

Cotton Mather's advice to parents

PARENTS, Oh! how much you ought to be continually devising for the good of your children! Often should you plan how to make them “wise children”; how to give them a desirable education, an education that may render them desirable; how to render them lovely and polite, and serviceable in their generation. You should often devote yourselves to planning how to enrich their minds with valuable knowledge; how to instill generous, gracious, and heavenly principles into their minds; how to restrain and rescue them from the paths of the destroyer, and fortify them against their peculiar temptations. There is a world of good that you need to do for them. You are without the natural feelings of humanity if you are not in a continual agony to do for them all the good that ever you can. It was no mistake of an ancient writer to say, “Nature teaches us to love our children as ourselves.”



RESOLVED— 1. At the birth of my children, I will resolve to do all I can that they may be the Lord's. I will now actually give them up by faith to God; entreating that each child may be a child of God the Father, a subject of God the Son, a temple of God the Spirit—and be rescued from the condition of a child of wrath, and be possessed and employed by the Lord as an everlasting instrument of His glory.

2. As soon as my children are capable of minding my admonitions, I will often, often admonish them, saying, “Child, God has sent His son to die, to save sinners from death and hell. You must not sin against Him. You must every day cry to God that He would be your Father, and your Saviour, and your Leader. You must renounce the service of Satan, you must not follow the vanities of this world, you must lead a life of serious religion.

3. Let me daily pray for my children with constancy, with fervency, with agony. Yea, by name let me mention each one of them every day before the Lord. I will importunately beg for all suitable blessings to be bestowed upon them: that God would give them grace, and give them glory, and withhold no good thing from them; that God would smile on their education, and give His good angels the charge over them, and keep them from evil, that it may not grieve them; that when their father and mother shall forsake them, the Lord may take them up. With importunity I will plead that promise on their behalf: “The Heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit unto them that ask Him.” Oh! happy children, if by asking I may obtain the Holy Spirit for them!

1. I will resolve to do all I can that my child may be the Lord's.

2. I will encourage my child to every day cry to God that He would be the child's Father, and Saviour, and Leader.

3. I will pray for my child daily.

4. I will early entertain the children with delightful stories out of the Bible. In the talk of the table, I will go through the Bible, when the olive-plants about my table are capable of being so watered. But I will always conclude the stories with some lessons of piety to be inferred from them.

5. I will single out some Scriptural sentences of the greatest importance; and some also that have special antidotes in them against the common errors and vices of children. They shall quickly get those golden sayings by heart, and be rewarded with silver or gold, or some good thing, when they do it. Such as:

Psalm 11:10—"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Matthew 16:26—"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

1 Timothy 1:15—"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief."

Matthew 6:6—"When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret."

Ephesians 4:25—"Putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour."

Romans 12:17, 19—"Recompense to no man evil for evil . . . Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves."

Jewish treatise tells us that among the Jews, when a child began to speak, the father was bound to teach him

Deuteronomy 33:4—"Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob."

Oh! let me early make my children acquainted with the Law which our blessed Jesus has commanded us! 'Tis the best inheritance I can give them.

6. I will cause my children to learn the Catechism. In catechizing them, I will break the answers into many lesser and proper questions; and by their answer to them, observe and quicken their understandings. I will bring every truth into some duty and practice, and expect them to confess it,

4. I will read the Bible to my child and tell the stories of the Bible to them.

5. I will teach my child to memorize Scripture.

6. I will teach my child the Catechism.

and consent unto it, and resolve upon it. As we go on in our catechizing, they shall, when they are able, turn to the proofs and read them, and say to me what they prove and how. Then, I will take my times, to put nicer and harder questions to them; and improve the times of conversation with my family (which every man ordinarily has or may have) for conferences on matters of religion.

7. Restless will I be till I may be able to say of my children, "Behold, they pray!" I will therefore teach them to pray. But after they have learnt a form of prayer, I will press them to proceed unto points that are not in their form. I will charge them with all possible cogency to pray in secret; and often call upon them, "Child, I hope, you don't forget my charge to you, about secret prayer: your crime is very great if you do!"

8. I will do what I can very early to beget a temper of kindness in my children, both toward one another and toward all other people. I will instruct them how ready they should be to share with others a part of what they have; and they shall see my encouragements when they discover a loving, a courteous, an helpful disposition. I will give them now and then a piece of money, so that with their own little hands they may dispense unto the poor. Yea, if any one has hurt them, or vexed them, I will not only forbid them all revenge, but also oblige them to do a kindness as soon as may be to the vexatious person. All coarseness of language or carriage in them, I will discountenance.

9. I will be solicitous to have my children expert, not only at reading handsomely, but also at writing a fair hand. I will then assign them such books to read as I may judge most agreeable and profitable; obliging them to give me some account of what they read; but keep a strict eye upon them, that they don't stumble on the Devil's library, and poison themselves with foolish romances, or novels, or plays, or songs, or jests that are not convenient. I will set them also, to write out such things as may be of the greatest benefit unto them;

7. I will teach my child to pray.

8. I will teach my child to be kind.

9. I will teach my child to read and write. I will direct their reading and talk with them about what they have read.

and they shall have their blank books, neatly kept on purpose, to enter such passages as I advise them to. I will particularly require them now and then to write a prayer of their own composing, and bring it unto me; that so I may discern what sense they have of their own everlasting interests.

10. I wish that my children may as soon as may be, feel the principles of reason and honor working in them—and that I may carry on their education, very much upon those principles. Therefore, first, I will wholly avoid that harsh, fierce, crabbed usage of the children that would make them tremble and abhor to come into my presence. I will treat them so that they shall fear to offend me, and yet mightily love to see me, and be glad of my coming home if I have been abroad at any time. I will have it looked upon as a severe and awful punishment to be forbidden for awhile to come into my presence. I will raise in them an high opinion of their father's love to them, and of his being better able to judge what is good for them than they are for themselves. I will bring them to believe 'tis best for them to be and do as I will have them. Hereupon I will continually magnify the matter to them, what a brave thing 'tis to know the things that are excellent; and more brave to do the things that are virtuous. I will have them to propose it as a reward of their well-doing at any time, I will now go to my father, and he will teach me something that I was never taught before. I will have them afraid of doing any base thing, from an horror of the baseness in it. My first response to finding a lesser fault in them shall be a surprise, a wonder, vehemently expressed before them, that ever they should be guilty of doing so foolishly; a vehement belief that they will never do the like again; a weeping resolution in them, that they will not. I will never dispense a blow, except it be for an atrocious crime or for a lesser fault obstinately persisted in; either for an enormity, or for an obstinacy. **I will always proportion the chastisements to the miscarriages; neither smiting bitterly for a very small piece of childishness nor frowning only a little for some real wickedness.** Nor

10. My yoke will be light.

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shall my chastisement ever be dispensed in a passion and a fury; but I will first show them the command of God, by transgressing whereof they have displeased me. The slavish, raving, fighting way of discipline is too commonly used. I look upon it as a considerable article in the wrath and curse of God upon a miserable world.

11. As soon as we can, we'll get up to yet higher principles. I will often tell the children what cause they have to love a glorious Christ, who has died for them. And how much He will be well-pleased with their well-doing. And what a noble thing 'tis to follow His example; which example I will describe unto them. I will often tell them that the eye of God is upon them; the great God knows all they do and hears all they speak. I will often tell them that there will be a time when they must appear before the Judgment-Seat of the holy Lord; and they must now do nothing that may then be a grief and shame unto them. I will set before them the delights of that Heaven that is prepared for pious children; and the torments of that Hell that is prepared of old for naughty ones. I will inform them of the good things the good angels do for little ones that have the fear of God and are afraid of sin. And how the devils tempt them to do ill things; how they hearken to the devils, and are like them, when they do such things; and what mischiefs the devils may get leave to do them in this world, and what a sad thing 'twill be, to be among the devils in the Place of Dragons. I will cry to God, that He will make them feel the power of these principles.

12. When the children are of a fit age for it, I will sometimes closet them; have them with me alone; talk with them about the state of their souls; their experiences, their proficiencies, their temptations; obtain their declared consent unto every jot and tittle of the gospel; and then pray with them, and weep unto the Lord for His grace, to be bestowed upon them, and make them witnesses of the agony with which I am travailing to see the image of Christ formed in them. Certainly, they'll never forget such actions!

11. I will teach my child to love Christ.

12. I will encourage my child to speak with me about the state of their soul.

13. I will be very watchful and cautious about the companions of my children. I will be very inquisitive what company they keep; if they are in hazard of being ensnared by any vicious company, I will earnestly pull them out of it, as brands out of the burning. I will find out, and procure, laudable companions for them.

14. As in catechizing the children, so in the repetition of the public sermons, I will use this method. I will put every truth into a question to be answered with Yes or No. By this method I hope to awaken their attention as well as enlighten their understanding. And thus I shall have an opportunity to ask, “Do you desire such or such a grace of God?” and the like. Yea, I may have opportunity to demand, and perhaps to obtain their early and frequent (and why not sincere?) consent unto the glorious gospel. The Spirit of Grace may fall upon them in this action; and they may be seized by Him, and held as His temples, through eternal ages.

15. When a Day of Humiliation arrives, I will make them know the meaning of the day. And after time given them to consider of it, I will order them to tell me what special afflictions they have met with, and what good they hope to get by those afflictions. On a Day of Thanksgiving, they shall also be made to know the intent of the Day. And after consideration, they shall tell me what mercies of God unto them they take special notice of, and what duties to God they confess and resolve under such obligations. Indeed, for something of this importance, to be pursued in my conversation with the children, I will not confine myself unto the solemn days, which may occur too seldom for it. Very particularly, on the birthdays of the children, I will take them aside, and mind them of the age which (by God’s grace) they are come unto; how thankful they should be for the mercies of God which they have hitherto lived upon; how fruitful they should be in all goodness, that so they may still enjoy their mercies. And I will inquire of them whether they have ever yet begun to mind the work which

13. I will be careful about my children’s companions.

14. I will discuss the sermons we hear with my child.

15. I will use the opportunities of Days of Humiliation, Days of Thanksgiving, and particularly birthdays to talk about the works of God.

God sent them into the world upon; how far they understand the work; and what good strokes they have struck at it; and, how they design to spend the rest of their time, if God still continue them in the world.

16. When the children are in any trouble—if they be sick, or pained—I will take advantage therefrom, to set before them the evil of sin, which brings all our trouble; and how fearful a thing it will be to be cast among the damned, who are in ceaseless and endless trouble. I will set before them the benefit of an interest in a CHRIST, by which their trouble will be sanctified unto them, and they will be prepared for death, and for fullness of joy in a happy eternity after death.

17. Among all the points of education which I will endeavor for my children, I hope to see that each of them—the daughters as well as the sons—may gain insight into some skill that lies in the way of gain (however their own inclination may most carry them), so that they may be able to subsist themselves, and get something of a livelihood, in case the Providence of God should bring them into necessities. Why not they as well as Paul the Tent-Maker! The children of the best fashion, may have occasion to bless the parents that make such a provision for them! The Jews have a saying worth remembering: “Whoever doesn’t teach his son some trade or business, teaches him to be a thief.”

18. As soon as ever I can, I will make my children apprehensive of the main end for which they are to live; that so they may as soon as may be, begin to live; and their youth not be nothing but vanity. I will show them, that their main end must be, to, acknowledge the great God, and His glorious Christ; and bring others to acknowledge Him: and that they are never wise nor well, but when they are doing so. I will make them able to answer the grand question of why they live; and what is the end of the actions that fill their lives? I will teach them that their Creator and Redeemer is to be obeyed in everything, and everything is to

16. I will use the opportunity of trouble, sickness or pain to remind them to be mindful of CHRIST and eternity.

17. I will teach my child a trade or business.

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be done in obedience to Him. I will teach them how even their diversions, and their ornaments, and the tasks of their education, must all be to fit them for the further service of Him to whom I have devoted them; and how in these also, His commandments must be the rule of all they do. I will sometimes therefore surprise them with an inquiry, “Child, what is this for? Give me a good account of why you do it?” How comfortably shall I see them walking in the light, if I may bring them wisely to answer this inquiry.

19. I will oblige the children to retire sometimes, and ponder on that question: “What shall I wish to have done, if I were now a-dying?”—and report unto me their own answer to the question; of which I will then take advantage, to inculcate the lessons of godliness upon them.

20. If I live to see the children marriageable, I will, before I consult with Heaven and earth for their best accommodation in the married state, endeavor the espousal of their souls unto their only Saviour. I will as plainly, and as fully as I can, propose unto them the terms on which the glorious Redeemer would espouse them to Himself, in righteousness, judgment, and favor and mercies forever; and solicit their consent unto His proposals and overtures. Then would I go on, to do what may be expected from a tender parent for them, in their temporal circumstances.”

19. I will oblige the children to retire sometimes, and ponder on that question: “What shall I wish to have done, if I were now a-dying?”

20. I will endeavor to see my child espoused to the Saviour first, then I will help them as I can for their best accommodation in the married state.

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