

Back to school—what Christian kids need most



More important than lunch money is what you pack inside their minds.

By DEAN MERRILL

Notebooks and pencils and gym sox—that's the least of it. By the time you've paid for new sneakers, registration fees, band instrument rental, and maybe even a doctor's exam, your wallet is empty and so is your gas tank.

Getting kids ready for another school year is a major accomplishment. At our house we've done it 11 times so far and will repeat the process at least 9 more times over the coming years. By now, like most parents, we've learned to plan ahead and shop the sales to hold down costs. We've also discovered something else: Physical preparation is only half the job. We also need to prepare their spirits, their attitudes for the start of school.

Two areas need special attention; we call them the "forgotten E's." Report cards, as you know, concentrate on A's, B's, C's, D's and F's—but the E's are just as important.

Excellence

If school is in fact a young person's "joy," his or her main occupation for now, then how should a Christian student "work?"

We've tried to instill in our son and two daughters that Christians are people who give their best. That's the point of Colossians 3:23—"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (NIV). Paul originally wrote this to Christian slaves, who hardly had it easy. "When the day gets hot and your muscles ache and the task seems impossible," he said, "imagine that your work is not for the slavemaster but instead for Jesus. That will make all the difference in the world."

Christians are people who give their best—whether it's fun or not. European history can be dull to a lot of kids. But the Christian student presses on because he serves the Lord of history.

Christians give their best—whether it's easy or not. Mastering the parts of speech, mul-

tiplying fractions, running the mile; every day has its challenges.

Christians give their best—whether it's expected or not. A few schools and teachers, sad to say, have lost sight of excellence and now settle for mediocrity. That's no excuse.

Christians give their best—whether it's "cool" or not. Classmates may call you a "brain" or other less complimentary names. But settling for average when you could do better is not worthy of Jesus.

When I was a boy, my mother had me memorize a short recitation by a 19th-century British poet, John Oxenham:

*To every man there openeth a way, and ways,
and a Way;
And the high soul takes the high road
And the low soul gropes the low.*

*And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift, to and fro.*

*But, to every man there openeth a high way and
a low;
And every man decideth the way his soul shall
go.*

The point was clear: Go for the high road. Aim for the top. You may not hit it, but whatever you do, don't waste your life on the "misty flats."

We've tried to instill that same attitude in our children by having them memorize such Scriptures as Proverbs 6:6-11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:11,12. School is a place to put those verses into practice.

Environment

This is, of course, the scary part for Christian parents. If you send your children (as we do) to public school, you worry about the influence of ungodly, foul-mouthed peers and secular-humanist teachers. If you scrape together the money to send your children to a Christian school, you don't have to worry about teachers—but you must still think

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about peers. Not every enrollee at a Christian school is, to use one youth speaker's phrase, "sold out and radical" for the Lord. Jealousy, temptation, gossip, and even vulgarity stalk those halls as well.

But think about this: The school environment is also scary for your children, especially at the beginning of a year. They may not say much . . . but as they lie in bed trying to go to sleep on hot August nights, they wonder: *Will this be a good year for me? Will I have any friends? What if nobody likes me? What if I get in trouble?*

We believe it's important to talk about these things at home—not in the language of panic ("Don't you dare get mixed up with those terrible kids who are all going to hell!") but realistically. Some years we've read Ephesians 5:1-18 with our children and talked about how the school population is a mixture of light and darkness. Some classmates truly know the Lord; others may not but at least come from disciplined,

moral homes; still others are in real trouble, spiritually and every other way.

"But what's stronger—light or darkness?" we ask. "Do we really believe what we sing, 'Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the

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world'? If so, then we go into school and every other place as leaders, not followers. We have a secret weapon."

Another way to prepare young people for the upcoming social pressures is to talk about three sea creatures with contrasting personalities. (We borrowed this idea from a junior high curriculum.)

Sharks are aggressive, pushy, and threatening.

Jellyfish are shy, nonassertive, unwilling to stand up for anything.

Dolphins are positive, assertive; they have no natural enemies in the sea. They always seem to be playing in the waves, but they've been known to sense a human being in trouble and rescue him from drowning by bobbing him back to the surface from underneath. However, other fish don't harass the dolphin. It can knock out even a shark with a sudden *thunk!* of its head to the shark's belly.

This is a picture of any group of school kids. Some are loud, pushy, dangerous—like sharks.

Some, like jellyfish, are afraid to assert themselves, fearful of being noticed for any reason.

And some are confident without being obnoxious. They take care of themselves; they do the right thing even if it's hard; they show courage.

A key Scripture for "dolphins" at

school is 1 Corinthians 16:13—"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men (and women) of courage; be strong" (NIV). Not a bad verse to memorize. (For other back-to-school devotional ideas, see our book, *Together at Home*, published by Focus on the Family.)

The point is to make sons or daughters inner-directed rather than outer-directed, so they never forget they belong to Christ and to this Christian family. These anchor points will then control how far they move and in what direction.

What about non-Christian teachers? Can you teach your child to respect a teacher's knowledge and authority even if his personal philosophy or life-style (or language) is unacceptable?

Yes, especially as the child gets older. Kids by the age of 9 or 10 are sharp enough to know that not all teachers and principals (or mayors or doctors or police officers) are perfect. But that doesn't mean we write them off.

"As you sit in a class," we've told our three, "try to figure out a teacher's point of view. Where is this person coming from? Do you hear traces of 'You call the shots in your life; you decide what's right or wrong for you'? If so, the teacher's humanism is showing. Ditch that kind of propaganda—but hang onto the chemistry or grammar or French. You have to pick and choose."

In this sense, getting ready for school is getting ready for life. It's complicated—far more than a matter of gathering up crayons and reading the bus schedule. The intangibles are every bit as important as what goes in the duffle bag.

And that's why Christian young people need our thoughtful, prayerful help. ☐



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