

Editorial: What are our children learning from us in these difficult times?

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A recent *Washington Post* article reported how attendees of President Trump's rally in Tulsa on June 20 explain racial protests to their children.

Richard Standridge took his 12-year-old daughter to the BOK Center in Tulsa, hoping to get inside for the rally. They arrived too late and spent their time outside, taking it all in—the people and the protests.

Speaking about his daughter, Standridge said she needed to be able to see “what’s going on,” adding: “[She’s going to take the most from this](#), and it’s going to shape her life and how she handles different viewpoints.”

Indeed, our children are going to take the most from this unsettled time. What are they going to take?

The short answer is, “We don’t know, yet.”

More importantly, we need to ask, “What are we teaching them?”

Our children are learning from us

Our children are learning from us during these unsettled times, not only explicitly through what we say to them about what is happening and why, but also implicitly through our reactions to what is happening. They are learning from our emotions, our perseverance or fatigue and our pessimism or optimism.

Of all the things our children need to learn right now—reading, writing and arithmetic among them—they need to learn how to do hard things. They need to learn to deal with viral pandemics, to bridge political divides, navigate economic crises and enact justice for others.

For followers of Jesus, these things need to be learned and taught, not as ends in themselves, but as expressions of the person, character, commands and lordship of Christ Jesus.

Teaching these things to our children requires us to be intentional, not just in what we say, but also and perhaps more so in what we do.

Three ways we can teach our children

Teaching our children to do such hard things requires us to be creative, compassionate and courageous. Embodying these three qualities is some of the best teaching we can do. We can embody them in at least three ways.

We can make sure our children hear and see us pray, asking God for help to be the people God calls us to be. They need to hear us asking God for forgiveness for wrongs we have committed—things like demeaning someone who disagrees with us politically or degrading another person because of gender or race. Our children need to see us demonstrate humility through prayer and seeking forgiveness.

If our children don't see or hear us praying to God about politics, economics and social conditions, they may learn God is irrelevant to matters so central to life.

We can talk with our children about difficult circumstances, even if our lives seem relatively unaffected by them. Our children need to realize not everyone has enough money or food, not everyone lives in relative comfort, not everyone has the same opportunities.

If we don't engage our children in thinking and talking about uncomfortable realities, they may learn comfort is the norm rather than the exception.

In addition to praying and talking, we also need to act. We can do things like examining and changing our purchasing decisions—where, what and why we buy what we buy. We can also address our friendships—who we befriend and why—and build relationships with people unlike us.

Praying and talking is important, but if we don't act also, our children may learn to become what Paul describes as “clanging cymbals” and “resounding gongs.” They may learn to talk about love without actually loving. And don't the greatest commands tell us to love?

What we learn as children

When I was a young child, I remember watching the news about the presidential race between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. I thought it was a literal race between two older men, and whoever crossed the finish line first became president of the United States. If only running for president was that simple, maybe even that literal. The more complicated truth made no sense to my young imagination.

What are our children making of the complicated truths we face today? What are they learning about Jesus and the role of the gospel in these complicated truths? Whatever they are learning, we are their teachers through much more than our words.

I wasn't around for the first Watts riots or the Kent State shootings. Stories about them and other protests and altercations of the 1960s and 70s became part of the soundtrack and background noise of my early years. It shaped my thinking about life and our country.

There's a difference, though, between hearing the stories your parents tell and seeing and living the stories yourself. Just ask any adult who lived through the 1960s and 70s. Just ask our children now.

During this new unsettled time, I hope our children are learning hope. I hope they are learning how to rise to—rather than be overcome by—the challenges of difficult times. Most importantly, I hope our children are learning to follow Jesus. I hope.

Praying, talking and acting creatively, compassionately and courageously will increase the likelihood of such hope being realized.

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