

The Power of Teachable Moments

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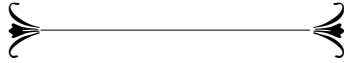
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Introduction



Stephen King couldn't come up with a worse nightmare: On August 20, 2002, my daughter started middle school. *Public* middle school.

I never thought it would happen to me. You see, I quit my job as editor of Focus on the Family's *Clubhouse* magazine in 1996 to be with Danielle, then age five. I wanted to be a full-time, home-schooling, bread-baking, stay-at-home mother, AKA "Super Christian Mom." Well, the bread baking lasted only one day, but I really thought I was going to home school for the long haul, all the way through medical school if need be.

For three years I was on a home-school honeymoon. I loved every day with Danielle. I read the books she read. I chose the friends she had and how much time she spent with each one. I determined which Bible verses she knew and which she didn't (like those about Lot's daughters). We memorized the books of the Bible, did Abeka curriculum, and prayed together every day.

Home school equaled parental control. Home school meant heavy exposure to biblical principles. Home school was my version of heaven on earth.

Then on July 10, 1998, the word *uh-oh* began to define the next phase of my life. That was the kind, sensitive phrase the nurse in the ob-gyn's office used when she saw the ultrasound image of my womb. Uh-oh—two syllables, two tiny babies.

Those babies grew, and grew, and grew, and finally were delivered on February 26, 1999, and though I'm thankful to have two healthy sons, I haven't stopped saying uh-oh since.

Danielle was smack in the middle of second grade when her twin brothers were born. I quickly realized that if she continued to stay home for school, the only thing she would learn is that baby poop comes in Technicolor. The next fall she entered third grade at the public elementary school around the corner from our house.

Fast forward three years and some 11,000 diapers. Danielle leaves for middle school around 8:15 A.M. After all her extracurricular activities are over, she's home at six o'clock, or, if it's a soccer practice night, at seven. Then comes homework while I pour the bowl of Cheerios (ahem, I mean provide a healthy and nutritious, vitamin-rich supper). Next the trumpet sounds, literally, as she practices for band. Soon it's time to put the twins to bed. After I have given them baths, read the entire series of Curious George stories, had a pillow fight, sung several choruses of "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly," prayed with them, and kissed them goodnight, Danielle has been asleep for at least an hour.

My husband, Doug, manages to lead the family through a study on Psalms, though not as routinely as we'd like. He also helps Danielle with her homework when he's not teaching night classes at a local university. We do pull into church nearly every week, 15 minutes late, and send Danielle to Sunday school, but it's still not enough. What exactly is she learning in there while we're singing praise choruses at the opposite end of the building?

That's when I think, I couldn't pick her locker partner out of a lineup. I can't talk to her in the car because we're in a carpool. I can't talk to her in the morning because the twins are awake and screaming for their frozen French toast sticks. I have no idea what she's learning in school. I have no idea who her new friends are. I haven't seen the textbooks because they're not allowed to come home. I can't remember the last time we've studied the Bible together. I can't remember being so out of touch.

Good-bye, Super Christian Mom. Hello, uh-oh.

About the time Danielle entered middle school, I received a call from my friend and former coworker Larry Weeden: Would I be interested in co-authoring a book with Jim Weidmann, the guru of family nights, on a surefire method of training godly kids?

I almost said no because I write primarily “short stuff”—works for short people (kids) or short magazine articles that take short periods of time to write. The last book I actually managed to finish since the twins were born is a phonic reader with only 100 words. I also create a lot of fiction, and the proposed book had to be true.

But I was captivated by the teachable-moments concept. I thought the method could be my answer to the uh-oh situation I’m in—the same situation many parents are in. While I had used teachable moments off and on over the years, I had by no means used them as a methodical, reliable method of spiritual training.

But after catching Jim Weidmann’s vision, I realized that teachable moments could be orchestrated to foster Danielle’s spiritual growth and that I needed them to happen more often. I also found that even though I couldn’t spend the hours with her that I wanted to, I could still take hold of those blocks of time I had with Danielle and impart a meaningful spiritual heritage. I could learn how to build a better relationship that would help us discuss those deeper issues; I could make sure she understood the core values of the Christian life. The ideas also got me thinking about how to be more intentional about teaching the twins, who aren’t quite ready for formal Bible training.

So I began to research and write this book, gleaning insights from Heritage Builders Jim Weidmann and Kurt Bruner, as well as from old friends and new. And lo and behold, I found myself thinking, Good-bye, uh-oh. Hello, hope.

—Marianne K. Hering, September 28, 2002

Warning

The families and their stories in this book are true. They do not, however, represent the whole truth. The examples presented here are, for the most part, victory stories of parents whom the Lord has blessed with something likened to success in raising their children. The parents quoted in this book have made many mistakes along the way, but those failures are not noteworthy—nor do we have enough volumes to print them all!

The parents here would like to be remembered for their positive examples in the same way sports figures are remembered for their successes. In 1927 Babe Ruth led the league with 60 home runs, and he also led the league with a total of 89 strikeouts. People didn't flock to Yankee stadium to watch Babe Ruth strike out. They paid money to see him hit home runs.

What Is a Teachable Moment?

John Bengé knew the site would look desolate. The firefighters had told him the house was gone. But he wasn't prepared for the physical shock of seeing his home of 22 years in a heap of charred rubble. His breath grew short; his throat tightened; the tears flowed. The only things left intact were five plastic lawn chairs and the garden hose, which dangled ghostlike from the spigot.

As John inspected the grounds with his 17-year-old son, Austin, he could no longer deny the truth: His family had not a single earthly treasure left—no restored antique cars, no oil painting of the English family home, not one of his daughter's kindergarten drawings. Everything of sentimental and monetary value had been destroyed by a capricious inferno named the Hayman fire, which in 2002 consumed 137,000 acres of Colorado forest, including John's acre lot and his log cabin home.

Father and son sat on the stone steps that used to lead to the log house, steps where the pair had often gazed at the stars and talked. They'd discussed teachers, girls, cars, the future, and God; they pondered

the mysteries of the universe on those steps and together had found peace.

This day the mystery they pondered was why God had allowed their home to be consumed while neighboring cabins hadn't even been singed. What was the purpose of their loss?

Austin sat on the familiar steps and absentmindedly played with a loose rock tucked into one of the corners of a step. Underneath it lay a note:

I just wanted you to know that you are in our thoughts and prayers. Our hearts go out to you and we feel your loss with you. Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ, which strengthens me." Love in Christ, Doug, an Alaskan firefighter.

The short letter was what they needed to confirm that God's hand was on the whole situation. "I guess we still have everything that's important: family, friends, and God," John said.

"We'll have Christ forever," Austin said. "Nothing else lasts." In that moment, John knew Austin's faith had been tried by fire and had withstood the test.

Christian parents across North America want to know what it takes to build a lasting faith in their children, a faith that can withstand the trials and temptations of this world. They ask, "What can I do to make sure my kids stay strong in the faith—that they pass the test?"

Of course, there is no magic formula, but there are some things parents can do to help develop strong children. Many parents know that the best faith-learning takes place in the context of real life, because it is real life that tests faith. John and Austin will remember the events following the fire and the lessons they learned far longer than they will remember any three-point Sunday sermon. Those precious minutes on the steps of their burned-down cabin represent a faith-learning principle called a "teachable moment."

Capturing a teachable moment is one of the easiest methods to train your child in spiritual matters. These are moments when you are with your child and something occurs that offers an opportunity to teach something about God. It's as simple as paying attention to the world around you and presenting it from a godly viewpoint.

For example, if you see a beautiful tree growing near a lake or river, you can point it out and say to your child, "Isn't that tree magnificent? God says that people of faith are like that tree. Trees stay strong because they grow near the water. People stay strong when they grow closer to God. What other good things happen if you grow near God?"

Or if you are at the grocery store and you receive extra change back from the cashier, you point out the mistake to your child, saying, "God wants us to be people of integrity. Should I give this extra money back or should I keep it?"

If you're like most parents, you want your children to learn biblical principles and become spiritually aware of what God is doing in their lives. And you probably already know that lectures don't work, Sunday school lays a good foundation but isn't always memorable or life-changing, and family devotion time turns into family demoralization time if the material isn't fun and relevant.

Once you discover the power of the teachable moment, however, you will have a method to make a life-changing spiritual impact through everyday events. A teachable moment gives you the resource to make the Bible relevant to your children today, right now, this very moment.

A teachable moment requires three simple ingredients. The first is a good relationship between the parent and child. Most positive learning occurs best inside a loving bond. Second, a teachable moment requires a catalyst such as the fire, the beautiful tree, or the extra change in the examples above. A catalyst is the conversation starter, the reason the teachable moment is occurring at that specific

time and place. You can even design your own catalyst to teach your child a specific truth. Third, a teachable moment requires a biblical truth. The truth can be a Bible fact, a truth about God's character, or insights into living a life of faith.

Teachable moments can be used to affirm, encourage, correct, or equip your child in spiritual matters. They are the perfect way to catch your child doing something good. For example, if your child's teacher comments that he gets along well with other people, you can tell him later, "I'm proud of you for being a cooperative person at school. The Bible says that Jesus got along well with other people when he was young. You are following in His footsteps when you treat others with respect and kindness."

Teachable moments are perfect for the single parent who doesn't have a partner to help pass on a spiritual legacy. They can be incorporated into any family routine, no matter how busy. Teachable moments



A Hot Topic

During the summer of 2002, forest fires devastated the western United States. The Hayman fire had counterparts all over Colorado, Arizona, California, and several other states as well. I thought our house in the suburbs, with its green lawn, was safe—that is until one Friday night in July when our next-door neighbor's juniper caught fire. In a matter of seconds, the 20-foot tree blazed like the Olympic torch and quickly caught the garage and nearby bushes on fire. Only the rapid response by neighbors kept the house from burning to the ground and the fire spreading to our home. My daughter, Danielle, witnessed the blaze, and the sight and smell of the small inferno is seared into her memory.

The forest fires had been burning for months. On windy days ash filled the air, and the sunsets glowed deep orange because of the smoky air. But I never thought to use the fires as a teaching tool until a small one struck

require no manuals, discussion guides, or preparation. In fact, they work best when you're just having plain old fun with your kids.

Take Just a Moment

Austin Bengé didn't suddenly become the kind of person who could trust God in the face of a disaster. His father had carefully nurtured his son's spiritual life to the point where Austin was ready to respond to the loss of his possessions with peace instead of bitterness. John had built a relationship with Austin and throughout his son's life had taught him about the loving nature of God. They'd shared hobbies, including the restoration of antique British cars, and spent many hours together working, playing, and talking. The fire took the cars, but it couldn't touch the special relationship that had been built between father and son; neither could it hurt the relationship between Austin



close to home. After inspecting the destruction of the fire, I read Danielle these verses from James 3:5-6: "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

As Danielle enters middle school, I know she will see many a social fire kindled by the words of friends and classmates. I used this nearby fire as an example of what cruel words can do and how sin, once burning, is difficult to control. Now we have a life event and biblical base to discuss and deal with the inevitable gossip she will encounter. Because of that discussion, she has the Bible as a base for her personal standards of conduct. We never would have had that conversation if the fire hadn't sparked our interest in the Scriptures.

—mkh

and his heavenly Father. Austin's faith had been built up moment by moment with his father, and those faith-learning moments, when added together, will yield him an eternity in heaven with Christ.

You can have the same type of spiritual influence on your children. The chapters of this book will allow you to discover the impact of teachable moments and how to shape them. You'll be able to understand the dynamics of teachable moments and to recognize those golden opportunities when they arise. Finally, this book will give you tools and ideas on how to create your own teachable moments. You'll know *what* to teach your children, *when* to do it, and *how* to make those moments spiritually meaningful.

We hope these pages will inspire you to keep your children's spiritual development a top priority. As a result of using the teachable moments God provides each day, your relationship with your children will be strong and spiritually rich. We want you to grasp and share the joy that God has for your family every waking moment.

Jim Weidmann

Marianne K. Hering

101 Common Opportunities for Uncommon Teaching

Think of your best teachable moments as 60-second commercials for God’s truth and leave the 30-minute infomercial “lectures” where they belong—on late-night cable TV. The scenarios and Bible verses provided are for you to pick and choose from. Should a completely different idea materialize—go with it. At a later time you may want to use the extra truths and verses as a base for a family Bible study, but don’t ruin the beauty of the teachable moment by cramming too many verses into one sound bite.

Remember these rules for a positive teachable moment:

- Use questions to start the conversation and keep it going.
- Give your child the opportunity to explain the spiritual truth if he or she can.
- Affirm every respectful attempt at an answer.
- Keep it light.
- Stay focused on the catalyst.
- Explain truths in a way that appeals to the child’s perspective.

Teachable Moment #1: A Lie

Catalyst: You catch your child lying, or a lying scenario is presented through the media.

Truth #1: Satan is referred to as the “father of lies,” and God cannot lie. Honesty comes from a redeemed heart; lying is wrong. (Exodus 20:16; Proverbs 19:22; John 8:44; Colossians 3:9; Titus 1:2)

Questions: What’s the worst lie ever? (There is no God; second is that Jesus was not resurrected.) Why do you think most people lie? Has someone ever lied to you? How did you feel when that happened? How can being silent be a lie? Even if you don’t get caught, who knows that you lie?

Truth #2: Lying ruins a person’s credibility. He or she can’t be trusted or given privileges. (Galatians 6:7)

Questions: If you lie about a little thing, will it be easier down the road to lie about a big thing? If you were I, would you trust you again? Why? How long should it take before I can trust you again? Has someone ever lied to you? How did it feel?

Teachable Moment #2: Gossip

Catalyst: Your child repeats an ugly rumor about someone.

Relationship Truth: Gossip destroys relationships and is not dignified. (1 Timothy 3:11; Proverbs 20:19; James 3:11)

Questions: How do you think so-and-so would feel if he or she heard you say that? Did you see this firsthand? If not, how do you know it’s true? Even if it is true, what good will come of your telling it? Have you repeated this rumor to anyone else? What can you do to help stop rumors like that?

Teachable Moment #3: Teen Pregnancy

Catalyst: An unmarried teen that you know had sex and is pregnant.

Truth #1: Sex is intended to be enjoyed in the context of marriage; anything else is impure. (Hebrews 13:4; 1 John 2:14-16)

Questions: Why do you think God wants humans to have sex only with their marriage partners? Do you think the girl expected to get pregnant? Why do you think she decided not to wait for marriage? Is that a good reason? (Or is that what love is?) What benefits are there in being abstinent before marriage? Does abstinence make sense to you?

Truth #2: Although it is legal in this country, abortion is not a biblical option. (Psalm 139:13-16; Deuteronomy 5:17)

Questions: Under what circumstances should she consider abortion? What is best for the baby now? What are your plans for raising children?

Teachable Moment #4: Too Much on Your Plate

Catalyst: You are at an all-you-can-eat restaurant. Your child doesn't eat all the food he or she selected, or he or she chooses several desserts.

Truth: Even though the food is “free,” it is still wrong to be a glutton. Self-control is a virtue. Discuss the sayings “Your eyes are bigger than your stomach” and “Eat to live; don't live to eat.” (Proverbs 23:19-21; Titus 1:7-8; Galatians 5:23)

Questions: How much food is too much? What signals does your body give when it's time to stop eating? Do you listen to those signals? Who pays for the food when you don't eat it? Do you think that is taking advantage of the system? Do you think it is considerate? Do you think Jesus would do it?

Teachable Moment #5: Intoxication

Catalyst: Your child comes in contact with someone who is intoxicated.

Truth: Alcohol affects a person's body so that he or she is no longer in control of his or her actions. This is disgraceful in the eyes of God and oftentimes is hurtful to others, not to mention dangerous, especially if the intoxicated person is driving. (Proverbs 20:1; Galatians 5:19-21)

Questions: What does the Bible say about drinking alcohol? About getting drunk? Do any of your friends drink alcohol? Do you respect the actions of so-and-so now that you've seen him or her drunk? Why do you think so-and-so drinks? What will you do when you are someplace and are offered a drink? Many of your friends will start drinking. What do you plan to do if they start drinking and you're around?

Teachable Moment #6: Taking the Lord's Name in Vain

Catalyst: You are watching a movie or a TV show and someone uses the Lord's name in vain or uses foul language.

Truth #1: God does not want His name to be used in any way that is not reverent and uplifting, honoring and respectful. (Deuteronomy 5:11)

Truth #2: God also expects us to refrain from using language that does not build up or is offensive. (Ephesians 4:29, 5:4)

Questions for both truths: What are your standards for language in a movie? Under what circumstances would you turn off the TV or walk out of a movie theater? What do you think God's standards are? Do you need to re-evaluate your personal standards? Does it matter if the "bad guys" or the "good guys" use the bad language? Why or why not?

Teachable Moment #7: Feeling Ugly

Catalyst: Your child is upset about acne, a bad hair day, or is feeling fat or unmanly. He or she lets this outward "disaster" stop him or her from enjoying the day.

Truth: God does not evaluate people by their outward appearance; your child needs to learn that he or she is still valuable and still has a purpose for the day even though he or she may feel worthless. (1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 32:10-11; Colossians 3:23-24)

Questions: Let your child know that you had days like that and still do but that you go on and help the family or go to work, etc. Will God judge you by what you look like? Even if you were the ugliest per-

son on the earth, which you're not, can you still please God? Do your friends judge you the same way God does? Who is easier to please—God or your friends? Whom can you trust to love you no matter what you look like?

Teachable Moment #8: Pride

Catalyst: Your child participates in a sporting event, academic competition, or a game like Monopoly. He or she is successful and then makes a disparaging comment about his or her opponents.

Truth #1: It is dishonorable to bad-mouth or wish ill on your opponents or enemies. (Proverbs 17:5, 24:17-18; Romans 12:16-18)

Questions: I thought you won the game—why the nasty words? What would Jesus say about so-and-so? You are the winner, what would a good sport do? What does so-and-so feel right now? Have you ever felt that way?

Truth #2: God hates pride. (Proverbs 8:13, 11:2, 13:10, 16:18, 29:23)

Questions: What will so-and-so say about *you*? Why does winning a game or contest make you better? Who gave you that talent in the first place? Do you think God likes your attitude? Why or why not? What does God want you to do with your talents?

Teachable Moment #9: Finders Keepers

Catalyst: Your child finds something valuable in a parking lot, for example, a necklace, expensive sunglasses, or money.

Truth: Finding something that doesn't belong to you isn't stealing, but you should make every effort to find the owner. The more valuable the object is, the more effort you should put into locating the owner. It's never okay just to say, "Finders keepers, losers weepers." (Deuteronomy 22:1-3; Philippians 2:4)

Questions: Have you ever lost something and had it returned? How did that feel? Do you remember when we lost the ____?

Wouldn't it have been great if someone had returned it? When you find the owner, what will be his or her reaction? If you were a millionaire, would you still want to keep this object? Why or why not? If you really "needed" this object, wouldn't God provide for you in a way that didn't harm someone else?

Teachable Moment #10: Feeling Like a Failure

Catalyst: Your child feels like a failure; he or she has lost a competition, earned poor grades, been rejected by friends, been cut from a sports team, messed up in a piano recital, or did not find a date for the prom.

Truth: God loves him or her no matter what! Jesus died for your child before he or she was worthy. (Romans 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Hebrews 11:13)

Questions: *None.* Tell your child about a time when you felt like a failure. Let your child know that you love him or her and respect the time it will take to emotionally recover from such a big disappointment.

Teachable Moment #11: Lost!

Catalyst: Your child is lost or separated from you for a time at the mall, amusement park, or other crowded place. When you are reunited, there is a special closeness.

Truth: God feels a similar joy when your child first believes in Christ or your child repents from his or her sins. (Luke 15:3-32)

Questions: How did you feel when we were separated? Do you think I was worried? How does God feel when we are "lost" from Him when we do things that are wrong? How does God feel when we come back to Him?

Teachable Moment #12: A Scalding Scolding

Catalyst: You reprimand your child in public and then feel bad about it. You apologize. Or one of your children gets on a sibling's case in public. You ask the aggressor to apologize.

32. A pit is a metaphor for being in trouble or caught in sin—
Psalm 7:5, 40:2, 103:4; Proverbs 23:27; Matthew 15:14.
33. A plank or a board represents blindness to your faults—
Matthew 7:3; Luke 6:41.
34. Fruit is used as a metaphor to indicate spiritual maturity or
prosperity—Matthew 3:8-10, 7:16-20; Galatians 5:22.
35. Flocks of sheep represent Christians—Matthew 25:32-33;
John 10; 1 Peter 5:2.

Five Milestone Truths

Milestone Moment #1: Baptism

Baptism is a public ceremony at which a Christian confesses his or her faith in Jesus Christ's ability to forgive sins and provide salvation. It is an act of obedience and satisfies the older child's desire to commit to the teachings of Christ.

Catalyst: Your child expresses a desire to accept Jesus as his or her savior, or he or she wasn't baptized as an infant and wants to be now. If a child is very young, it's up to the parent to decide if baptism is appropriate, depending on whether or not the child is mature enough to understand the commitment and cost of such a decision. When baptism is the answer, set aside an hour or so to go over the truths associated with this spiritual milestone. If your child was baptized as an infant and you sense a desire in his or her heart for a forum for public confession, check into a rite of passage or blessing ceremony. (See chapter 9 for details.)

Truth #1: Jesus was baptized and we should follow His example. (Matthew 3:13-17)

Truth #2: Getting baptized answers the feeling you have that asks, "What do I do to show God I believe?" (Acts 2:14, 36-4)

Truth #3: Many people, upon becoming saved, immediately were baptized. (Acts 10, 16:11-15)

Truth #4: Baptism represents being cleansed from our sin nature and being renewed through spiritual life. It is an outward sign of inward repentance. (Romans 6:3-7; 1 Peter 3:21-22)

Questions: Tell me what you know about baptism. Why do you want to be baptized? What are good reasons to be baptized? Do you understand the symbolism surrounding baptism? How do you want to be baptized?

Milestone Moment #2: Communion

Catalyst: Your child exhibits a desire to know more about Communion; you as a parent ask questions, and your child reveals he or she is ready to delve deeper into the meaning of this mystical and wonderful sacrament.

Truth #1: The wine represents Jesus' blood, which was poured out for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:17-30)

Truth #2: The bread represents Jesus' body, which was given for the life of the world. Jesus is the living bread. (John 6:48-58)

Truth #3: When you take Communion, it is to remember what Christ did for us. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Truth #4: Self-examination is part of the Christian life. You need to check your motives and confess your sins regularly. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

Questions: Why do Christians observe Communion? Why is taking Communion so important? What does the bread symbolize? What does the wine symbolize? Why do we keep taking Communion? Isn't once enough, as with baptism?

Milestone Moment #3: Preparing for Adolescence

Catalyst: Hormones. This is one of the times you act before the catalyst of puberty hits. The prime time for most children is between the ages of 10 and 12.

Truth #1: Adolescence is a difficult time, but you have help to avoid

Ten Resources for Teachable Moments Success



Bedtime Blessings by John Trent, Ph.D. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale/Focus on the Family, 2000). Designed for use with children ages seven and under. *Bedtime Blessings* will help affirm the great love and value you and God have for your child and will help each of your evenings together be filled with cherished moments.

“**Family Night Tool Chest**” series by Jim Weidmann and Kurt Bruner with Mike and Amy Nappa and others (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Cook Communications, 1997–1998). *Introduction, Christian Character Qualities*, and *Basic Christian Beliefs*. Each volume offers dozens of catalysts for planned teachable moments. Your family will never forget the wild and fun lessons designed by parents like you who want learning to be exciting and accessible.

Focus on the Family Clubhouse Family Activity Book edited by Marianne Hering (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale/Focus on the Family, 2001). This book offers fun family activities to structure relationship time and introduce new hobbies. It also has teachable-moment helps that will allow you draw out spiritual truths from the dynamic games, crafts, recipes, and activities.

Mealttime Moments: 164 Faith-Filled Entrees to Stir Family Discussions compiled by Elaine Osborne (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale/Focus on the Family, 2000). *Mealttime Moments* brings you great