

## Parenting by Faith—Not Formula



by JULIE LOWE

---

Bill and Amanda are the parents of three children. They both work, are involved in church, and are trying their best to juggle the business of life and family activities. Like many parents, they are looking for solutions to the problems that their children are experiencing. Micah (age 14) is consumed with his phone and seems to be slowly withdrawing from family life. Rachel (age 6) is anxious and struggles just to get on the morning bus, and Matthew (age 4) is a typical high-energy child who wears his mother out with his constant movement.

Bill and Amanda came for counseling to find out what they could do to make their family “function normally.” As we talked together about what function normally meant to them, I realized that they were looking for *the* thing they could do to end the struggle in their family. They wanted to know what to do so that their kids would become happy, decent young people. Surely, there is *a* right thing, a foolproof recipe for producing the results they are looking for?

I get it. I am like this with my children, too. I want a formula for successful parenting. I want a parenting roadmap with directions (like my GPS) that tells me where to turn. And I definitely want the guarantee that my family will end up at the right destination. I don’t want to have to struggle or

*Julie Lowe (MA, LPC) counsels and teaches at CCEF. She works extensively with children and families.*

wonder; just tell me the next step and I will take it.

In my search, I, like many others, have read my share of the countless books written on Christian parenting that tell me what steps to take. But I often struggle to apply what I have read to my own family. I notice in myself, and in the parents I counsel, the tendency to take what we read or hear and try to squeeze our families into a one-size-fits-all approach to our children: Do these specific things and your family will function well. But all too often, we feel defeated, frustrated, and stuck when it seems that we've followed the rules, and yet our children still struggle, appear unresponsive, or have challenging behaviors.

When this happens, we can feel abandoned by God, discouraged, and frustrated. From there, it's easy to simply revert to our own ways, the ones that seem right and natural to us. We move toward a parental pragmatism that justifies our bad reactions, our passivity, and a paralyzing defeatism. What we fail to see during these times is that we have *not* been abandoned by God as we have attempted to parent. The reality is that biblical truth and biblical principles are *always* at work and *always* offer hope and help. They remain true and effective even when it appears that our children are not responsive.

And yet we do flounder. The place where I see myself and others struggle the most is in our application of biblical principles. We want someone to give us ten steps to apply the Bible to our family life and we want it to work NOW! But that is not how it works. Applying biblical principles and truth to your family (and mine) takes time and requires biblical wisdom. The wisdom that comes from God to us is gentle, peaceable, full of mercy, and good fruit. From that wisdom we are promised a harvest of righteousness that brings peace (James 3:17–18). But it doesn't come through a formula and it has no timetable.

The goal, then, is not to keep looking for *the* formula but to pursue biblical wisdom that comes from knowing and loving God. The aim is to turn to him and depend on him for what we lack. God promises to give wisdom to those who seek it (James 1:5), and what he gives is tailor-made for our children and for us. It's a practical expression of what it means to love God and love others. The thing to remember is that, while the biblical principles remain universal and unchanging, the way they are *applied* in specific ways

is unique to each family's personalities, gifts, difficulties, and circumstances. God gives much more liberty in how we live out godly principles in family life than we often give ourselves. And God does not give guaranteed outcomes. He wants us to always need him, to always seek help.

---

One of the common stumbling blocks to seeking biblical wisdom for our parenting is trying to fit our family into a pre-conceived “ideal” family mold.

---

The purpose of this article<sup>1</sup> is to explore what Scripture teaches about parenting and the freedom it brings to family life. We will begin by discussing how the myths we believe about what our families are supposed to look like send us in the wrong direction.

### **Your Picture of the “Ideal” Family**

One of the common stumbling blocks to seeking biblical wisdom for our parenting is trying to fit our family into a pre-conceived “ideal” family mold. Perhaps you have a picture of that ideal family in your mind right now. Most of us do. Maybe the children are always respectful, the parents are always calm, and family devotions are deep and engaging. When you compare your family to that ideal, it's easy to feel defeated. Or perhaps your ideal family is more about accomplishments. The children are on the honor roll, they excel at sports, and have lots of friends. We are all good at finding families that seem to have it more together than we do.

But consider this: Is it possible that your picture of the ideal family is keeping you from understanding and loving your *actual* family? Does your image of the ideal family hinder you to live out the two great commandments to love God and others?

When we want our families to fit a preconceived mold, it's a small step

<sup>1</sup> The themes in this article will be further developed in my forthcoming book from New Growth Press: *Child Proof: Parenting by Faith, Not Formula*.

To continue reading this article, visit [ccef.org/jbc](http://ccef.org/jbc) to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

[www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)

Copyright © 2018 CCEF

All rights reserved.