

'This is an endearing and helpful book, full of wisdom and insight for Christian parents seeking to make their home a place of love and learning that will bring blessing and delight to their children. It will make you think, and pray!'

Wallace & Lindsay Benn, Speakers who are parents and now grandparents, with over 40 years of ministry experience

'In her inimitable style Ann writes with both beautiful clarity and refreshing, godly challenge. This has been a wonderful spur as we continue to strive to root our family life in the rich soil of the gospel.'

David & Sarah Dargue, parents of three small children and members of Christ Church Newcastle

'In a day where child-led "parenting" is gaining traction, even among Christians, Ann Benton has produced a balanced, biblical and at times humourous corrective which will instill confidence in God's wisdom and design for parenting and fruitful family life.'

Wes & Karen Johnston, serve the church family at Emmanuel Baptist Church, Leeds

‘Our culture of hyper-individualism promotes a relentless quest for personal fulfillment. This militates against the formation of households where mutual service draws on and reflects the unfailing love of God. This book offers a refreshing and compelling guide to life in a home where Jesus is Lord. It is firmly grounded in Scripture and reflects the wisdom gained from many years of experience.’

Dr Sharon James, Social Policy Analyst, The Christian Institute

‘In The Fruitful Home, Ann Benton appeals to Psalm 128 as the inspiring basis for raising children in our confused culture. In her thoroughly Biblical and eminently practical way (and with a good dash of English wit), she discusses the foundations on which our homes should be built along with the Gospel-focused furnishings with which to fill them. Parents (and grandparents) will find much encouragement as they seek to honor the Lord in their parenting.’

Jodi Ware, Southern Seminary faculty wife, member of Seminary Wives Institute faculty

The Fruitful Home

CREATING A GOSPEL CULTURE
FOR FAMILY LIFE

Ann Benton

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Introduction: What Is a Family?

I have begun to notice how frequently the ‘Weekend’ sections of Saturday newspapers deal in top tips: ‘36 ways to keep half-term screen-free’; ‘17 colourful ideas to spruce up your front garden’; ‘9 tips on eating more and staying slim’; ‘23 steps to a perfect night’s sleep’; and so forth. Journalists know that we all love a top tip. They are so short, so cheery, so positive and so can-do.

But like the row of shiny new pens in the blazer pocket of the schoolboy sitting his A-level physics, while they may inspire confidence, they are unlikely to materially affect the outcome.

I confess I enjoy top tips myself and read them with immense interest if they are relevant to a current problem I am desperate to solve. And

in twenty years of running parenting courses I occasionally dish out my top tips and am touched by how busily the punters scribble them into notebooks. When faced with a parenting conundrum, we would be so delighted to hear of a quick-fix solution. Whether it concerns crying at night, potty-training, sibling rivalry, internet issues or getting children to church, we are ready to try a new strategy, especially if it is presented as effective, fast-acting and convenient.

But even as I hand out my ideas, some of which are based on sound experience, I know that it is not that simple. Raising children (my preferred term for what parents do) does not happen in a vacuum; it happens in a context. And that context is critical. God has given the context for raising children: family.

In the 1970s, when I was starting out on the adventure of motherhood, I came upon a book which recognised the importance of that context. It was called *What Is a Family?*² by the writer Edith Schaeffer,¹ wife of the more famous Francis. Recently rereading the book, I was struck by its quirky, intensely personal style. It put me in mind of the kind of grandmother you might

meet on a train, who insists on showing you many (too many?) photos of her grandchildren. *What Is a Family?* paints a charming, somewhat bohemian and folksy picture of family life. Yet it had a profound influence upon me and many other Christian mothers of my generation. All over the country, because of her suggestion, mothers began lighting candles at the dinner table to signify the importance of every family meal.

It remains a wise book. Yes, it is a voice from another century and is unsurprisingly dated. Who now, for example, would argue that it is cheaper to make your own clothes than buy them? But beyond all those details *What Is a Family?* remains unique in its insistence on the powerful impact of the rich tapestry that is family life. Where that family life is grounded in Bible truth and a delight in the worship of our loving Creator and Redeemer, a wonderful chemistry is possible. I owe Edith Schaeffer and that book a huge debt.

Instead of seeing parenting as a series of problems to be solved, perhaps we might take a longer and deeper look at the whole of family

life, and recognise its pervasive influence. That is the point of this book.

Plants are raised in soil and the nature or quality of that soil is one of the key determining factors of the health of that plant as it grows. Likewise, children are raised in a subculture of family life and according to the health of that subculture they will either wither or flourish.

Let's think about that reality. Let's talk about the soil of family life. The answer to how to parent lies there.



1

A Happy House

When my sisters and I were children, one of the storybooks we had in our comparatively small collection at home was a clothbound book (A4 size) published in 1946 with attractive coloured pictures. It was *The Children of Happy House* by Enid Blyton. This is the story of a family who moved to a new house in the country, and is a charming evocation of a secure family life where nothing more alarming happens than the breaking of glass in the next-door neighbour's cucumber frame. Written at a time when Britain was just emerging from the uncertainty, loss and fear of invasion of World War Two, it was no doubt a sweet diversion, expressing hopes for a better life for the nation's children. I recall it now with some nostalgia.

5

Such twee fodder would doubtless go into the bin of any self-respecting, twenty-first-century publisher of children's books. They like – in the name of reality – dysfunction, attitude and flawed, vulnerable characters. They may have a point; I am not defending *The Children of Happy House* as great literature. But the Bible has its own 'happy house', a freeze-frame of a delightful and fruitful family life. It is found in Psalm 128:

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord,
who walk in obedience to him.
You will eat the fruit of your labour;
blessings and prosperity will be yours.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
round your table.
Yes, this will be the blessing
for the man who fears the Lord.
May the Lord bless you from Zion;
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
May you live to see your children's children –
peace be on Israel.*

Psalm 128 does not major on dysfunction, attitude and weakness – although there is plenty of that in the Bible. It presents a happy house indeed: a house of security, order, peace, prosperity and beauty. It depicts a harmonious family seated around a table, perhaps from three generations of God-fearing people. The end of the psalm shows that the blessing spreads outwards to God's people and to the wider community – like widening circles in a lake when a stone is thrown.

Is the Bible unreal to give us this picture? Is it the Christian equivalent of an idealistic picture on the Corn Flakes packet? Of course not! This psalm, one of the psalms of ascent or journeying psalms, is a call to obedience and faith – at home. It is both aspirational and inspirational. It is showing us what could and should happen in the believer's home. And the necessary condition is fear of the Lord. Healthy family life starts with worshipping the Lord.

To fear the Lord – that is, to recognise in your very soul the presence, awesome power and matchless grace of the transcendent, personal, triune God – means that you will love him and

want to walk in his ways. And when you live like that, you will create around you a subculture of family life, a subculture which is Christian and distinctively so. This is the soil in which to grow healthy, rounded human beings.

One of Edith Schaeffer's many definitions of the family is 'an ecologically balanced environment for the growth of human beings'. This is the way it is intended to be. God did not first make children and let them grow up in the garden untended, as it were. He made the grown-ups first and then he gave them babies.

Psalms 128 pictures a whole family subculture in one frame – this will be further unpacked in the following chapter. Without this foundation, even the best techniques and top tips will be insufficient and probably fruitless in creating a happy house.

This is a critical point in our current secular, atheistic age. Parents, grandparents and churches – who have a heartfelt and right desire to see the next generation won for Christ – need to recognise the atmosphere of the age. Its values, priorities, ambitions and glories are ever present in the air we breathe *and have invaded our*

homes. I shall term this the prevailing culture. Its impact on us all is far greater than we realise. It is subtle; it is generally invisible; it is frequently very attractive; and it is immensely powerful.

Every family, consciously or unconsciously, creates its own subculture. Very often, and quite naturally, it draws from the prevailing culture in doing so. Even the names you chose for your children reflect the age you live in. My husband and I thought we were being terrifically original (and proudly biblical) when we chose the name Matthew for our firstborn. We knew no other children of that name. It was only later we discovered that it was one of the most common names of his generation. How did that happen? Answer: it must have been in the ether.

We are so much more influenced by the prevailing winds of fashion and culture than we care to admit – from the colour we paint a baby's bedroom, to the books we read and the music we listen to; from the things we talk about over dinner to the way we spend our money and our time. Our prevailing culture is a package and it carries its own message. Much may be harmless but plenty is not.

Schools, in a competitive marketplace, recognise the importance of ethos. Just visit a few of their websites and you will notice the emphasis that is placed on ethos in selling a school. One prestigious school in my neighbourhood markets itself thus:

You will always be curious

You will always value others

You will always believe in being yourself

You will always have a life less ordinary

*You will always be a community within
the community*

You will always want to make a difference ...

Now will there be explicit lessons on those subjects? Probably not. But those messages will intentionally be there in the warp and woof of school life. Schools have their own subculture. Traditions will be in place; mottos will be repeated; attitudes will be discouraged; habits will be formed.

However, having been a teacher, I am all too aware that the impact school has on a child is minimal compared to that of home. Home

wins. So here is the question: what will your child always be as a result of growing up in your home? Always ambitious? Always feeling a failure? Always arrogant? Always able to take correction? Always materialistic? Always generous? You get the point.

Paul McCartney wrote the song 'Let It Be' recalling his mother. She died when he was only in his teens. And yet something of what she was and taught him stayed with him. According to the song, it sustained him in a dark place for many years after her death: 'And when the night is cloudy there is still a light that shines on me, speaking words of wisdom ...'

Naturally the ethos of most families is undergirded by love. That is taken as a given in this book and indeed in Psalm 128. It is undisputed that the unconditional love that parents give their children, especially in their earliest years, is a critical factor for healthy development. This too is imaging the God who made us.

But human love can be blind, as we know. Love can overlook what it should see. Love can be distracted and not realise the soil, the ethos, that is being unconsciously engendered.

Psalm 128 would not agree that with the Beatles that 'all you need is love'. It argues that all you need is parents who fear the Lord and walk in obedience to him.

Family subculture, ethos, soil – for good or ill – has a telling and lasting effect. If the family subculture is sound, parents will muddle through the stresses and strains of potty-training, sibling rivalries and teenage angst, with or without a how-to guide, and still come out smiling.

Psalm 128 is a foundational aspiration for all believing parents, calling them to continually fear the Lord and walk in his ways. Such a stance and direction will be, as they say, a 'game changer'. And not only will the children in those families thrive, but the blessing will spread outwards to church and nation.