

Transforming Children into

# Spiritual Champions

Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority

**George Barna**



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George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*  
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## Foreword

Finally! I have been waiting almost thirty years for someone to put into book form what I have known to be true nearly all my ministry life: *Children matter!* They matter to God and to their parents, and they ought to matter more to the church.

With surgical precision, George Barna has cut through the veil of denial that most church leaders have lived in for far too long—the belief that we are doing enough in our churches to transform the average kid in our congregations into a spiritual champion. Painfully few churches have paid the price to break out of decades of status-quo ministry to children. Those that do break out soon discover a kind of anointing from God that suggests He might just favor churches that focus on and build up little ones.

We owe George a huge debt for writing this book.

Bill Hybels  
senior pastor, Willow Creek Community Church

## Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to the dozens of pastors and church leaders who allowed us to conduct interviews, pore through church documents and poke around their ministry while we conducted the research for this book. I hope the time you invested will assist many other churches in becoming ministries that produce children who mature into spiritual champions.

I appreciate the patience and assistance of the publishing team. In particular, thanks go to Kim Bangs, Deena Davis, Bill Denzel, Kyle Duncan, Bill Greig III, Bill Schultz and Rob Williams.

I am indebted to my family for letting me abandon them for a couple of weeks to put this book together. My wife, Nancy, and my daughters, Samantha and Corban, deserve a lot of credit for flexing with my intense schedule requirements. I pray that Nancy and I will be better able to raise our girls to be spiritual champions thanks to the insights we have gleaned from the research and the writing of this book.

# Introduction

## *I Missed the Ocean*

Few people would have guessed that one day I'd become an impassioned advocate for ministry to children. Until recently, not even I would have bet money on that.

In my mind, children had always been part of a package deal: We want to reach adults with the gospel and then help them mature in their faith in Christ, so we have accepted the kids as a “throw-in.” The paramount importance of serious, top-priority ministry to kids was not something I had ever taken too seriously.

My mind-set was not attributable to a lack of involvement in kids' lives. Over the years, I have had constant and satisfying interaction with young people: teaching in a public school, coaching basketball at a Christian school, serving as a youth leader at a church, being an elder overseeing Christian education, studying the beliefs and behavior of young people through primary research, working as a board member for ministries focused on the needs of kids and being the father of two girls.

In fact, young people have always been on my radar screen. Ever the diligent researcher, I was capable of quoting the statistics

related to the number of children in the United States, their quality of life, their behavioral and attitudinal patterns, how many have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, the nature of their spiritual beliefs and even their importance in drawing adults to churches. I knew a lot about kids and their plight in the local church, the schools, the marketplace and the home. I even wrote several books about teenagers, based on our nationwide studies.

Yet somehow the wisdom and necessity of seeing children as *the primary focus of ministry* never occurred to me. In that regard, perhaps I've simply been a product of my environment. Like most adults, I have been aware of children, fond of them and willing to invest some resources in them; but I have not really been fully devoted to their development. In my mind, they were people en route to significance—i.e., adulthood—but were not yet deserving of the choice resources.

Like many Christians, my life is committed to knowing, loving and serving God to the best of my ability. My focus has been to increase the spiritual health and cultural influence of the local church and the lives of individual believers. There is nothing I covet more than to someday hear the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." My assumption—never seriously challenged either by my own reflections or by the arguments of others—has been that the most efficient path toward receiving such an accolade from God would be through intense focus upon the moral development and spiritual transformation of adults.

I had never given alternative approaches serious consideration. After all, aren't *adults* the ones who call the shots in the world and determine the nature of our current and future reality? If the family is central to a healthy society and a strong Church, shouldn't we invest our resources predominantly in the *adults* who lead those units? When it comes to grasping the substance, the subtleties and the implications of the Christian faith, don't *adults* possess the greatest learning and intellectual capacities? Strategically, isn't it

more important for us to equip *adults* so that they can use their gifts and resources to advance the Kingdom?

No, no, no and no. In retrospect, my view was so far off the mark that I didn't just miss the boat—I missed the entire ocean!

## **A Transformed Mind**

Having spent the first two decades of my ministry engaged in research and leadership that targeted adults, the Lord has recently accomplished an extraordinary thing in my life. He changed my mind about the nature of effective ministry in our nation today.

For 20 years, credible and convincing information regarding the centrality of children to the health and future well-being of the Church was right in front of my eyes. During that time I'd consistently, although by no means exclusively, been working with ministries whose success could be traced to their wholehearted devotion to the needs and development of children. However, from the moment I'd accepted Christ at age 25, I'd been seduced into believing the great myth of modern ministry: Adults are where the Kingdom action is.

Somehow, God managed to lift the veil from my eyes long enough for me to gain wisdom. During the past couple of years, as I have been rethinking the foundations of church-based activity and seeking to understand how the Church might revolutionize life and faith in America, it became painfully clear to me that I had been operating on the basis of some very faulty assumptions.

Upon reprioritizing ministry to children, my perspective on ministry in its entirety has been revolutionized. My perceptions regarding worship, evangelism, discipleship, stewardship, community service and family—in short, just about everything related to ministry—have been altered. That is not to say that suddenly I know everything there is to know and you should therefore listen carefully and fall in line. Rather, this shift has enabled me to

understand both situations that previously seemed too perplexing to comprehend and challenges too massive to voluntarily confront. Ministry will always be a difficult and sacrificial journey, but placing children in a more appropriate place in the landscape makes the journey more comprehensible and hopeful.

### **God's Method**

I have often heard Bible teachers claim that God meets you where you're at and leads you where you need to go, if you're willing to follow. I believe that is exactly what God has done in my life these past two years.

Almost every book I write is based on the same process: After considerable observation, discussion, prayer and reflection, I conduct primary research and analyze the results. Armed with the data, I seek confirmation of my interpretation through the real-world ministry experiences of churches and individuals. Confident that there is something valid to present, I then share the results through the written word.

It was through this standard practice that God opened my mind and heart to ranking ministry to children at the top of the priority list. He could have used any number of unusual tactics, but He chose to grab my attention not only in a way that made sense to me but also a way that would not allow me to deny the message. True to form, He contextualized the message for my consumption.

For this book, my company conducted a variety of nationwide surveys: a half-dozen surveys among adults and parents, a couple among teenagers and adolescents, four surveys among Protestant pastors and one project with church-based youth workers. After living with the data and placing it into a coherent perspective, we then conducted in-depth studies of the children's ministries in several dozen churches from across the nation to see if my hypotheses held true and to glean additional insights into effective ministry

among kids. The contents of this book represent the tested and refined view from that two-year effort.

### The Mission Revealed

What does my epiphany have to do with you? I am not interested in simply informing you about the state of children and the opportunities to minister to them. Allow me to describe my prayer and goals for this book. My dream has five facets:

1. *Reach agreement.* If you do not share my view that ministry to children is the single most strategic ministry in God's kingdom, then I hope this book will challenge your prevailing notions. My thesis is that if you want your life to count for God's kingdom, there are many viable ways to use your gifts, talents and resources. However, if you want to have the greatest possible impact (i.e., to achieve a lasting legacy of spiritual dividends), then consider employing those resources in ministry to young people.
2. *See spiritual development as primary.* I have been discouraged to discover that most American adults—including most parents—see spiritual development of children as a value-added proposition rather than the single most-important aspect of children's development. You are invited to reconsider the priority of spiritual growth in the lives of children and to accept it as being more important than intellectual, physical and emotional development.
3. *Motivate to action.* It makes sense for us to reallocate the resources God has entrusted to us to those ministries and toward those people whom we can affect most positively for God's purposes. There is no group in greater need of such investment—or one that pays greater dividends on such investment—than children. Cognizant of the fact that most

adults prefer to devote their ministry resources elsewhere, my desire is to challenge your current preference in favor of putting more into children's ministry.

4. *Facilitate the appropriate linkage.* In the course of reflecting on children and their spiritual growth, it is imperative that we understand God's expectations of how children should be nurtured. The local church is crucial in this process, but a child's family is central. Gaining a proper perspective on the partnership between parents and church in the mutual effort to raise God-loving and God-fearing children is paramount. Enabling you to embrace that perspective and to support it is yet another objective of this book.
5. *See what it looks like.* Having studied many ministries, I want to describe the principles and models that we found to be common among the churches that effectively develop spiritually whole young people. I do not believe in prescribing a one-size-fits-all model for everyone to embrace; I have seen that approach undermine too many ministries. However, one of the processes that has served thousands of churches well in the past has been to identify common principles and best practices among effective churches. My hope is that those elements can be adapted to your ministry context without creating the need to accept and adopt an entirely foreign set of ministry philosophies, structures, values and programs.

Ultimately, the purpose of this endeavor is to enable the Church to engage in the process of transforming mere children into spiritual champions. It can be done. I know, because I have seen it firsthand, studied it closely and personally benefited from it. My earnest request is that you have an open mind long enough for me to make the case and then that you give this perspective your honest consideration. Let God lead you in your response—we may confidently trust that He knows how best to guide your life.

# 1

## The State of American Children

They are more numerous than the entire Hispanic and African-American populations of the nation combined. They have more energy than a nuclear power plant and are as confounding as the federal budget. They have tastes as fluid as the Missouri River and dreams that will redefine the future. They are a marketer's pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and the most lovable and frustrating beings in the life of every parent.

We're talking about America's children. You don't have to look too hard to find them. In 2003, the Census Bureau reported that there were 73 million residents 18 years of age or younger living in the United States.<sup>1</sup> They come in all shapes and various sizes, in many colors, and are distributed indiscriminately across the 50 states.

Our children will define the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy. After all, God never told His followers to take over the world through force or intelligence. He simply told us to have children and then raise them to honor God in all they do. Therefore, you might logically conclude that bearing

and raising children is not only our most enduring legacy but also one of our greatest personal responsibilities.

In this book, I will focus upon understanding and affecting the lives of children in the heart of the youth cohort (i.e., children in the 5- to 12-year-old age range).<sup>2</sup>

**Our children will define the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy.**

This group, some 31 million strong, represents nearly half of the under-18-year-olds in the country. That's almost equal to the population of the entire state of California.

Why focus on this particular slice of the youth market? Because if you want to shape a person's life—whether you are most concerned about his or her moral, spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional or economic development—it is during these crucial eight years that lifelong habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are formed.

### **Four Dimensions of Our Children's Well-Being**

Everyone's life has challenges, difficulties and hardships en route to adulthood. On balance, though, most American children experience a good life, especially when compared to the quality of life children in many other nations of the world endure.

#### ***Educational Achievement and Intellectual Development***

Most of America's children spend plenty of time in the classroom—and we pay for it. Public school systems throughout the nation spent more than \$380 billion in 2000.<sup>3</sup> More children than ever before get an early educational start—more than half of all three- and four-year olds enroll in school, and nearly two-thirds of five-year-olds enroll in all-day kindergarten programs.<sup>4</sup> But neither school spending nor student attendance is a viable indicator of

educational achievement or quality. Studies measuring such factors raise troubling questions.

For example, it is estimated that one-third of all school-aged children are at least one grade level behind in their academic performance.<sup>5</sup> Fewer than 3 out of 10 fourth graders read at grade level. Matters do not improve much over time. Just one-third of eighth graders are proficient in reading, and only one-quarter are proficient in writing and math.<sup>6</sup> These findings are particularly alarming given the correlation between poor academic skills and quality of life. Studies by the National Institutes of Health and the National Association for Educational Progress discovered that poor reading skills are a harbinger of teen pregnancy, criminal activity, poor academic achievement and dropping out before high school graduation.<sup>7</sup>

Testing among students reveals that when the academic performance of American pupils is compared to that of peers in other nations, American students come up far short. Recent studies of eighth graders in 25 industrialized nations showed that American students ranked tenth in science and twenty-first in mathematics.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, most parents are pleased with the quality of the schooling their young ones get. Gallup's recent research shows that 7 out of 10 parents are generally satisfied with the educational quality their children receive.<sup>9</sup> Our research found that most parents think their children are well cared for and well taught and have access to adequate facilities and programs. Relatively few parents believe their children are unsafe or exposed to unreasonable social pressures at school. Also interesting, most parents believe that the schools attended by most other children in the nation do not provide a quality education.<sup>10</sup>

Exposure to technology in the classroom is increasing in the United States. More than 4 out of 5 children under 13 years of age use a computer at school on a regular basis. Whether or not the integration of technology into the daily academic regimen will enhance students' learning experience remains to be seen.

### ***Health and Physical Development***

Advances in medical and health care have substantially reduced infant mortality during the past half-century. With new breakthroughs in medical research and technology, children have greater opportunities than ever before to live long and healthy lives.

There are, however, five dominant health-related challenges kids face these days. The most prevalent of these is being overweight. It is estimated that roughly 1 out of every 8 children under 13 is overweight or obese, which is double the figure of two decades ago. The combination of couch-potato behavior, computer games, fear of lack of safety in public places such as playgrounds and gymnasiums, supersized fast-food meals and the demise of school-run athletic programs contribute to the problem. While government agencies posit that only 25 percent of children ages two to five have a consistently healthy diet, that already low percentage shrinks to just 6 percent among teenagers.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if lifestyle modeling is a significant influence on behavior, then the future looks even bleaker concerning the physical condition of our young people, since a variety of medical professionals have estimated that as many as 65 percent of adults are overweight or obese.<sup>12</sup>

Another serious concern is the increased sexual activity among youngsters. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report that almost 1 out of every 10 teenagers had sexual intercourse prior to his or her thirteenth birthday and that the number is steadily rising. Apart from the serious moral, emotional and spiritual consequences of premature sexual activity, such experiences commonly introduce sexually transmitted diseases (STD). CDC has reported that while relatively few adolescents have contracted an STD—fewer than 1 million of the youth under age 14—these young people are at greater risk than older individuals of acquiring one or more of the numerous permanent and incurable diseases, which is a particularly unnerving reality given the increasing sexual activity among children.<sup>13</sup>

Substance abuse—tobacco, drugs and alcohol—is a temptation to which millions of young people succumb. Current estimates indicate that about 1 out of every 10 eighth graders smokes daily (the proportion rises to 1 out of 4 by age 17); 1 out of 5 used drugs of some type in the past year (ranging from marijuana to hallucinogens to “club drugs” such as Ecstasy); and more than 1 out of 3 were drunk at least once in the past year, with significant numbers of adolescents reporting regular alcohol use and even binge drinking. For a small but significant percentage of those who abuse these substances, the behavior becomes addictive; and for a larger portion, the temporary impairment of their decision-making abilities produces serious physical consequences.

Being the victim of violence is yet another danger that threatens the health and well-being of millions of preteens. Forty-five percent of elementary schools reported one or more incidents of violent crime; the figure balloons to 74 percent, three-quarters, of all middle schools. In a typical year, 4 percent of elementary schools and 19 percent of middle schools report one or more serious violent crimes (e.g., murder, rape, suicide, use of a weapon or robbery). Students are subjected to violence most often in schools where gangs are present, and gangs are known to exist in nearly 3 out of 10 public schools. During a typical school year 1 out of every 14 students is threatened or injured at school with a weapon; 1 out of every 7 students is involved in a serious physical fight on school grounds. One common result, of course, is that millions of parents feel uneasy about their child’s safety, and more than 1 million adolescents missed at least one day of school this past year due to fear of physical violence.<sup>14</sup>

**More than 1 million adolescents missed at least one day of school this past year due to fear of physical violence.**

Finally, the physical condition of young people is impacted by their medical care. Despite the attention focused on this issue in

the past decade, 1 out of every 8 children under 13 has no health insurance and thus lacks adequate access to qualified medical attention. Combined with the skyrocketing cost of medical care, children suffer from medical challenges more widely than many people realize. One recent study noted that about 20 percent of youths in the United States exhibit some signs of psychiatric ailments and that most of those go undiagnosed.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most widely discussed conditions is attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which afflicts about 7 percent of children in the 6- to 11-year-old age group. Millions of them are treated with Ritalin, antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs; millions more receive no treatment at all.

It should be pointed out that both the health of children and their engagement in at-risk behaviors have serious ramifications. A number of studies conducted in the past decade have demonstrated a strong correlation among six at-risk behaviors undertaken by adolescents—sexual intercourse, excessive drinking, smoking, use of illegal drugs, depression and suicide—and their generally negative impact.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Economic State***

During the past three decades, the economic state of children has actually improved. The federal government has expanded its support for children, currently funding more than 150 child-targeted programs to the tune of more than \$50 billion annually.<sup>17</sup> While an unacceptably high proportion of young people (33 percent) will live in poverty before they reach adulthood, just half as many (17 percent) are mired in it at any given time.<sup>18</sup> (Realize that while the percentage is small, the human suffering is enormous—nearly 7 million American adolescents are plagued by poverty on any given day.) Most kids live in relatively suitable circumstances, and 8 out of 10 adolescents even report receiving spending money from their parents or extended family members.

On average, adolescents are given an allowance of slightly more than \$20 per week.

### ***Emotional and Behavioral Development***

Much of the emotional stability and maturity of children stems from their relationship with their family. Even though most parents feel they are doing a good job of raising their kids—and there is little doubt that most parents take their responsibility seriously—there is an abundance of evidence that suggests many overestimate their performance.

The effects of cohabitation, divorce, births to unmarried parents, and working mothers are taking a significant toll on a growing body of children—an impacted group that now numbers in the millions. One out of every 3 children born in the United States each year is born to an unmarried woman. One out of every 4 children presently lives with a single parent, and about half find themselves in that situation before they celebrate their eighteenth birthday. Three out of every 5 mothers of infants are in the labor force—roughly twice the proportion from just a quarter-century ago.<sup>19</sup>

The confluence of isolating factors has led a majority of parents of adolescents to admit that they do not spend enough meaningful time with their young ones.<sup>20</sup> Among kids 8 to 12 years old, one-third say they want to spend more time with their mother, in spite of the fact that today's preteens spend 31 hours per week with their mom, a jump of about six hours each week from two decades ago.<sup>21</sup> Adolescents spend less time with their fathers—an average of 23 hours weekly—which is also an increase compared to the early '80s. However, a substantial amount of the increases in parent-child time are attributable to an escalation in the amount of time spent driving to and from various activities, which is an endeavor not normally deemed a meaningful moment or quality time.

The good news is the slow rise in the percentage of kids who live with both biological parents (up from the 1 out of 2 a decade

ago to nearly 6 out of 10 today). These families tend to be more financially and relationally stable, live in safer and more well-to-do areas and enroll their kids in higher-quality schools.

In spite of—or, maybe, thanks to—the changes in family realities, how are the kids turning out? There are many aspects to consider, but here are a few factors to ponder:

- Most adolescents consider themselves to be happy, loved, safe and optimistic about their future. However, we have found that most of them believe that adults generally consider young people to be rude, arrogant, lazy and sloppy.
- Kids ages 2 to 7 average nearly 25 hours per week of mass media intake; the figure balloons to almost 48 hours each week among those ages 8 to 13.<sup>22</sup> Evidence of the changing times and the new generation in place is the favorite medium of all, the Internet, according to 54 percent of kids under 8 and 73 percent of kids 8 to 12 years old.<sup>23</sup>
- Adolescents have become highly proficient at multitasking—the ability to juggle several activities simultaneously without losing ground in any of the areas.
- Young people admit to being highly influenced by their role models and to be actively seeking more such examples, but nearly half of all preteens (44 percent) admit that they don't have any role models.<sup>24</sup> While parents are the most commonly named role models, it is revealing that when children are asked to identify the three most important people in the world to them, only one-third name their mother or father. Even so, the vast majority of young kids—more than 9 out of 10—say they get along well with their parents, and most have no desire to have their parents eliminated from their lives.<sup>25</sup>
- A sign of the fears and pressures that weigh most heavily upon children is provided by the dominant social concerns named by adolescents: retaining and protecting their personal

rights and freedoms, dealing with the presence of guns in their school, the prevalence of drunk driving, issues related to self-esteem, educational quality and drug abuse.<sup>26</sup>

- Kids stay busy. If it's not the crunch of homework, then it's the frenetic involvement in after-school and extracurricular activities. Even during the summer, two-thirds of all adolescents (64 percent) are booked into a full slate of activities.<sup>27</sup>
- The world is becoming more complex, but kids maintain the same basic needs as they have for decades: to be trusted, to be loved, to feel safe and to identify a significant purpose in life.<sup>28</sup>

**Young people admit to being highly influenced by their role models but nearly half of all preteens admit that they don't have any role models.**

### **The Meaning Behind the Numbers**

If you have been working hard to stifle a yawn as I blazed through these figures and behavioral patterns, rest assured your reaction is quite normal. However, keep in mind that while numbers might not be your thing, the most important take-away from such a barrage of statistics is to determine the implications of the numbers. The value of research is that it allows you to form a portrait of reality, with each statistic representing another brushstroke in the picture. Armed with a clearer view of reality, you are prepared to respond more efficiently and meaningfully.

You don't need a series of surveys to remind you that life is messy. We prefer experiences and conditions to fit together into a simple, easy-to-interpret, black-and-white storyboard. But that is not often the case. More often, the emerging story is one riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions, rabbit trails and misleading irrelevancies. The narrative related to adolescents is no different.

Adolescence is a season of life characterized by ups and downs, hopes and despair, victories and defeats, and constant changes. Finding the threads of truth that tie it all together is an art more than a science, and there are not many artists who can accurately and insightfully interpret the portrait.

What do the data regarding young people teach us? Many of the statistics that capture the public's attention tell the bad news. Yet if we examine all of the data, from various angles, we find that most kids face a few difficult challenges but generally live safe and satisfying lives. Each child has issues related to family, friends and lifestyle choices; but comparatively few kids are drug addicts, gang members, obese or dropouts. Most of our kids will not wind up as prostitutes or pimps in jail or number among the long-term unemployed.

The media headlines screaming "crisis" every other day are not designed to communicate truth but to capture market share and sell products. As consumers of information, we must retain some level of perspective. Granted, most of the nation's adolescents face serious threats and temptations, but most of them cope with those challenges fairly well. Yes, there are thousands of kids who live in despicable conditions or who consistently make awful choices—their situations are gut wrenching and deserve our best thinking and responses—but those kids are the anomalies, not the norm.

However, another spin on these statistics relates to the trajectory of the curves. While the behavioral and situational indicators may not suggest that the nation's children are engulfed in a large-scale, all-encompassing crisis, there are ample reasons to be concerned about the path of their development and the environment in which they are maturing.

Most of our young people will not end up as alcoholics or drug addicts, but most of them will abuse those substances on an irregular basis and will have one or more close friends who are serious substance abusers. Fortunately, most children will never

be the victims of a serious physical crime, but most of them will experience daily fear and scheduling limitations as a result of the growing instances of juvenile violence. Fewer than 20 percent of kids will drop out of school before receiving a high school diploma, but the bigger danger may be their lack of desire to learn or their disinterest in personal excellence. Relatively few youngsters will be physically abandoned by their parents, but millions will be traumatized by receiving their parents' emotional leftovers, as well as by the divorce, separation or adulterous activities that will shatter their family unity. The majority of America's kids are not clamoring for X-rated, profane and violent content on TV or in movies and video games, but they are constantly seduced and tantalized by messages and imagery that blur or overstep the boundaries of decency. Maybe our young ones are not the sexually depraved beings that some have charged, but we must recognize that their perceptions of sexual propriety have been sufficiently compromised and that most kids will wind up with a sexually transmitted disease and an unfulfillable longing to return to virgin status.

Our nation's children will struggle to maintain a healthy balance in life. Constantly exposed to evil, they will win the battle most of the time but never escape the sense of jeopardy. They will seek to live a normal life but fall prey to the constantly deteriorating definitions of normality. The end result of growing up in this challenging culture will be a country of adults whose standards have been lowered and whose sensitivities have been blunted. The gifts of childhood that have become or are rapidly becoming extinct include innocence, civility, patience, joy and trust.

### **The Missing Link**

Many of the choices and outcomes in children's lives relate to two things that we have yet to examine: the moral and spiritual dimensions.

Often we seem bent on ensuring that the next generation will have a better life than did the preceding generations—the ability to live “the good life.” But we define that life as the presence of comfort and security combined with the absence of hardship and disappointment. Well-intentioned parents often try to buy experiences and environments that foster a soft and satisfying lifestyle for their progeny.

In contrast, a biblical understanding of “the good life” is one that provides and exploits opportunities in order to experience, obey and serve God and other people. The existence of difficulties, failures and even persecution are not so much indicators of failure as they are events that build character and test our resolve to know, love and serve God. If life is primarily about our participation in a spiritual battle, then we must expect to encounter trials and pitfalls. The route to significance and success, therefore, demands that we develop the moral and spiritual foundations that permit us to lead holy and servant-like lifestyles.

Even though all of the above-noted statistics are current and accurate, they leave us with an incomplete picture of the lives of our nation’s children. To round out that portrait we must study the moral and spiritual dimensions of the lives of young people. Let’s take a deeper look at these matters.