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Loving Your Prodigal Child



Hope and help for parents
waiting for their prodigal
child to come home.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Hope and help for parents waiting for their prodigal child to come home.



Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Until the Prodigal Returns
By Marian V. Liataud

6 LEADER'S GUIDE

How to use this resource for a group study.

7 LOVING YOUR PRODIGAL

Author H. Norman Wright offers help when a child turns her back on her family and her faith.
Interview by Carla Barnhill

16 THE MISSING MOTHER

When my prodigal son left, it sent me on a sojourn as well.
By Wendy Murray Zoba

27 A PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

'Do I cut-off my child because I disapprove of her lifestyle?'
By Frederica Mathewes-Green

30 DEALING WITH A PRODIGAL

How the pain of a runaway daughter helped Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's director, Carol Cymbala, discover the truth about God.
Interview by Ginger E. Kolbaba

35 WHAT A PASTOR LEARNED FROM HIS PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

6 tips to get you through a dark time.
By Anonymous

41 REAL LIFE, REAL HOPE

What happened when I put my daughter's future in God's hands.
By Janis Johnson

44 WHAT EVERY PARENT WONDERS

Wise counsel for some of the hidden concerns you face.
By Susan Alexander Yates

49 CONNECT WITH YOUR KIDS

8 great ways to build a better bond.
By Kathi Hunter

58 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Introduction

Until the Prodigal Returns

By Marian V. Liataud

My Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Joe raised eight boys. You read that right—eight! With four boys, I am only halfway to where they were size-wise as a family. One thing I have always admired about their parenting is that they literally saw everything (from boyish pranks to serious, life-changing incidences) and still somehow they managed to remain optimistic about their children's futures. They never seemed particularly riddled with guilt for not being perfect parents, though I am sure they took some bullets of blame.



Loving Your Prodigal Child Until the Prodigal Returns

Though practically every son wandered away from the flock at one point or another, each one returned. And always, waiting for them with open arms, were their parents.

Aunt Dorothy died recently. (My uncle preceded her in death 12 years earlier.) The thing I will miss the most is the way she modeled unconditional love, even when her kids' actions broke her heart. A couple of years ago, she spent the night with us. We were going through a particularly difficult time with our oldest son, and frankly, I was not feeling much love toward him. I was angry and resentful of the choices he was making and the impact they were having on our family. When Dorothy came to visit, though, she took the time to chat with our son and get to know him. Over and over, she said to me on the side, "That Danny, he's really special. There's something about him. I just love that boy."

Aunt Dorothy's assessment of our son was the first drop of hope I had received in a long time. I drank up her words like a tall glass of water on a sun-scorched day. I went from feeling parched to being filled with promise. He (and we) would live! We would survive this prodigal season. If Dorothy, the mother who had seen everything, could see the possibility of this, than I could believe it too.

Now, with two more teenagers and an eight-year-old caboose, we are experiencing prodigal behavior on all kinds of levels. Though our kids have not physically left home to squander their inheritance, in a multitude of ways they have left home in search of foreign lands and





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Until the Prodigal Returns

experiences. Painful as these years are turning out to be, we're learning how to thrive, even in the midst of frequent heartache. Slowly, I think I'm beginning to understand how my aunt and uncle did it—how they survived the prodigal years: They watched and waited. In other words, they never gave up hope that one day, no matter how long it took, their sons would come knocking.

You may be facing the early signs of wayward behavior, or perhaps you're wrestling with all-out rebellion in your child. We've put together a collection of thoughtful essays, practical tips, real stories from moms and dads who have looked down the same road, watching and waiting for their son or daughter to return. Take heart in the encouragement that follows and remember, just as my Aunt Dorothy could see the diamond in the rough that is my son, you possess your own gem. It may feel like they've been polishing in the rock tumbler long enough, but God will only keep them there until they sparkle.

Blessings,

Marian V. Liataud

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Loving Your Prodigal Child” for a group study



“Loving Your Prodigal Child” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

Loving Your Prodigal



Author H. Norman Wright offers help when a child turns her back on her family and her faith.

Interview by Carla Barnhill

H. Norman Wright has written more than 65 books on everything from parenting to pets. But his book, *Loving a Prodigal* (Chariot Victor) is perhaps his most personal. At the age of 20, Wright's daughter, Sheryl, rejected the family's faith and became involved with alcohol, drugs and abusive relationships. Over the next several years, Wright and his wife, Joyce, prayed, cried and struggled to bring their daughter back from a dangerous life. Finally, Sheryl turned her life back over to God.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

We talked with Norm Wright to find out why some children turn from their faith and their families and what parents can do to help their children avoid the traps of rebellion.

What do you mean by the term prodigal?

The word is used to describe someone who is extremely wasteful. In the biblical story of the prodigal son, the son wastes his inheritance and so much more. Prodigal children waste the values their parents have worked to instill in them. They waste their potential, their abilities, their health, their future. In some cases, they waste their lives. For the sake of our discussion, I consider a child who has rejected the values of his family to be a prodigal, even if that child still lives at home, even if that child is 12 years old.

Why do some children become prodigals while other children in the same family don't?

I believe rebellion comes from a combination of personality, environment, genetics and the basic sinfulness we all have. Parents might say, "We raised all of our children the same way. Why is John in trouble and Jane a model child?" But in reality, every child is different. Every child is born into a different family. The family dynamics change as more children come into the family. Parents react differently to their different children. Maybe you move or change jobs or someone gets sick. All of those changes affect the atmosphere of the family.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

There are also factors like mental illness and addiction that play into this. After our daughter turned her life around, she told us that she has an addictive personality. She believes that contributed to her attraction to a lifestyle filled with drugs and alcohol. If parents suspect mental illness or addiction issues, they should work with a professional counselor as early as possible.

The truth is, every child has free will. If you want to know why some children rebel and others don't, that's the best reason I can come up with.

Is there anything parents can do that will keep a child from becoming a prodigal?

The best thing parents can do is listen to their children from an early age and get to know this person that God created. What's unique about him? What matters to him? How does he see the world? The more you know about your child the better equipped you'll be to notice the little changes that might be early signs of rebellion.

And clearly, faith has an impact. Strong families make Christ the center of the home in a healthy, positive, realistic way. The family devotions, praying for one another, praying for the child, demonstrating through your own choices what it means to live for God, these all make faith real for children and help them see that God is someone they can turn to, not someone to fear or turn against.

But again, parents can do all these things and still have a prodigal child. It simply happens.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

You mentioned early signs of rebellion. What are they?

As I said, some of these signs are found in a child's temperament. There are children who fall into the category of being oppositional. These kids will challenge authority at every turn. They tend to be negative and stubborn just for the sake of being defiant.

There are also children who don't act out their defiance in an aggressive way but tend to do their own thing or simply ignore what other people want or need.

Our daughter, Sheryl, was more of a creative child who liked to explore and dream. She always wanted to do things a little left of center. That may have contributed to her rebellion.

But keep in mind that just as there's no guarantee a child won't rebel, these personality traits don't mean a child is destined to become a prodigal. They are simply clues that what worked for the other children in the family might not work for this child.

How does a parent maintain that kind of awareness with an 11-year-old who insists on privacy or a 14-year-old who won't talk about anything?

Be observant. Keep your eyes and ears open. Listen to what the kids are saying. Listen to what they're not saying. Listen with your eyes. We hear more with our eyes than we do with our ears.

Research on listening suggests that 7 percent of what we take from a conversation is based on the content of what is said, 38 percent is based on tone of voice, 55 percent





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

is based on non-verbal signals such as the way the speaker is sitting or what she does with her hands. Parents need to watch their kids. Hear what they're saying. Have an open door where they can bring the friends over. And know something about the families of these friends, too.

So if a child does rebel, despite the parent's best efforts, it must be devastating. How can parents deal with the emotions that come with a prodigal child?

I counsel parents to start by allowing themselves to grieve the loss they're experiencing. This is a major upset. Your family is not turning out the way you hoped it would and that brings on a whole myriad of emotions—guilt, anger, blame, confusion, doubt. Those emotions have to be dealt with for the family to stay healthy and deal with the crisis in an effective way.

I encourage parents to find a support group through their church or a community organization. When parents withdraw into themselves, the only people they're talking to about this is each other and they aren't experts. They're people in pain. They need comfort. They need encouragement. They need guidance.

After a while, I think parents simply have to relinquish their child and give him or her to God. This should be the first thing we do, but for many parents, we'll exhaust our own resources before recognizing that God will be the one to bring change. You almost have to detach yourself from the child and realize that you can't control him and bring him back. What you can do is what we ended up doing. We prayed that, since Sheryl wouldn't listen to us, God would





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

connect her with people she would listen to. And that's what ended up happening. God used a friend of Sheryl's to get her to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where she finally saw that she had a problem. We never could have gotten her to go to AA, but her friend did.

In your book, you talk about the shame factor that often keeps parents from seeking support from friends or even from their church. How can parents move past that shame?

I think parents have to be willing to be honest, to say, "This is where we're walking, folks. This is what we're going through." If your family is struggling, don't hide it. Don't get hung up by feelings of shame. Just realize that you have a problem you can't fix; there's no shame in that.

How can those of us who haven't dealt with this ourselves reach out to families who might be too embarrassed to talk about their prodigal child?

Frankly, there are a lot of rigid and judgmental people in the church. There's this false presumption that Christians should raise perfect children. But look at God. He is the perfect parent. He gave Adam and Eve everything, did everything right, but they still rebelled.

So we need to be sensitive. If we know others are struggling, we can go to them and say, "I don't know if you'd like to talk, but I'm available." What the parents of prodigals don't need is someone judging us or telling us what we did wrong or what happened when Aunt Mary's brother went through this. We don't need someone to quote Scripture and then walk away. We need friends who will listen, be there, support us.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

What can parents do to bring their prodigal back home, literally or figuratively?

With our daughter, we maintained a relationship with her throughout her struggle. I think keeping a connection is an essential part of loving your prodigal child. As difficult as it can be, parents need to stay in contact with that child. Don't cut them off. Show your love for them. That doesn't mean you accept what they're doing. In fact, we were always clear with Sheryl that we didn't like her lifestyle. Your child might say, "What I'm doing is me. If you don't accept that, you don't accept me." If that happens, it's important to say, "You are not your behavior or your lifestyle. You have value apart from what you do. And we love you as a person. We value you as a person."

Some parents use the subtle-hint approach. They'll put a book in the child's backpack or leave a note on her bed reminding the child that she is loved. They'll say, "Let me tell you how I'm praying for you." It doesn't have to be anything long or complex, just an expression of care and love.

In the end, of course, it's God who will change a child's heart. Parents can only be faithful and know that God is in control.

When the prodigal child does begin to show signs of coming back, how can a family move toward reconciliation?

Patience is essential. It might take a good year of reconnecting before the family feels like they're through the crisis. None of you are the same people you were before.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

There's also a big difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. You can forgive, but the other person doesn't have to do anything about it. Reconciliation means both people reach out. There are often lingering resentments between a parent and the child or between the child and a sibling, which can prevent reconciliation. You just have to deal with those feelings and keep going to counseling or working with a support group or do what it takes to bring the family together again.

Something else I recommend is that parents list their expectations for the returning prodigal. The child should do the same. Both sides need to be honest about what they need and the ways they're willing to negotiate and compromise. And keep your expectations realistic. Your child might be ready to stop drinking or stealing but still be unwilling to go to church or participate in your faith. If you can live with that, then be willing to compromise for the sake of keeping a connection and making a first step toward reconciliation.

So this really is a process?

Absolutely. We want things fixed quickly, but this takes time. And in the end, the biblical model remains the same. The door is always open, the father is always waiting and watching for the son to return. In the research we did for the book, we asked the question, "Has your prodigal returned home?" My favorite response was from the parents who said, "No, my prodigal has not returned home. But we're still fattening the calf."

Carla Barnhill is the former editor of CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY. This article first appeared in the July/August 2000 issue of CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Loving Your Prodigal

Reflect

- *Why do you think some children become prodigals and others do not, even though they are raised in the same home?*
- *Looking back, can you trace the early signs of rebellion in your child?*
- *Think back over your own life. Were there times when you veered off course and chose your own way? How did you feel at the time? What brought you back again? How did this experience shape you into who you are today?*





The Missing Mother

When my prodigal son left, it sent me on a sojourn as well.

By Wendy Murray Zoba

Where is my son?

This question began what became a steady stream of notations documenting the disorienting passage in my life when one of my children left the world in which my husband and I had reared him—the world of faith. An unexpected aspect of this painful season has been the equally forbidding sojourn his pilgrimage has meant for me.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

Before our son was born, my husband and I took "natural" childbirth classes. The pain was supposed to be "managed" by breathing techniques. But by the time I was pushing that boy through my loins (after 36 hours of labor), the classes didn't mean a thing: Nothing could have prepared me for what that felt like. In the same way, nothing in all the parenting books I had dutifully read prepared me for the stages of pain and grief that having a prodigal child brought to my otherwise well-ordered, biblically packaged, evangelical world.

Early on, when I first began to wonder what was happening in my son, I pictured the saucereyed, silky-haired little helper who used to come to me as a four-year-old with pen and paper in hand and ask, "Mom, draw me an Ewok" (the furry creatures from *The Return of the Jedi*). I drew so many of them I could have marketed them.

Our son was the same age when he told us he was afraid of dying. We talked to him about his fear and tried to help him understand that, when we belong to Jesus, we don't have to be afraid. He wanted that assurance, and my husband, Bob, on the spot, helped him pray. Our son prayed the words after my husband, asking the Lord to come into his heart and free him from his fears. He prayed loudly, clearly, without mumbling.

When he was 10, he took Communion for the first time. He said he felt like he "was growing in God" when he took it. A year later, he asked his dad (a pastor) to





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

baptize him. He was nervous at first, he said, but afterward he was "excited."

When confusing things started to happen during his later teens—things that signaled a departure from our unwritten family "covenant" (the details of which do not pertain here)—I brought assumptions to the situation that operated out of the Ewok-era model of who my child was to me. (This is where mothers tend to lose all grounding in reality.) So the first leg of my sojourn as a prodigal's mother involved general disorientation: I was trying to reconcile who this person is in relationship to who he was. What went wrong? What had I done to turn my son against me?

I found comfort in the prophet Isaiah, who became the mouthpiece for God's own laments over his wayward Israel: "This is what the LORD says, 'The children I raised and cared for have turned against me. Even the animals—the donkey and the ox—know their owner and appreciate his care. But not my people Israel. No matter what I do for them, they still do not understand' " (Isa. 1:23 NLT; all Scripture references are from the NLT unless noted otherwise).

I thought that if God experienced this kind of heartache, then perhaps my son's wanderings were not necessarily attributable to my failures alone.

My disorientation evolved into spiritual resolve to do battle for my son's soul—to wage a campaign to rescue him from the Devil. I arose early in the mornings to be alone with God, first to right myself in his presence, and





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

then to storm the gates of heaven on my son's behalf. I fasted. I prayed. I even went so far as to go into his room and face down the myriad freakish posters and photos he had posted on his walls. I defied these people to try and steal my son's soul out from under me.

For all my resolve, I was shocked at my emotional disequilibrium: I was unable to predict or control my own tears, which erupted effusively at unexpected moments. Isaiah spoke to me again, revealing a similar intensity in the Lord's resolution: "Because I love Zion, because my heart yearns for Jerusalem, I cannot remain silent. I will not stop praying for her until her righteousness shines like the dawn, and her salvation blazes like a burning torch" (62:1).

I was soon to discover, however, that the problem with the all-out combat mode is that battle fatigue sets in before results. The more I prayed, fasted, and otherwise pulled out the stops in spiritual warfare, the more I expected measurable effects. When it became painfully evident that results were not part of this picture (at least at this point), the peaks of inspiration eventually were followed by troughs of dejection. This sense of powerlessness framed the third phase of my sojourn: discouragement.

Journal entry, October 1, 1996: "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (Ps. 73). I am so utterly discouraged. I don't go right to sleep at night so it is hard in the mornings to get up. Almost consistently, I am not rested. I hear the Devil whisper in my ear: "It doesn't do any good. Why not just sleep in and be rested?"





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

My son's increasingly frequent and unaccounted-for late nights meant that sleeplessness became a way of life. This only exacerbated the many conflicting emotions that assaulted me. My disorientation at times degenerated into hostility; my resolve metamorphosed to dejection. All of these emotions conspired to weigh me down with doubt about God's "intimate acquaintance" with my distress.

Again, late one night (always late at night) I got up and found an old copy of Augustine's Confessions. I saw in the contents the section titled "Grief of his mother Monnica at his heresy and prayers for his conversion."

Thou sentest Thine hand from above, drewest my soul out of that profound darkness, [as] my mother, thy faithful one, weeping to Thee for me ... discerned the death wherein I lay. And Thou heardest her, O Lord; Thou heardest her and despised not her tears when, streaming down, they watered the ground under her eyes in every place where she prayed; yea, Thou heardest her.

The Lord sent Monica a dream showing her a vision of a "shining youth coming towards her, cheerful and smiling upon her, herself grieving, overwhelmed with grief." Augustine recounted that the dream assured his mother that "where she was, there was I also." She told her son the dream and he contradicted her interpretation, suggesting that it meant she would one day be where he was—without faith. "She was not perplexed by the plausibility of my false interpretation," he said. Her assurance "moved me more than the dream itself."





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

"Now more cheered with hope," he wrote, "yet no whit relaxing in her weeping and mourning, ceased not at all hours of her devotions to bewail my case unto Thee." A bishop comforted Monica, promising he would speak to her son: "Go thy way and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish." And in fact, when her son was 32 years old, many years after the dream, he finally stood "where she was" in the Lord.

I had no visions like Monica's to comfort me that night. But reading a former prodigal's own account of his mother's travail enabled me to drop off to sleep hearing the words he recounted repeatedly in his remembrances: Thou heardest her, O Lord.

Momentary Light

There were moments when the darkness lifted and God momentarily gave me his eyes. These moments were like lighthouses in a heavy fog—I was able to see past the immediacy of the pain and instead capture a glimpse of my son as a searching and wandering soul. Once when my heart had been so quickened I got up (long after everyone had gone to bed) and drew an Ewok. Scribbling in a frenzied flurry, the pen followed the same strokes and shading it had 14 years earlier, when my son would curl up next to me exulting in the near-perfectly rendered fuzzy arms, wrinkled boots, draping hood, and rustic spear. That night I captured just the right sparkle in the Ewok's eyes and the exact curl in the dark little lips.

I attached a letter to the picture of the Ewok and left it on my son's pillow. I told him that even though he no longer asks me, I would gladly draw him all the Ewoks he could ever want.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

But for all the fleeting blessedness of these glimmers of light, they were not sufficient to quell the force of the pain of his course. My "combat fatigue" and discouragement eventually gave way to acquiescence. By his 18th year, it had become painfully apparent that the circumstances of our respective existences were incompatible. We arranged for him to study abroad for his first semester of college, giving us all some needed relief and distance from our turmoil. He was ready to go; I was ready to send him.

Journal entry, December 20, 1997: He leaves in a few weeks. At this stage of our relationship so much has been darkened by confusion and alienation that I don't know how it can be fixed short of both of us being miraculously wiped clean and given a fresh start.

We said good-bye in mid-January. The drive to the airport was quiet with only sporadic superficial chit-chat. He walked 10 steps ahead of us through the many corridors we had to trek to get to the ticket counter, passing through a corridor where glass tiles formed a wavy wall and a freelance saxophonist was playing a sloppy version of "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

We stayed with him at the gate for the hour and a half prior to his boarding. Airport CNN was on, and I heard more than I wanted to about Oprah's trip to Amarillo, Texas, to take on the beef industry and Al Gore's antigeneticdiscrimination legislation.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

Marla Maples appeared on *Larry King Live*, and for a few minutes her blather lulled me into temporarily forgetting what I was there for. She talked about her conversation with Ivana after she and Donald Trump broke up; about how having a child out of wedlock disgraced her Southern Baptist sensibilities; and about how she was "really happy" about her new movie career (movie career?). Then, with shocking suddenness, the boarding call for our son's flight interrupted her mesmerizing inflections. Everyone started shuffling.

"Well, son, are you ready?" his dad asked him.

He was.

He hugged his dad and thanked him for sending him. I honestly didn't think I was going to cry because there really hadn't been a lot of emotion welling up inside me up to that point. But my heart started pounding when he hugged me and thanked me too. I told him I loved him and he said it back. I handed him a note I had written him, and then I started to cry; but I kept it inside.

He passed by the ticket checker and started down the ramp. Then he dropped his tickets and had to interrupt the flow of people to pick them up. (I couldn't pick them up for him.) He gathered them and walked on. Bob yelled over the heads of several people, "Good-bye, Son!" Our son turned back and saw me waving. There was no stopping the tears. I didn't even try.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

My husband put his arm around me and we walked back through the corridors. Marla Maples said that you just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how hard it seems. ("Life is full of ups and downs.") So we walked, one foot in front of the other, past the saxophonist (playing "Has Anybody Seen My Gal?") and beyond the wavy glass wall. "If you are walking in darkness, without a ray of light, trust in the Lord and rely on your God," Isaiah says (50:10).

A friend of Ruth Graham's once told her: "You have the right to ask the Mighty One to do more for your children than he could if you were with them. Open thy mouth wide." I decided to stop focusing on my son's choices and start focusing on God's trustworthiness.

This ushered in the next stage of my sojourn as a prodigal's mother: release and trust.

When I read Luke 15 and "The Parable of the Two Lost Sons" (as my husband calls it) soon after that moment, I approached it not as a seminary graduate, but as a struggling mother looking for some help. I was struck by the complete omission of any reference to the Prodigal's mother in that parable.

Where is she?

Thinking about it from the vantage of a mother who, at times, has felt as lost as her son, her absence made perfect sense. Prodigals, I would think, by definition, assert their autonomy in a way that most dramatically severs the intimate parental bonds.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

And in many cases, that intimacy goes back to the heart of their mothers. That severing leaves mothers like me without a role. So we retreat, emotionally disoriented, physically fatigued, spiritually embattled. (Fathers probably do, too, but that's another article.)

I realized that I needed to subsume my role as tormented mother under that of being a trusting daughter—waiting on God in faith. That didn't mean I stopped praying and weeping for my son. But it helped me understand why, perhaps, "the mother" is not a player in this parable.

My guess is that she was there. She was probably where I have found myself throughout all stages of this sojourn: behind a closed door, looking out a window, waiting for her son to come home.

Wendy Murray Zoba is a former editor of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. This article first appeared in the October 26, 1998 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

The Missing Mother

Reflect

- *If you are the mother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where are you right now? Are you hiding from the problem? Watching and worrying? Or waiting prayerfully for your child to return?*
- *The author kept a journal of her feelings and experiences during this stage of life. How could journaling help you?*
- *If your child has rebelled for some time, what will it take to reconcile?*





A Prodigal Daughter

'Do I cut-off my child because I disapprove of her lifestyle?'

By Frederica Mathewes-Green

Q: *My daughter, though she claims to be a Christian, is living with her boyfriend. If I follow I Corinthians 5:11, I would have to disassociate myself from her altogether! I want to please the Lord and not compromise my faith yet be there for my daughter. What should I do?*





Loving Your Prodigal Child

A Prodigal Daughter

A: In this complex situation, the first thing to remember is that you must continue to love and pray for your daughter. Secondly, keep your eyes on the goal: you are trying to help her return to honoring God's standards. In I Corinthians 5:3-5 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, we see Paul's method in action; he applies enough discipline to motivate a person to rethink their behavior and turn, but not so much to crush them with despair.

It doesn't seem that disassociating from your daughter would have the desired effect. I would imagine that the most persuasive thing you can do is communicate, even wordlessly, that this situation saddens you. Not that you disapprove or worry, but that it grieves you deeply.

Don't be a nag, but don't hide your displeasure either. It is likely you can't conceal this anyway.

When given the opportunity to speak to her, be prepared to lovingly show your daughter from God's Word why this situation is not pleasing to the Lord. Her awareness of your loving concern may gradually awaken something in her and wear away her defenses like water against a stone.

Frederica Mathewes-Green is the author of The Illumined Heart (Paraclete Press). This article first appeared in the July/August 2003 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

A Prodigal Daughter

Reflect

- *What do you think the apostle Paul meant in the following verse? 1Corinthians 5:11: "But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat." (NIV)*
- *What boundaries have you set in your home for behavior? How will you respond if your child chooses to rebel against your rules?*





Dealing with a Prodigal

How the pain of a runaway daughter helped Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's director, Carol Cymbala, discover the truth about God.

Interview by Ginger E. Kolbaba

What happened with your daughter, Chrissy?

Chrissy, our eldest, had always been a model child. But when she turned 15, she did this aboutface. She started hanging around with the wrong people, and she turned her back on the Lord. She went so far away from God that we didn't even know her. It was as if she were another human being. She wasn't the daughter I had raised.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Dealing with a Prodigal

We began sensing a hardness in her, a lack of interest in God, and a growing tendency toward deception and destructive behaviors. Her attitude was, "I'll do things my way." By the time Jim and I finally realized what was going on, it was too late. The situation culminated in her running away from home.

Did you have any contact with Chrissy after she left?

I did. Chrissy stayed in several different places. Sometimes she'd call me. Sometimes she'd communicate with a good friend of ours who'd let us know how to get in touch with her. I couldn't bear not to have contact. While the separation was extremely hard, just hearing her voice and knowing she was OK gave me some comfort. I never stopped praying for her. My prayer was that God somehow would shine his light into her heart, and that she'd be drawn back into the light of God's love.

Did you ever blame yourself?

Oh, yes. I'd think, I'm not a good enough mother. So naturally when Chrissy rebelled, my mind went, Oh, I should have done this. I should have done that.

I've now come to this understanding: Even though I haven't been the perfect parent, my children know unequivocally that Jim and I love them and would do anything within our power for them. God used that knowledge to comfort me when the guilt showed up.

So what finally happened with Chrissy?

I knew the only way we could get through to Chrissy was through serious, intense prayer. There was nothing else





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Dealing with a Prodigal

we could do; words with her didn't mean anything. But I knew prayer was so powerful that God could change her.

Well, one Tuesday night when Chrissy was at her worst and still away from home, Jim was leading the church's prayer meeting when a woman handed him a note. It said, "I really feel we need to pray for your daughter." After reading that note, Jim broke down in tears. He asked one of his associates to lead the church in prayer for Chrissy. About 2,000 people lifted Chrissy up to God.

That very night, as Chrissy lay in bed, she had this vision of seeing herself going down into a horrible abyss. She thought, *Oh no, I'm heading toward destruction!* Hell became real to her. She cried out to God, repented of her sin, and asked God to forgive her. And he did a total overhaul on her.

Right after that, Chrissy came home and knocked on our front door. I'll never forget that moment.

She knocked on the door?

Well, she rang the bell. I opened the door and there Chrissy stood. She said, "Is Daddy here?" Jim was upstairs, shaving. I ran upstairs into the bathroom and said, "Chrissy's here." He looked at me, wiped the shaving cream off his face, and went downstairs. Chrissy was in the kitchen. Jim went into the kitchen, and she walked over to him and knelt before him. It was so beautiful. ...





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Dealing with a Prodigal

She said, "Dad, I've sinned. I've come back to God, and I want to ask your forgiveness too. I'm so sorry." And that was it. After about two-and-a-half years of rebellion, Chrissy's life was turned around. It was like the prodigal coming home.

When I think of what God's done in her life; that's faithfulness.

Chrissy has since married a wonderful man. They're in the ministry together. Chrissy assists me in the music ministry. I can depend on her.

There have been hard times in my life. There are hard times for everybody who wants to do God's will. Life's not easy. But when I look back and see how God has ordered everything, it's amazing how each piece fits. It's like a puzzle. When you're in the middle of it, you can't see the big picture. But when you look back, you see how all the pieces fell into place.

When we get through a rough time, we see how God has been truly faithful. And how he uses everything—our heartaches and everything else—for his glory.

Look at the cover of my book, *He's Been Faithful*. There are hands lifted in worship below the title. Just knowing whose hands those are and the story behind them moves me. Those hands—my "prodigal" daughter Chrissy's hands—are lifted up to say God is faithful. And he truly is.

Ginger E. Kolbaba is the former editor of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP. This article first appeared in the November/December 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Reflect

- *How do you think you would react if your child's personality and/or lifestyle changed dramatically and became opposed to your beliefs?*
- *Carol Cymbala talks about feeling guilty for not having done a good enough job parenting her daughter. What truths can we claim from Scripture to overcome false guilt?*
- *In what ways has God been faithful so far in your life and in your children's lives?*





What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

6 tips to get you through a dark time.

By Anonymous

If you met my daughter today on the street or in a mall of the large city where she lives, you would see a dark-haired, five-foot-ten, attractive woman with an open spirit and a ready self confidence. She lives independently, serves in her church, and mentors inner-city girls in her spare time.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

Nothing would tell you that when she was their age, starting in the middle grades and running straight through high school, she was furious at the world. Somewhere around sixth grade, she decided to buck the norms: She would dress in a "punk" style (this was the early '80s), argue with her parents nonstop, raise shocking questions in Sunday school, quit doing homework, and in time, experiment with marijuana.

At one point I was so distraught about what the congregation must be thinking that I offered to resign. "I know the biblical qualifications for an elder include the ability to manage one's household well," I said to the board. "I'm not sure I qualify any longer for this position.

"My father was a pastor," the first man said. "My sister caused a tremendous amount of turmoil at home. I think I understand your pain."

Another picked up the thread. "Pastor, the fact that you are dealing with your daughter's problem is evidence you are managing your household." The board concluded I should stay on.

The day finally came when my daughter turned 18, graduated from high school, and struck out on her own. In the years since, counseling has helped her drain the anger inside, feel better about herself, and come to terms with God. She has become friends once again with her mother and dad. When we talk on the phone, or she visits our home for holidays, it is a time of joy and warmth.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

What did my wife and I learn along the way?

1. It's all right to air your pain with trustworthy confidants.

While at first we were guarded about letting our problem show, we eventually couldn't hold out. And the perspectives we gained were invaluable.

Counselors played a beneficial role in helping us. Additionally, I finally took a friend to lunch who had seen three of his children go through drug rehabilitation. "George," I said with much nervousness, "I hope you won't disrespect me for this, but I have a problem with my daughter. . . ." He didn't gasp; he listened and gave wise advice.

2. Don't stoop to the child's level.

While adolescents are often self-absorbed and think only of their own feelings, adults should take a wider view. One day I realized that the biggest adolescent in our household wasn't my daughter; it was I. I had abandoned the role of parent and become another teenager. I wanted so much to control the situation that I had forgotten my primary role as nurturer and guide.

If I didn't get back to treating her with respect, no matter what she did or said, the downward spiral would never end.

3. Don't force conformity.

One Sunday my daughter got into an argument with the teacher right in the middle of junior high Sunday





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

school. She came home saying, "That's it! I'm not going to church anymore. Nobody's for real there; it's all phony."

We shuddered. But an older pastor recommended letting her stay home. Maintaining our image as a pastoral family was not worth enlarging her misery and resentment. Our daughter now says this endeared us to her rather than pushing us further away.

4. Change the scenery if possible.

One Thanksgiving, during a blizzard, I took her along to drop off a load of clothing and food at a small urban church that served mainly minorities and single parents. This seemed to strike a chord in her soul. She liked being around people who didn't care what you looked like. Jeans and T-shirts were fine for Sunday worship there.

She felt safe and accepted, so much that she returned to see the inner-city pastor, his wife, and the church more than once.

5. Never doubt that God understands.

In one of my lowest moments, I heard a sermon by a friend who told about the time his daughter almost died in a car accident. As I listened, I realized how little I cared whether my daughter lived or died. "Forgive me, God," I prayed, "for my selfabsorption. You created her, and you're not surprised by anything she's doing. Help me to love her again the way you do."





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

Not long afterward, Colossians 1:27 took on special meaning for me. It speaks about the mystery "which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." If Christ really was living inside of me during those dark days, he was the hope I needed that one day all this confusion and sorrow would end, and glory would return.

6. Take one day-or even one hour-at a time.

This won't sound like much, but when you're struggling to keep going, you're grateful for small blessings. We learned to give thanks whenever there was a single day without eruption.

Sometimes we even broke it down into smaller chunks. If breakfast went peacefully, we rejoiced! Lunch or dinner might still be torturous, but at least we'd gotten through one meal of the day in fair shape.

Today my wife and I are grateful that the turmoil of that era is behind us, and single meals without conflict have stretched into whole months and years of goodwill. Not long ago my daughter presented me with a copy of Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf 's autobiography, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*. In the front she had written, "It doesn't take a hero to be a father; it does take a hero to be a great father. You're a hero to me. I love you."

Sometimes I still look back with sadness at the loss of a more normal, happy adolescence for my daughter. But recently she told me her perspective: "Everything happens for a reason. God brought us both to a place of compassion we didn't have before. I care more about





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What a Pastor Learned From His Prodigal Daughter

people because of what I've been through. I wouldn't trade my past for the world. In fact, I'm proud of myself for working through all this and turning it into something good."

You know, this strong-willed daughter of mine has a point.

This article first appeared in the Winter 1997 issue of LEADERSHIP.

Reflect

- *What's going well so far today that you can rejoice over?*
- *Oftentimes when things are not going smoothly with our kids, we blame ourselves and feel like we're failing as parents. How, like the pastor, are you actually managing your household, even though problems persist?*
- *If you had to guess, how could you envision God using your child's difficult circumstances or poor choices for future growth and glory?*



Real Life, Real Hope

What happened when I put my daughter's future in God's hands.

By Janis Johnson



I've been a single mom for 12 years, shouldering the bulk of the responsibility of raising my four daughters. My youngest resented her father's absence from our lives more than her sisters, and rebelled against me because he wasn't around. I became worn out trying to keep peace at home and keep her from disaster.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Real Life. Real Hope

Finally, I realized I was carrying the load of being both mom and dad, and God wasn't asking me to. One day I bowed my head in despair and said, "Lord, I can't go on with her anymore. I love my daughter dearly, but you love her more. I'm letting go and asking you to do what it takes to bring her heart to you." I cried because I knew it might take a difficult time to bring her to Jesus, and I would have to keep my hands off her so he could do his best work. My job was to continually pray for my daughter and for her friends, whom I disliked.

Did it take a difficult time to bring her back? Yes. She's pregnant and broken. Her friends recommended an abortion, but she decided to keep the baby. Six months into her pregnancy, she came to me and said, "I know God's calling me, and he's going to use this baby to help me straighten out my life."

After my shock wore off, I heard that wonderful, still small voice whisper, *Remember, I love her, and my plans are not your plans. I want to bring healing to the broken parts of her life you don't even know about.* Peace flooded my soul. I'm so thrilled to know God's at work in her life, and I can trust him to continue the process.

Janis Johnson is a pseudonym for a woman living in Illinois. This article first appeared in the November/December 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Real Life. Real Hope

Reflect

- *What fears do you have for your child that prevent you from letting go and trusting God for his or her future?*
- *Sometimes the consequences of our children's actions linger for years, even a lifetime. How is God using difficult consequences of your child's choices to mold and shape her?*





What Every Parent Wonders

Wise counsel for some of the hidden concerns you face.

By Susan Alexander Yates

Here are three of the toughest hidden concerns we don't often articulate but all share—and what to do about them.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What Every Parent Wonders

Have my parenting mistakes messed my child up for good?

Rachel and her husband, Todd, realized they had a problem when their nine-year-old daughter Annie exploded with, "You are the stupidest mom in the world. I won't do that. You're crazy."

For too long they'd overlooked Annie's back talk and rudeness, and their home was fast becoming a battle zone. But with the help of an older couple, Rachel and Todd began to realize they had to teach their strong-willed daughter respect. But Annie was already nine. Was it too late?

It's never too late to do what's right. Together, Rachel and Todd worked out a new strategy, then sat down with Annie to discuss their plan. "We realize we've made some mistakes in parenting, and we're going to make some changes in our household," they told her. "As of now, back talk is no longer permitted in this house."

They cited specific examples of back talk, then explained what punishments would occur if it happened. The next time Annie talked back, they followed through on their punishment. It took weeks, but she soon learned her parents meant what they said. Her language improved, and her respect for her parents increased.

We'll all make philosophical mistakes in raising our kids, but we'll also simply blow it. After all, there are no perfect parents. Our kids know that better than anyone else. But they don't need perfect parents, only honest parents who are quick to say, "I'm sorry, will you forgive me?"





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What Every Parent Wonders

Several days ago my teenage daughter, Libby, tried to share a painful situation with me, but I was preoccupied and unsympathetic. A few hours later, finally realizing the problem was mine, I went and put my arm around her.

"Libby, I was wrong to be so insensitive to you in our conversation," I said. "Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, Mom, I forgive you," she responded as she gave me a hug. "Thanks for asking."

Did I feel like going to my daughter? No. Was I embarrassed? Yes. But feelings shouldn't always control actions. I went because I knew it was right, not because I felt like it. We have to be willing to go and get things straight, then wait and trust God to bring the feelings of healing in his time. And sometimes, it takes a long time.

Remember, there is no mistake God can't redeem. Luke 1:37 says, "For nothing is impossible with God." He can redeem anything.

What if my kids don't continue in their faith?

This concern increases as our kids grow, especially as our children prepare for college. As we visualize our child on campus, we wonder, Will she be taken in by the allure of intellectual elitism? Will he be strong enough to resist temptation?





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What Every Parent Wonders

We cannot fully protect or insulate our kids. Instead, we can train them to be salt and light in a fallen world. Here's what you can do to prepare them for leaving home with a strong faith.

- Make church attendance a non-negotiable. Go as a family.
- Involve your teens in a vital youth group.
- Use their summers for spiritual nourishment. Our teens need to be exposed to peers who are excited about their faith. Begin now to explore Christian camps or mission projects for your teen for next summer.
- Determine to grow in your own faith. The model of a parent striving to grow in Christ is a strong message.
- Pray, pray, pray. And enlist others to pray for your child.
- Remember the prodigal son. Leave your welcome mat out so that even if your child strays, he knows he can always come home. Remember that God loves your child even more than you do and that he's at work in his life even if you can't see it right now.

Susan Alexander Yates is author of A House Full of Friends (Focus on the Family) and coauthor, with daughter Allison Yates Gaskins, of Thanks, Mom, for Everything (Servant). This article first appeared in the November/December 1997 issue of TODAY 'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

What Every Parent Wonders

Reflect

- *What is the best parenting advice you ever received?*
- *When you're dealing with a parenting crisis, what tips from Susan Alexander Yates' list of how to choose appropriate resources is most helpful to you?*



Connect with Your Kids

8 great ways to build
a better bond.

By Kathi Hunter



I thought I was close to my kids. Then I bought my daughter a toothbrush. That's when I found out how clueless I really was.

"Mom! A Barbie toothbrush! How could you buy me a Barbie toothbrush?" Kimberly shrieked.

"Sweetie, you like Barbie. You just asked for a Barbie for your birthday," I said sweetly, trying to not let my aggravation show.

"Mom, that was two whole months ago. I don't play with Barbies anymore," Kimberly said, stomping off.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

With hectic schedules, overbooked kids, and worn-out parents, it is hard for us to keep up on toothbrush styles, much less work on shaping our children's character. But carving out time to spend with our children is a must.

Recent research shows that children who spend time talking to their parents, taking part in family activities and meals, and building family traditions with their parents are less likely to engage in harmful activities. During these times of simply hanging out with their parents, kids tend to open up more easily about sensitive topics and explore issues in greater depth. Those same conversations about school, God, friends, and science projects rarely take place solely in a 10-minute chunk of "quality time" at the end of a long day.

As Dr. Janice Crouse, a respected authority on family issues, explains, "Kids learn our values when they are spoken to respectfully and feel free to ask questions. When we spend time with our children, we can be sensitive to the teachable times in their lives. Even while I watched television with my kids, I would ask them leading questions. 'Did you see how that man treated his wife? How could he have handled that situation better?' Those discussions helped my children become more discerning and discriminating in what they watched and the activities they participated in growing up."

To avoid a repeat of what is now referred to as "The Barbie Incident," and to keep the lines of communication open between the members of our family, we have come up with eight ways to stay connected with each other. Try them out in your family, or use them to inspire bonding time that's unique to your family.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

I. Take a One-on-One Vacation

My friend, Kim, and her husband, Jim, had long promised their children that when each child turned 16, he or she would go on an extended vacation with one of their parents; their daughter, Sarah, would go with Mom, and their son, Ryan, with Dad. The only requirements were that it had to be in the continental U.S. and that the kids had to help plan the trip.

"Money was tight, and we had to give up a lot in order to afford the vacations," Kim explains, "but we knew how important it was to spend that time with each of the kids." Time alone with a parent during the teen years can be just the ticket for a teenager who needs to be reminded that she'll always have a safe haven as she moves out into the world.

If an extended vacation is impossible, try a long weekend with each of your children, like my friend Lynn. She and her husband, Mark, have taken turns going on a weekend getaway with their boys, Jake and Ben. Lynn got the first opportunity when each of their sons turned 10, and Mark two years later when the boys turned 12. Lynn says the best part about the trips was getting to see the uniqueness of each of her boys. While Ben wanted to get dressed up and go to the area culinary academy with his mom to try new and exotic dishes, Jake was thrilled to pedal across northern California on a guided bike tour with Lynn bringing up the rear.

Finally, if a weekend away won't work, an overnighter in a local hotel or campground can go a long way toward strengthening the bond between you and your child.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

2. Plan a Family Night

Once a week, we have a "Family Fun Night," with one family member in charge of the planning. They get \$15 to feed and entertain the troops. Our family has experienced everything from a bake-at-home pizza and a video rental of *The Princess Bride* to a home-packed picnic at the duck park followed by an afternoon at the local nickel arcade. Not only does Family Fun Night give us an opportunity to spend some time together, it forces our kids to plan, budget, and take other people's likes and dislikes into consideration. We also find that giving the children the chance to plan the event helps them enjoy this time a whole lot more.

3. Eat Dinner Together

It sounds so simple, but when our family is balancing work, kids' band practice, the golden retriever's vet appointments, and church choir rehearsal, our van passes beneath the Golden Arches more times than I care to admit. Now we make it a priority to sit down and eat a meal together at least five times a week. These range from dinner at a local restaurant to pancakes and bacon on a school morning to a Saturday tailgate before the big game. Not only is this a time to nourish our bodies with food, we nourish our family with good conversation and fun.

Not long ago, we were seated around the dinner table, discussing what it was like to be a kid when my husband and I were in elementary school. "You didn't have computers?" our son asked incredulously. "That's right," my husband replied, "we didn't even have a microwave." Justen thought about that for a moment, "Then how did you cook?" I am sure that he was not commenting on my culinary talents.





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

4. Have a Date Night

My son, Justen, and I began this tradition when he was seven years old and we still do it now that he's thirteen. About once a month, we choose a night to go out on the town, just the two of us. It may be hamburgers and strawberry shakes at the '50s-style diner in town, picking up mystery novels and hot chocolate at our favorite bookstore, or playing Skee-Ball at the local arcade. Whatever the activity, it gives us a chance to talk without the distraction of the phone, his siblings, or the Cartoon Network.

To create your own date night, ask your child what type of activity he'd enjoy. Maybe you both love Japanese food and want to try out the new sushi restaurant in town. Maybe you're astronomy fans; take a star walk sponsored by a local planetarium. The object of your evening is to get out of the house and do something you will both enjoy and can talk about in the years to come.

5. Pray Together

It sounds like a given, but it took many years before we got into the routine of praying together as a family. So we made it part of our regular routine. We decided to have everyone write out any prayer requests on an index card and place it in a basket on the breakfast table. Each morning, we divide up the cards, and have each family member pray aloud for the request. We pray for missionaries and math tests, friends who are sick and puppies who are about to be born. No request is too trivial.

My friend, Kimberly, prays with her son, Matthew, each night before he goes to bed. He refuses to put his head on the pillow until all of his friends, grandparents, and





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

stuffed animals have been upheld in prayer. It certainly makes bedtime last a little longer, but this is a special time of closeness for Kimberly and Matthew that is rarely missed.

6. Write a Love Note

In the middle of our cluttered kitchen counter sits a small, lidded basket, better known as the "family mailbox." Often when I check our little basket, there will be a sticky note with the words "I love you, Mommy," written in my daughter's best nine-year-old cursive with green glitter pen.

Our family mailbox is a great way to encourage each other and brighten our kids' days. My son is long past the age of wanting notes in his brown paper lunch bag where his friends can see them, but he never minds finding a note or a small treat in the family mailbox.

To start your own family mailbox, all you need is a basket, a pad of paper, and a pen. Start the ball rolling by writing notes to each member of your family. You could start with a note of encouragement, or maybe a Bible verse. End the note with a question, such as, "If you could be invisible for a day, what would you do?" I promise you will get some fascinating mail in your little basket.

7. Break for Coffee

After a long day at school, my kids need a chance to unwind before diving into their history and algebra homework. Once they've had a chance to pet the dog and put away their backpacks, we gather around the kitchen table and have our afterschool coffee break. We have





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

popcorn and hot chocolate, cookies with a tall glass of frosty milk, or pretzels and lemonade. This is when I find out about the day's happenings at school, how much homework there is for the evening, and, most importantly, how I can pray for my kids while they are at school.

To have your own coffee break, all you need to do is prepare a simple snack and be ready to ask open-ended questions. Instead of "How was your day?" ask, "What did you and Haley talk about at recess this morning?" or "I know you studied really hard for your chemistry test; was it as tough as you thought it would be?" Try to stay focused on your kids during this time. Look at them, listen to their stories no matter how convoluted they get, and make sure you share a little about your day as well.

Some kids just need to decompress after school and don't feel like replaying their day right away. For other families, it might be nearly dinnertime before everyone is home. The point of the coffee break isn't to add more stress to your lives, but to give you a regular time to talk through the day. So fit your coffee break in where it works best for you and your children.

8. Start a Parent-Child Journal

When my daughter Kimberly was eight, we started sharing a mother-daughter journal. One night she would lay it on my nightstand for me to write in; the next, I would tuck it under her pillow for her to record her thoughts and dreams. Through the pages of that little book we've shared secrets, settled arguments, and discussed life. It's been a great way to talk about all the fun and not-so-fun issues going on in





Loving Your Prodigal Child

Connect with Your Kids

my little girl's life. It has also given me the opportunity to share Bible verses, advice, and love notes in a non-threatening way.

It's easy to get the ball rolling on a parent-child journal. Find a notebook, attach a pen, then write a question to start the conversation. Ask about school, friends, books, or anything else that interests your child. Ask open-ended questions, like "Tell me about the best book you've read in fourth grade." This will help you get more in-depth responses, as well as having even more to write about the next time you share journal entries.

All of these ideas take planning and time, and there have been times that I've wondered if it's worth it. Yet those seem to be the days when my daughter comes running in to tell me about the new elephant joke she heard at school, or asks my advice on how to handle a problem with her best friend. With a chuckle I realize all that effort has created a deep, lasting bond that will keep our family connected for years to come.

*Kathi Hunter is a frequent speaker at retreats and MOPS events. She is the mother of two and a contributor to *More Humor for a Woman's Heart* (Howard). This article first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY.*





Reflect

- *If research shows that kids who spend time talking to their parents, taking part in family activities and meals, and building family traditions with you are less likely to engage in harmful activities, in which of these areas are you creating the strongest bond? Which areas need strengthening?*
- *What is your child's most communicative time of the day—after school, before bed, while doing an activity together? What can you do today to capitalize on this peak time with him or her?*
- *If you have older children, what are some ways you can adapt the author's suggestions for bonding with your child?*



Additional Resources



Daughters Gone Wild, Dads Gone Crazy by Charles Stone and Heather Stone (Thomas Nelson, 2005; 224 pages). Though honest stories from their sixyear nightmare of a relationship, this father and daughter offers readers nine practical lessons and provides a compass for even the worst tempests of teen rebellion.

Praying Prodigals Home by Quin Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock (Gospel Light, 2000; 224 pages). This book reminds us that for those of faith, victory is always within our grasp and that our loved ones are eternally dear to his heart.



Loving Your Prodigal Child

Additional Resources

The Hope of a Homecoming: Entrusting Your Prodigal to a Sovereign God by Brendan O'Rourke and DeEtte Sauer (NavPress, 2003; 224 pages). The authors offer empowering and professional advice on going deep beneath the surface to enlist and direct God's sovereign power toward the children of our hearts.

Prodigals and Those Who Love Them by Ruth Graham Bell (Baker, 1999; 176 pages). Ruth Bell Graham knows about prodigals—two of her five children were spiritual wanderers—from the pain she experienced as she prayed, watched, and waited for them to return to the fold, comes this book.

Surviving the Prodigal Years by Marcia Mitchell (YWAM Publishing, 1995; 176 pages). With compassion and sensitivity, Marcia Mitchell will show you how to love your prodigal child without ruining your own life!



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