



**GUIDING YOUR KIDS
INTO A FAITH
OF THEIR OWN**

Raising Disciples

TERESA ROBERTS

The deepest desire of every Christian parent is to raise their kids to know and love Christ. This is a tall order, and it is hard. *Raising Disciples* addresses parents' core desires and shows them, step-by-step, how to succeed. Dr. Roberts weaves the presence of Christ into a child's normal development in a way that makes growing a child's faith in Christ completely natural.

MEG MEEKER, MD, bestselling author of *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters*

Raising Disciples provides an easy-to-use template for not only raising disciples but also teaching your church how to raise disciples. Teresa has provided a timely and valuable resource for all Christ followers.

RUSTY GEORGE, lead pastor at Crossroads Christian Church

Teresa Welch Roberts brings clarity on raising children who love Jesus for every parent, teacher, and grandparent. This book offers biblical guidance and practical nurturing, and it doesn't disappoint as a valuable resource for those who want to raise children of faith.

LUCILLE WILLIAMS, author of *The Impossible Kid*

Raising Disciples is a treasure trove of wisdom for parents wanting to guide their children in developing a meaningful relationship with Jesus. Dr. Teresa Roberts has outlined principles for kids at each age level that are both practical and deeply rooted in Scripture. Get this book—it'll help your kids take their next step of faith toward Jesus.

CALEB KALTENBACH, founder of The Messy Grace Group, author of *Messy Grace* and *Messy Truth*, and research pastor at Shepherd Church

At our gigachurch, we are always looking for ways to maximize ROI. That's why we prioritize coaching parents in our kids' ministry. We realize that what Dr. Roberts is advocating for in *Raising Disciples* is, hands down, the single greatest investment of our church to secure the future for God's Kingdom. This is a resource you can't afford to overlook.

MARK E. MOORE, PHD, teaching pastor at Christ's Church of the Valley

Imagine our twelve- and thirteen-year-olds coming of age knowing exactly who they are in Christ, viewing the world through a biblical framework, sorting through questions, and thinking abstractly—all with a trusted faith community beside them. *Raising Disciples* turns this vision into a reality by offering practical guidance to those doing the most fruitful work of the church—child discipleship.

MATT MARKINS, coauthor of *Forming Faith* and CEO of Awana Child Discipleship

Parents who are looking for a compassionate and compelling guide to nurturing their children's faith in Jesus need look no further than *Raising Disciples*. Dr. Teresa Roberts masterfully provides sound biblical principles and relevant stories that will help kids embrace Christ-centered values. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone seeking to lay a powerful spiritual foundation for their children.

DUDLEY RUTHERFORD, senior pastor of Shepherd Church

I've known Dr. Teresa Roberts since she was a grade-schooler. As the weekend youth pastor, I was often hosted in her home, where I observed her humble and godly parents demonstrating intentional discipleship. Teresa's insights are forged not only in tremendous research and academic rigor, for which she is immensely qualified, but also in the lab of real life and practicality lived out by her extraordinary mom and dad, just everyday people who love Jesus and passed that on to their kids. You will be blessed, encouraged, inspired, and informed by this tremendous book.

GENE APPEL, senior pastor of Eastside Christian Church

Why is a college president still teaching children's church after thirty years? I do it because I believe children's ministry is *the* most effective strategy under heaven. Most Americans who decide to follow Jesus do so by age thirteen. In these pages, Dr. Teresa Roberts shows how those first thirteen years are also the most effective *discipleship* opportunity. I know no one better equipped to write about discipling kids than my colleague and friend Teresa, and this book offers wise and clear help to anyone—church leaders, parents, grandparents—who wants to shape children into committed Christ followers. My six kids are grown, but I'll be recommending this book as they now raise my grandchildren.

MATT PROCTOR, president of Ozark Christian College



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*To Lyle and Judy Welch,
who raised me to be a disciple of Jesus*

Preface

My earliest memory is of a water tower.

Yes, you read that correctly—a water tower.

The first four years of my life were spent in Newark, Ohio. I can't remember the two-story white house in which we lived. Pictures don't jog memories of my bedroom or the family room where I played. The one thing I clearly remember from that time in my life—some forty-five years later—is a water tower, or perhaps more specifically, what that water tower signified.

Passing by that water tower meant we were driving to church. I would see it out the window from my car seat as we drove and know exactly where we were going. Accompanying that memory are the feelings I had when I spotted that water tower—excitement, joy, happiness. We were going to church; it was my favorite place to be.

That water tower is the first in a series of symbols of my discipleship journey. It signifies the priority my parents placed on Christ. It indicates their commitment to participating in a

local church community. It symbolizes that from my infancy, God has been the central character in my story.

The result of my parents' placing Christ and the church at the center of our family was that a college math professor and a bank accountant raised three children to be disciples. My younger brothers and I were typical kids who grew up in a small, Midwestern college town. We went to public schools, participated in sports and music, and did well academically. We also had sibling squabbles and had our actions and attitudes corrected from time to time. But because our parents raised us to be disciples, we each made a commitment to Christ in childhood, grew in our walk with Jesus through our teenage years, answered the call to vocational Christian service, graduated from Bible college, and are now discipling others in our families and ministries.

Our parents didn't raise perfect kids. They didn't intend to raise us to enter vocational ministry. What they did was put Christ at the center of our family and guide us on a journey with Christ.

This journey included my parents placing us in the middle of a Christian community. This was more than attending church on Sunday mornings. Our weekly schedule and annual calendar centered around participation in our church community. We lived hours away from my grandparents and extended family, but because of the church, I had "adopted" grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. I was disciplined by and through this community.

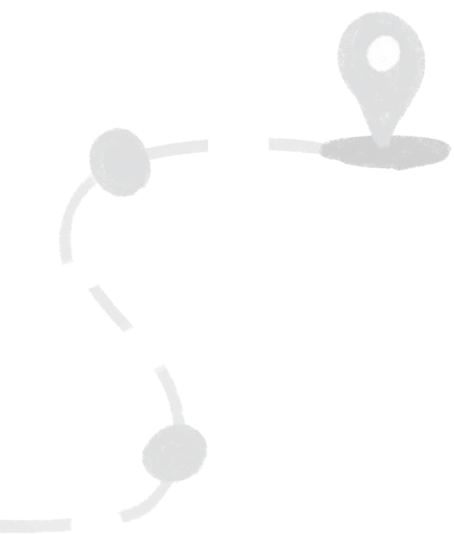
PREFACE

Twenty years after passing that water tower week after week, I was called to serve as the children's minister at a church located about an hour away. For more than twenty-five years I have served the church—first as a children's minister and currently as a Bible college professor and a children's ministry volunteer. I have loved participating in the discipleship of thousands of children.

Over the course of years of children's discipleship, I have learned one very clear lesson: I can spend hours preparing lessons, writing curriculum, training volunteers, and planning events, but ultimately the discipleship of children centers on the home. Moms, dads, stepparents, foster parents, and other caregivers are the primary influencers in raising a child to be a disciple.

But God has not left parents to do this work alone. He has created us for community and placed us in the family of God. That means every person who interacts with a child—children's ministers, grandparents, small-group leaders and volunteers, aunts and uncles, family friends, and other ministry staff members—has a part to play in raising disciples.

This book is written for everyone who desires to partner with God in the discipleship of children. My desire is to help you engage children by empowering them to become the followers of Christ God has created them to be. By guiding them along the discipleship map introduced within these pages, you can direct each one you encounter toward developing a relationship with God and their identity in Christ.



Becoming like Christ

The first thirteen years of life are the most important years for discipleship.¹

As I write this sentence, I can hear my friends who work with teenagers raise objections to this statement as they describe their work with middle school and high school students. I can see on my office shelves several books about discipleship of adults. In my current work, I'm surrounded by college students—these emerging adults—and I come alongside students as their belief in Christ deepens in those four years. Discipleship is a lifelong process, and each stage of that process is important.

But I will argue that the first thirteen years of life are the most important in this lifelong process of discipleship. No

other time between birth and death provides as many opportunities to shape how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world. This is by God's design.

While we can witness the rapid growth of a child's physical body,² what is happening in their mind is even more miraculous and formational. In fact, it is during these first thirteen years of life that humans develop cognitive skills,³ social competencies,⁴ and moral commitments⁵ at a rate that exceeds any other time of life.⁶

By the time a child reaches adolescence, she will have a cognitive framework—a mindset—that organizes her world into clear categories. This framework begins with concrete thinking: understanding the world through her senses and direct experiences. By age thirteen, she will mature beyond concrete thinking to abstract thought through the conceptualizing of ideas, critical reasoning, and understanding hypothetical scenarios. During childhood, her social world shifts from being self-centered toward being others-centered (and to a desire to be valued by others). By age thirteen, she can identify right from wrong, describe her basic beliefs, and make decisions based on what she values most. Many of the choices we make, passions we pursue, and perspectives we articulate as adults can be traced back to what we learned and believed in childhood.⁷

In other words, the first thirteen years of life are the most active in our development as humans and therefore in our development as followers of Jesus.

This process of biological, cognitive, social, and moral maturation is commonly labeled *childhood development*. But

I suggest that we could also label the process of maturation during childhood in this way: *discipleship*.

Defining *Discipleship*

Christians often associate the term *discipleship* with the process of becoming more like Jesus, but by its most basic definition, discipleship is *the process by which a student becomes more like the person or subject he or she is following*.

Every child is in the process of discipleship. The question is *What is discipling them?*

Consider a day in the life of your child. Who are the people she is following—peers, teachers, celebrities, coaches? How much time does he spend at athletic practices or watching sports on television? Who is teaching her to dance en pointe, dismount from the balance beam, or play the piano? How much emphasis is being placed on homework and academic achievement? What grabs his attention on YouTube or TV? How much time is she spending playing video games or reading books? Children are being disciplined through academics, athletics, extracurricular activities, relationships, and entertainment. Every child is in the process of discipleship, whether intentionally begun or not. If her discipleship is focused primarily on these types of activities, consider the natural result. She might be an excellent athlete, academically strong, or socially active—but is she following Jesus?

Now consider the amount of time your child spends in Christ-centered activities in a day. How much time does

he spend reading the Bible, singing songs about God, or in prayer? Is she participating in a Christian community to learn about faith, worship God, and be in fellowship with other believers? Does your family gather for meals to share about your day or have Christ-centered conversations regularly? Does he walk or hike trails to appreciate the beauty of God's creation? How often do you take advantage of everyday moments to point her to Jesus?

Hear me well. I'm not suggesting that playing Little League, taking piano lessons, or focusing on academics is bad. Not at all. Children need a variety of activities and relationships to grow into well-rounded, healthy adults.⁸ Under the right circumstances, almost every experience can come under the lordship of Christ and be part of the process of discipleship in Christ. I'm also not saying that parents should place their children inside a Christ-centered bubble and not allow them to interact with anything that isn't explicitly "of God." Instead, I suggest regularly evaluating a day in the life of our children to consider what we are emphasizing and the choices we are helping them make.

We need to recognize that from infancy children are being disciplined. At the same time children are growing taller, learning vocabulary words, developing social skills, and starting to understand themselves and others, they are developing their beliefs about God, God's Word, and God's work in their lives and the world. In the same way we teach them to read, practice a sport with them, and help them develop good manners, we should actively and intentionally place our

children on a discipleship journey toward Christ. We can't just expect children to arrive at the destination of belief in God; we need to guide them along the path. We need to ask this question on a regular basis: Are they following Jesus and becoming increasingly more like Him?

One of the joys I've had as a children's minister is observing those I identify as "my kids" grow and mature into young adults. I've had the honor of attending their weddings, holding their children, and even teaching some of them in college. What I've consistently witnessed as "my kids" mature into adulthood is directly connected to the observations I made about them during their childhood. These young men and women are in many ways just older—and taller—versions of the children I disciplined. Much of their personalities, habits, and interests remain the same—just more mature and, sometimes, more intense.

Proverbs 22:6 encourages us to "start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." This proverb is not a promise that every child will remain in Christ—a child's disposition and life events can work contrary to the gospel. But research indicates that adults who follow Jesus most likely made a commitment to Him in childhood.⁹

Becoming more like Christ—engaging in lifelong discipleship—is the expectation of every follower of Jesus. Christian publishers regularly release books on discipleship topics to help guide adults in their Christian maturity. Middle school and high school ministries include discipleship groups

as part of their weekly programs. Some churches designate a ministry staff member to focus on discipleship. When discipleship discussions take place, however, they often focus on adolescents and adults rather than children.

Why?

Perhaps it's because Jesus chose twelve young men—teenagers and young adults—as disciples during His ministry. Maybe it's because there are few examples of the discipleship of children in Scripture, so it's difficult to identify a pattern to follow. But I believe the most common reason is that the ability of children to be disciplined is underestimated due to the immaturity of their thinking and choices. Many adults assume it is better to wait until a child's cognitive abilities have matured before beginning the process of discipleship rather than to see the opportunities for effective discipleship that childhood presents.

If you weren't already convinced that children can be disciplined and that the first thirteen years of life are *the* most important for discipleship, remember this: Jesus believed childhood was so important that He lived it. The God of all creation came to earth in the person of Jesus not as a twelve-year-old or a thirty-year-old but as an infant.

Consider for a moment that Jesus experienced every stage of childhood. He learned to sit up, crawl, stand, and walk. He learned how to speak and the meaning of words. He played with friends, completed chores, and grew up alongside other children. Between the time Jesus was dedicated at the Temple at forty days old (Luke 2:22) and when He

attended the Festival of the Passover at twelve years old (Luke 2:42), Scripture records that Jesus “grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him” (Luke 2:40). In other words, Jesus experienced physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual growth firsthand in those early years of life on earth.

It remains a mystery what Scripture means when it says that Jesus

made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

PHILIPPIANS 2:7

We do not know whether the wisdom of the universe was in the mind of the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:7). But we should not underestimate the importance of Jesus living childhood so that He might empathize with the whole of life’s experiences.

In accordance with Jewish tradition, Jesus attended the Festival of the Passover at age twelve. This year was labeled the “age of discernment” in preparation for the rite of passage into adolescence at age thirteen, when Jewish males were expected to bear the weight of God’s law.¹⁰ The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus remained in Jerusalem after the Festival of the Passover. Though He worried Mary and Joseph when they discovered that Jesus was absent from the group returning to their home in Nazareth of Galilee (Luke 2:48),

He demonstrated, with words and actions, awareness of His identity and purpose. Jesus asked His parents, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49), which can also be translated as “. . . about my Father’s business?”¹¹

According to the psychosocial development research of Erik Erikson, it is around age twelve that children enter a stage of self-awareness and social development when they are faced with finding out who they are, what they are about, and where they are going in life.¹² Therefore, just like Jesus, by the time a child reaches adolescence, they can believe that they are a child of God whose purpose is to live in the presence of God and be about their Father’s business. They’ll be more likely to believe this truth if we raise them as disciples.

The Goal for *Raising Disciples*

The first thirteen years of life are the most important for discipleship . . . so what can we do?

Though the Bible does not provide us with step-by-step instructions for raising children to be disciples, it does provide commands to parents and examples of discipleship that can be helpful and instructive. Though not all children develop biologically, cognitively, socially, and morally in the same way, we can rely on research that helps us understand the stages of childhood development that God designed. And though each child’s journey with Christ will be unique based on a variety of factors, there is a clear goal for their

discipleship journey, and there are some general directions we can guide them along on their journey.

Chapter 2 provides a discipleship map to use in guiding children in a life of discipleship from infancy to adolescence. Built on a biblical description for the process of discipleship, this map integrates information from childhood development to provide directions for spiritual growth. The goal of these steps in a child's discipleship journey is that they will never know a life outside of Christ. Instead, their faith will be nurtured from infancy toward a relationship with God that flourishes and matures throughout their life.

After the discipleship map is introduced, subsequent chapters provide ideas for each stage in raising a disciple. These chapters provide guidance on how to teach children to become students of the Bible, build a vocabulary of faith, and develop spiritual practices to develop an identity in Christ and a relationship with God. At the conclusion of the book, appendix D ("Age-Level Discipleship") contains information from each chapter organized by age group as a reference in guiding a child into a faith of their own.

Though this book is oriented toward parents and primary caregivers of children, the discipleship map and the additional information provided is helpful for anyone who is participating in the discipleship of a child. So whether you are a children's ministry leader or volunteer, a grandparent or a godparent, or an amazing aunt or uncle, this resource is for you, too. It takes the whole family of God to raise a disciple. In appendices A and B, you'll find additional questions for

reflection and resources helpful for anyone who participates in the discipleship of kids.

Let's link arms to guide the children in our lives along this pathway toward faith and commitment to Christ.

God Makes Things Grow

From the very beginning, I want to acknowledge that not every child is born into a Christian family, nor does every child have the ability or opportunity to grow in ideal circumstances. Whether a child has barriers to their growth or experiences trauma that impacts their development, not all children will progress in their discipleship in the same way. I encourage you to disciple every child, wherever they are along this path, in a way unique to their circumstances and experiences. Recognize potential barriers to their growth, but also identify the opportunities.

A good reminder is that though we can lead, train, encourage, and empower kids in their discipleship, God is the One who makes things grow (1 Corinthians 3:6-9). God knows each child and their location along the discipleship map. May we rest in the knowledge that God is at work in our lives as we become more like Christ and in the lives of the children we are raising to follow Him.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

As Jesus' earthly ministry was coming to its conclusion, He traveled with the twelve disciples through towns where He would heal the sick and teach the crowds the Good News of the Kingdom of God. His teachings challenged the religious leaders, but they also challenged His followers in their understanding of His message. And as they traveled, people desired to be near this miracle-working teacher.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

LUKE 18:15-17

Notice in this encounter what Jesus did and did not do.

Jesus did not summon the parents to come. Jesus summoned children. Jesus did not say that once a child matures they become a disciple. Jesus said that children are in the Kingdom of God *now*. Jesus did not keep children at arm's length. Jesus rebuked the disciples and admonished everyone not to hinder children. Jesus did not say that the disciples or religious leaders were the example to follow. Instead, Jesus said that children are our example of how to receive the Kingdom.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Questions for Reflection

1. Create a chart or map of your family's weekly schedule. List the regular activities for each family member from the past few months.
2. Review the chart and answer the following question: What or who is disciplining your child?
3. Reflect on your own childhood and how you were disciplined during the first thirteen years of your life. In what ways do you want your child's discipleship to be similar? Different?
4. How does your childhood experience of discipleship influence the way you're disciplining children?

