



Helping Your Child Welcome Others

by Mary Oldfield

We have high hopes and dreams for our children's faith. We want them to have a healthy understanding of their own sin and the need for God's forgiveness. We want them to recognize the voice of God and obey Him. We want them to have an enduring faith that keeps them strong through life's troubles and protects them from harmful behaviors. In short, we want our children to have a healthy, growing relationship with God.

We have such high hopes for our children's faith; we just don't always know what to do to help them get there. Because of this, it can be easy to fall into discouragement. I can relate. As a mother, grandmother, and former children's ministry director, I know firsthand the many struggles involved in parenting, especially when it comes to spiritually nurturing your child.

The demands of parenting can be overwhelming and exhausting. I've talked with many parents who feel worn down, frazzled, and frenzied, trying to keep up with the fast pace of life. I've prayed with many parents who know they are supposed to spiritually nurture their children, but don't have time to read all the Christian parenting books scattered around their house.

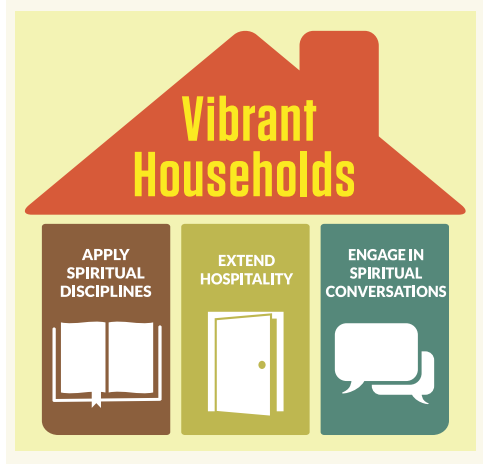
Some of us wind up feeling guilty for not nurturing our children in the Christian faith, but we just don't feel adequate or equipped enough to do anything about it.

If you are feeling this discouragement, let me share with you some refreshingly good news. New research from the Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM) has revealed that there are three everyday household habits that can help nurture a spiritually vibrant home. What are these practical habits? The research tells us faith formation is more robust in households that do the following:

1. APPLY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
2. EXTEND HOSPITALITY
3. ENGAGE IN SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

The task of spiritually nurturing your child becomes less difficult and overwhelming when you break it down into these three everyday habits. And the good news is that the research also shows that these habits can be nurtured in any household.

So, whether you are parenting your own children or step-children, parenting your grandchildren, or living in a multi-generational household, keep reading. There is hope for anyone who wants to nurture their child's spiritual health by helping them relate with God, extend hospitality, or have spiritual conversations.





... Judy has a heart that is as wide open as the front door of her house.



To help you nurture these habits with your own child, I have gathered together insightful passages from the Bible and practical ideas from my years of working with parents and children. The result has been to create a practical guide for each of these habits. These three quick reads are designed to guide, encourage, and equip you to nurture the faith of the children in your household.

In *this* booklet, we will be looking at how you can nurture the second of these household habits: *extending hospitality*. It really is possible to help your child have a welcoming heart. You can do this with God's help.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY

It's understandable that faith formation is more robust in households that apply spiritual disciplines and engage in spiritual conversations. But it might be surprising to learn there is a correlation between hospitality and robust faith formation in the home. And yet the Barna/LHM research indeed revealed that *"generally, faith formation is connected to and increases with a spirit of hospitality."*

The Bible reveals to us that hospitality is close to the heart of God. God calls His followers to show hospitality because He, Himself, is hospitable. Is it any wonder, then, that hospitality is so beautiful to encounter?

Our youngest daughter was fortunate to marry into a family that regularly extends hospitality. From the time our daughter became engaged, Judy, her future mother-in-law, invited my husband and me for dinners at her home throughout the year. These were dinners for birthday celebrations, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and any other reason she could think of to get everyone together. And most of the time, non-family guests, along with extended family members, were there as well. Some were people she had worked with; some were people who would have been alone for the holiday, and some were friends she just wanted to include. All this hospitality has been beautiful to behold and touching to experience. It's safe to say that Judy has a heart that is as wide open as the front door of her house.

Our daughter and son-in-law have followed in Judy's footsteps in extending this kind of beautiful hospitality. And our five-year-old granddaughter is already developing a welcoming heart for others. She has experienced welcoming hospitality in her home since she was a baby, with yearly "family" Christmas Eve celebrations at their home. Her parents, too, invite immediate family, extended family, friends who are like family, and non-family members. Most years, in addition to the 18 of us who would be considered "extended family," a girlfriend of a cousin, a married couple and daughter, and her parents who are "friends like family" of our son-in-law's sister are there, too.

Last Christmas Eve was especially memorable. Our son-in-law invited one of his employees (a single parent) with her four children the day before when he learned they would be celebrating Christmas alone. And they came. Since guests are included in the holiday traditions, all the children participated in the annual Christmas play (directed by Judy), followed by singing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus around a candle-lit birthday cake.

When gifts were exchanged at the end of the evening, each child received a gift, including the four children invited the day before. Judy made sure each of them had a Christmas stocking filled with candy and other goodies.

Those children left with full tummies, full hearts, and wide smiles on their faces from the warm hospitality that was extended to them. I did too.

In the following days, I thought about that evening a lot. It was beautiful, heart-warming, and memorable. However, I have to admit this isn't the way I have always felt about our new way of celebrating Christmas Eve. In previous years, I longed for Christmas Eve the way it used to be: mostly with just our immediate family. Admittedly, I wasn't very receptive to change. But through the years, God has been changing my heart and my attitude to see the beauty of gracious hospitality. I've experienced firsthand that when hearts and homes are open to welcoming others, both hosts *and* guests are blessed.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REVEAL ABOUT HOSPITALITY?

Everyone is blessed when our hearts and homes are open to welcoming others. Scripture confirms the value of extending hospitality. Hospitality reflects the heart of God, the ways of Jesus, and the model of the early church.

The Heart of God

When we understand the heart of God, we'll better understand the importance of helping our children welcome others. We see God's heart throughout Scripture in His character and in His expectations for how we are to treat others.

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." Deuteronomy 10:17-19

"For God does not show favoritism." Romans 2:11, NIV

A "sojourner" was anyone who was new in an area (like a foreigner or traveler) or had no permanent home. We are told that God loves these people. God has a heart for *all* people. He is gracious, merciful, and loving. He shows no favoritism to nationality, class, or color. God desires that *all* people be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:4). In heaven there will be people from every nation and all tribes standing before the Lamb, Jesus (see Revelation 7:9). God wants us to have a heart like His for His people.

I remember my first mission trip to Honduras, looking out the bus window, seeing so many poverty-stricken people and thinking how much it must break God's heart. We don't have to travel to Honduras to see poverty, loneliness, and hurting people. God wants us to show love to the poor, lonely, and hurting people around us. He wants us to love those He has put in our paths. He wants us to help our children love those He puts in their path without showing favoritism. He wants us to love sojourners because He does.



Hospitality reflects the heart of God, the ways of Jesus, and the model of the early church.



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**When we love
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***“Contribute to the
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seek to show hospitality.”***

Romans 12:13

The Ways of Jesus

The ways of Jesus help us better understand the importance of helping our children welcome others. Wherever Jesus went, He welcomed all kinds of people. He broke down barriers of race, gender, and class. Jesus ate with outcasts, touched lepers, stopped to care for widows, and rebuked the disciples when they tried to send children away. He chose uneducated fishermen to be among His 12 disciples. Jesus had compassion for the deaf, blind, paralyzed, and the crippled, and said that we should do the same.

“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.”

Luke 14:13-14a

Jesus said that when we care for “the least of these,” we are, in a special way, caring for Him. As He put it:

“For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me. ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.” Matthew 25:35,36,40b

When we love and welcome others, we are loving the Lord. Love is what distinguishes us as disciples of Jesus. And we have this capacity to love others because God first loved us (see 1 John 4:19).

Wholehearted love for God with a heart for hospitality doesn’t come naturally to our children or to us. And showing love to others and not receiving gratitude or anything in return is even more difficult. We can ask the Lord to help us and our children grow more like Him in the way we love and welcome others. God did this with the very first Christians.

The Example of the Early Church

Because God’s heart is for *all* people, and because of the welcoming and loving ways of Jesus, it’s no surprise that the early church also welcomed and loved in these ways. God knit the early church together into a community that cared for each other and lived life together with open doors and beautiful hospitality. Throughout the letters in the New Testament, hospitality is urged and encouraged:

*“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to **show hospitality.**”*

Romans 12:13

*“Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to **show hospitality** to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”*

Hebrews 13:1-2

*“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. **Show hospitality** to one another without grumbling.”* 1 Peter 4:8-9

Considering the heart of God, the ways of Jesus, and the example shown in the early church can help us understand the importance of helping our children welcome others.

Parents can help their child have a welcoming heart to others by modeling hospitality and teaching about hospitality.

MODEL HOSPITALITY

In addition to the warm hospitality I've experienced from my daughter's mother-in-law, I've also experienced gracious hospitality while on church mission trips to Honduras. My church returns yearly to the same orphanage home run by a loving Honduran Christian couple. Isaac and Olga show the heart of God in the way they lavishly welcome us each time we visit. They open their hearts and home to us, and our differences don't seem to matter. They demonstrate the love of God in their hospitality and have taught the girls living in the home to do the same. As soon as we arrive and the large iron door is opened, we are greeted by a row of girls on each side, giving us hugs, high fives, and smiles as we enter the home. From the time of our arrival to the time we depart, Isaac, Olga, and the girls make us feel special and unconditionally loved. They model hospitality for me in this way, which inspires me to be more hospitable. We can all model hospitality in the same way for our children.

Perhaps you have the gift of hospitality and are modeling hospitality by regularly welcoming guests in your home already. And perhaps you already have extended hospitality to neighbors in various ways. For you it may be great news that there's a connection between hospitality and faith formation, because it affirms your love of welcoming others.

But for others, it might be more difficult to model and nurture hospitality in your home. You may wonder how you can overcome barriers that prevent you from being as hospitable as you'd like to be.

Perhaps you feel there isn't enough time to get your home ready to receive guests, or you tend to be a little introverted or shy. Maybe you aren't confident in your cooking ability or have some budget or space constraints. Perhaps reaching out to neighbors is out of your comfort zone. You barely know your neighbors and really aren't sure where to begin to get to know them. There are a variety of barriers to hospitality that we may face personally.

Our habits can be barriers to hospitality, too. There is a new home under construction near my home with two stone entrance columns on both sides of the driveway. The address is engraved on one column and "Private Lane" is engraved on the other. Whether intentional or not, these words convey a message. As I drive by this house, it has caused me to wonder if my habits give the impression that I'm more private than hospitable, and helpful questions come to my mind:

- Do I look down when I walk out to get my mail, or do I notice neighbors who may be out?
- Do I drive into my garage and immediately close the door, or do I look around first to see if a neighbor might be in sight to greet?
- Do I get to know new neighbors?
- If I moved away, would my neighbors care? Would they even notice?

A few years ago, we had a sermon series at church on "The Art of Neighboring," and we were challenged with some of these same questions. I made an intentional effort to be more neighborly because of the series. Since our driveway is in the back of the house, I brought a chair from the patio and put it on the front porch. When the weather is nice, I sit outside and wave at people that go by. I look up when I get the mail, and I'm being intentional in getting to know my neighbors better. I've taken small gifts to the neighbor children to let them know I care.



**They open their hearts
and home to us, and
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**Do I get to know
new neighbors?**



These are small steps that I have taken to be more hospitable to my neighbors. With God's help, we can all be more intentional and take small steps towards being more neighborly.

Whatever barriers you may have, you can take steps towards being more hospitable. Do something, however small it may seem, and involve your children in these acts of hospitality.

Whether you are eager or reluctant to extend hospitality, it can be helpful to remember that biblical hospitality begins in our hearts. It is gracious hospitality and comes from God's love for us, and, as a result, our deep love for God and others. Biblical hospitality means having open hearts for our neighbors and those God places in our path.

The focus is on welcoming guests and making them feel special. This differs from merely entertaining, where the focus can be on ourselves in showcasing our home or wanting to impress our guests with the amazing food we've prepared. Shifting the focus from ourselves to our guests has a way of breaking down many barriers to hospitality.

TEACHING HOSPITALITY

We can teach our children to welcome others by establishing a few practical guidelines. These would be guidelines such as being present with guests, making appropriate eye contact, and using names properly when talking to or greeting adults. When I was growing up, my parents regularly invited an elderly couple to our home for dinner. This couple didn't have children and had no family in the area. I remember many evenings as a teenager enduring what I thought was boring conversation because my dad insisted that I be present. I learned to be present anytime guests were in our home. Today this may look more like choosing not to be on a cell phone or playing a video game when adult guests are visiting your home.

You can also teach hospitality by reviewing the Scriptures in this booklet with your child and teaching them about God's heart, the ways of Jesus, and the example of the early church.

One way I have taught my granddaughter about God's love for all is by playing a game when we sing the familiar song, "Jesus Loves the Little Children." As we sing the song, I spin our globe around while she lets the globe slide through her fingers. When the song ends, we identify the place where her finger stops, and we pray for the children of that country. This simple children's song helps her understand God's heart in a fun way:

*Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red, brown, yellow,
Black, and white,
They are precious in His sight;
Jesus loves the little children
Of the world.*

You can help your child have a more welcoming heart by teaching him or her the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25-37). Ask your child as Jesus did, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands

of robbers?” Help your child understand that the man who fell into the hands of robbers wasn’t a neighbor in terms of location to the good Samaritan. He wasn’t even from the same town. But the man who had mercy on him acted in love, and we are to do likewise.

Many parents think of “stranger danger” when telling this parable to their child. It’s important, of course, to teach our children about potential threats to protect them and keep them safe. However, we can still teach our children about God’s heart for people, while at the same time guarding them from experiences that might put them in danger.

It really is possible to help your child have an open heart in welcoming others. You can create opportunities and experiences for your child to express hospitality with just a little planning. Whether at home, in the neighborhood, at school, church, or through generosity towards people they don’t even know, there are many practical ways to help your child grow in the habit of welcoming others.

At Home

Your home is the most natural place to help your child have a welcoming heart. Recently, God expanded my view of hospitality at home when He gave me a heart for our new trash collector. It was a steamy hot summer day, and our community had just switched to a different trash service. As I saw our new trash collector trudging from house to house in the extreme heat, the Lord prompted me to take him a bottle of cold water. As he thankfully took the drink, my thoughts turned to what his life was like, and I found myself praying for him as I walked back to the house. God can grow you and your child in showing hospitality at home as well. Here are some ideas you could try:

- Involve your child as you make and take a home-cooked meal to someone in need.
- Be intentional in modeling kindness and respect to people who come to your home to service appliances or make deliveries.
- Go with your child to give your mail carrier or trash collector a bottle of cold water on a hot summer day. (I learned the name of our new mail carrier doing this.)
- Host an Easter egg hunt or a birthday party for Jesus.
- Invite another family with children over for a game night.

In the Neighborhood

Your neighborhood is a good place to model hospitality with your child. I have a friend who “adopted” an elderly widower in her neighborhood. For years, she and her young daughters became family for this older gentleman, and he became family to them. My mother-in-law lives in a very large neighborhood in Texas, and over 30 years ago, she helped implement a block captain system as a way to keep this large neighborhood connected. Through her efforts, and those of others with the same desire, families were connected in many creative ways with a neighborhood newsletter, babysitting co-op, and social gatherings throughout the year (including an Easter egg hunt and tree-lighting ceremony in a nearby park). Now in her late 80s, she has lifelong friendships because of her open and welcoming heart for neighbors. There are many ways you can help your child become welcoming to neighbors. Here are a few things you could try:

- Involve your child in doing random acts of kindness for neighbors such as taking flowers, raking leaves, or shoveling snow.



... we can still teach our children about God’s heart for people, while guarding them from experiences that might put them in danger.



God can grow you and your child in showing hospitality at home as well.



Involve your child in doing random acts of kindness for neighbors ...



- Adopt a widow or widower in the neighborhood and visit regularly with your child.
- Offer to walk an elderly neighbor's dog in snowy weather or after they've had surgery.
- Make special treats and take them to your neighbors for holidays.
- Go with your child to take cold water bottles or hot drinks to utility workers doing repairs in your neighborhood.

At School

The school setting is a great place to help your child have a welcoming heart towards others. You can encourage your child to notice children who sit or play alone or who are brand new to the school. Ask about your child's interactions with other children when they get home and help them process those interactions. Here are some ideas to try:

- Invite new children from school over to play.
- Encourage your child to sit with children who are alone in the lunchroom.
- Encourage your child to look for children playing alone at recess and play with them.
- Write names of children in your child's class on popsicle sticks and each day, choose one at random and pray for them together.
- Consider inviting the entire class to your child's next birthday party.



... encourage your child to notice children who sit or play alone or who are brand new to the school.



At Church

Church can be another great place to teach your child about hospitality. Each week there are newcomers to welcome in addition to those who aren't newcomers but who might feel like outsiders. I have a friend who pauses before taking her seat in worship while she scans those already seated, looking for anyone sitting alone that she could sit with. The children's program can also be a lonely place for some children. In the church I served as children's ministry director, there were 26 different elementary schools represented, making it difficult for children who were the only ones from their school. Here are some ideas to cultivate a welcoming heart at church:

- While in the parking lot, look for unfamiliar families and introduce your family to theirs.
- Sign up to be a greeter and greet with your children.
- Encourage your child to sit with students in the children's program who are sitting alone.
- Encourage your child to help other children who have physical impairments.
- If your church has a special needs ministry, volunteer to help with your child.

The World Around Your Child

There are many ways you can safely help your child learn to show love to poor, lonely, and hurting people in the world around them. For years, a woman at my church took her daughter with her each week as she delivered Meals on Wheels meals to those in need. Her daughter is now college age and has grown to be a young woman with a compassionate and giving heart. This is an example of a great way to cultivate and nurture a heart like God's. You could also try these other ideas:

- Participate in Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child. Pray for the recipient of the gifts as you shop with your child. Write a letter to the child. Select the "track your box" option online and continue to pray for the child and the country where your shoebox goes.
- Volunteer with your child at a local food pantry or help serve a holiday meal at a homeless shelter.
- Include your child in purchasing items for community- or church-sponsored Christmas wish lists for area families in need.
- Shop with your child for food and toy drives sponsored by local fire and police departments.
- Involve your child in learning about the different national origins of children in their class.

As we experience and model hospitality, we can see firsthand why this is close to the heart of God. Hospitality is beautiful. Showing hospitality is God's desire for us. And it's God's desire that we provide these experiences for our children and help them have welcoming hearts.

When hearts and homes are open to welcoming others, both the hosts and the guests are blessed. God can help anyone who wants themselves and their children to have hearts and front doors that are more open. It really is possible to help your child have a welcoming heart. You can do it with God's help.



It really is possible to help your child have a welcoming heart.





"All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children."

Isaiah 54:13



GROWING MORE SPIRITUALLY VIBRANT

If the preceding pages have given you ideas for next steps to try out with your own child, I encourage you to persevere. Begin with prayer and a plan to get started. Start small. Start somewhere. Start by initiating something you have learned. God will do the rest! I love the picture painted in Isaiah's prophecy:

"All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children." Isaiah 54:13

If nurturing your child's faith makes you feel inadequate to the task, just remember this verse: Our children will be "taught by the Lord." He is the One working inside them. You aren't parenting alone, you can parent with God, partnering with Him as He invites your child to have a living relationship with Him.

It's parenting with God that allows us to nurture the high hopes we have for our children. It's good that we have high hopes and dreams for our children's faith. It is right that we would want them to have a healthy understanding of their own sin and the need for God's forgiveness. It's good that we want them to recognize the voice of God and obey Him. It's natural that we want them to have an enduring faith that keeps them strong through life's troubles and protects them from harmful behaviors.

Yes, let us have high hopes for our children's faith. And let us parent with God as we help our children grow by extending hospitality. As you take your next steps in helping your child welcome others, my prayer for you is from Hebrews 13:20a, 21:

*Now may the God of peace ...
equip you with everything good that you may do His will,
working in us that which is pleasing in
His sight, through Jesus Christ.*

MORE RESOURCES

For the full research report from Barna/LHM, you can read:

Households of Faith: The Rituals and Relationships That Turn a Home into a Sacred Space

You may also be interested in:

The Spiritually Vibrant Home: The Power of Messy Prayers, Loud Tables, and Open Doors



Vibrant Households

**APPLY
SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES**




Helping Your Child
Apply a Relationship
with God



PROJECT CONNECT

**EXTEND
HOSPITALITY**



Helping Your Child
Welcome Others



PROJECT CONNECT

**ENGAGE IN
SPIRITUAL
CONVERSATIONS**



Helping Your Child
Grow Through
Faith Conversations



PROJECT CONNECT

Mary Oldfield lives in St. Louis with her husband, Robin, of 38 years. They have two married daughters and five grandchildren. She delights in trusting God to help her prepare a place for God to work in the lives of her grandchildren. Mary is a retired children's ministry director who spent 20 years equipping and supporting parents as they responded to the call to be the primary spiritual nurturers of their children.



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