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ROCK-SOLID  
CHILDREN'S  
MINISTRY

**Biblical Principles that  
will Transform Your Ministry**



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Every one of us is passing on the influence of our influencers. Through my writing, it is my privilege to extend the legacy of those who have mentored and influenced me.

Ralph Sawyer was the director of Homeward Trail Bible Camp, where many of my ministry convictions were formed. He has graduated to eternity, but I am indebted to him, as well as my parents, Mervin and Margaret Fowler, for my conviction about the priority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Jim Walters and Gil Weaver were my college professors at John Brown University and deeply impacted my thinking. Thank you, Jim and Gil, for leaving your godly imprint in my life.

Gene Goertzen, Awana missionary to southern California, has been my children's ministry mentor. He has served children for more than 50 years and is still as energetic and effective as ever. Keep going, Gene!

My co-workers Cindy Craig, Richard Yandle, Ken del Villar, Natalie Sum, Amy Staska, Diane Garmany, Tom Chilton, Betsy Sentamu and Michael Handler—who have had to put up with hearing my newest inspirations and notions during the past couple of years. You have sharpened me!

No one has had a bigger influence in my life than my wife, Diane. She is God's perfect match for me, and because she is my partner in life, my best friend and my love, I feel I am the most fortunate man in the world. Thanks, sweetheart!

# FOREWORD

One question I'm asked all the time is, "Who are the churches with the best ministries to children?" That's a hard question to answer, as it all depends on how we keep score and what our definition is of a win. How do you define "good"? We know good is good and great is better, but what does it take to go from good to great? How about from same-old-same-old to effective?

I think we have been using the wrong rulers to measure success. Numbers, style, decor and even what type of check-in system we have—these all are the wrong rulers. Larry, on the other hand, is on the right page by writing a book that truly defines what I believe every person in children's ministry should be pursuing: rock-solid ministry!

You might be asking why a guy who comes from a totally different church background, ministry perspective and vantage point—one who has never had an Awana program—would be writing the foreword for this book. Good question! First of all, I'm doing it because this book isn't about doctrinal perspective, church flavor or whether you're a club person, a large-group person or a small-group person. It's about the main thing becoming the main thing in your ministry, which is our ministries becoming truly rock solid. The eight standards Larry wrote about in *Rock-Solid Kids* are game changers and provide solid biblical guidelines that every person who ministers to children needs to know and practice. Add to that the seven principles this book covers, and now we can move past theory into the practical aspects of what makes ministry effective from God's perspective.

The second reason I agreed to write the foreword is because Larry Fowler is one of the most genuine godly examples of a man of God I have ever met. Last year, Larry sought me out and asked me to forgive him and Awana for excluding my denomination during the 1980s and 1990s. I saw in Larry a heart after God and a desire for the Body of Christ to truly *be* the Body of Christ, even though some of the parts that make up that Body are different. Since then, I'm happy to say that Larry has become my friend. We have made time to hang out at every event we've both attended. I love how he leads his ministry and his family, but most of all I've gotten to see first-hand his heart for others and his heart for God. I'm honored to know him.

I love this book. The way it's divided makes it one of the best practical training tools I've ever seen. I plan to use it to train my staff and volunteers

here at my church. Right thinking based on God's Word leads to right actions that produce the right outcomes in every part of our ministries, our lives and our families. Get ready to allow the Lord to take you on an incredible journey to become a rock-solid children's ministry.

Jim Wideman  
Children's Ministry Pioneer  
[www.jimwideman.com](http://www.jimwideman.com)

# INTRODUCTION

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

MATTHEW 7:24

Did you ever hear the old children's song about this parable Jesus told? I learned it as a kid, and the lyrics we sang went like this:

*The wise man built his house upon a rock,  
The wise man built his house upon a rock,  
The wise man built his house upon a rock,  
And the rains came tumbling down.*

*The rains came down and the floods came up,  
The rains came down and the floods came up,  
The rains came down and the floods came up,  
And the house on the rock stood firm.*

We did the actions with the song, too. During this verse, we pretended that we were building by placing fist over fist. However, my friends and I were actually waiting for the big climax at the end of the second verse:

*The foolish man built his house upon the sand,  
The foolish man built his house upon the sand,  
The foolish man built his house upon the sand,  
And the rains came tumbling down.*

*The rains came down and the floods came up,  
The rains came down and the floods came up,  
The rains came down and the floods came up,  
And the house on the sand went splat!*

We *loved* the “splat!” The motion was one hand with palm open, facing up, and the other hand, with open palm, coming down on it. We kids would try to outdo each other making the biggest splat. It was *fun!*



The application of the third verse was, “So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ.” It was (and is) a great song. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve learned a couple of things about it.

First, the application imagery is close to accurate, but not quite. In other passages, Jesus is the rock, and certainly it is appropriate and right to say we must build our lives on Him. However, in concluding His sermon on the mount with this parable, Jesus tells us what the rock is:

*Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matt. 7:24).*

It is clear: The rock is God’s Word—in this case, Jesus’ teaching.

Second, we who are involved in children’s ministry teach this story to children and seek to follow it ourselves in our personal lives. But maybe it has not occurred to some of us to follow it in our *ministries*.

Let me explain by telling you about the journey God started me on in the mid 1990s. I had been in children’s ministry nearly 20 years and saw myself as a veteran. But at that time, the Holy Spirit began to stir my soul with this question:

What if we allowed the Bible to be the *designer* of our children’s ministry?

Would it look the same, or not? I became convicted that it would not look the same, and I began searching Scripture passages that talked about children, or teaching children, for guidance.

By the early 2000s, I was teaching Scripture passages that could guide us in designing our ministry to kids. A deeper conviction continued to grow in me: God’s Word must not be merely the content of children’s ministry, but also the designer of children’s ministry.

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**God’s Word must not be merely the content of children’s ministry,  
but also the designer of children’s ministry.**

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In 2003, George Barna, founder of The Barna Group and Christian researcher of how faith and culture intersect, came to speak to the staff at my organization, Awana. He gave us a preview of his findings on children’s ministry in the church, which was published later by Gospel Light under the title *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*. As I listened to the dismal results his research revealed, I can remember turning to someone next to me and whispering, “I just want to scream!” What I meant was, I was so stirred that I felt like standing on my chair and hollering, “Why should we

expect anything different? We haven't been doing it the way the Bible says to do it!" I felt like my personal journey and Barna's research aligned, and I wanted people to see it.

I *didn't* stand on my chair and holler that day, but later, that same deep burden and emotion prompted me to write my first book, *Rock-Solid Kids*.

At the time, I observed various foundations for children's ministry: Most churches just did what they had traditionally done, with no thought as to why they were doing it. Others were more pragmatic, trying to find out for themselves what works, or copying what they observed in other churches. For those with an academic background, educational theory or child psychology was their starting point.

But the Bible was not in the mix. It was perceived as *content* for children's ministry but not as the *blueprint*. As I wrote in my introduction to *Rock-Solid Kids*:

Children's ministry is being pushed and pulled by educational models, statistical analysis, growth techniques, cultural change and technological advancements. But with the weight of all these influences, little attention is given to what ought to be the most important influence in molding the shape of children's ministry—the Word of God. All of these other influences can be very helpful, but they should build upon scriptural truths, not the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

God has greatly blessed the use of *Rock-Solid Kids*. Its message has prompted some significant changes in children's ministry. In it, I set forth eight standards that ought to guide our thoughts, words and actions. They are:

- Standard 1:** Ministering to children is a high priority.
- Standard 2:** The responsibility for children's ministry first belongs to parents.
- Standard 3:** Scripture is the foundation of our content; relevance follows.
- Standard 4:** Spiritual training of children is the core lifestyle of the home.
- Standard 5:** Every child is safe and loved at all times.
- Standard 6:** Children serve God as soon as they are ready.
- Standard 7:** Children's workers communicate the gospel with clarity and urgency.
- Standard 8:** Children have regular opportunities to trust in Christ.

Since writing *Rock-Solid Kids*, my dream of its being used in Christian colleges and seminaries as a text to prepare young people for a life of service in children’s ministry has been realized. I have been overwhelmed with the positive response to its message in many places around the world. Its content, in my opinion, is still foundational.

Since 2004, however, I have become persuaded that other Scripture passages ought to be considered as “designer passages” as well—ones we look to for formation of ministry. For that purpose, I am writing this book as a sequel to *Rock-Solid Kids*.

In this book, there are seven principles—one overarching principle for each of the seven sections. The table that follows lists a word for each section that describes how the section relates to children’s ministry, and what the standard is that I am going to unpack in presenting the material of each section:

Section	The _____ of Children’s Ministry	The Children’s Ministry Standard
1	Right Target	We target the hearts of the children.
2	Right Discipline	We reflect the nature and work of God in every discipline situation.
3	Right Workers	We value both approaches—mothering and fathering—in spiritual discipleship.
4	Right Focus	We are locked on to the needs of children and the desired spiritual outcome in their lives.
5	Right Organization	We value every individual child and are concerned about not losing even one.
6	Right Power	We know where spiritual power comes from and rely upon it to fuel our ministry.
7	Right Quality	We carry out our ministry to children with biblical excellence.

Each section is divided into three parts:

- The first is a chapter that is intended to challenge you to think biblically.
- The second is a chapter that will help you think through what to do in response.
- The third is a page to address how you feel about this topic.

Why this sequence? Because I have learned a simple yet profound sequence for spiritual growth from my friend Shawn Thornton, who is the senior pastor of Calvary Community Church of Westlake Village, California. I want to pass it on to you. It is . . .

- **Think Right**
- **Do Right**
- **Feel Right**

You will learn all about this in section 1. The point is that how we *do* children's ministry is impacted primarily by how we *think* about children's ministry. In other words, *what we do follows how we think*, and how we feel is dependent upon both what we think and what we do.

I have placed discussion questions at the end of the book. It is my prayer and desire that this book will not be one that you only *read*, but rather it will be one that you *study*—with other children's ministry workers. Use the questions. Look at the Scripture passages for yourselves and learn together.

Are you ready for a journey closer to a rock-solid children's ministry? To a *Bible*-solid children's ministry? This book will guide you toward that end as you focus your attention on the rock of God's Word as the designer of your ministry with kids.

**Note**

1. Larry Fowler, *Rock-Solid Kids* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2004), pp. 9-10.



## SECTION 1

# BULL'S-EYE

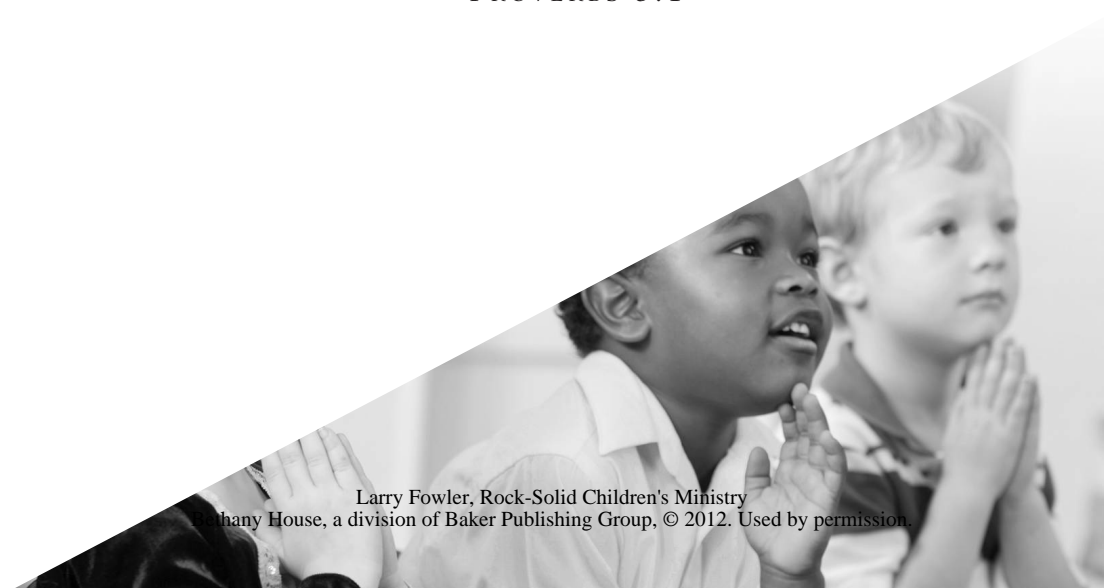
## The Target of Children's Ministry

### STANDARD 1:

**We target the hearts of the children.**

*Keep my commands in your heart.*

PROVERBS 3:1



The eighteenth-century Dubner Maggid (literally, the preacher from Dubner, Poland), is credited with the following story:

I was walking through the woods, and to my astonishment came upon tree after tree with a target drawn upon it. In every target, an arrow had pierced the very center of the bull's-eye. I then met a little boy with a bow in his hand. I asked him, "Did you shoot these arrows?"

"Yes," he replied.

Amazed that such a young boy could be such an accomplished archer, I pressed for more information: "What is your secret? How did you get to be so good as to hit the exact center every time?"

"It was easy," said the boy. "I shot the arrow first and drew the target around it afterward."

Do we do that in children's ministry? Do we ever figuratively select our ministry "arrow," engage all our strength into pulling back our "bow," and then release that ministry effort without ever carefully considering where we are aiming? And then—afterward—proclaim, "It was a success!" because we drew the target after the fact?

Or do we see the target *before* our events, *before* our programs are launched, *before* we expend ministry energy? Ministry friend, you **MUST** start by identifying your target, and that involves answering these questions:

*What is children's ministry really about?*

and

*What is it that we are trying to do?*



T H I N K   R I G H T

## TARGETING THE HEART OF A CHILD

My friend and co-worker Ron Ryba is a serious archer. He is a member of an archery club, and he is a regular competitor in target archery. In 2011, I had the experience, along with my executive team colleagues at Awana, to receive instruction from him and try my hand at shooting a bow and arrow.

Ron started us off pretty close to the target—10 meters, I think it was—so we would have a decent chance of hitting it. I was pretty nervous—just the idea of handling something that could be deadly if aimed the wrong way was enough. Trying to protect my ego in front of my co-workers while doing something I had never done before added to the pressure.

He told us, “Try to hit the bull’s-eye. You will need to experiment in order to adjust for the trajectory of the arrow. You’ll need to take any breeze into account. And you’ll need to get some muscle memory going so that you can pull back the string on the bow the same distance each time.”

I soon learned that as a left-hander, I had to aim up and left of the target to even have a chance to hit the bull’s-eye. With a number of arrows, I began to get the hang of it and even got lucky enough to hit the bull’s-eye a time or two.

After a while, we urged Ron to show us how he did it. He took three arrows and went back to the 25-meter line in alignment with the far left target. He pulled back the bowstring and let go. The speed of the arrow alone

produced a “wow” from us. Then we looked at the target. Bull’s-eye. He took another arrow. Whish. Bull’s-eye. A third: whish—bull’s-eye! We were *very* impressed.

Then Ron said, “Now I’m going to those targets over there, but I’m going to do it blindfolded.” He pointed to four small targets arranged as if they were on corners of a square. He took a blindfold out of his shirt pocket and put it over his eyes. Now he *really* had our interest. We watched intently as he carefully raised the bow, pulled back the string and let go. He hit the first target. “Amazing,” someone said. Second arrow: second target hit. He was doing it *blindfolded. Unbelievable*, we thought. Then, the third arrow hit its target, and finally, the fourth. We never knew our co-worker had that kind of skill. Then Ron turned and faced us (his stance had kept his back toward us), and we saw his secret: a hole in the blindfold so that he could see the target with the one eye he used to aim.

He tricked us; we all had a good laugh, but it only took *some* of the amazement away. Ron was (and is) flat-out good at archery, especially compared to the rest of us.

In this chapter, we are going to talk about a different kind of target you may or may not be good at hitting. But if you haven’t clarified what it is that you are aiming at, chances are you are doing a poor job of hitting anything significant.

All of us want to hit the target in ministry. But I want you to identify something more specific than the target: I want you to know what the bull’s-eye is. In this chapter, I’m going to tell you what *I* name the bull’s-eye. And once you understand that, it will provide a framework for the rest of the book.

So here it is: I believe the bull’s-eye of children’s ministry—the *center* of the target we want to hit—is the *heart* of a child. There are three reasons from Scripture for this conviction:

## Why Target the Heart?

### Reason #1: Close Associations

There is a close association in Scripture between the spiritual development of children and the heart. Wherever we look in the Bible to find spiritual training of children, the word “heart” is not far away. Here are some examples:

God’s Word and the heart: we shouldn’t separate the two, because the Bible doesn’t. But sometimes we *do* in practice. Later in chapter, I will discuss this in more detail.



Wherever spiritual training is mentioned . . .	The heart is nearby:
Deuteronomy 4:9: <i>“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your <b>heart</b> as long as you live. <b>Teach</b> them to your children and to their children after them.”</i>	Right in the verse!
Deuteronomy 6:7-9: <i>“<b>Impress them on your children.</b> Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”</i>	One verse earlier—in verse 6: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.”
Deuteronomy 32:46: <i>“So that you may command your children to obey carefully all the <b>words of this law.</b>”</i>	In the first half of the verse: “He said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day.’”
Psalm 119:9: <i>“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to <b>your word.</b>”</i>	Two verses later, in verse 11: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”
Proverbs 3:1: <i>“My son, do not forget <b>my teaching</b>, but keep my commands in <b>your heart.</b>”</i>	In the last half of the verse!
Proverbs 4:1-2: <i>“Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake <b>my teaching.</b>”</i>	Two verses later, in verse 4: “He taught me and said, ‘Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.’”

## Reason #2: The Biblical Definition of the Heart

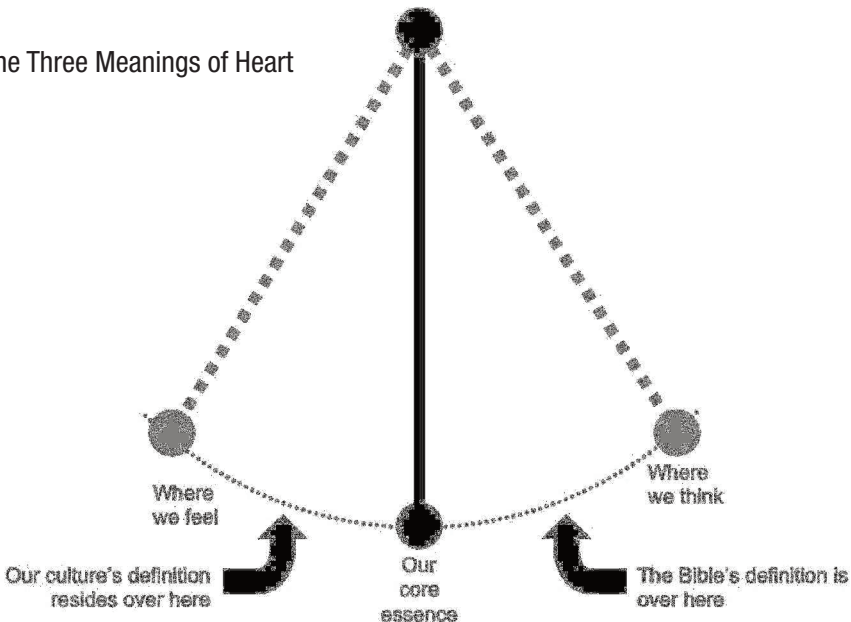
What is the heart? Maybe it’s not what you think (of course, I’m speaking of the figurative “heart,” not the physical one). In our culture, we think of the heart as the core of a person, but in an emotional feeling sort of way. The huge number of heart idioms that are part of our English language is evidence of that. Here is a sample:

### Heart Idioms

Where you feel	Where you find your essence	Where you think
Follow one's heart	At heart	Have a change of
Bleeding heart	Get to the heart of	heart
Broken heart	Heart of gold/stone	In one's heart of
Does my heart good	Search your heart	hearts
My heart goes out to		
Heavy heart		
Wear your heart on your sleeve		

As you can see, our usage of “heart” is lengthier on the left side of the “Heart Idiom” table. The Bible’s usage is different; it would be heavier on the right side of the table. In comparison to our culture, the Bible uses the term “heart” to more often deal with one’s core essence and where we think. Look at the right side of “The Three Meanings of Heart.” Of course, there are many passages that talk about the mind, but I’m focusing on the usage of “heart.” I want you to understand *that* term.

### The Three Meanings of Heart



It may be helpful to understand that the heart, as used in the Bible, can be interchanged with “worldview.” The Bible, however, has a different word for the center of your feelings. In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, it is the word that is literally translated “kidney.” So the heart is NOT the center of feelings or emotions in most scriptural references.

I like the *New King James* translation of Proverbs 23:7: “*For as [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he.*” We know that, don’t we? Every action and feeling we have is preceded by thought. Jesus said as much when He proclaimed, “*A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say*” (Luke 6:45, *NLT*).

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### **Biblically speaking, my *heart* is where I *think*.**

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Do you agree? It is the HEART of a child that counts. And that (figuratively speaking) is where his or her thoughts emerge. Targeting anything less is inadequate.

I’m sure you are familiar with Psalm 119:11: “*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*” Proponents of Scripture memorization (I am one) often use this verse to say, “See? Scripture memory is in the Bible.” Memorization of God’s Word IS in the Bible, but most important, it is modeled by Jesus. The ability to recall Scripture passages or verses from memory is merely step one toward hiding God’s Word in one’s heart; it is not truly in a person’s heart until he or she allows it to influence the way he or she *thinks*. Then it will fulfill the promise of this verse and keep that person from sin.

A final example of the Bible’s usage of the *heart* is found in Deuteronomy 6:6: “*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.*” What does that mean? Does it mean that we are to have deep feelings for the commandments of God? Of course not. It means that the commandments are to guide our deep thinking, which will, in turn, result in right behavior.

### **Reason #3: The Bible’s Pattern for Discipleship**

I’ve already noted in the introduction that I owe the next several paragraphs to my friend Shawn Thornton, senior pastor at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California. His simple yet profound

explanation of the process of growing as a disciple of Christ is based upon Philippians 4:8-9:



Here is the pattern in Scripture:

- First, think right: *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”* (Phil. 4:8).
- Then, do right: *“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice”* (v. 9a).
- Then, you will feel right: *“And the God of peace will be with you”* (v. 9b).

So, thinking right comes first. In other words, the HEART comes first—then behavior and feelings follow. If you *think* right, you will *do* right; and then, as a result, you will *feel* right. Why? Because, as Jesus said, *“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him”* (Matt. 12:34-35).

But we have a challenge. We are bombarded on all sides with our culture’s pattern, which is exactly the reverse of Scripture. If it feels good (feels right), do it (do right); and if your thinking bothers you (like guilt or something), then adjust your thinking to the first two.

We are also barraged with behavior modification, which is better than the dominant cultural pattern. It says “do right,” and if you repeat the action, thinking will eventually follow (remember Pavlov’s dog?). However, behavior modification doesn’t address feelings. Here are the illustrations of these two inadequate patterns:





It is possible for all of us to “feel right” but not alter our thinking. Therefore, if our ministry target is to help children feel good, it is an inadequate target. However, I don’t think I’ve ever met a children’s ministry worker who would state that helping children feel good was the ultimate target.

It is also possible for a person to “do right” but not alter his or her thinking. I have done it, haven’t you? Your kids do it too. Have you ever told your own children, “sit down,” and they sit, but the defiant look on their face says that they are still standing up on the inside? In that case, “doing right,” or changing behavior, is still inadequate because thinking has not changed.

---

**It is essential that we help children “think right.”  
When their thinking changes, their behavior—  
and subsequently, their feelings—will follow.**

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It is essential that we help children “think right.” When their thinking changes, their behavior—and subsequently, their feelings—will follow. Biblically speaking, the heart is where they think. We *must* target the heart of a child.

## Recent Children’s Ministry History

Targeting the heart—and affecting it— isn’t easy. Especially when we have children for only a limited time each week. The record of children’s ministry over the past decades demonstrates just how difficult it is.

I am now one of the “old dogs” in children’s ministry, which gives me the luxury of possessing a perspective that spans several decades. I have seen a progression of change in ministry approaches that, in my opinion, still leaves an inadequate result. I realize that the following description is a simplification, but I believe it is helpful to identify the trend.

### The 1950s and 1960s

If a children's worker today saw the Sunday School material my teachers used with me when I was a child, it would probably just get tossed in the trash. First of all, there was no color; it consisted of a single half-sheet in about 9-point type with a Scripture passage on the front. There was an attempt to explain the passage in kids' terms, but I think someone just tried to simplify some adult commentary and make it work. Then there were the *questions*. They were simply regurgitate-the-facts questions that required little thinking.

There weren't many visuals. Flannelgraph was the cool new tool, but there were so few scenes and figures that it wasn't used very often. And there wasn't much thought given to environment or décor. "Just teach them God's Word" dominated the thinking of the time.

In that era, *Bible knowledge* was king of children's ministry. We were more concerned with what children *knew* than what they thought.

### The 1970s and 1980s

When I graduated from John Brown University in Arkansas, I wanted to find a seminary that offered a major to prepare me for children's ministry. There was not a single graduate-level track to be found. One seminary had a youth ministry track, and two others had a Christian education track. I chose one of those and attended Talbot Seminary in Southern California.

At Talbot, there was a strong emphasis upon practical application, and I loved it. Though I was not in the pastor track, I knew that pastors were being bombarded with encouragement to make their sermons practical. As a result, there was a *huge* shift. The younger pastors were preaching differently than the older generation. Typically, the sermons were "Four [or Five, or Seven] Steps to \_\_\_\_\_." You fill in the blank.

In the Christian education division of the seminary, I was instructed to judge children's ministry lessons first and foremost by the question, "Is there a practical takeaway?" While Bible knowledge was still valued, the greatest weight was put upon what the student was to *do* as a result. We talked a lot about life change. "Horried" was the expected response in those days to a lesson that didn't end with an application.

We also learned that the correct environment was conducive to learning, so we made sure chairs were the right size and tables faced the right way and activities were age-appropriate. We used child-appropriate décor, and flannelgraph became passé. It certainly was the age of enlightenment in children's ministry—for me, anyway!

In that era, *practical application* became king of children's ministry. We were more concerned with what children *did* than what they thought.

## The 1990s and 2000s

People began to sense that children were getting bored, and a new focus emerged: our materials must be *relevant*. Practical application wasn't enough, because not every application applied to each student. Also, we didn't want children to think of the Bible as old or out of date, so we did our best to raise the cool factor and *make it relevant*. Relevance, however, was difficult to nail down. To some, it meant "don't refer to your parents [emphasis on the s] when many of your kids have only one." To others, it meant "talk about the latest hot topic—maybe even the hottest topic of the week." And the importance of relevance spread. Publishers all proclaimed *their* curriculum to be relevant, and they put a huge marketing effort behind helping us recognize it.

We began to give themes to the décor. We all had been to Disneyland as kids, and we knew how attractive Disney was, so we began to emulate what we learned from them. We also recognized that kids are totally immersed in a technology-saturated world, so in an attempt to be *relevant*, we did the same: we improved the sound and added data projectors and big screens. Media became our delivery method of choice in an effort to stay "relevant."

In this most recent era, *relevance* has been king of children's ministry. We have been more concerned with how children *identified* with the issue than how they thought.

## My Perspective of What Is Needed

Each era has had its strengths and weaknesses. In the 1950s and 1960s, we rarely thought of relevance; ministry to children could have been so much improved if we had. And what about practical application? We just left it up to the student and the parents to figure that out. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bible knowledge began to wane. After all, there are just so many minutes in a lesson period, and you don't have time for everything. We hadn't really thought much about relevance yet. More recently, in the 1990s and 2000s, Bible knowledge has been in severe decline.<sup>1</sup>

Have we failed? Not entirely. But we haven't succeeded enough either. The overwhelming amount of research that began with George Barna's book

### Ruling Emphases in Children's Ministry

1950-1970

**Bible Knowledge**

1970-1990

**Practical Application**

1990-2010

**Relevance**

*Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* has certainly pointed that out. What has been a consistent failure in all three eras is the failure to adequately name and focus on the best target—the *heart*. While Bible knowledge is highly valuable, *knowing* Scripture does not automatically translate to changing the heart (the innermost thinking) of a child.

Practical application is also very desirable, but changing behavior can be done without a heart change. Relating Scripture in such a way that it meets a child where he or she is at is critical, but as an approach, it may fail to build a solid enough foundation to equip children for the challenges they will face later in life. So, what do we do?

We must not give up on relevance. Relevance is a *path to* heart change. We could say it is a target, but it's not the bull's-eye of the target.

We must not abandon practical application. But applying God's Word so that behavior changes may only affect the "surface" of a person. Application is part of the target, but it is not the bull's-eye. We must aim deeper.

We must not give up on Bible knowledge. God's Word is the truth, and we need to get as much truth as we can, as deep as we can, into the hearts of as many children as we can. James 4:17 says, "*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*" But we all agree: *knowing* isn't enough. When we focus on knowledge alone, we are missing the bull's-eye.

All three approaches have merit, but on their own they are insufficient. All three must be synergized for the best impact. And all three must be re-targeted at the bull's-eye, the heart.

## The Failure of Proper Measurements

We also measure the wrong things. Suppose your big Ministry Day is over (Sunday or Wednesday, or whatever yours is), and your spouse asks, "How did it go?" You reply, "It was the best day I've ever had in ministry!" What makes you say that? Do you mean . . .

- All the volunteers showed up?
- Billy (or whoever the eight-year-old tyrant in your group is) didn't?
- You nailed the lesson?
- You actually got a compliment from a parent?
- You hit a new record in attendance?
- You heard that your pastor mentioned you (in a positive way) in the message?
- Three kids professed faith in Christ?



What is the *outcome* that makes you rejoice the most? The last one in the bulleted list is pretty awesome and certainly worth rejoicing about! Actually, all are good (well, maybe not the one about Billy), but none are the best measurement. Even counting children who profess faith in Christ is not the best, because we really don't know their heart decision.

We must intentionally target the heart. Maybe you are saying in response, "Well, Larry, I DO target the heart." Great. Do you hit it? In other words, are you *changing the way children think*?

"But it is so difficult to know whether we are doing that or not," you protest. Of *course*; that is the nature of children's ministry. It is one huge differentiating factor between business and ministry; in business, the bottom line is very measurable—did we make money or not? In ministry, the essence of what we do is to impact the immeasurable—the heart of a person. "Are we training the heart?" is similar to asking, "Am I becoming more Christlike?" I can't measure it with real accuracy, but I *can* know whether there is progress or not, and I *can* know what it takes to get there. Let's take the same approach with training the hearts of children.

## Responding to the Crisis

I am certain you are aware of the crisis we are in: We have well-documented research that our children are abandoning their faith—walk in unacceptable numbers. Too many of our children have excelled in "head knowledge" of Scripture but then walk away from their faith. Others have learned the "Christian way" to behave, but their hearts don't follow. And many of our children have enjoyed children's ministry with its more recent coolness factor, yet they are ill-equipped to battle competing messages.

We *have* to do better. We have changed over the last half-century, and we must learn from the failures of the past and change even more. I believe it will be the hardest change yet for children's ministry.

Let's be biblical. Let's target the hearts of the children we serve. Now we need to understand how to do that, which is the subject of the next chapter.

### Note

1. In a small research project (2007) in which I participated, we asked 100 Bible colleges and seminaries two questions: (1) "Do you measure the Bible knowledge of incoming freshmen?" and, (2) if so, "Have you seen any trends?" While few measured, most had an opinion. Many responded like this: "The general consensus of the Bible and theology faculty is that there has been a marked

## Section 1: Bull's-Eye

decrease in the level of Bible knowledge in recent years” (Toccoa Falls College); “General Bible knowledge has been steadily declining over the past 10 years based on the Bible Content Entrance Test” (Briarcrest College and Seminary); and “The level of Bible knowledge for our incoming students has decreased dramatically over the last 20 years. Our assumption now is that incoming freshmen know nothing about the Bible, and that we must start at the most basic level” (Puget Sound Christian College).