

Everything Is Interesting: Raising Educated People

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We live in a culture filled with boredom and cynicism—even among our children. It is a tragic commentary on our culture that you can meet 16- and 17-year-old kids who are apathetic about their own existence and bored much of the time. And it is not only teenagers for whom this is a problem. I meet many young children whose natural curiosity and excitement has already been turned to boredom. How has the insatiable curiosity which occurs so naturally in little children been quenched? Why are there so many bored children and young people in our contemporary society? I do not claim to be a parenting expert, but I would like to propose three causes which I believe foster this boredom in our children.

Television

I think the first answer to why our children are so bored is simply the abuse of television. I am not opposed to television. We have always had a television in our home, and we were happy to have our children watching programs on television when they were small. My objection is to the misuse of television. In an enormous number of families, including an enormous number of Christian families, the television is on almost all of the time. If it is that way in your home, I would encourage you to read Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which addresses the abuse of television.

I think the same thing can happen with the abuse of video games. I am not opposed to video games in principle. Our children played video games but with great moderation. They had plenty of other things that they were interested in, too.

I believe that is the first level of our problem. Many families simply abuse television, and it takes away that fascination, that delighted interest in everything which is natural to children. As soon as children learn to speak, they are constantly asking you, "What's that?" and "Why?" They are naturally interested in absolutely everything—that is the way God has created them. It is part of being made in the image of God, but the misuse of television quenches that deep fascination with the world. Children learn only to be fascinated by flickering images.

Parental Involvement

The second cause of this boredom in our children is directly tied to the reason television is so often misused. It is the failure of parents to make the time to be with their children and to encourage and stimulate that innate curiosity that is in every child. You can see the tiniest children playing very imaginatively, making up their own little universes and peopling them with all sorts of personalities. They know perfectly well that it is not reality, but they are using their wonderful imaginations. Many parents simply fail to spend the time

with their children which will encourage and stimulate that curiosity and help bring their imagination to life. I understand that there are enormous problems if you are a single parent having to work one or two jobs to try to support your kids. Nevertheless, without being idealistic, we need to examine how the lack of time with our children can lead them into passivity and boredom.

Postmodern Culture

Thirdly, we face a problem in our culture as a whole. There are two things in our society which work together to quench our children's curiosity: postmodernism and consumerism. Postmodern ideas say there is nothing true or meaningful that we can learn about life or build our lives around. Consequently, our postmodern culture has lost the sense that there is an overarching meaning to life, a story that explains life. Society no longer believes in ultimate meaning. Our culture mainly rejects Christian truth, and there has been nothing else to take its place which explains where we have come from, what we are here for and where we are going. Postmodernity leaves people with no answer to the question, "What is life for?"

This message constantly comes at our children from their televisions, music and peers. They hear over and over again that there is no ultimate meaning to anything, so we might as well live for today. This message is implicit in the soap operas, the children's shows and the music on the radio.

At the same time our children are being schooled in the "meaninglessness" of life, they are bombarded with the messages of a consumer society, yet another feature of our culture which drives people into passivity and boredom. Every commercial on the television, radio, billboard or magazine tells them that having this thing or that thing will make them happy. They constantly hear that life is about having this sense satisfied or having that pleasure consummated, and it is only natural that this is what society pursues. When postmodernism says there is no overarching explanation to who one is and what one is here for, it leaves people with nothing else to do except satisfy their senses. A postmodern society produces people who are idolaters.

Now the consequence for our children, if we are not careful, is that they are going to be always dissatisfied. They will always want more, but when they get what they want, they will always find themselves disappointed that the thing has not lived up to its promise. Their appetites become jaded, and they become bored.

The abuse of television, the lack of time with our children, and the message of our culture—all three of these things are reinforcing each other all the time to lead our children into a pit of boredom and disillusioned cynicism.

Television, time and consumerism, all three of these pose great threats to our children and their natural creativity. So what are we going to do? How are we going to raise educated and interested people? We can start by intentionally countering these threats with a plan to help our children grow intellectually just as we plan balanced meals to help them to grow physically.

Television: Servant Or Master

First, we need to consider the place of the television in our homes. Let it be a servant and not a master! Even now, when our children have all grown up, our television is down in the basement. It is not in the kitchen. It is not in our living room. It is not where we spend most of our time. You have to make an effort to go and watch it. We watch it sometimes, but it is there as a servant.

This truth is particularly important when children are young. A good test of whether television is servant or master is, when your children have watched something, do they then go out and do something related to

what they have seen? Is their imagination stimulated? Television is a servant when your children can watch a program then say, "Well that was fascinating. Let's go and play Robin Hood," or "Let's go and do this thing."

Is television stimulating your children's interest and imagination, or is it actually having the opposite effect? When you turn it off, do they just lie around on the floor and say, "What am I going to do now?" If it is not stimulating them, you are using it as a master rather than a servant. Or you may simply be using it as a servant to you, which in the end will not serve you at all. My brother's family resolved this problem by not having a television at all. They just have a video player. They have to make a choice about what they are going to see by going to buy or borrow a video. I do not know what is the best solution for your family, but if the television is your family's master, you may need some radical solutions.

Time: A Daily Priority

Secondly, spend time with your children. This seems such an elementary thing to say, but it is easy to forget to make time with our children a daily priority. Rather than getting home from work and collapsing because you are so tired, once you have had children you have a responsibility to give yourself to them.

You'll find it far more refreshing to actually do something with them which will bring joy to them, than to go and serve your own needs right away. Make some difficult choices no matter how tired you are. When you have a day off from work, think creatively about what you are going to do together as a family rather than what you are going to go do with your buddies. You have heard it said before, but the time really is going to pass so fast. With three boys who are in their twenties, that time is now gone for me.

You will never stop being a parent, but more and more over time you can become friends as well. You can be both your children's authority and the person they like to be with.

Meals: A Family Gathering Time

What are some key opportunities for busy parents to spend time with their children? The first thing to consider is your mealtime. Meals are a wonderful time to enjoy each other and to share with one another. The family should turn off the television and radio and sit down together. It becomes very difficult to coordinate with all of the family members' activities, but families should continually try to have meals together no matter how hard it is. Just do it!

The kitchen was the room in which our children most liked to be. They would come home from school and immediately come in the kitchen to start their homework. It did not always make it easy for my wife, Vicki, to prepare the meals, but it was better to have them there where they could communicate with their mother than just to pack them off somewhere else. When our children come to visit us now, they still spend most of their time in the kitchen. Make meals important in your home, something to really give yourself to both in terms of time and in terms of creativity in preparation.

Begin to take steps today to nourish your children's natural interests in the world around them. Monitor their intake of television programming, be creative and intentional about time together, and take joy in your daily opportunity to eat together and build relationships as a family.

Respond to Your Child's Interests

One of the wonderful things about having children is that they stretch you. See what your children respond to and then give yourself to becoming interested in what they are interested in. Whether it is music or

insects or drama, encourage them and help them develop in these areas. This means stretching yourself as they are stretched.

When children are tiny they are interested in things which will be with them their whole lives. My nephew's first word was not "Mama" or "Dada," it was a baby-talk word for "car." Before he could talk, he was entranced by motor vehicles of every kind. Car was still his favorite word sixteen years later. His parents were not interested in cars, but they became interested for his sake.

Book Time Together

Take time to read to your children. Books stimulate a child's curiosity and imagination in ways that will stay with them throughout life. They are never too young to start. Do not underestimate what they understand.

When our son was three-and-a-half years old I read aloud for him C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. I was reading the account of how the Witch had bound Aslan, the Christ figure, and shaved him and my son started to weep. He said to me, "Daddy, are they going to kill him?" By this time I was crying as well, and I said, "Yes, they are." He responded, "But he will rise again, won't he?" He was three-and-a-half, but he didn't need to have the story explained to him, he understood it.

Get Out into God's Creation

Encourage children to open their eyes to God's creation. Most people do not see it. The outdoors are a wonderful place to spend time together and to get away from pressures.

If you are a Christian, more than anyone else you have a reason to be interested in the creation in which God has set us. It speaks so powerfully of His majesty and glory. As you and your children enjoy the majesty of God's creation, you are helping every moment to counteract the very heart of the postmodern thought of our generation which says there is no overarching story or meaning in life. Anybody who starts enjoying the world around them knows at the very deepest level that there is indeed a story which makes sense of this world, that we live in a created universe.

Appreciate the Glory of Human Creation

Teach children to glory in what human beings create as well—all human beings, both Christian and non-Christian. We must guard against creating little Pharisees in our children by teaching them only to see what is sinful in culture and people. That is not what God's Word teaches. We are called, as we look at a human person, to say, "What is a man that God is mindful of him?" And our answer to that question is that God has crowned him with glory and honor and set all things under his feet (Psalm 8).

As we teach our children about human beings, we must not only teach that we are sinners. In fact before we say we are sinners, we must first say that God has crowned us with glory and honor and set all things under our feet. We must work at helping our children enjoy the glory of their humanity and of the humanity of the people around them. To fail to do so is, in effect, to blaspheme against God. Help children see the glory of what different cultures have created. Help them see the creativity, the wonderful music and painting and literature that flows out of humanity. The book of James puts it this way, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness...this should not be!" (James 3:9,10).

Time—A Priceless Gift

As this series concludes, let me finish by emphasizing once again, you must give yourselves to spending time

with your children. If you have not done it, if they have been in a sense growing up by themselves sitting in front of the television and doing their own thing, take some practical steps to alter the pattern of your life. Do not make it some new rule that you impose on them—you have got to win them again to delight in spending time with you if you have not been doing it.

It may be a time for deep repentance in your own heart and a change of pattern of life and priorities. We all need great grace and wisdom from the Lord to care for the children who are entrusted to us. None of us will be perfect as we take this responsibility seriously. But by the grace of God we can lead children to develop into people who are always learning and interested in the world around them, just as they were created to be.

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