

# GROWING KIDS: Is it God's Way?

While Preparation for Parenting and Preparation for Toddlerhood contain numerous apparently questionable items, the validity of *Growing Kids God's Way* (GKGW or GK) is much more murky. Many parents have been comfortable in altering or avoiding *Prep*, but once their children reach the preschool and elementary school ages of GKGW, they are ready to embrace the teachings fully. Is it really better and more trustworthy than the first two curricula?

One of the first things that I feel is important to realize is that GKGW really can't be taken without acceptance of the first two curricula. I mention this because I have heard parents and pastors say, "well, we don't agree with *Prep*, but *GKGW* is okay by itself." In several places, however, GK discusses the foundation that must be laid in order to implement it, and it refers the parents back to *Prep* if they feel that the proper foundation has not yet been laid. This in turn means accepting the premises put forth in *Prep*, including accepting the belief that mothers do not have a mothering instinct, that our children are by nature depraved to the point that we cannot trust them to know what is good for themselves in any circumstance, and that the parental relationship is always to be put before the children. GK cannot be separated from its *Prep* siblings; it is a foundation stone in the philosophical building of Growing Families International (GFI) and cannot stand alone.

But what about the actual curriculum itself, aside from its indisputable ties to *Prep*? It must freely be said that there are many good tenets in GKGW. No one can argue that kids need to be disciplined, that morality is important, or that they learn much from our example. Indeed, we do want to model servanthood to our children so that they will learn it. The questions rather are on the perceived emphasis of the curriculum as a whole: the methodology, the overall flavor of the text, the "scripturalness" of it, and the resulting impact upon the family. It is widely noted that GKGW kids are known for their politeness, obedience, and apparent "happiness". I put the latter in quotes because I have cause to question this last observation, and will later explain why. Are these end-results the goal of godly parenting? Does external behavior always reflect the inner heart? I do not think so, and furthermore, I would contend that the means are as important as the ends and therefore must also be examined. What do I mean? My perusal of GK uncovered the following:

**First time obedience**- this GK concept says that children should obey the first time they are told to do something<sup>1</sup>. If the child does not immediately obey, he is in sin; if the parent repeats their request, then they are also in sin because, by repeating, they are reinforcing lack of obedience on the first request. I believe that it is undeniable that scripture requires us to teach our children obedience. I also am personally aware, as a parent, how lack of follow-through among other things can impact resulting "obedience" in children. However, I do not see in scripture anywhere the implication that if I don't follow through and must repeat myself again, that I am sinning. In fact, the child might not have jumped to my command for some very valid reason, and to presume sin automatically seems to me to be very judgmental, which is *unscriptural*. I would point out that in the Bible, God Himself gave commands wherein He was questioned or challenged by the recipient; did He

<sup>1</sup> GKGW 4th edition, p. 176, under principle three of Principles of Instruction: "When a child continually disobeys, he is in sin. When parents continually reinforce that disobedience, they are in sin."

therefore sin by having to repeat Himself?

**Servanthood-** GK, like its predecessors, emphasizes the belief that the marriage relationship is primary and foundational to the family. Based on this belief, it is then set forth that when the father comes home, he should not spend time with his children but should first sit down with his wife and have "couch time"<sup>2</sup>, visibly showing the children that she is first and that they are second. In the same vein, it is suggested that parents **need** time away from their children in order to build a strong marriage, and that the wife should serve her husband first, before the children, even down to the detail of who is served first at the dinner table. By putting the father first, it is asserted, the children will learn the proper balance of relationships, and the mother will be modeling servanthood. This may sound legitimate at first glance, but closer examination reveals many troubling possibilities. A GFI mother posed a sincere, hypothetical dilemma: young child is teething and miserable, mother is trying to cook dinner, father comes home hungry. By the GFI interpretation, mother concludes that servanthood is best exemplified by setting child aside and making dinner for dad first. My question is this: who made the sacrifice in being the servant? [child] What lesson did the child really learn? [dad is first place, I am second] Is this servanthood, or is this merely a hierarchical, pecking-order experience? It seems to me that true servanthood would better be modeled here if one or both parents attended to the child first, rather than attending merely to themselves. I disagree strongly with the Ezzo's interpretation of modeling servanthood and believe that they are *imposing* it upon children rather than modeling it, without regard to age, readiness or foundational teaching. In such a context, resentment may be the result rather than positive Christian learning.

**Modesty-** GK previously defined modesty as the need to cover nude bodies promptly, and to shield children's exposure not only to their parent's nudity, but also to each other's and their own. While some may agree with this, acceptable nudity is more culturally defined than it is absolutely defined, and the Bible is silent on this definition. Nevertheless, this interpretation was presented as a morality issue, and defined in Victorian fashion as biblical; it has now been moved to a companion curriculum on morality.

**Discipline-** GK asserts that discipline is integral to children's lives, and I agree. However, the emphasis was heavy here in past editions, which used to include a chart for spanking by age, and much discussion on the "proper" attitude of the child that needs to be instilled. The fourth edition has been edited of previously objectionable material and a nice section on restoration after chastisement integrated; however, parent's attitudes still are often addressed only to the extent that they must recognize the need for their children to be disciplined and must be ready to carry this through regardless of how they feel. Indeed, the emphasis includes a strong belief in parenting through the rational mind coupled with prayer, and often dispassionately excludes gut emotions and intuition as weaknesses of the human flesh or even sinful nature. Discussion on how to help a child feel loved, though newly added to the fourth edition as a separate chapter, is not readily integrated into the context of the many situations discussed, and varying personality traits of children are dismissed as irrelevant to the teaching of morality to our children. The curriculum provides one approach to all personalities, and seems to deny that discipline and standards may

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<sup>2</sup>GKGW 4th edition p.68

need to be individualized.<sup>3</sup>

**Child philosophy-** the Ezzo's are strong opponents of anything they perceive to be "child-centered"<sup>4</sup>. Children are generally not asked what they want, but told what they are to do. The appeal of this curriculum is to families who embrace a strongly control-oriented view of Christianity that appears to interpret I Peter 3:1-7 in a unilateral fashion: a fairly voiceless mother subordinated to father, and children as silent followers. In this narrowly defined order, preferential treatment to children is avoided as "unbiblical" at most all times. I have concerns that in such an environment, children may not feel like the blessings that God intended them to be, but might instead be broken by the uncertainty of their intrinsic value or provoked to wrath.

**ADD/ADHD-** [This also appeared in previous editions; I am including it because, though it does not appear in the 4th edition, no formal retraction has been published, either] Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder was categorized as being due to poor parenting in 95%<sup>5</sup> of all diagnosed cases. This flies in the face of the fact that stimulants, which increase jitteriness in "normal" people, will actually help the ADD person to settle down, pointing to a chemical rather than emotional problem. Families learned to perceive the parents of hyperactive children as permissive before they had a chance to really examine them, leading to unfair judgment of parent and child alike. It must also be added that common wisdom regarding ADD has shown that these children do best in a structured environment, and *GK* certainly does provide structure. Perhaps this is where the erroneous belief that permissiveness (AKA non-structure, and including demand feeding, as defined by the Ezzo's) was the *cause* of most cases of ADD/ADHD developed in the Ezzo's minds. Rather, the reverse is more likely true: unboundaried parenting is probably the cause of 5% of hyperactive behavior cases, but not the cause of **true** ADD.

**Black and white approach-** Many scenarios are discussed, and are commonly cast into two extremes, the "right" approach and the "wrong" approach<sup>6</sup>. Parents are encouraged to accept a black and white view of child raising and related issues, and gray areas are ignored or denied entirely. Such casting is known as legalism, and appears in many places throughout the text, though the curriculum asserts otherwise.

**Exegesis-** When I first read the 3rd edition, I was struck by the de-programming approach that it implemented. Scriptures regarding having the proper "mindset" and humility and openness to teaching were quoted, and by the end of the chapter, I found myself wanting to throw away everything that I previously believed about parenting. Then, in an "open" condition, I was readied to embrace Christian parenting as it was about to be taught to me. It took several weeks of prayer and soul searching for me to realize that this same approach is utilized by cults to disarm potential recruits and ready them for re-programming. Others besides myself have

<sup>3</sup> *GKGW* 4th edition, p.40, "Regardless of the personality distinctions found in your children, persistent moral training should not vary from child to child because scripture's moral requirements do not vary."

<sup>4</sup> See *The Bible and Common Sense Parenting*; also noted in various informal writings of the Ezzo's.

<sup>5</sup> Statistic from 3rd edition

<sup>6</sup> *GKGW* 4th edition, p.13: "Introducing the Jones and Brown Families".

also noticed similarities between GFI attitudes and approaches with cult behavior; whether by intention or not, it does attempt to open the person to new teaching, new input, and often causes doubt in former beliefs. Sometimes the line between truth and opinion can be very fine; it is important to examine scripture for what it says, and not for what **might** be extrapolated. This last statement has been well dealt with by another author.<sup>7</sup>

In continuation with its predecessors, GKGW draws many of its principles from broad scriptures, taking text and then applying it in increasingly narrow ways to establish a "biblical principle". The fact that the Bible itself did not make the resulting statement is oft ignored, and the new principle is promoted to the level of authentic scripture. In this reader's opinion, the curriculum would have more validity if it were presented as "Growing Kids the Ezzo's Way". One cannot dispute the right to share ideas, but the platform for sharing *is* a matter for debate. It is because the Ezzo's method is touted as "God's Way", when the Bible is not as specific as the Ezzo's curriculum, that I especially find the program unacceptable. When confronted by the title of their book, the Ezzo's will admit that they do not have an exclusive claim to Christian parenting. However, in practice, *GK* parents in local churches have been known to set themselves aside from non-*GK* families and teachers in the belief that mixing with those who do not practice *GK* principles will lead to contamination of their family's discipline and moral teaching efforts. Churches have been divided and friendships broken over this belief<sup>8</sup>, destroying rather than promoting unity within the Body of Christ. The common retort to this observation has been the citation of scriptures such as Luke 12:49-53, quoted in part: "Do you think I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other....."---- but I take exception to using this verse, since Jesus was referring to being ready for the last days and doing the master's will, not parenting methods.

**Salvation-** The crux of *GK* philosophy is the belief that a child's heart is molded by external factors, and it is molding by the parents that will lead the child to Christ. Rebelliousness in teenagers is seen largely as the result of poor parenting methods/discipline, and salvation, though not stated as such, appears to be more the result of "good" parenting more than of God's grace. Parents bear heavy responsibility for the outcome of their children, and God's ability to reach even the most difficult child seems diminished by the parental burden. One must ask, what is the role of the Holy Spirit, then, in salvation? Is it He or us who brings our children to repentance? The Holy Spirit seems minimized, even lost, in this context.

A secondary concern here is that, in the end, it seems that behavior modification is what is really being taught as the key to success and Christianity. Once again we walk a fine line in questioning this application. Behavior modification is a long-accepted tool of child raising, but I would stop short at believing that this leads to salvation. The authors may disagree with my conclusion of their beliefs, but this is the strong impression that I and others have received in both reading *GKGW* and in conversing with *GK* parents.

**Christian Etiquette and Mealtime Behavior-** This section used to appear as a

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Prewett, *Preparation for Behavioral Pediatrics? A Biblical and Practical Critique of Preparation for Parenting*, 1994 (available at <http://www.fix.net/~rprewett/fam.html>), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Anecdotes relayed in personal conversations.

separate chapter, but has been relegated in the 4th edition to the appendix<sup>9</sup> as an optional application of the text. My concerns are not for the appropriateness of teaching etiquette, but for couching it as an extension of Christianity, another pharisaic extrapolation of scripture. The text states, "The way your child handles himself at mealtimes says much about the standards by which you live. Your child's social etiquette is a reflection of your discipline in training him, both in proper behavior and in the respect toward others." The video expands upon this with two examples: one of a child with elbows on the table, and one of a child who doesn't have the "correct" answer as to why he should wait to eat dessert until the hostess has sat down at the table. Both children are labeled as lacking Christian character, making mealtime behavior an extension of Christian character. I consider this a stretch of scripture, and another example of legalism.

**How to Raise a Moral Child-** In the text it is stated: "The duty of parents is to continually bring their children to God's standard and not lower the standard to suit the child." Many parents have expressed concern, however, over haziness as to when it is GOD's standard set forth, and when it is the Ezzo's standards, or a cultural standard, i.e. required use of Mr. and Mrs. to express respect<sup>10</sup>; mealtime etiquette; dealing with a shy child; returning shopping carts to their proper places. These are all good things in and of themselves, yet are often presented dogmatically and in the name of God and scripture. If we fail to do them, are we really letting God down? Should extenuating circumstances influence our decisions, or is it really that cut and dried? I am concerned for the many parents who may accept the Ezzo's interpretations without discernment, and feel that this is highly possible since the curriculum is intended to rebuild the Christian's view of Christian parenting to the Ezzo's perspective.

**Happiness-** "Obedience and discipline lead to happiness" (my summary of GK concept; not a direct quote)-- at first glance, this would appear to be a true statement to a biblically literate Christian; don't all children require boundaries, and in those boundaries find peace, security and love? Doesn't the Bible teach that "happy are they who obey the Lord?" Absolutely yes. At second glance, however, this statement in isolation ignores the setting of the discipline and obedience. Most parents will recognize that there are "right" and "wrong" ways to discipline children; when done improperly, discipline can be as harmful as it can be good. It is my belief that GK does not adequately take to task the parent's attitudes and heart. So much emphasis is placed on the child fitting into the family and NOT allowing the child to alter the family that the parental mindset may easily fall into a self-serving frame of mind that considers the adult's wishes as primary and the child's as insignificant. Children are smart, they know when they can "win" and when survival depends on remaining silent, and there is concern that some GK kids will be obedient at the price of denying their inner feelings and beings. Adding to this potential dilemma is the fact that "whining", "pouting" and "talking back" are strictly disallowed; protests are only allowed under strict guidelines which require the child to request permission to protest first. This may have a strong appeal to parents who are weary of arguing with their child, but at what price? Is a compliant child necessarily a happy child? And what about the Psalms, where David alternately whined at, cried at and then praised God? Was God always displeased with all of these expressions? GK does not adequately address the possibility that a child may be frustrated beyond healthy learning and may begin to internalize anger and resentment to his own detriment.

<sup>9</sup> GKGW 4th edition, p. 304-5.

<sup>10</sup> GKGW 4th edition, appendix.

Does avoiding one extreme validate replacing it with another?

I have great concerns for this last statement because of several disturbing anecdotes. One mother relayed her twelve year-old daughter's observations of the many GKGW families in her church and those children specifically in Sunday school where she helps. When asked which children in the church seemed the most sad, the daughter unhesitatingly listed six or seven children, and without exception all were raised under GKGW. Other reports include such phrases as "the angriest child I've ever seen," and there also have been isolated but still troubling stories of GK kids who exhibited severe withdrawal, depression and hopelessness. I am not suggesting that this is the result of the curriculum for all GK children, but rather that there is a strong propensity for the curriculum to be applied negatively, especially since it is presented in a black and white manner with little leeway for the personalities involved.

**Cult-like Characteristics-** I do not wish to be an alarmist, but it also cannot be ignored that many parents, without prompting from others, have related observations of a "cultishness" about GFI and some of the families. Behaviors and actions commented upon include an air of superiority in their conviction that they are parenting "God's Way"; inability of GFI parents to explain and in some cases defend their parenting beliefs outside of quoting Gary Ezzo or the text (lack of original thinking)<sup>11</sup>; insistence on clinging to beliefs or decisions even when proven inappropriate or wrong for the situation; a steadfast faith in the leader of the organization and trust that his words and interpretations are correct even when challenged by other reputable leaders; changes and corrections made by the author in texts to reflect criticisms without admitting error; attacking the character of concerned challengers while avoiding discussion of the issues that are presented. I have personally experienced the last behavior, as I have yet to receive answers to many valid questions which I have submitted while I have experienced side-stepping and third-person character slander. Some observers have also related sad tales of grandparents being estranged from their grandchildren because of their refusal to follow the prescribed precepts to the letter. This, of course, does cross over into the realm of parental authority, but in the instances that I have heard, in my opinion, the situations did not warrant the extreme actions taken.

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GKGW appears as a godsend to parents. Its methods appear to bring children in line, remove much of the strain and inconvenience of parenting, and produce cooperative, "happy" children. Indeed, there are many positive testimonies as to how this curriculum has helped parents learn to raise their children and positively influence their behavior. Any struggling or insecure parent will grab hold of this program as it promises that, if applied properly, the children will not only become "joys" to their parents, but will also come to the Lord with open hearts. All you have to do is follow the principles.....

My question to parents is this: does the Bible support a belief that there is a set of rules that you can follow that will make you righteous and bring you to salvation? Is our salvation based on our good works, our good behavior, our good morality, or upon

<sup>11</sup>This has been publicly observed in "Ezzo" and "Prep" discussion folders on America Online, as well as in personal conversations ('95-96).

God's grace? If we embrace classical Christianity and the doctrine of salvation by grace, should we also be embracing a parenting method that seems to imply that it is our parenting as much as it is God's grace that will bring our child to salvation? I would not shirk the influence of a parent's modeling upon their children, and in fact I would like to emphasize it! We know that God is our Father, and that we understand much of our relationship with Him through the filter of our experience with our own earthly fathers.

In the beginning I asked the question: do the ends justify the means? I have identified what I consider to be problem areas, and include in the category of "means": stretching scripture to say more than it does; using legalism to control both parent and child's behavior; use of a cultish approach to teach a method that Mr. Ezzo has acknowledged is *his* interpretation of Christian parenting and not the Bible; misapplication of scriptural precepts; neglect of good research in formation of opinions and conclusions; imbalance in weighting how to help your child feel loved as himself, versus imposing a "one size fits all" model; and unfair characterization of non-Ezzo methods as unchristian and permissive.

Mormons have long been admired for their strong family structures, and yet should an evangelical Christian convert to Mormonism to gain this positive family model? In the same vein, should we also accept the total *GKGW* package in order to help our families? I have spoken with couples who express grave concerns about the curriculum, but who also lament the lack of options in Christian parenting curricula. I know that we have many desperate parents, and that *GK* contains some of the answers that they are looking for; however, I do not feel that the trade-offs and risks that they bring are worth the price. Others may disagree with me, but new Christian parenting curricula is coming out on the market, and we have the rich wisdom of older generations available to us in our local churches. I do believe that the extra effort spent learning and sharing parenting skills on our own is well worth it, especially when we seek for ourselves what God would teach us about parenting our own, *individual*, children.

-by Lisa Marasco