

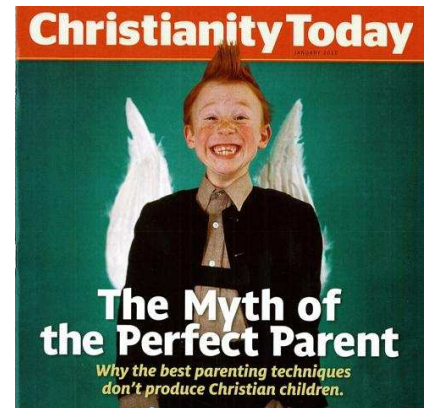
**Date:** Jan. 19, 2010  
**To:** Our Ever-Curious Students of the Family  
**Re:** **CT Cover Story: Does Parenting Matter?**

## [“The Myth of the Perfect Parent”](#)

### **Why the best parenting techniques don't produce Christian children**

This month's cover story in *Christianity Today* is worth reading and reflecting upon, primarily because it highlights – directly and indirectly – some important points for us to understand and learn from as we seek to help parents.

**Article Thesis:** *Too many Christians put pressure on themselves and others for getting the parenting job exactly right. Others make the mistake of thinking Scripture gives us some fool-proof, step-by-step template for turning out perfect, Godly kids.*



Both are important messages to parents. First is one of grace, freeing them from the impossible pressure to be perfect and one we should communicate more often. The Scripture-as-Blue-Print view of parenting is one we have done a good job of helping parents avoid: Christian parenting by Scripture is more *art* than *science*. Each child God gives us is different and there is no template that works the same for all children.

**Article Cautions:** *The article comes to these important conclusions by some misdirected premises. This does nothing to undercut the thesis itself, but we must be mindful of the weaknesses the author uses because Christian leaders will unfortunately cite them as fact and parents will be influenced by them. Problems with the supporting assertions are:*

**1) Parents Are Less Happy?** – A “massive 2006 study” is referenced stating how parents have “significantly higher rates of depression” than child-less adults. ***This is only true if you take all parents together, married, single, cohabiting, and divorced.*** The very newest research finds that *married* parents with 2 to 4 children report much higher levels of happiness than unmarried parents and child-less adults.<sup>1</sup>  
(See our 11/9/09 FocusFamilyINSIGHT - “Does Parenting Decrease Happiness?” on *ImIn*)

**2) Young People Leaving Faith in Droves?** - Barna and Lifeway research is cited indicating a strong majority (60-70%) of young adults bag their childhood faith, implying that parental efforts at passing their faith are failing. ***This is not exactly true either.*** Better, broader research shows that young adults – over these years - tend to slow their church attendance and wrestle with their faith, but not drop it. Most come back to more regular attendance and practice as they mature and enter family life.<sup>2</sup> And the reliable Pew findings from last year refutes the “droves of young people leaving the faith” plot line that is so widely and incorrectly repeated

<sup>1</sup> Luis Angeles, “Children and Life Satisfaction,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, October 2009: 1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

today. And the much smaller number of young people who do leave their faith report coming from Christian homes where church attendance was very sporadic. (See our 5/1/09 "Faith in Flux" FocusFamilyINSIGHT on Imln)

**3) Research Shows Parenting Matters Little** – The article references a *Newsweek* article citing research supposedly showing that "genetics may have more potent impact on child development than our parenting practices." This research was conducted by leading child development psychologist Jay Belsky and merely says that certain genetic dispositions might interact differently with different parenting styles, not that parenting itself is inconsequential. In a recent article for *PsychologyToday.com*, Professor Belsky explains how impactful parenting actually is in child development:

We discovered that the quality of parenting experienced across the first 4 ½ years of life consistently predicted many aspects of children's functioning even after we had taken into consideration a laundry list of alternative sources of influence....<sup>3</sup>

An additional article from *Psychology Today*, examining the current body of research on the *nurture vs. nature* debate in child development, explains it must be understood that #1: "Genes by themselves, can't determine anything" and #2, "Parents matter, and will always matter." The article explains that the often cited media-message that parenting doesn't matter "couldn't be farther from the truth."<sup>4</sup> *This article's author made the common mistake of basing important scientific conclusions merely on stories in popular news magazines.*

And as such, *Christianity Today* has given new voice to a semi-popular falsehood that arose in the late 1990s. Judith Harris' 1998 book, *The Nurture Assumption*, became a talk-show sensation because it purported, "parents have little power to determine the sort of people their children become" because "parents don't socialize children..."<sup>5</sup>

In response to Harris' provocative thesis, leading Harvard child-development theorist, Jerome Kagan, explained how consequential parenting can be for children by simply showing the impact parents have in simply reading to their children. Celebrated child-development specialist and Harvard Professor Emeritus T. Berry Brazelton described Harris' thesis as "absurd".<sup>6</sup>

My primary concern over some of these items in the article is not about *Christianity Today* publishing the article, *per se*, but that our faith's understanding of parenting and our familiarity with scientific developments on the subject is so uninformed that a major evangelical publication could publish such an article as a serious offering of research and understanding on parenting. We have to become a smarter, more discerning people; *folks who are known for being born-again, not born-yesterday.*☺

The article concludes by reminding parents that "we are not sovereign over our children – only God is" as if most Christian parents don't know their place in the parenting equation, but also that good parenting is "faith rather than formula, grace rather than guarantees, steadfastness rather than success..."

*Focus on the Family must help evangelicals develop a fuller, more informed understanding of what parenting is about, why it matters and reliably know what both God and the sciences have to say about it.*

<sup>3</sup> Jay Belsky, "Early Parenting Matters," *PsychologyToday.com*, September 8, 2008. Accessed at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/family-affair/200809/early-parenting-matters>

<sup>4</sup> Scott Barry Kaufman, "Straight Talk About Twins Studies, Genes, and Parenting: What Makes Us Who We Are?," *PsychologyToday.com*, October 24, 2008, Accessed at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/print/2155?page=3>

<sup>5</sup> Judith Rich Harris, *The Nurture Assumption* (The Free Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> John Leo, "Parenting Without Care," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 21, 1998., p. 14.