



Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it

Heart Matter

by Lucy Waterman

It seems that there has always been a lot of pressure on the very youngest children to behave incredibly perfectly. From the times of being rigorously controlled by Victorian discipline to our days when the distraction technique or being kept quiet with a tablet or phone, the old adage of children being “seen and not heard” seems to have prevailed. In these days, when we understand so much more about the emotional impact of long hours in day care, when we can use technology to see the impact on brain development of neglect or poor attachment, and when we know the corrosive effects that cortisol and stress have on young children, why do we still appear to be trapped in expecting the very “best” behaviour day after day?

A recent article described ‘after school restraint collapse’. This is when children have appeared to be fine all day in school but are then either very angry or very upset as

soon as they walk in the door at home. Stacy Haynes, the psychologist explains: “It’s only natural for kids to release their emotional, mental and physical energy as soon as they hop off the bus. After all, they had to show a lot of self-control during the school day.”¹ There is no doubt that our youngest children have shown a lot of self-control during their nursery or preschool day as well!

Is it possible that we can support children during the day, to help ensure that they are emotionally secure enough to avoid such outbursts at its end? What is a day in an early years group really like for them? Do they find that they are being threatened, or that they are hearing repeated instructions or raised voices in an attempt to get them to obey?

Or do we feel guilty because we understand that behaviour is only ever the outward sign of a deeper

need in the child, and sometimes it seems we just can’t reach the heart of the child?

Unfortunately, it appears that many working in early years today still focus only on the outward behaviour of the children in their care. They assume that they are raising children in the right way if they get their them to act rightly (to behave). Yet caring for children involves more than getting children to ‘act’ rightly. As carers, we must think carefully and be motivated by a love for children rather than giving them any fear of punishment or shame.

The Bible helps us to see that we have tools for supporting children and understanding their behaviour. **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness** (2 Timothy 3:16, New International Version). God has provided us with everything we need

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to help children effectively. The key is learning how to apply the Scriptures to the everyday struggles our children face.

When children express themselves through their behaviour, they are drawing from what is in their hearts. We all need to see the importance of reaching past the outward behaviour and seeing the issues of the heart. The heart is the well from which all of the responses to life gush forth.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). The behaviour a child exhibits is an expression of the child's heart at that moment. To put it simply: the heart determines behaviour. What goes into their hearts will be what they draw on.

So, how can we help to understand the hearts of the children we work with and nurture the spirits of little ones who may feel sad, angry, alone, abandoned or just tired out? How can we see beyond the behaviour and nurture those precious hearts?

- **Look at their hearts. The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out** (Proverbs 20:5 NIV). Jesus set the ultimate example of how to search the heart of another in order to draw out what lies within. When dealing with those who had done wrong in the eyes of the law, Jesus did not shake His finger in their faces and tell them what they were doing wrong. Instead, He would ask thought-provoking questions in such a way that the person to whom he was talking felt listened to and that someone was genuinely there for them. How often do our children feel there is someone on their side during their long days away from home? How often do they feel that breaking the 'golden rules' is an

unforgivable act? Who will take the time to ask real questions and listen with love?

- **Guard their hearts.** We can correct and instruct children repeatedly, but God asks us to guard children and their hearts. We need more than our own wisdom to do this. It is God's wisdom from His Word that will truly help us guard the hearts of children. **Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it** (Proverbs 4:23, NIV).

Guarding our children's hearts is about protecting them from the negative forces that can shape their lives and prevent them from experiencing God's life. There are so many negative words, criticisms and demands placed on children that we need to be constantly asking God for His insight. Then we will be watching over, figuring out, caring about and supporting children with their challenges – guarding their hearts.

- **Provide a means of escape.** In 1 Corinthians 10:13, God explains that when His children are tempted, He always provides a means of escape. God ordains parents and carers as the protectors of their children to put His plan into action. We must follow through with His plan by providing our children with a means of escape. Simply rebuking behaviour that we see as unacceptable can exasperate children and provoke them to anger. **Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord** (Ephesians 6:4, NIV). Instead, our place is to walk alongside them, helping as they deal with big emotions and working together to find a way through. **"Come now, let us reason together," the Lord says**

to us (Isaiah 1:18, NIV). This is His appeal to us to consider a choice, and a choice which is more than an instruction to "share", "use your words" or "have some thinking time". It is an invitation to open up our hearts and be real about who we are and how we feel. Surely, we owe our youngest children the same opportunity to be supported and respected for their feelings and concerns?

Writing this has led me to think about how we "manage" behaviour in a fresh way, and with more emphasis on how God is asking us to nurture children. Maybe it really is time to put away the sand timer, the thinking chair (which is really still a naughty chair, but by another name!) and the behaviour charts. Maybe it is time to pray more, and ask God to guide us, as we seek to help young children manage huge feelings. Maybe it is essential that we take time to see behaviour as God sees it: not by the outward expression, but by the inner need.

¹ Stacy Haynes (Ed. D), CEO of Little Hands Family Services, quoted in "After-school restraint collapse is real—here's how to help your child" by Heather Marcoux. <https://www.mother.ly/child/if-your-child-falls-apart-after-school-theres-a-good-reason-why> (accessed on 30/12/2018)

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