

CONTRASTING IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD

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Children. They come in an assortment of shapes, sizes and colors. They have different joys, expectations, hopes and dreams. God has uniquely designed each child in his own image—creating each one as an exciting bundle of potentiality. He also has planned the gift of childhood to be a special time for nurturing children’s God-given gifts and abilities. With the help and encouragement of family, friends and extended family members, children should find childhood a time to discover the person God created them to be.

IMAGES OF A HEALTHY CHILDHOOD

Childhood, especially in time past, recalls some very happy and memorable experiences of that brief span of time in which life was left uncluttered by adult-sized upsets, problems, decision-making, choices, responsibilities and complexities. Bedtime stories predictably began, “Once upon a time” and ended, “They lived happily ever after.” And as soon as you were launched into the “Once upon a time,” nothing was impossible; you were swept as far away as your imagination could carry you!

Such a “fairy tale” existence, however, was not always the way things were! Childhood even back then had problems and woes to be dealt with on a daily basis. But apart from family deaths and sporadic bouts of cuts, bumps, bruises and broken bones, childhood crises generally bottomed out at the level of peril experienced by my brother.

Whiling away a beautiful summer day, Gordon was sprawled under a favorite tree, his faithful pal, old Shep, beside him. He was ready to enjoy his newest story book when his eyes gazed upward to the deep blue sky filled with puffy white clouds. Gordon’s mind was quickly diverted to deciphering picture in the clouds: dogs, giants, turtles and trains belching smoke.

Suddenly, awestruck and filled with terror, Gordon ran for the safety of home. Breathlessly he cried out, “Mom, Mom, what is holding up the sky? What’s keeping it from falling down on me?”

Childhood crises aside, my most vivid recollections of a carefree childhood revolve around words and images that reflect a sense of freedom: boundless energy, carefree play, infectious giggles, happy laughter, simplicity, trust, security. Such “freedom images” are portrayed in children happily romping over a grassy hill on a warm, breezy day or flying kites that effortlessly soar skyward along with the children’s spirits; or blowing enchanted pipes that waft delightful multicolored bubbles high in the air, free to spiral at will.

THE BIBLICAL PATTERN FOR CHILDHOOD CARE

The psalmist reminds us that children are a gift—an inheritance—from God (**127:3**). Surely God expects us to care for his “gift” with a heart of love; a love such as Paul describes in **1 Corinthians 13:7**: “It [love] always protects,...always hopes, always perseveres.”

Love always protects

Protection and safety are foundational to a child's healthy development. Home always lies at the heart of a safe and happy childhood. No matter what woes or crises a child might experience growing up in his or her expanding world, home should always be there to serve as a safe retreat; a place where love is an unconditional given. In this safe haven, the child's daily joys and experiences can be shared freely, and child-sized heartaches are soothed and healed with love.

In healthy homes where relationships are based on love and trust, children develop a sense of self-esteem that molds their identity. Healthy relationships also provide a basis for development growth and spiritual integrity. In such an environment, children are equipped to discover the persons God created them to be. The encouragement offered and sense of self-worth imparted in the home produce happy children who can trust their world, their feelings and, eventually, their God.

The children, in communities that loved and cared for their children, also could depend on neighbors who were ready to offer a cheery "hello," extend an invitation to come in for fresh homemade cookies and a glass of milk or allow a sneak glimpse of some adorable, newborn kittens. It was even more enriching when relationships with neighbors formed a two-way street; elderly neighbors being appreciative of children's helping hands to shovel snow, bring in the mail or carry groceries from the nearby store.

Love always hopes, always perseveres

Parents' love for their children causes them to hope the best for them. They know such hopeful expectations will require perseverance in training—a training which will prepare their children to one day become responsible adults. One way of accomplishing this training in my childhood was through the "home schooling" provided not just by household chores, but also through my parents investing time in their children. Working alongside us, our parents taught skills which they hoped would one day be used in our own homes or jobs.

In this training, the importance of responsibility and doing one's best were always stressed. When Mother sent me out to collect the eggs, she expected me to check all the nests—not quitting in a few minutes to play. When my turn to wash dishes rolled around, I was to be diligent to complete the task, not hiding the dirty pans in the oven! When helping with the laundry, I was encouraged to do my best in folding it neatly.

Along with perseverance in training, came perseverance in discipline. Although sometimes trying to parents, consistency in discipline is also a vital part of childhood training. Children everywhere are constantly tempted to evade chores and responsibilities. Discipline, however, is essential in providing children with healthy boundaries and a framework of authority. Learning obedience and respect is a lifelong task that must begin in childhood.

The church also played a vital role in preparing children for adulthood. Lessons learned from "home schooling" were reinforced in Sunday school classrooms. Teachers had the opportunity to instill in youthful hearts the wonderful truth that

Jesus is a special Friend who loves and cares for them. Children were assured that Jesus would always be near to help them in their daily encounters with fears, troubles, obedience problems or with learning new skills.

Results of following God's pattern

When the biblical pattern of caring for children with a heart of love is honored, family and community leaders provide children with an abundance of loving, trust-filled relationships. These relationships give children a sense of security, identity, belonging, love and happiness. Such ingredients of childhood enable children to thrive happily and to mature according to God's intended pattern.

IMAGES OF A MARRED CHILDHOOD

Just as I have witnessed children living a carefree and joy-filled childhood, I also have witnessed firsthand many others who have had their childhood ruthlessly snatched from them. Abuse and violence toward children have become rampant around the world. Such poured-out abuse has caused millions of childhood images of joy, freedom and safety to become radically altered or altogether erased.

The United Nation's description of a normal childhood has become a hollow mockery to millions:

The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable, and dependent. They are also curious, active, and full of hope. Their time should be one of joy and peace of playing, learning and growing. Their future should be shaped in harmony and cooperation. Their lives should mature as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experiences.

Tragically, just a glimpse of the changing images of childhood for the millions of children living in difficult circumstances reveals the depth of loss children experience when they are deprived of a normal, healthy childhood.

Why are such radical changes occurring? Because children in much of the world no longer are provided with a living environment conducive to their happiness, growth and development. They also aren't granted the protection and basic tools of childhood needed for healthy development. Experiencing happiness and fulfillment in childhood depends on whether a child's God-given potential is nurtured and developed or crushed through abuse and neglect.

Traditionally, people assumed children would be protected by adult members of society. What an indictment on many societies, including America, that children as young as three years of age must now be taught to protect themselves from perpetrators of the violence and abuse that have become a part of daily life in their homes and neighborhoods! And who would imagine that in many so-called "modern" societies it has become necessary to form anti-slavery societies to rescue young children from harmful exploitation?

Our children are being forced to learn two extremely painful, sad and tragic lessons: the world is no longer a safe place in which to live, and adults cannot always be trusted.

On a recent newscast, violinist Isaac Stern expressed what he considers a basic right for all children: "Every child has the right to know there's beauty in the world." But how is a child to find beauty when the sights and sounds of his or her world include:

- Racial violence resulting in random murders
- Exploding bombs and burned out villages
- Mutilated bodies scattered everywhere
- Wailing air raid sirens
- Abject conditions of poverty in the ghettos
- Smelly, rat-infested city dumps as the source of today's food---perhaps even as the place called "home"
- Slovenly-kept brothel "prisons"
- Dust-choked rock quarries where children chip rocks up to twelve hours a day
- Almost total confinement to a small, dark hut because a care giver fears caring for a child victim of AIDS

One could paint endless bleak landscapes containing little, if any, beauty. No wonder children have forgotten how to laugh and play!

RESULTS OF A MARRED CHILDHOOD

When children live in traumatic situations, their hope is replaced by despair. Their infectious giggles, happy laughter and the joy of receiving parental love and nurture, which make their spirits carefree, are replaced with paralyzing fear, mistrust and deep grief. They carry burdens and responsibilities far too heavy for any child to bear. Deep in their spirits an overwhelming sense of hopelessness springs up; they see no opportunities to develop their God-given potential.

The new "roles" also rob children of their happy laughter. In war, for example, children often are forced to "grow up quickly" and assume parental care for siblings or "turn men overnight" and be trained in the art of killing and destruction. Poverty in the ghettos has forced thousands of children to give up both play and school to somehow help eke out a livelihood for other family members. And the moral decay in many nations promotes the bartering and selling of children as common chattel. This crime is committed simply so children can be used to serve the desires of depraved members of society.

The adult-sized roles thrust upon children leave them with no time or energy for play, school, friends or development of relationships. Instead of a safe, healthy home and community environment, millions of children are forced to live in an environment of fear, insecurity, suffering, poverty and trauma. Their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional needs are ignored.

RESTORING GOD'S DESIGN FOR CHILDHOOD

The urgency of a compassion-driven response to the children's tragic plight is vividly described in an article written by David High following his trip to Santa Cruz. From

his personal encounter with street children's sufferings experienced through murder, abandonment and exploitation, he poured out his heart:

There must be a pleading on the part of God's people all over the world that the raping and killing of these children be stopped. If our hearts do not cry out for mercy upon them, and if our hearts are not burdened by the reality of their lives, then we are a people whose hearts have grown stony and cold. It is time to bend the knee and humbly ask the Lord to take out the old stony heart and create in us a new heart of love [**Ezekiel 36:26; Psalm 51:10**].

Yes! It is beyond comprehension to fully imagine, let alone absorb, the pain and suffering of over 100 million children living on the streets with little or no love or security from home, family or community; or the trauma of countless children who have been left homeless through war, many forced to live in overcrowded refugee camps with few necessities; or the abandonment of millions of children shunned as "dreaded" AIDS orphans because caregivers fear contracting the disease. We must, nevertheless, "ask the Lord to take out the old stony heart and create in us a new heart of love" for these children.

Our heavenly Father fully understands the pain and fear of the world's suffering children, whatever difficult circumstances engulf them. I am convinced that his deepest heart-longing is to stir us, his people, to reach out with God-given compassion toward them—the youngest members of our world-wide family. We have the responsibility to bring them the message of God's redeeming love, holistic healing and hope.

Our first response is to confront the situations children are being forced to endure by taking a "walk in their shoes." As you pursue this journey in the remaining chapters of this section, keep your hearts open to hear the children's stories. Ask God to help you feel their intense anguish from the incredible tragedies and abuses heaped on them; to gain an understanding of the hopelessness of their situations; and, above all, to sense a deep responsibility to become actively engaged in God's love and compassion toward these precious children.

Far too often in the church's ministry, children in desperate need of love and acceptance, security and hope, beauty and joy are marginal when they should be at the heart of the church's mission and identity. An Old Testament description of Jesus' ministry (and ours) beautifully portrays God's desire to have the children's painful childhoods restored to his original design:

To comfort those who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair (**Isaiah 61:2-3**).

May the Spirit of God prepare your heart to grasp the challenge of becoming a restorer of God's grand design for these precious little ones.