



WHEN OUR CHILDREN “TAKE A BREAK” FROM CHURCH

WHEN OUR CHILDREN ARE YOUNG we can find masses of books, articles, websites, and parenting seminars to help us whenever we don't know what to do. Once our children become adults, all this helpful support seems to evaporate. But sometimes parenting adult children can be even more complex when they make challenging choices about faith, relationships, and lifestyles. Fortunately, the Bible is a useful GPS system to help us navigate this unpredictable and sometimes hostile territory.

THEY'RE IN GOD'S HANDS

Whenever we're relating to our adult children we need to remember they will always be God's children too. They may make unwise choices and wander around in the wilderness for many years, but He still loves them and watches over them. Some children need to leave the church to find God, and sometimes they discover God in amazing and unexpected places. We have all taken wrong turns and wandered through various deserts. But He keeps leading and guiding all of us. He can use our wanderings to bring us into a closer relationship with Him.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them, in His way, into God's purpose for their lives. Let the Holy Spirit prompt you when to speak, what to say, and when to stay silent. Our children will experience more of God's love and grace through our loving silence than through our critical words. Make each word a gift (Ephesians 4:29).

LOVE FIRST

Our adult children need to know, without a shadow of a doubt, that we will never stop loving them and being there for them, whatever choices they make. Jesus accepted people who were struggling because of their poor life choices. He lifted them up and showed them His love and forgiveness. His incredible love inspired them to turn their lives around and follow Him.

According to Paul, love never fails, and it starts with our patience toward those who are not growing as fast as we want them to. God is continually patient with us, slow to anger, and abounding in love (Psalm 103:8). We can be more patient with our adult children when we reflect on God's patience with us. As we read through 1 Corinthians

13:4-8 we can find plenty of good advice for experiencing a loving relationship with our adult children: be humble, be respectful, don't keep score of wrongs, delight in the good, always protect, always hope, and always persevere.

NOTICE WHERE GOD IS AT WORK

Christian parents struggle with a deep sense of loss, shame, inadequacy, and hopelessness when their children take a break from church and make other challenging lifestyle choices. We are not God. It is not our responsibility to save our children; instead, it is our responsibility to love them and take away their aloneness (Genesis 2:18). We can help them experience the rich dimensions of God's grace and love. We can teach them what we know about God. Then the choice is theirs.

If our children sense our sadness and anxiety, or feel that we are critical of their lives, it can deeply hurt our relationship with them. Alternatively, we can focus on their positive values and character strengths and see this as evidence that God is at work in their lives (Philippians 4:8). If they are loving, joyful, peaceful, kind, patient, good, gentle, generous, and humble, then they are showing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23). We can look for the effects of His Spirit blowing through their lives and thank God.

NURTURE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Stay connected with your adult children through their favorite means of communication. Accept them with open arms, especially when their lives are messy, and offer help and support when they're struggling. Respect their choices and beliefs.

Reflect on each interaction and ask yourself: "Did this strengthen my relationship with my adult child or weaken it?" Let your children know that nothing could ever weaken your love for them.

BE CREATIVELY GENEROUS

Our heavenly Father blesses all His children with sunshine and rain whether they follow Him or not. His love inspires us to keep blessing our children as fairly and generously as possible. Surprise them with little gifts and treats to brighten up their days. The surprises don't have to be expensive. Kathy sends fully stamped loyalty cards to her children. Adam saves points on his airline card and uses them to buy plane

tickets for his sons. Pop some money into their bank accounts when they're going through a tough time. These little expressions of love and generosity can speak powerfully to their hearts.


RESPOND COMPASSIONATELY

Be generously compassionate with parents whose children are taking a break from church. Most people who choose to leave the church do so because they haven't experienced the love and care that they needed, especially in a time of crisis. We don't know all the complex and painful stories behind other people's choices. We need to check that we are not carrying an attitude of self-righteousness because our children are still choosing to come to an Adventist church, or an attitude of judgment that they must have been less spiritual parents. Don't add to their pain and grief. Listen compassionately and encourage them. Pray for them and their children and show loving acceptance to the whole family.

REFLECT SPIRITUALLY

Revisit the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32). Both tell stories of "obedient" sons who didn't have a positive attitude toward their father, and "disobedient" sons who understood their father's love and responded positively in the end. The parables of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), and the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) also have powerful and encouraging messages from God that can comfort the hearts of hurting parents if we dig deep into their treasures.

PRAYER AND LOVE SAVES (PALS)

Why not start a PALS group in your local church? This is a resource for parents whose children are taking a break from church and encourages parents to pray together with their children and find fresh ways to love them. It was created by Dorothy Eaton Watts and is available through your local Women's Ministries department or from AdventSource (<https://www.adventsource.org>). 

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