more energy than a nuclear power plant and are as confounding as the federal budget. They have tastes as fluid as the Missouri River and dreams that will redefine the future. They are a marketer’s pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and the most lovable and frustrating beings in the life of every parent.

We’re talking about America’s children. You don’t have to look too hard to find them. In 2003, the Census Bureau reported that there were 73 million residents 18 years of age or younger living in the United
States. They come in all shapes and various sizes, in many colors, and are distributed indiscriminately across the 50 states.

Our children will define the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy. After all, God never told His followers to take over the world through force or intelligence. He simply told us to have children and then raise them to honor God in all they do. Therefore, you might logically conclude that bearing and raising children is not only our most enduring legacy but also one of our greatest personal responsibilities.

In this book, I will focus upon understanding and affecting the lives of children in the heart of the youth cohort (i.e., children in the 5- to 12-year-old age range). This group, some 31 million strong, represents nearly half of the under-18-year-olds in the country. That’s almost equal to the population of the entire state of California.

Why focus on this particular slice of the youth market? Because if you want to shape a person’s life—whether you are most concerned about his or her moral, spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional or economic development—it is during these crucial eight years that lifelong habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are formed.

**FOUR DIMENSIONS OF OUR CHILDREN’S WELL-BEING**

Everyone’s life has challenges, difficulties and hardships en route to adulthood. On balance, though, most American children experience a good life, especially when compared to the quality of life children in many other nations of the world endure.

**Educational Achievement and Intellectual Development**

Most of America’s children spend plenty of time in the classroom—and we pay for it. Public school systems throughout the nation spent more than $380 billion in 2000. More children than ever before get an early
educational start—more than half of all three- and four-year olds enroll in school, and nearly two-thirds of five-year-olds enroll in all-day kindergarten programs. But neither school spending nor student attendance is a viable indicator of educational achievement or quality. Studies measuring such factors raise troubling questions.

For example, it is estimated that one-third of all school-aged children are at least one grade level behind in their academic performance. Fewer than 3 out of 10 fourth graders read at grade level. Matters do not improve much over time. Just one-third of eighth graders are proficient in reading, and only one-quarter are proficient in writing and math. These findings are particularly alarming given the correlation between poor academic skills and quality of life. Studies by the National Institutes of Health and the National Association for Educational Progress discovered that poor reading skills are a harbinger of teen pregnancy, criminal activity, poor academic achievement and dropping out before high school graduation.

Testing among students reveals that when the academic performance of American pupils is compared to that of peers in other nations, American students come up far short. Recent studies of eighth graders in 25 industrialized nations showed that American students ranked tenth in science and twenty-first in mathematics.

Interestingly, most parents are pleased with the quality of the schooling their young ones get. Gallup’s recent research shows that 7 out of 10 parents are generally satisfied with the educational quality their children receive. Our research found that most parents think their children are well cared for and well taught and have access to adequate facilities and programs. Relatively few parents believe their children are unsafe or exposed to unreasonable social pressures at school. Also interesting, most parents believe that the schools attended by most other children in the nation do not provide a quality education.

Exposure to technology in the classroom is increasing in the United States. More than 4 out of 5 children under 13 years of age use a computer at school on a regular basis. Whether or not the integration of technology into the daily academic regimen will enhance students’ learning experience remains to be seen.
Health and Physical Development

Advances in medical and health care have substantially reduced infant mortality during the past half-century. With new breakthroughs in medical research and technology, children have greater opportunities than ever before to live long and healthy lives.

There are, however, five dominant health-related challenges kids face these days. The most prevalent of these is being overweight. It is estimated that roughly 1 out of every 8 children under 13 is overweight or obese, which is double the figure of two decades ago. The combination of couch-potato behavior, computer games, fear of lack of safety in public places such as playgrounds and gymnasiums, supersized fast-food meals and the demise of school-run athletic programs contribute to the problem. While government agencies posit that only 25 percent of children ages two to five have a consistently healthy diet, that already low percentage shrinks to just 6 percent among teenagers. Indeed, if lifestyle modeling is a significant influence on behavior, then the future looks even bleaker concerning the physical condition of our young people, since a variety of medical professionals have estimated that as many as 65 percent of adults are overweight or obese.

Another serious concern is the increased sexual activity among youngsters. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report that almost 1 out of every 10 teenagers had sexual intercourse prior to his or her thirteenth birthday and that the number is steadily rising. Apart from the serious moral, emotional and spiritual consequences of premature sexual activity, such experiences commonly introduce sexually transmitted diseases (STD). CDC has reported that while relatively few adolescents have contracted an STD—fewer than 1 million of the youth under age 14—these young people are at greater risk than older individuals of acquiring one or more of the numerous permanent and incurable diseases, which is a particularly unnerving reality given the increasing sexual activity among children.

Substance abuse—tobacco, drugs and alcohol—is a temptation to which millions of young people succumb. Current estimates indicate that about 1 out of every 10 eighth graders smokes daily (the proportion rises to 1 out of 4 by age 17); 1 out of 5 used drugs of some type in the
past year (ranging from marijuana to hallucinogens to “club drugs” such as Ecstasy); and more than 1 out of 3 were drunk at least once in the past year, with significant numbers of adolescents reporting regular alcohol use and even binge drinking. For a small but significant percentage of those who abuse these substances, the behavior becomes addictive; and for a larger portion, the temporary impairment of their decision-making abilities produces serious physical consequences.

Being the victim of violence is yet another danger that threatens the health and well-being of millions of preteens. Forty-five percent of elementary schools reported one or more incidents of violent crime; the figure balloons to 74 percent, three-quarters, of all middle schools. In a typical year, 4 percent of elementary schools and 19 percent of middle schools report one or more serious violent crimes (e.g., murder, rape, suicide, use of a weapon or robbery). Students are subjected to violence most often in schools where gangs are present, and gangs are known to exist in nearly 3 out of 10 public schools. During a typical school year 1 out of every 14 students is threatened or injured at school with a weapon; 1 out of every 7 students is involved in a serious physical fight on school grounds. One common result, of course, is that millions of parents feel uneasy about their child’s safety, and more than 1 million adolescents missed at least one day of school this past year due to fear of physical violence.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, the physical condition of young people is impacted by their medical care. Despite the attention focused on this issue in the past decade, 1 out of every 8 children under 13 has no health insurance and thus lacks adequate access to qualified medical attention. Combined with the skyrocketing cost of medical care, children suffer from medical challenges more widely than many people realize. One recent study noted that about 20 percent of youths in the United States exhibit some signs of psychiatric ailments and that most of those go undiagnosed.\textsuperscript{15} One of the most widely discussed conditions is attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD),
which afflicts about 7 percent of children in the 6- to 11-year-old age group. Millions of them are treated with Ritalin, antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs; millions more receive no treatment at all.

It should be pointed out that both the health of children and their engagement in at-risk behaviors have serious ramifications. A number of studies conducted in the past decade have demonstrated a strong correlation among six at-risk behaviors undertaken by adolescents—sexual intercourse, excessive drinking, smoking, use of illegal drugs, depression and suicide—and their generally negative impact.\(^{16}\)

**Economic State**

During the past three decades, the economic state of children has actually improved. The federal government has expanded its support for children, currently funding more than 150 child-targeted programs to the tune of more than $50 billion annually.\(^ {17}\) While an unacceptably high proportion of young people (33 percent) will live in poverty before they reach adulthood, just half as many (17 percent) are mired in it at any given time.\(^ {18}\) (Realize that while the percentage is small, the human suffering is enormous—nearly 7 million American adolescents are plagued by poverty on any given day.) Most kids live in relatively suitable circumstances, and 8 out of 10 adolescents even report receiving spending money from their parents or extended family members. On average, adolescents are given an allowance of slightly more than $20 per week.

**Emotional and Behavioral Development**

Much of the emotional stability and maturity of children stems from their relationship with their family. Even though most parents feel they are doing a good job of raising their kids—and there is little doubt that most parents take their responsibility seriously—there is an abundance of evidence that suggests many overestimate their performance.

The effects of cohabitation, divorce, births to unmarried parents, and working mothers are taking a significant toll on a growing body of children—an impacted group that now numbers in the millions. One out of every 3 children born in the United States each year is born to an unmarried woman. One out of every 4 children presently lives with a sin-
gle parent, and about half find themselves in that situation before they celebrate their eighteenth birthday. Three out of every 5 mothers of infants are in the labor force—roughly twice the proportion from just a quarter-century ago.¹⁹

The confluence of isolating factors has led a majority of parents of adolescents to admit that they do not spend enough meaningful time with their young ones.²⁰ Among kids 8 to 12 years old, one-third say they want to spend more time with their mother, in spite of the fact that today’s preteens spend 31 hours per week with their mom, a jump of about six hours each week from two decades ago.²¹ Adolescents spend less time with their fathers—an average of 23 hours weekly—which is also an increase compared to the early ’80s. However, a substantial amount of the increases in parent-child time are attributable to an escalation in the amount of time spent driving to and from various activities, which is an endeavor not normally deemed a meaningful moment or quality time.

The good news is the slow rise in the percentage of kids who live with both biological parents (up from the 1 out of 2 a decade ago to nearly 6 out of 10 today). These families tend to be more financially and relationally stable, live in safer and more well-to-do areas and enroll their kids in higher-quality schools.

In spite of—or, maybe, thanks to—the changes in family realities, how are the kids turning out? There are many aspects to consider, but here are a few factors to ponder:

- Most adolescents consider themselves to be happy, loved, safe and optimistic about their future. However, we have found that most of them believe that adults generally consider young people to be rude, arrogant, lazy and sloppy.
- Kids ages 2 to 7 average nearly 25 hours per week of mass media intake; the figure balloons to almost 48 hours each week among those ages 8 to 13.²² Evidence of the changing times and the new generation in place is the favorite medium of all, the Internet, according to 54 percent of kids under 8 and 73 percent of kids 8 to 12 years old.²³
• Adolescents have become highly proficient at multitasking—the ability to juggle several activities simultaneously without losing ground in any of the areas.
• Young people admit to being highly influenced by their role models and to be actively seeking more such examples, but nearly half of all preteens (44 percent) admit that they don’t have any role models. While parents are the most commonly named role models, it is revealing that when children are asked to identify the three most important people in the world to them, only one-third name their mother or father. Even so, the vast majority of young kids—more than 9 out of 10—say they get along well with their parents, and most have no desire to have their parents eliminated from their lives.
• A sign of the fears and pressures that weigh most heavily upon children is provided by the dominant social concerns named by adolescents: retaining and protecting their personal rights and freedoms, dealing with the presence of guns in their school, the prevalence of drunk driving, issues related to self-esteem, educational quality and drug abuse.
• Kids stay busy. If it’s not the crunch of homework, then it’s the frenetic involvement in after-school and extracurricular activities. Even during the summer, two-thirds of all adolescents (64 percent) are booked into a full slate of activities.
• The world is becoming more complex, but kids maintain the same basic needs as they have for decades: to be trusted, to be loved, to feel safe and to identify a significant purpose in life.

**THE MEANING BEHIND THE NUMBERS**

If you have been working hard to stifle a yawn as I blazed through these figures and behavioral patterns, rest assured your reaction is quite normal. However, keep in mind that while numbers might not be your thing, the most important take-away from such a barrage of statistics is to determine the implications of the numbers. The value of
research is that it allows you to form a portrait of reality, with each statistic representing another brushstroke in the picture. Armed with a clearer view of reality, you are prepared to respond more efficiently and meaningfully.

You don’t need a series of surveys to remind you that life is messy. We prefer experiences and conditions to fit together into a simple, easy-to-interpret, black-and-white storyboard. But that is not often the case. More often, the emerging story is one riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions, rabbit trails and misleading irrelevancies. The narrative related to adolescents is no different. Adolescence is a season of life characterized by ups and downs, hopes and despair, victories and defeats, and constant changes. Finding the threads of truth that tie it all together is an art more than a science, and there are not many artists who can accurately and insightfully interpret the portrait.

What do the data regarding young people teach us? Many of the statistics that capture the public’s attention tell the bad news. Yet if we examine all of the data, from various angles, we find that most kids face a few difficult challenges but generally live safe and satisfying lives. Each child has issues related to family, friends and lifestyle choices; but comparatively few kids are drug addicts, gang members, obese or dropouts. Most of our kids will not wind up as prostitutes or pimps in jail or number among the long-term unemployed.

The media headlines screaming “crisis” every other day are not designed to communicate truth but to capture market share and sell products. As consumers of information, we must retain some level of perspective. Granted, most of the nation’s adolescents face serious threats and temptations, but most of them cope with those challenges fairly well. Yes, there are thousands of kids who live in despicable conditions or who consistently make awful choices—their situations are gut wrenching and deserve our best thinking and responses—but those kids are the anomalies, not the norm.
However, another spin on these statistics relates to the trajectory of the curves. While the behavioral and situational indicators may not suggest that the nation’s children are engulfed in a large-scale, all-encompassing crisis, there are ample reasons to be concerned about the path of their development and the environment in which they are maturing.

Most of our young people will not end up as alcoholics or drug addicts, but most of them will abuse those substances on an irregular basis and will have one or more close friends who are serious substance abusers. Fortunately, most children will never be the victims of a serious physical crime, but most of them will experience daily fear and scheduling limitations as a result of the growing instances of juvenile violence. Fewer than 20 percent of kids will drop out of school before receiving a high school diploma, but the bigger danger may be their lack of desire to learn or their disinterest in personal excellence. Relatively few youngsters will be physically abandoned by their parents, but millions will be traumatized by receiving their parents’ emotional leftovers, as well as by the divorce, separation or adulterous activities that will shatter their family unity. The majority of America’s kids are not clamoring for X-rated, profane and violent content on TV or in movies and video games, but they are constantly seduced and tantalized by messages and imagery that blur or overstep the boundaries of decency. Maybe our young ones are not the sexually depraved beings that some have charged, but we must recognize that their perceptions of sexual propriety have been sufficiently compromised and that most kids will wind up with a sexually transmitted disease and an unfulfillable longing to return to virgin status.

Our nation’s children will struggle to maintain a healthy balance in life. Constantly exposed to evil, they will win the battle most of the time but never escape the sense of jeopardy. They will seek to live a normal life but fall prey to the constantly deteriorating definitions of normality. The end result of growing up in this challenging culture will be a country of adults whose standards have been lowered and whose sensitivities have been blunted. The gifts of childhood that have become or are rapidly becoming extinct include innocence, civility, patience, joy and trust.
THE MISSING LINK

Many of the choices and outcomes in children’s lives relate to two things that we have yet to examine: the moral and spiritual dimensions.

Often we seem bent on ensuring that the next generation will have a better life than did the preceding generations—the ability to live “the good life.” But we define that life as the presence of comfort and security combined with the absence of hardship and disappointment. Well-intentioned parents often try to buy experiences and environments that foster a soft and satisfying lifestyle for their progeny.

In contrast, a biblical understanding of “the good life” is one that provides and exploits opportunities in order to experience, obey and serve God and other people. The existence of difficulties, failures and even persecution are not so much indicators of failure as they are events that build character and test our resolve to know, love and serve God. If life is primarily about our participation in a spiritual battle, then we must expect to encounter trials and pitfalls. The route to significance and success, therefore, demands that we develop the moral and spiritual foundations that permit us to lead holy and servantlike lifestyles.

Even though all of the above-noted statistics are current and accurate, they leave us with an incomplete picture of the lives of our nation’s children. To round out that portrait we must study the moral and spiritual dimensions of the lives of young people. Let’s take a deeper look at these matters.
Chapter 2

THE SPIRITUAL HEALTH OF OUR CHILDREN

The most significant aspect of every person’s life is his or her spiritual health. Some people would argue that other dimensions are more important—the physical, intellectual, relational, professional, moral, socioeconomic and so forth. At the risk of being perceived as intolerant or politically incorrect, let me simply say that they are wrong. Every dimension of a person’s experience hinges on his or her moral and spiritual condition. Let me illustrate the point.
Sociologists have found a strong correlation between socioeconomic standing and quality of life. That’s not surprising, of course, since money is crucial to acquiring the basics that foster survival. However, people’s reactions to their socioeconomic status are also closely tied to their faith. Many poor people experience greater levels of joy and fulfillment in life than do affluent individuals, because their view of life is based on the depth of their relationship with God rather than upon their personal achievements and comfort. Instead of defining success as the accumulation of possessions, experiencing the most exhilarating adventures or gaining public acclaim, many economically deprived people realize a greater degree of peace and joy because they view life as nothing more than a prelude to a more glorious existence with God in heaven. Their physical and emotional suffering is deemed secondary to the security they have in Christ’s love. Their affluent peers who do not see God’s hand at work in their lives will more likely lead comfortable but unsatisfying lives. The difference between these groups is their perception of the role of God and faith.

Viewed from another angle, consider the stories of individuals who have survived accidents but have been left with physical limitations. You will find that there are two types of reactions to such life-changing events: Some who emerge with disabilities see God at work, sparing them from a premature death while challenging them to enjoy and experience life in a new way. Others turn bitter over the loss of physical wholeness and criticize God for being absent in their time of need. As you might expect, the former group is typically composed of people who have a deep relationship with God while those who do not have such a relationship dominate the latter group. Again, how people view God and His role in their lives determines how they handle the cards dealt to them.

And so it is with children. We can strive to give our youngsters all the advantages the world has to offer, and motivate them to make the most of available opportunities and resources; but unless their spiritual life is prioritized and nurtured, they will miss out on much of the meaning, purpose and joy of life.
ARE ALL OF OUR DECISIONS SPIRITUALLY BASED?

An even deeper argument exists for the significance of a child’s spiritual and moral development: Every choice we make is ultimately a spiritual decision. No matter what the issue or challenge is that we face, our decision comes down to what we believe is right or wrong, which is based squarely on our sense of truth and purpose. Our perspective on such matters comes from our spiritual beliefs, since our notions of meaning, purpose, truth, value, integrity, morality and ethics all stem from our ideas about the ultimate determinants of life.

As children mature, they are faced with numerous questions and choices regarding how to live. They take cues from their environment—particularly from the people they trust—as to how to respond to the dozens of choices they make every day. Unless children are shown the moral and spiritual implications of their choices, such factors are overlooked, often resulting in unfortunate or unforeseen consequences.

Many Americans believe it is an intellectual stretch to suggest that every choice we make is spiritual at its foundation. For instance, some might wonder how something as commonplace and seemingly unspiritual as the entrée they choose at dinner affects their spiritual lives. They fail to see that the content of the food ordered affects the health of their bodies, which in turn affects their ability to fulfill God’s calling and purposes for their lives. Additionally, the entrée will cost them money. The expense of the meal affects the amount of money they will have to apply toward the priorities they have established in their lives, whether that entails spending in ways that maximize their personal comfort, donating funds to meet the needs of the poor or any of the thousands of other ways the money could be spent. In fact, the choice of whether to eat in a restaurant or at home, as well as the selection of which restaurant to patronize, is a reflection of their sense of responsibility to God, family, community and culture.
The Bible alerts us to the fact that someday we will have to give an account to God for every choice we made (see Eccles. 11:9; Rom 14:12). This includes how we utilized every resource He entrusted to us on His behalf, which encompasses money, relationships, ideas, time, possessions and words. It follows, then, that the only viable defense we will muster for a specific choice relates to the moral and spiritual foundation of that decision, because that is the basis of God’s judgment.

Friends sometimes tell me that such ruminations are overthinking or overspiritualizing life. Yet such thinking stems from one’s worldview, which reveals one’s foundational belief about the purpose and nature of life. For example, if you believe that life is about knowing, loving and serving God, then every decision, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant, must be run through a spiritual filter. In fact, even a cursory reading of Jesus’ life on Earth shows that He was deliberate in His choices as to where to go, whom to associate with, what to say and how to evaluate situations. In short, everything He did was done for a reason, and His reasons always related back to His relationship with God the Father and His rules for living a holy life. The more you study the body of statements and behaviors pertaining to Jesus’ brief public life as related in the New Testament, the more it becomes clear that every choice has consequences, and those consequences are ultimately about our relationship with God.

If your life is to be lived for a grand purpose—namely, to love God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul, and to love others as you love yourself—then you must evaluate each choice you make in light of its consistency with that purpose (see Luke 10:27). Most people fail to think about the connections made between their decisions and every other aspect of their lives, as well as to their bond with God. In other words, people rarely ponder the spiritual and moral implications of their choices. However, their refusal to reflect on the connections does not eliminate the connections or the spiritual consequences of their choices.

Can I expect children to understand these matters? No, these matters are too complex and require too much knowledge of faith, truth, love and God’s ways to emerge naturally within the context of a postmodern culture. As respected pastor Jack Hayford has written, “No
child naturally knows how to live in a manner that brings blessing to themselves and others.\(^4\)

How, then, will children gain such an understanding? Part of my responsibility as a parent and as a member of the community of faith is to expose young children to the history, the expectations and the ways of God. During their formative years, children develop their decision-making perspectives and patterns. Helping them in that process is one of the most important responsibilities we have as humans; engaging them at a young age is a critical strategic choice. Jesus’ teaching in the opening verses of Matthew 18 suggests that if we, as parents and counselors to the young, lose our interest in and sensitivity to children, we have shirked one of the most important duties given by God to humankind.

In order for our children to grow into whole and healthy people, we must help them build strong foundations to prepare them for the rest of their lives. Because everything is ultimately a spiritual and moral issue, the more intentional and clear minded we are regarding their spiritual development, the better off they will be for the duration of their lives. We will discuss this more extensively in subsequent chapters.

**DO OUR CHILDREN REALLY UNDERSTAND SPIRITUAL TRUTHS?**

If we accept the notion that the moral and spiritual dimension of life is so crucial to the quality of life and spirit of children, we must ask how they are doing in this area. To gain perspective, I have conducted extensive research among randomly selected national samples of 13-year-olds. The surveys were administered to young people of that age because it is the best means we have of assessing what kids are absorbing during their adolescent years as they enter the next phase of their development cycle (i.e., the teen years).
In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss what this research reveals about our children.

**Jesus Christ as Personal Lord and Savior**

Nine out of 10 young people (93 percent) consider themselves to be Christian by age 13. For a large portion of those kids, however, being Christian does not correspond to having a grace-based personal relationship with Jesus Christ; and for a large share of the self-professed Christians, commitment to that faith is minimal.

Among those who say they are Christian, only 35 percent indicate that they are “absolutely committed to the Christian faith.” A majority, 54 percent, say they are “moderately committed,” while the remaining 10 percent says they are not committed to Christianity.

A different way of assessing the faith commitment of young people is to determine whether they are evangelical, born again, nominal Christian, aligned with a non-Christian faith, or an atheist or agnostic. If born-again Christians are described as those who say they have made an important personal commitment to Jesus Christ and who believe they will have eternal life solely because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, then we estimate that 34 percent of children are born again by age 13.⁵

A subset of the born-again segment are the evangelicals. These individuals are not only born again but also have a belief system that is more strongly aligned with biblical teachings in specific areas. Evangelicals would strongly affirm the accuracy of all biblical teachings, the personal responsibility to share their faith in Christ with nonbelievers, the centrality of faith in a person’s life, the inability to attain eternal salvation except through the grace of God through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, the nature of God as the creator and sustainer of all that exists, and the existence of Satan (God’s enemy) as a real being, not merely a symbol of evil. Using this approach, just 4 percent of all 13-year-olds are classified as evangelicals.⁶

This leaves us with a majority of self-professed Christians as being neither evangelical nor born again. In total, 59 percent of all 13-year-olds are “notional Christians”—people who say they are Christian but are not
committed followers of Christ in any discernible way.

Surprisingly, few young people have embraced other faith views by age 13. Only 3 percent are associated with a non-Christian faith (led by Judaism), and 4 percent claim to be either agnostic or atheist.

A series of studies we conducted regarding the age at which people accept Christ as their Savior highlights the importance of having people invite Jesus into their heart as their Savior when they are young. We discovered that the probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her Savior was 32 percent for those between the ages of 5 and 12; 4 percent for those in the 13- to 18-age range; and 6 percent for people 19 or older. In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.

The importance of building strong spiritual foundations at an early age is again confirmed by recognizing that in 2003, there was virtually no difference between the spiritual standing of adults and those exiting their childhood years. Specifically, 4 percent of 13-year-olds were evangelicals compared to just 6 percent of adults; 34 percent of the 13-year-olds were born again, which was slightly less than the 38 percent found among adults. In other words, by the age of 13, your spiritual identity is largely set in place. Thousands of people decide to embrace Christ as their Savior each year, but from a statistical vantage point the number of Christians is not increasing—the new believers are essentially replacing the Christians who died or those who renounced their faith in Christ. My tracking of religious beliefs and behavior for more than a quarter century has revealed that the spiritual condition of adolescents and teenagers changes very little, if at all, as they age. When significant change is evident, it usually is attributable to a dramatic intrusion of the Holy Spirit into their lives.

**Religious Involvement**

Young people partake in a lot of religious activity during a typical week. Since most of them claim to be spiritual people and consider their faith to be very important in their lives, this level of religious involvement is not surprising.
Ninety-one percent of 13-year-olds pray to God during a typical week. Other common religious activities include attending church services (61 percent), attending a Sunday School class (52 percent) and donating some of their own money to a church (50 percent).

Fewer than half of all 13-year-olds engage in the following religious endeavors: attending a small group that meets away from the church grounds for some religious purpose (45 percent), reading from the Bible other than while at church (45 percent), attending a church-based youth activity other than Sunday School or a small group (44 percent) and reading from a sacred text or book other than the Bible (33 percent).

Put it all together and there is one inescapable conclusion: Most adolescents are involved in religious activity of some type. Deeper analysis of that engagement, however, reveals that while many young people are intrigued by spirituality and seek a deeper understanding and experience, just as many are involved because one or more of the individuals in their relational circle—often known as their tribe—want to be involved in faith activities and thus bring the entire tribe along for the shared experience, which then deepens their relational connection. For the former group, faith is the driving motivation; for the latter group, faith is an excuse that facilitates the strengthening of their surrogate family.

**Religious Beliefs**

As is true among adults, most kids possess an odd palate of spiritual beliefs. Some biblical views are nearly universally held. For instance, 9 out of 10 young people accept the existence of God, the existence of the Trinity, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in genuine disciples of Christ (92 percent) and the fact that every person has an eternal soul (91 percent). More than 4 out of 5 want to have a close relationship with God as a cornerstone in their lives.

Two-thirds or more of the nation’s 13-year-olds are at least somewhat persuaded that the Bible is totally accurate in its teachings, that
they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs with others and that circumstances do not justify theft.

But there are many pieces of evidence exposing the theological confusion that plagues the minds of millions of young people.

**Three-quarters believe the following:**

- The devil does not exist—Satan is just a symbol of evil.
- A good person earns entry into heaven by doing enough good works.
- People are born morally neutral and make a choice as to become good or bad.
- All of the sacred books from different religious traditions (i.e., the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and so forth) are merely different expressions of the same spiritual truths and principles.
- Spiritual and moral truth can only be discovered through logic, human reason and personal experience.

**Two-thirds believe the following:**

- Praying to deceased saints can have a positive effect on your life.
- The Bible discourages sin but never describes it as an innate behavior.

**Half or more than half contend the following:**

- Life either has no meaning or the meaning is realized through hard work, which produces the resources to enjoy comfort and security.
- There are no absolute standards for morals and ethics.
- Life is either a random series of acts or predetermined, but we have no real say in how our lives unfold.
- When Jesus Christ lived on Earth, He committed sins.
- The Bible does not specifically condemn homosexuality.
To place these views in context, realize that only 3 percent of the nation’s 13-year-olds have a biblical worldview, which serves as the foundation for their decision making. This is partially because young people are more likely to base their decisions on their feelings (37 percent) or upon what other people expect of them (26 percent) rather than depend upon the Bible as their standard for moral choices (8 percent). But it also is partly attributable to the theological distortions that young people embrace as truth.

The chances of seeing the worldviews of young people change to be more reflective of biblical truth are slim. We know this based upon two convincing bits of evidence. First, a large majority of young people believe that they know every major story and principle on which the Christian faith is based, and thus they feel secure in their understanding of Christianity. Consequently, more than 2 out of every 3 13-year-olds argue that they will not alter any of their core beliefs in the future. In other words, they are closed to learning new biblical insights or correction regarding erroneous perspectives.

Second, we find an astounding level of consistency between the religious beliefs of adults and children. This has two implications. Initially, it suggests that whatever beliefs a person embraces when he or she is young are not likely to change as the individual ages. (This is a variation on the “first impressions die hard” theory.) In addition, the consistency means that the average young person will encounter fewer adults or peers whose worldview is sufficiently different enough as to pose a serious challenge to his or her own existing belief system.

**What Does the Church Have to Do with It?**

Churches, of course, have a vested interest in the spiritual condition of children. However, an assessment of the importance that churches attach to ministering to children can be confusing.

A compelling sign of the significance assigned to children is the existence of a full-blown children’s ministry in virtually every church
TABLE 2.1

A COMPARISON OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF 13-YEAR-OLDS AND ADULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of the belief statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your religious faith is very important in your life.</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teaching.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people your religious beliefs.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If people are generally good, or do enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Jesus Christ lived on Earth, He committed sins.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When people are born, they are neither good nor evil; they make a choice between the two as they mature.</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is one Being in three separate and equal persons—God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every person has a soul that will live forever, either in God’s presence or absence.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A human being can be under the control or the influence of spiritual forces such as demons.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>kids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National surveys conducted by Barna Research Group in 2001-2003. Sample sizes range from 630 to 1,010 adults and 126 to 318 13-year-olds.

in the nation, complete with designated facilities and equipment, the purchase of Sunday School curriculum and educational resources, a full complement of teachers assigned to instruct kids each week, special programs administered during the year (e.g., Vacation Bible School, Mothers of Preschoolers, concerts, field trips and summer camps) and a series of safety procedures carried out to protect children from harm. Other signs include one or two sermons regarding the importance of children being preached during a typical ministry year, and having the entire congregation occasionally pray for the spiritual
health and development of the church’s young people.

Yet some signs indicate that children are not a high ministry priority. Among these are the fact that most church leaders we interviewed—pastors, staff and elders—are uninformed as to the spiritual content and practices related to their children’s ministry, and almost none of those church leaders is able to provide specific insights into how satisfactorily the children are maturing in their faith. (Attendance figures and the publisher of the curriculum purchased are widely known among church leaders, but those same leaders are rarely able to quote specific measures of children’s spiritual growth.)

This sense of limited priority is confirmed by research we conducted among a random national sample of senior pastors leading Protestant churches. When asked to identify their church’s top ministry priorities for the current year, only 24 percent mentioned ministry to children.

The attention devoted to the children’s ministry most frequently revolves around making sure there are teachers in place, rooms available and a standardized curriculum ready to be used. I also have discovered that most churches are interested in acquiring a turnkey curriculum—resources that require minimal administration by the church, minimal preparation time by the teacher, minimal prior knowledge by the students and the provision of all the ideas, materials and directions needed to fill the entire class time.

These issues are not solely related to church leadership. More than two-thirds of all Protestant churches admit that they struggle to recruit and retain adults who will serve as instructors and helpers in the classroom. Parents are the natural choice, but they are typically eager to drop off their kids so that they can enjoy some time for their own spiritual nourishment and a break from their kids. The adults who agree to serve in the classroom are often minimally qualified and barely trained for their duties. While they deserve sincere gratitude and admiration for willingly participating, many of them are ill equipped to leave a lasting and positive spiritual imprint on the children entrusted to them. Two of their often-heard complaints are that they do not believe they have been given the authority to institute the level of discipline sometimes called for and they are not able to demand the depth of commitment that
children and their parents need to make in order to see significant life change occur. Without that mantle of authority, many of these volunteers lament that they feel as if they are engaging in church-sanctioned babysitting rather than spiritual transformation.

Perhaps nothing makes the relative unimportance of children’s ministry clearer than budget realities. In the average Protestant church, approximately 41 percent of the people who attend the church on a typical weekend are under the age of 18—and that figure jumps to nearly 50 percent if we include all of the young people involved in some type of church-based, faith-related activity on the church campus throughout the entire week. Yet, less than 15 percent of the average church’s ministry budget is allocated to the needs of the children’s ministry. (Precise figures are very difficult to develop since churches track their spending differently, and it is hard to allocate some facility and personnel costs appropriately.) Regardless of the exact figures, the pattern is evident: Children receive a relatively minor share of the church’s ministry dollars. If the popular adage that one’s checkbook identifies one’s priorities is correct, then children are clearly a secondary concern for most churches.

Furthermore, the second-class status of nurturing children is evident upon exploring how churches staff their ministry. In the small proportion of churches that have ministry personnel beyond the senior pastor (Almost 20 percent of Protestant congregations have ministry staff other than support personnel such as secretaries and administrative assistants), hiring someone to direct children’s ministries is often seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. Assistant pastors, worship leaders and pastors to teens (i.e., youth pastors) are usually considered to be higher priorities than are individuals who focus primarily upon the needs of children. In most cases, other personnel such as office assistants, maintenance workers and professional subcontractors (e.g., lawyers and accountants) also are brought onto the payroll long before a director of children’s ministries is invited aboard.

One of the more disturbing findings from my research has been that church leaders often view the children’s ministry as a “loss leader”—a retail term used to describe the marketing of a product that loses money but generates a sufficient payback through ancillary benefits. Children’s
ministries are frequently marketed to adults because research shows that millions of parents want their children to have a positive church experience and that they will attend any nearby church that provides their children with a consistently high-quality ministry. Viewed from that angle, many churches do not adequately or appropriately support ministry to children because kids are seen as the “bait” that enables the church to land the real treasure—i.e., adults—rather than as a valuable, if unrefined, treasure in themselves.

**ARE WE MISSING THE MARK?**

The statistics pertaining to the spiritual life and experience of children are rather alarming. Given the trends indicating that your spiritual condition by the age of 13 is a strong predictor of your spiritual profile as an adult, it seems clear that a deep and robust spiritual life demands intentional and strategic spiritual nurturing during the early childhood and adolescent years.

Consider the facts. People are much more likely to accept Christ as their Savior when they are young. Absorption of biblical information and principles typically peaks during the preteen years. Attitudes about the viability and value of church participation form early in life. Habits related to the practice of one’s faith develop when one is young and change surprisingly little over time.

Although we spend roughly 68 times more money per capita on caring for the average felon than on a church’s ministry to a spiritually hungry child and we spend substantially more on church buildings and maintenance than on raising up spiritual champions among our progeny, I don’t believe the central issue is finances. More than anything, it is an issue of understanding the incredible importance of developing strong, spiritual foundations early and reinforcing those foundations as the child ages.
With widespread accessibility to the Internet, millions of Americans have jumped into investing in stocks, bonds and other financial instruments. The hope of amateur investors is to strike it rich by achieving a great return on investment. Yet if we could see the world through God’s eyes, we would quickly recognize that the only return on investment that truly matters is lives transformed to love God more deeply and to obey Him more perfectly. As you ponder how to invest your personal resources of all types—time, money, experience, ability, facilities, expertise and so on—keep in mind that there is no better investment than nurturing our youngsters for an eternal payback.

The research reinforces one simple but profound truth over and over again: If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people’s lives; and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young. The research simply crystallizes lessons that we can observe through history and personal experience. In other words, if you connect with children today, effectively teaching them biblical principles and foundations from the start, then you will see the fruit of that effort blossom for decades to come. The more diligent we are in these efforts, the more prodigious a harvest we will reap. Alternatively, the more lackadaisical we choose to be in our efforts to raise up children as moral and spiritual champions, the less healthy the Church and society of the future will be.

The choice is yours.
Chapter 8

It’s Time to Produce Some Spiritual Champions

Children often need reassurances that they are loved by those whom they trust and depend upon. My oldest daughter loves to ask challenging questions of her mother and me. Several years ago, while spending a laid-back Saturday lounging around the house, she wandered into my study where I was working at the computer.
“Daddy,” she began innocently, “do you love me?”

After turning away from the computer to give her my full attention, I affirmed that she was more important to me than anything else in the world and that I loved her very dearly. She smiled and then let loose the big one.

“How do I know you really love me?”

Ah, the thoughts that went racing through my mind. Let’s see. *I wiped your poopy behind every day for two years, ran a car into the ground carting you to sports practices, spent hours awake late at night holding you or calming you when you had earaches or stomachaches, spent more money than I’d care to tally on special adventures and events, played silly games until I couldn’t bear it any longer, and so on.*

“I hug you and kiss you and tell you all the time how much I love you,” I replied.

“Yeah, but how do I know you really mean it?” she pressed forward, digging for the golden nugget of truth.

“I work really hard to make the money that provides your food, clothing, home and toys.”

“Yeah, but you have to do that. That’s what every parent has to do, but that doesn’t mean you love me.”

I invited her to sit on my lap while I told her the ultimate, indisputable way that she could know that I loved her more than anything else on the planet.

“Buddy, I do everything I can to try to raise you up to be the woman that God made you and wants you to be. There is nothing more important than that you love, obey and serve God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul. And I do everything I can to help you be a little girl who grows up to be a big girl who is God’s pleasing and faithful servant. There’s nothing more special that any parent can do than to help his or her child honor God; and I will never stop trying to do the things that bring you closer to Him. That’s more important than buying you nice clothes or giving you a cell phone, than letting you see every movie you want to see
or giving you the biggest room in the house. I really want God and other people throughout the world to be blessed by who you are.”

Her big, dark eyes continued to stare intently into mine for a few seconds after I finished delivering my best shot. Then she pursed her lips, grinned, nodded her head up and down a few times, and simply said, “Okay,” and went bounding out of the room. She has never asked me that question again. I hope it is because she sensed the truthfulness and sincerity of my reply.

**A SHARED GOAL**

Each of us who has the privilege of relating to young children these days shares a special goal: to help transform those children into spiritual champions. It will not happen by accident. It may not happen even if we devote our best resources to that task, but the possibility is worth the risk. In fact, this isn’t really a risk at all since our personal success in life is completely wrapped up in our willingness to nurture these young people.

If you have not yet reached the point of embarrassment over the fact that most adults—perhaps even you—abdicate your children’s moral and spiritual development to illegitimate usurpers of that responsibility (e.g., schools, the media, legislatures, judges and even churches), then I pray that the Holy Spirit will heighten your sensitivity to this travesty with all due haste. We have no right to complain about how our children develop if we are not heavily and purposefully investing in those outcomes. Those who fill the gap in our absence are mere substitutes for us when we don’t pull our weight. If we default on our responsibility, we cannot blame those substitutes for making the most of the opportunity. This is, after all, part of the battle for the minds and hearts of humanity.

I pray that in the years to come you will seize the opportunities that God provides to you, as a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, to enable
your home and those of other believers to be places of victory in the turbulent and relentless spiritual battle for those young hearts, minds and souls. May your household provide a nurturing environment of faith, love and spiritual growth so that the emerging generation of America’s children will be all that their creator intends them to be.
ENDNOTES

Chapter 1
1. Source unknown.
2. For reasons that will be explained as we progress, it is during these ages that people are experiencing the formation of their characters and souls. While people are always changing and God can impact a person’s life at any age, an abundance of research has shown how malleable young people are during these early years—more so than at any other time of their lives.
4. Ibid.
7. An article in USA Today (June 11, 2001), p. 1, described a study by the National Institutes of Health that showed more than 75 percent of high school dropouts have reading difficulties, and 50 percent of all adolescents and teens who have a criminal record have reading problems.
10. This perspective is verified by surveys reported by the U.S. Bureau of the Census website, http://www.census.gov (accessed September 9, 2001), which show only one-third of parents identify safety issues, three-tenths list social pressures and one-quarter note social pressures regarding body image as being present at their child’s school. Most of the parents interviewed felt there is more pressure on their child to perform well academically than to not perform well.
15. Source unknown.
21. These figures are drawn from a survey conducted in 2001 by WGBH and Applied Research and Consulting and from the annual tracking study, Monitoring the Future, produced by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

Chapter 2
1. His intention to hold us accountable is clearly expressed in Ecclesiastes 11:9 and Romans 14:12. A wealth of other passages such as Matthew 12:36, Exodus 32:34, Psalm 10:13, Ezekiel 7:3 and Hosea 8:13 support such judgment.
2. Understanding our purpose and the meaning of life emerges from the foundation of our considerations, which is known as a worldview. For a more comprehensive explanation of common worldviews, their development and their implications, see George Barna, Think Like Jesus (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003); Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, How Now Shall We Live (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001); and David Naugle, Worldview (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).
3. By “postmodern,” I am referring to the widespread philosophy that says there are no moral absolutes, one’s views should not be imposed upon anyone else, you must be tolerant and accepting of all other viewpoints because there is no all-encompassing right moral or spiritual position, and each individual is his or her own moral standard. For a more expansive understanding of this vacuous worldview, see George Barna, Think Like Jesus (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003); Gene Edward Veith, Postmodern Times (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994); and James Sire, The Universe Next Door (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
5. In our research, we do not categorize people as “born again” based on their using that label to describe themselves. We categorize people based upon their beliefs, not their self-description, church affiliation or religious practices. The statistics cited in this section are based on nationwide research among a random sample of 907 teenagers, of which 154 were 13 years old.
6. As in the born-again population, when we classify someone as an evangelical, it is not based on self-description, church affiliation or religious practices; instead, it is based
solely upon their beliefs as described in this paragraph. The 5 percent who are classified as evangelicals represent about one-eighth of the born-again category of which they are a part.

Chapter 4
1. The influence agents in each of the three tiers are not listed in order of influence, because we are not able to determine, at this time, what that sequence is. At this stage, we are working with both qualitative and quantitative data but do not have sufficient confidence in the reliability of the statistical measures used to posit any definitive ranking of the elements.
2. Apart from our research, studies by individuals and institutions such as Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles, The Search Institute and Columbia University have indicated similar findings.
4. God has a unique and compelling vision for every person who relates to Him through the grace received by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Vision, which is a compelling mental portrait of a preferable future that God conveys to His followers for the purpose of advancing the Kingdom, becomes the defining characteristic of a true Christian. It is the means by which the person puts his or her faith in Christ into action. For a more extensive discussion of this practice, see George Barna, *Turning Vision into Action* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

Chapter 6
1. A taped presentation of this information by George Barna, entitled *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, is available in video or DVD form. The video can be acquired from Barna Research at http://www.barna.org. A DVD containing the presentation can be purchased from Gospel Light at http://www.gospellight.com.
2. For a more complete description of leadership, the four different aptitudes that leaders possess and how great team-based leadership works, read about the research Barna Research Group conducted on this topic in George Barna, *The Power of Team Leadership* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001). When this approach to leadership is utilized, the entire Church and community benefit; and leaders experience a higher level of satisfaction, impact and joy in their leading.