

## Freedom to Grow in an Environment of Grace

Mark Hamby

If it were not for my adventurous imagination, school would have been like solitary confinement in a maximum security prison. In elementary school my high grades reflected only my ability to memorize facts; my level of reasoning and comprehension remained below average. In high school, where a higher level of reasoning was required, my grades tumbled and with it, motivation to apply myself to study. “Why would anyone “give their all” when there are so few rewards and so much failure?” I reasoned.

If labeling a child for inattentiveness or hyperactivity had been prevalent during my childhood, I certainly would have been a candidate for ADD, ADHD, BDHD, ZDDD! I was “a handful” with an indefatigable spirit. For me, school was imprisonment. Looking back, I attribute this distaste for school to four factors:

1. Underdeveloped reasoning capabilities
2. Environmental pressures and stress
3. Fear
4. Character weakness

The first, underdeveloped reasoning capabilities, is a common problem especially in the early years of growth. Every child’s mental capabilities grow at different rates, and children of the same chronological age are often at different developmental stages. Children are neither meant to nor able to grasp the same content that the teacher or parent presents. Forcing or pressuring a child to learn beyond his/her capabilities will only frustrate and, in the end, lower his level of reasoning. Children subject to this approach rarely reach their potential as fear suppresses the ability to learn.

Fear, I believe, is the single greatest factor that impedes a child’s ability to learn. When the level of fear is high, the level of reasoning is low. Lower the level of fear and you will see the level of reasoning and risk-taking increase. Risk-taking is essential in the learning process. Without risk, children will persevere to unlock those “mental blocks” in order to achieve mastery. For example, a fearful, insecure child learning division for the first time will be easily frustrated and more apt to give up before this challenging concept is understood and applied through repetition and trial and error. The greater the fear, the lower the level of risk-taking and reasoning. Some children are born with an inquisitive nature and actually enjoy facing obstacles. They enjoy the process of discovery and remain motivated until the answers are found. These children do not succumb to fear easily. Their mental abilities are strong enough to carry them through most learning environments.

We must strive to lower the level of fear in order to raise the level of reasoning. The first and most significant fear factor is found at home. The stronger the relationship between mom and dad, the more security a child possesses, enabling him to tackle life’s challenges. When a child

fears that the relationship that holds his life together is breaking down, feelings of insecurity and worry are often insurmountable, resulting in an inability to concentrate. Other fear factors that contribute to a child's learning difficulties include the fear of failing; fear of an angry parent, teacher, or principal; fear of peers; fear of the death of a loved one; and more recently, the fear of terrorism. Though this list is not exhaustive, it does represent some of the destructive fears a child faces today. In light of war and terrorist threats, the threshold of fear for children has significantly increased.

So how do we address these external fears that paralyze our children? If relationships at home are healthy, then a child's ability to cope with external fears comes from his internal value system. Let me explain. The reason a child is devastated when conflicts arise between parents is because a child's parents are one of his most valued treasures. Children place a priceless value upon a mom and dad who love each other. When there are unresolved conflicts or divorce, a child's greatest value has been threatened or destroyed, thus suppressing his motivation.

For children who have an undeveloped level of reasoning but an overdeveloped imagination, there is only one alternative while being held captive in school, and that is to escape! Yes indeed, while listening to the lectures of well-intentioned teachers, children like me appear to be listening, but we've really been transported to some distant land. For example, when the history teacher begins to lecture on Marco Polo, children like me are riding in the caravan as we are about to meet Ghengis Khan. Unfortunately, by the time our imagination is brought back to the teacher's presentation, we are so far behind that we are lost, grappling for someone to help us. We look over to our neighbor only to view their extensive notes compared to our empty page. Next, we are asked to pay attention only to feel embarrassed. Fear settles in, the defenses go up, and off we go to another distant land.

Our low test scores and inability to comprehend what we read are poor indicators of our true abilities. If you could interview my high school teachers and ask if Mark Hamby would be a likely candidate for three master's degrees and a Ph.D., they would politely smile and then laugh. They would ask if this is the same Mark Hamby who hated to read, scored poorly on tests, was easily distracted, and would be remembered more as the class comedian than a scholar. How did such a disdain for reading and learning turn into an insatiable desire to grow in knowledge, instruction, and wisdom? This is not to suggest that I've arrived, but oh, I do desire to learn. Before we answer the question of "how," let's first look at the reasons behind the lack of motivation to learn:

Value—that which we treasure the most.

Motivations are driven by what we value. When a child's values have been threatened or destroyed, he will build up walls behind which to hide, thereby protecting himself. There is just no room for confidence and self-worth. His most treasured values have just been shattered, and he is not going to be hurt again! These children are often misjudged and devalued by well meaning adults.

Allow me to illustrate. As I was writing this article I was aboard an airliner. Seated in the front row, I was struggling to come up with a synonym for the word “determined.” So, being the shy introvert that I am, I asked the flight attendant seated a few feet in front of me for her help. She smiled and said, “How about the word ‘driven’?” “Perfect,” I said. “That will work.” A few minutes later she asked if she could hear how it sounded in the sentence I had written. This evoked a conversation on values and motivation. I explained how I believe peace at home is an essential component to self-worth which is governed by our motivations, which are driven by what we value, thus laying the foundation of our character.

“Children who live in fear possess weak character because their self-worth and motivations are based on what I call “descending values.” Descending values are self-centered rather than God-centered, and character that is developed in an environment of fear is “self-centered.” Children who have been hurt and are afraid of more attacks will insulate themselves as much as possible. The more they protect and isolate themselves, the more they “descend” and fall away from the only true source of love and protection—God Himself. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us, but this doesn’t guarantee a life without pain. It does mean that we can trust Him no matter how difficult life may become. When we value God and His promises, we quickly learn that He is a God who can be trusted. Unfortunately, those who live in fear often trust their self-prescribed protection more than the God of infinite love and resources. The tightly-clung-to values of self-preservation soon decay as a myriad of other protective devices replace the old descending ones.

The flight attendant then did something that surprised me. She removed her seat belt and stood beside me. She began to tell me how her parents divorced when she was in fifth grade. She described the fighting, yelling, and physical abuse that molded her childhood. Then she said something that added further confirmation to my thesis. She said that she could remember her report card in fourth grade. Her school graded by letters such as “N” for “needs improvement” or “G” for “good work” etc. She said she could remember receiving all N’s. But one in particular stuck in her mind. It was an “N” for show and tell. Because she had refused to stand in front of the class to show and tell anything, the teacher interpreted this as disobedience, and evaluated her as an uncooperative child. I see this as a child who was afraid of rejection and hurt, resulting in low self-worth, low risk, and a longing for somebody to protect and love her!

Oh, may God open our eyes. Our children need our unconditional love and protection. They need to know, experientially, that they are fully loved, fully known, without any fear of rejection. Children who know they are unconditionally loved, in spite of what others know about them, will be more willing by God’s grace to admit their weaknesses/sins and ask for help. They will be more willing to remove the mask of safety and tear down the walls of protection if they sense that we have their best interest in mind. Children who sense that they are loved in this way, will possess a lower level of fear, which in itself is a powerful motivating factor toward “ascending” values and character development. Allow me to explain. Fear, according to John in his first epistle, involves punishment. But perfect love casts out fear. In the context of John’s discourse on fear and love, he is referring to eternal judgment. But John wants his readers to know that those who know God, or are known by Him, do not need to fear punishment because God has

already demonstrated His great love toward them through the life and death of His Son. Because of this great love, we are presented with life's highest possible value; a value of such worth that once found, one would be willing to give anything to possess it.

With God and His Son as our highest value, we are motivated unto love and good works because we know how much He gave on our behalf. It's quite simple. When someone does something for you that is sacrificial and loving, it motivates you to reciprocate in some way to show your appreciation for their love and sacrifice. Because you have been greatly valued, you in turn are motivated to love and sacrifice for others. For the believer, new motivations are driven by a new sense of value—God and His lavish love. It is amazing what happens when we place a high value on others. Children and adults become motivated to please because they appreciate being valued, and value reciprocates value; it ascends. God valued us, and we in turn value Him and others.

Misunderstanding the depth of God's unfathomable love (and if unfathomable, we can never truly comprehend its depths) is the single greatest reason why a Christian would possess a low self-worth. When one realizes how much they are fully loved (valued), having no fear of rejection, their level of fear decreases and their level of reasoning and risk-taking increases. This, too, is ascending. The higher one feels valued, the more a child is motivated to learn regardless of failed attempts. In fact, they begin to see failure as one step closer to success. I believe that it was Theodore Roosevelt who once said, "Success is failure upon failure, with great enthusiasm!"

May your children truly experience the freedom to grow in an environment of grace this summer. Surround them with heroes and heroines who model persevering character and noble deeds. May Summer truly be a time for growth in your dear family.

### **Recommended Reading for:**

#### **• Boys ages 12 and up:**

Shipwrecked; Sir Knight of the Splendid Way; Titus: A Comrade of the Cross; Stick to the Raft; The Highland Chairman; The Captive; Stephen: A Soldier of the Cross; The Archives of Anthropos; The Pillar of Fire; Boys of Grit Who Changed the World; Boys of Grit who Became Men of Honor; Joel: A Boy of Galilee.

#### **• Boys ages 8–12**

Teddy's Button; The Bird's Nest; Christie's Old Organ; Christie the King's Servant; The Lost Ruby; Tom Watkin's Mistake; The Stolen Child; The Golden Thread; Clean Your Boots, Sir?; The Inheritance; The Hedge of Thorns; Tales of the Kingdom Trilogy.

#### **• Girls ages 12 and up:**

The Lamplighter; Sir Knight of the Splendid Way; Rosa of Linden Castle; The Wide Wide World; Titus: A Comrade of the Cross; The Pillar of Fire; The Three Weavers; Always in His Keeping; The Hedge of Thorns; What is Her Name?

• **Girls ages 8–12**

Probable Sons; The Little Lamb; Nobody Loves Me; The White Dove; The Bird's Nest; Jessica's First Prayer; Melody; Tales of the Kingdom Trilogy; Christie's Old Organ.

• **Preschool–7 years old:**

The True Princess; The Beggar's Blessing; The Hedge of Thorns Illustrated; Bible Stories for Little Ears (audio drama); Patch the Pirate (audio—fun filled character lessons with Patch and his crew.)

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**Biographical Information**

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*Serving my King by serving you, Mark Hamby, President of Cornerstone Family Ministries & [Lamplighter Publishing](#).*