



Spiritual Education for Children as A Shared Responsibility Between Parents and The Church

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ABSTRACT: Parents must nurture their children from their earliest days to know God personally. However, some parents sometimes do not realize this and neglect their responsibility. Thus, this study explores how parents and the church should develop a mutual partnership in children's spiritual education. The author used a qualitative method with a literature approach to investigate the problem and propose suggestions. The conclusion was that the parent is the primary responsible party in educating children. But, they can not do this task independently without the church's help. Since relying on Sunday School as part of the church's responsibility for teaching children alone is not enough, the church could help them by providing training that educates parents to do their parental responsibilities. And to ensure that the education at home will overlap with church teaching, Sunday School teachers and parents as partners should develop mutual respect and communication. If everyone involved in children's ministry, directly or indirectly, could cultivate this joint responsibility, it would help children grow in fear of God and be better people. As the future generation, improving the quality of our ministry for children will eventually create a better church, now and later.

Keywords: children, spiritual education, church, Sunday School, parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Who is the most responsible for children's spiritual education? Is it the church or the parents? This question always comes up when we talk about Christian education for children. For some, the answer is clear since a family is a primary context for a child to be nurtured. However, in reality, some parents think educating children is the foremost duty of the church. Every day they send their children to school for adequate education; they relate the same way with the church. They expect their churches to provide the most for their children's spiritual needs since they have many other things to do (Habermas, 2009). While it is undeniable that serving and guiding the children as members of a faith community is an important calling for church ministry, putting the onus of children's spiritual growth on Sunday School

programming as part of the church's ministry for children is a neglect of God-given parental responsibility. Parents share a responsibility to teach their children, and their share is even more significant since they spend more time with their children.

To answer which party is most responsible for fostering children's spirituality, whether church or family, in 2018, the Barna Research Group in California concluded that the parents were the most accountable and then the church (*Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?*, 2019). Christian communities and schools also play a role, even though they are not as significant as family and church. Unfortunately, despite recognizing parents' critical role in spiritually educating their children, not every church provides services that equip parents in this regard. Often the

church does not offer an explicit spiritual education curriculum and forgets to emphasize the vital role of parents in the growth of children's faith (*Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?*, 2019).

Thus, the church and the parent should have a mutual responsibility for nurturing faith. But we rarely found the link between the teaching at home with what a child receives from the church. Many parents are clueless about what their children have learned in Sunday School and do not think they need to educate them spiritually (M. J. Bunge, 2008). They thought their children automatically got to know Jesus personally by attending the Sunday School weekly. With this paradigm, they are seriously neglecting their part in evangelizing and disciplining their children. As stated by Mambo, this discontinuity results in the sad reality that a child could diligently attend Sunday School for years but still does not hear the gospel (Mambo, 2019).

Moreover, Sunday School is often considered a secondary service in the church (Pranoto, 2012). Many Sunday schools struggle to give the best service to children because of the lack of facilities. Not every church can afford divided classes for different ages, making it challenging to create an ideal teaching-learning activity. If one class comprises children from 0 to 10, we can imagine how difficult for teachers to communicate and teach the children (Supartini, 2017). Besides, Sunday School lasts only about one to two hours, which is very short compared to children's other activities. No matter how excellent or creative the programs and contents of a Sunday School class, it would be inadequate if it were not supported by spiritual education in the context of families, where children spend more time than in the church. A synergy between the family and the church in educating children could maximize the process of Christian education for children. The home should be the first place where a child gets spiritual education, and the church functions to strengthen this foundation.

The author realizes that before this article, plenty of material currently available discusses children's spiritual education since this topic is popular and related closely to the aspect of the life of believers. However, most writers usually focus on one side, whether offering biblical theology of parenting or how to teach faith at the church or schools. Sunarko, for instance, in his writing, has emphasized family as the basis of Christian education for children (Sunarko, 2021). What he stated is not entirely wrong by placing other institutions (like church and school) in a place of secondary importance. However, he neglected the reality that parents cannot do their job if they do not have a proper biblical foundation that the church should teach. In another article, Hadi Siswoyo stated that Sunday School has a significant role in implementing faith principles and practices in a child's life to complement parents' responsibility (Siswoyo, 2020). However, although he stated both parents and church have a significant role in children's spiritual education, he did not explore how actually to do this.

In recent writing, because of the pandemic, Thomson Siallagan has proposed in his article the importance of synergism between families, schools, and churches to make families the center of Christian education (Siallagan, 2021). Although this recommendation sounds excellent, it will be hard to realize since the school is independent and has a curriculum under government jurisdiction. Therefore, it is easier to correlate faith education in the family with the church. And this will be the aim of this article, to propose how synergy can be realized to complement previous research on this topic.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative research methods with a library research approach. The author collects data from various literary sources that discuss children's spiritual education. The Bible, multiple books, and Christian journals focusing on children's education and spirituality are

the sources the author uses. This writing also integrated those resources with the author's experience as a Sunday School teacher in a local church.

To produce a piece of descriptive and systematic writing, the author presents a brief biblical theology for children's spiritual education as a fundamental theory by exploring a few verses about children's education. Based on this brief biblical exposition, the author then built an approach on how parents and the church should practice their respective roles. Since the research shows a need to make children's education at the home match up with what is valued and taught by the church, the author suggests a few principles for accomplishing a meaningful synergy between family and church.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Christian Education and Spiritual Formation

Christian education and spiritual formation are two terms that often overlap. Some people think of both as synonymous; these terms are inevitably ambiguous for others. However, although we cannot separate them as two disconnected things, they have different meanings. Various literature presents Christian education vis-a-vis spiritual formation in two views: some consider both to have the same role, and some assume both as two other things. Both are different but complementary since both focus on identifying ways to implement Christian education with integrity (Steibel, 2010).

Holistic Christian education should be present in every child's life. Holistic means that the teaching demands sharing information, nurturing spiritual formation, and exploring transformation to become like Christ. This education should alter, recharge and reform persons by the Spirit's power to comply with God's revealed will as expressed in the Bible. In short, Christian spiritual education requires spiritual information, formation, and transformation; Pazmino suggests that Christians should not emphasize spiritual formation without

the rigors of study and transformation risks (Pazmiño, 2010). Only then can Christian education retain a holistic view of a person growing and becoming more like Christ with the principles and practices of spiritual formation (Setran & Wilhoit, 2020).

Biblical Theology for Christian Education

J. T. Carroll suggests there is a profound cultural vagueness about children's position in the Bible and the Jewish and Christian communal practices (Carroll, 2001). Although a child is considered a blessing from God, their social position is marginal in the Bible (Carroll, 2001). Therefore, one of Jesus' missions is to present Himself as "the friend of the children" to transform the Jewish traditions' view of children. However, when talking about the theology of childhood, Andersen et al. remind us that from the very beginning, God created human beings, including children, in His image, and He saw all He had made was very good (Andersen et al., 2004). Children are worthy of honor and respect regardless of their origins and circumstances. Teaching them to know God, then, is a must.

In Mark 10:13-16 the author records how important children are in Jesus's eyes. He even rebuked his disciples for preventing parents from bringing their children to Him. Jesus then encourages parents to bring their children to Him and states He will never reject those who come to Him. In other verses, Luke 18:15-17 and its parallel verses Mark 10:13-16, both writers used the word *βρεφη* *brephe*, which comes from the word *brepheos*, which means "infants" or "small children." Both passages proclaim that for Jesus, children are also participants in the Kingdom of Heaven, just like adults. He acknowledges their existence and encourages spiritual growth (Borgo, 2016). He shows His acceptance by hugging the children when their parents bring them to Him. Thus, the first step in giving spiritual education to children is to do it with love. We shall imitate what Jesus has done in

this story: He opens His arms and receives those children warmly.

The second aspect of spiritual education is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. These verses are undeniably the most famous verse as the foundation of children's education in the Old Testament. In his commentary of Deuteronomy, Duane L. Christensen states that verses 4-9 are a separate unit marked by the cry, "Hear, O Israel," in verse 4 and accompanied by the paragraph markers called *setuma* in verse 9 (Marfo & Tembo, 2017). These verses contain commands for God's people to love God with their whole hearts, with their entire souls, and with their absolute strength. In the Jewish tradition, this text is essential in teaching about the oneness of God, and every parent has a responsibility to pass this truth to their offspring. The New International Version reads verse 6 as follows: "These commandments that I give you today are to be in your hearts," while the King James Version of the English translation writes in more depth as follows: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart." This command emphasizes that the source of the teaching is the word of God.

The word "teach" in verse 7 was written *weshinantam* in Hebrew, the original Old Testament language. According to the NET Bible, the primary verb for this word means "to engrave," which indicates something that needs to be repeated until it is permanently etched on one's heart. It suggests that parents must ensure what they teach is embedded in their children's hearts. Because it is a difficult task, they should regularly do it with patience and sincerity (Benson, 1857). Moses commands the Israelites to bind God's truth on their hands, foreheads, and the pillars of their houses and gates. The hand signifies physical growth, the forehead speaks of intellectual abilities, the house's pillar refers to spiritual intelligence, and the gate symbolizes the social aspect. Thus, educating a child is a duty not only for parents but also for teachers, pastors, and everyone involved in the child's life (Marfo & Tembo, 2017). They must

ensure that this education continues to take deeper roots in children's hearts and minds.

Another important aspect of teaching the young generation is content. In the New Testament, Matthew 18:1-6 is the passage that states unequivocally how precious a child is in the eyes of God. Jesus even taught His disciples to behave like children who are innocent and open to accepting His teachings. Because children are impressionable, Jesus warned the disciples in verse 6 that he would punish whoever deceives a little child. These verses warn parents, teachers, or all parties responsible for children's education to pay attention to the content of what they teach and ensure it follows the Bible.

Besides the content, the Bible also emphasizes the importance of discipline as stated in Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (ESV)." As the head of a family, every father is responsible for educating his children. If needed, he can use disciplinary action as long as the child believes it is done based on love (Barnes, 1870). Father should avoid harsh punishment; he must practice self-control when disciplining his children. When a parent decides to punish, it must be for the right reason, not purely out of anger. Discipline is related closely with respect. Parents must be disciplined and patient so their children learn to respect them. Before they can submit to God, children must first learn to obey their parents. Punishing a child is sometimes considered cruel. However, John Wesley insisted otherwise and argued that parents who do not "break" or "redirect" their children are the ones who commit atrocities (Derr, 2014). What do parents have to break? Not their children's hearts, of course, but their sinful proclivity before it gets bigger.

Christian Education for Children As Joint-Responsibility

Parents' Role

Before proposing how to develop the synergism between parents and churches, this

article will explore both parties' roles in nurturing children's faith. A family plays an essential role in a child's growth, and problems might evolve later if this foundation is not well established (Van Niekerk & Breed, 2018). The family unit also has a prominent role in forming social behavior and a child's moral and religious values (Tighe, 2016). It is a context where a child gets basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and comfort. In it, an individual experiences a sense of belonging and attachment to other members. A family should also be where a child finds his true identity.

A family that can meet the child's basic needs has an excellent opportunity to instill life values in him. When a child's needs for food, drink, and security are fulfilled, it will be easier for him to develop higher and noble life aims and become a person who pleases God and blesses others. Research conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute in the United Kingdom in 2017 showed that 46% of children raised in evangelical Christian families followed their parents' faith's footsteps even though they had no close relationship. However, that number boosted to 71% for children who grew up emotionally close to their parents (Care for the Family, 2014). This research proves how vital intimacy between parents and their children is in faith development.

As a prominent figure in the family, parents should begin teaching their children as soon as possible. It is never too early to introduce Jesus to a child. Parents must work as a team, giving instructions on how their children ought to live and correcting them when they fall short. Every parent must know how dangerous it is when a child does not understand the ways of God. Scripture gives various examples of the great punishment that fell upon God's people when a generation did not know properly about God's mighty works (Judg. 2:10) (Davis, 2021). They need to learn the consequences of life without God from their parents before they experience those consequences from others.

Parents need to pay attention to a few principles in educating their children. First, the

teaching should be done with sincerity, not artificially, like pretending to pray, for example. As adults, it is not wise to underestimate children. Even small children can sense the sincerity or insincerity of grown-ups. Therefore, to be an effective teacher of God's word, parents must first have an intimate relationship with God. Parents have a higher chance of transferring faith values into their children's lives if they live this way. Parents themselves have to believe the words of God before they can teach them to their children. They must show how they live by faith in everyday life. The best way to teach children is not by emphasizing it verbally but by carrying out religious practices at home (M. J. Bunge, 2008). Learning from actions tends to be more effective than learning from mere words.

Every Christian parent may consider setting up a regular family prayer time to teach their children the importance of prayer and how to do it. By doing it consistently, parents instill God's truth and set an example for their children. Horace Bushnell, a leading pastor and 19th-century well-known scholar in Christian education, postulated that family is the ultimate emissary of grace, not the church (M. J. Bunge, 2008). Thus, a family should function as a "little church" where parents are priests and bishops to their children. A home is where God's grace is glorified and given the freedom to work (Andersen et al., 2004). Family worship would help parents form the spiritual foundation for their children and strengthen their spiritual bonding as one unit. This nurturing act should begin as soon as possible, ideally from infancy. Of course, parents must deliver the education in a language appropriate to the child's development and ability. This instruction must also be consistent and given daily, with patience and love (Derr, 2014).

Church's Role

An ancient African adage says, "It takes a village to raise a child." It sounds excessive but conveys the inevitable truth. Considering many factors that affect individual growth and

development, a family cannot raise a child without help. Community is essential for a child's faith, and the faith community needs to play a significant part in the child's faith development (Morgenthaler et al., 2014). Nurturing faith should be a partnership between home and congregation (M. Bunge, 2009).

The church's role consists of two kinds of involvement: direct and indirect. Direct could be Sunday School services targeting children from 0 to 13 years (the maximum age limit is usually different from one church to another) and providing spiritual education regularly. Meanwhile, indirect involvement is how the church equips parents to implant the truth within their children (e.g., parenting seminars based on biblical principles). Both types of involvement are essential, and parents should realize this to avoid the tendency to think Sunday school is the only or most effective kind of church involvement. According to Jennifer Hooks (2019), some parents assume children's ministries serve as a behavior-modification program. When the desired behavior is not cultivated, often, disappointment occurs. For a program that only lasts one to two hours every week, it is too much to think that Sunday school alone will effectively enable children to become "better people," respecting their elders, for instance. We should realize that this is an unrealistic hope.

The purpose of Sunday School is to provide spiritual education to children in worship and fellowship. Usually, this committee's service also consists of collective praise and worship besides preaching. The problem, which is quite common, is that there is no robust coordination between education in the church and the home. There must be a balance between knowledge and experiential spiritual education in the church and the family. Christian education programs must operate as an extension of the home, not isolated from it (M. J. Bunge, 2008). The church's mission is to inform parents of their significant role in children's faith formation and equip them to do their tasks. Thus, churches have a considerable responsibility to

empower parents to participate in the discipleship of their children (Nelson & Jones, 2010).

Besides attending Sunday School, children need to be involved in community worship services at church. This act will help them form their Christian identity through interactions with various community strata, such as practices, rituals, symbols, and relationships (Yust et al., 2010). By learning through socialization, children will have the chance to observe others' worldviews, values, and practices essential to the faith community. As a believer, a child must also have a sense of belonging as a part of their faith community (Morgenthaler et al., 2014). It does not mean that public community worship can supplant Sunday School. However, attending Sunday School and communal worship with their parents would benefit that child's faith development.

Synergy Between Education in the Family and the Church

We must admit that there is still a lack of balance between knowledge and experience in spiritual education at the church and in the family. Therefore, the author suggests two principles to establish the synergy between family and the church.

Firstly, the church functions as the resource for spiritual education in the family. Spiritual education is like a circle of life. Even though parents are fully responsible for raising their children to know the word of God, they can only do their best if they have already become disciples of Christ who wholeheartedly believe and learn to obey. For this reason, the church needs to educate parents by providing guidelines and opportunities for parents to share their faith experiences with their children (Barfield, 2019). It would be even better if the church could facilitate special classes to help parents carry out this noble duty. With the provision of the church, parents can be more confident when talking about God and His truth with their children. Educating parents to raise their children according to the word of God is much more helpful than all

sorts of programs in Sunday School, which last one to two hours each week. Only when parents and the church can carry out their respective roles well and as directed by the word of God will the child's spiritual education reap the expected results, creating future generations rooted in the word of God.

Secondly, Sunday School teachers function as parents' partners in fostering children's spiritual growth. Sunday School is an active environment where children develop their motoric and social intelligence. Teachers and parents share the same goal: to guide children to know Jesus personally and become more like Christ. If each party performs its role properly, it will significantly benefit the children.

To create synergy, parents should monitor and follow up on the lessons their children have received at Sunday School. All the creativity and effort made by Sunday School teachers to implant God's word into children will be in vain and easily forgotten if the child does not respond positively and continuously. Parents can help their children remember and appreciate what they have learned by asking them to retell what they have learned and study the meaning of the verses or Bible stories they have received to keep the learning chain.

Communication between parents and teachers is a must. If teachers can ask to meet the parents if their students encounter difficulties in the formal institution, why could not we apply it in the Sunday School? When teachers and parents can function as team players with mutual respect and support, it will help equip the children with spiritual education.

CONCLUSION

Children's spiritual education needs the participation of everyone involved in the child's life.

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Because the family is the primary rearing context that a child experiences after birth, parents are automatically the central figures who educate children in all aspects of life, including spirituality. Parents undergo this task by applying the principle of imitation so that their children can learn to be disciples of Christ by seeing the way of life of their fathers and mothers.

To maximize their role, parents need help from the church. Therefore, the church is responsible for guiding and developing programs involving parents. The church should do this program regularly and continuously in courses or training, not only mention it occasionally in a sermon. Although it functions as a complement, spiritual education in the church is crucial because humans are social creatures who need to interact with others.

In addition to equipping parents, the church also carries out its role in children's education through Sunday School services. Therefore, teachers should function as parents' partners to educate this young generation. Establishing a good relationship and communication between both sides will help create synergy. Besides that, Sunday School must also develop a sound and biblical curriculum and upgrade its teachers' competencies. The author realizes that this suggestion may not be something that ministry practitioners have not considered. But this is easier to talk about than to do since executing it requires time, energy, and finances. Perhaps since the consequence of the failure to do this is not immediately apparent, the church is hesitant to take action since it already has other responsibilities. Thus, the author realizes this as this article's limitation and recommends another research to address these issues.

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