

RAISING JUDGMENTAL

Kids

BY GREG HARTMAN

Okay, it's an old joke, although I suspect Sam might have been the first 7-year-old to think of it.

I Know What Parents Want

Many parents would no doubt gasp and tell me I should have told Sam not to judge something he didn't understand. But I didn't—I laughed, agreed and praised him. Why? He wasn't afraid to say what we were both thinking: It's silly to call a black square one of the most important paintings in history.

I don't believe in tolerance, acceptance or openmindedness anyway. In fact, I'm deliberately raising my kids to be intolerant, judgmental and narrowminded. And I submit that most Christian parents have the same goals whether they realize it or not.

Think about it: Do we *want* our kids to be gullible and vulnerable to peer pressure? Do we pray they'll grow up to be weak-minded, weak-willed, easily led astray? Do we hope they'll be unable to discern good from evil and intelligently apply biblical faith to everyday life?

Of course not. We want our kids to be street-smart, yet pure (Matthew 10:16; Ephesians 4:14). We want them to have real compassion that emboldens them to tell the truth even when it hurts (Proverbs 27:6). We want them to be humble enough to say "I don't know," but brave enough to be the only one to take a stand (1 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 6:14). We want them to be intolerant of sin, yet eager to forgive (John 8:1-11). We want them to know—and respect—the difference between moral absolutes and minor convictions (Romans 14:1-4; 1 Timothy 4:6).

X Games

The common theme in all these goals is a balance between two extremes:

Extreme No. 1: Fire at will. I once got a letter from someone who took umbrage at my using the term *theologians* in an article:

The writer said all Christians love God and read his Word, so we are *all* theologians. He described my article as "a slap in the face of

Two years ago my son, Sam, and I were flipping through a book of history's most important paintings when we came across Kasimir Malevich's "Black Square on White Ground." As the name suggests, the painting is a black square on an otherwise blank canvas.

Sam said, "What is *that*?"

I read the author's description (which, given the painting, seemed even more bombastic than usual for such books): "Malevich wants

the viewer to see the barrenness of form and tone as majestic and capable of freeing us from the smallness of incident—"1

Sam interrupted: "It's just a black square!"

"It's an abstract," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, instead of painting what they see, abstract artists paint what they feel or think. They try to say something, not show something."

Sam giggled. "I think *he's* saying he can't paint!"

PHOTO BY G.A. BELUCHE AND KAYTE WOLVERTON—PTM

all believers” and “heresy.” He also wrote my editor, saying he would cancel his subscription unless my editor fired and blacklisted me at once.

“So I’m a heretic,” I remarked to my editor. “Can’t get any lower than that.”

He shrugged. “He could have called you a reprobate.”

My article, by the way, was in a Christian teen magazine, and the angry reader was 17 years old.

I don’t know what his parents were like, but sadly, he had no shortage of bad examples to follow—from Jerry Falwell blaming 9/11 on feminists, to picketers at gay men’s funerals, to Christians warring publicly over trivial issues such as methods of baptism and Bible versions. Whether an onlooker is looking for role models or scapegoats, it’s not hard to conclude that being a Christian means fighting to the death over every issue, no matter how insignificant, indiscriminately shooting enemies and friends alike.

Extreme No 2: Surrender. Today’s mantra is tolerance, acceptance and sensitivity. When parents pay lip service to it, the results in our children can be chilling:

“Kay Haugaard teaches creative writing at Pasadena City College and says she has, for more than 20 years, been teaching ‘The Lottery,’ Shirley Jackson’s short story in which the citizens of a small town ritually stone one of their number to death. Jackson’s story used to shock people into moral judgment. No longer, according to Ms. Haugaard. After a lengthy discussion, it became apparent that her students thought they were in no position to judge people who followed different traditions.

‘At this point I gave up. No one in the whole class of more than 20 ostensibly intelligent individuals would go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice.’”²

“The Lottery” is a fictional account of one person’s death.

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Yet students are reluctant to make moral judgments, even about the Holocaust, according to Robert L. Simon, a philosophy professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY:

“In more than 20 years of teaching college students, I have yet to meet even one student who has expressed doubts about whether the Holocaust actually happened. However, I have recently seen an increasing number of students who, although well-meaning, hold almost as troubling a view. They accept the reality of the Holocaust, but they believe themselves unable morally to condemn it, or indeed to make any moral judgements

whatsoever.... By denying themselves the moral authority to condemn such great evils of human history as the Holocaust, slavery and racial oppression, these students lose the basis for morally condemning wrongdoing anywhere.”³

Many Christians nod at such stories, remarking that the United States has indeed lost its moral footing. But studies show that Christians aren’t much different (see “Scary Statistics”).


Teach Your Children Well


Most parents understand the concept of gradually giving children more responsibilities and privileges while gradually releasing them to independence. Parents wanting a successful launch from the nest will model responsibility for their kids from infancy through adulthood (see “Maximized Modeling”).


The same holds true for training children in making moral judgments, says Steve Isaac, editor of *Plugged In Online* (www.pluggedinonline.com).


SCARY STATISTICS


We’ve all heard frightening facts about how America has blundered into the quicksand of relativism:

 Sixty-four percent of Americans agree with the statement, “All religions are equally good.”¹


 Sixty-four percent of Americans believe, “Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and all others pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God.”²


 Sixty-two percent agree with the statement “It does not matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life.”³

 Seventy-one percent of Americans agree that “There are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations.”⁴

 Seventy-two percent agree that “There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.”⁵

That’s scary, all right. Here’s something scarier:

 Fifty-three percent of those saying there is no such thing as absolute truth identify themselves as born-again Christians.⁶

 Forty-two percent of those who identify themselves as evangelical Christians agree that “There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways but both could still be correct.”⁷

¹ *Religion in America, 1996* (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton Religion Research Center, 1996) p. 74.

² George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), pp. 210-212.

³ George Barna, *Absolute Confusion* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), p. 207.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 230.

⁵ George Barna, *Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), pp. 83, 283.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

MAXIMIZED MODELING

Child-development experts describe three separate windows of opportunity during which parents can teach values and influence by example:

Imprint Stage: From birth to about eight years old, children absorb their parents' teaching. Parents can ground children in their values with structured, but fun, teaching: games, stories, memorization.

Impression Stage: From age eight to about 14, children are still open to parental influence, but they want to know the rationale behind their parents' beliefs and actions. Parents should be ready to discuss their faith intelligently during this stage (1 Peter 3:15).

Coaching Stage: By the time kids are about 15, direct parental influence is waning. The parent's role shifts to coaching. Parents should encourage and advise, but also let kids make, and learn from, their own mistakes.

Source: Kurt and Olivia Bruner, *The Family Compass* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Chariot Publishing, 1999).

"You can't completely isolate children from negative influences," Isaac says. "Even if you could, they have to learn sound judgment; sooner or later you have to unwind the leash."

Plugged In Online's reviews detail the content of movies, TV shows or music and encourage parents to decide how best to proceed. A frequent frustration, however, is that many Christian parents simply want someone to tell them what to do.

"We teach discernment so parents can pass it on," Isaac says. "We list positive and negative elements in movies; we suggest ways to help children think through a movie's message. But often parents call or write and say 'Just tell me whether to let my kids watch it!'"

Walk This Way

We can't all be experts on theology and apologetics. But since kids are more likely to follow our example than our advice, why not learn alongside them? Here's how and where to get started:

Let's get cynical. Studies show that kids with parents who are openly critical about the messages given in today's media are far less vulnerable to its influence.⁴ Music, TV programs and movies

are jammed with hidden—or blatant—agendas. Challenge your kids to spot the landmines; point them out if necessary, whether it's an attempt to ridicule people of faith, normalize homosexuality or immorality, or encourage violence or rebellion (2 Corinthians 2:11). Take my son's example: Tell it like you see it in no uncertain terms—and pull the plug if necessary.

Your kids may argue with you, insisting that song lyrics don't matter, that you're being unfair or nitpicky, or that you just don't understand. Stand firm: They're listening and learning more than they know.

Ask the tough questions—before someone else does. As your kids get older and start dealing with more complex, abstract issues, openly discuss your own doubts and failures (1 Timothy 1:15).

Why does God let the innocent suffer? Does he really condemn people to hell if they don't believe in him? Kids with no parental guidance will find no shortage of sources eager to fill the vacuum. Your kids already know you're not perfect, so it's no use pretending you are—instead, model a believer whose faith survives failures and unanswerable questions (Job 13:15).

Use mistakes to your advantage. Someday you'll lose your temper with your kids, unwittingly curse in their hearing, tell a lie, unfairly criticize someone else or expose them to something you didn't intend to.⁵

You'll need to ask your kids' forgiveness, of course. But don't stop there—discuss it with them. Challenge them to recall if they've ever faced similar temptations or fail-

ures; ask them what you could have done differently. Ask them what else they would do to rectify the situation. Give them the chance to learn from your mistakes (Acts 10:27-35).

Noble Character

As I mentioned at the beginning, raising judgmental kids is a balancing act. I love the example set by Paul's congregation in Berea (Acts 17:11): They didn't reject Paul's message, but neither did they accept it uncritically. Instead, they listened carefully, but immediately compared everything he said against the Scriptures.

That balance between respect for principles and respect for people is just what our kids need to see. If we model it for them, we'll do much to ensure that our kids will develop the same praiseworthy noble character as the Bereans. □

¹ Sister Wendy Beckett, *Sister Wendy's 1000 Masterpieces* (New York, DK Publishing, 1999), p. 288.

² Richard J. Neuhaus, "The Public Square," *First Things*, December 1997, p. 77; Kay Haugaard, "Moral Judgment," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 1997, p. B4.

³ "The Paralysis of 'Absolutophobia,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 1997, p. B5.

⁴ Marilyn Elias, "Does TV Cause Teens to Drink?" *USA Today*, Feb. 8, 2000, p. 8D.

⁵ *If you've been a parent for more than a few years, in fact, you've probably done all of these in a single day.*

Greg Hartman lives in Colorado with his wife and two children, both of whom think square black paintings are silly.

FURTHER READING

What Your Child Needs to Know About God is an excellent resource to help you ground your child in Christian values.

Author Ron Rhodes gives over 300 pages of lessons, illustrations and examples, for only \$5 (price includes shipping).

Call 1-800-309-4466 and ask for item B176. (Offer available only in the U.S. and Canada, while supplies last).

