

“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING??”

Ann Jahns

Has that ever slipped out of your mouth as you responded in frustration to something your teen child said or did? Why, when our teens are being raised in a Christian home and are clearly taught right from wrong, do they sometimes do things that are just, well, dumb?

In their defense, it might not be entirely their fault. In fact, your teen might be the unsuspecting victim of silent sabotage, and that saboteur is lurking in your teen's own body. The culprit? Your teen's developing brain. Did you know that the human brain isn't fully "wired" until about age 25? It's true. So what does that mean? It means that for your teen, there really is no such thing as a "no brainer." The growing, maturing teen brain can inhibit adolescents from reaching logical conclusions and from easily differentiating between right and wrong in certain situations.

Teen Brain 101

The human brain is an absolute marvel of God's creation, and scientists are only beginning to plumb the depths of its complexities. But since most of us aren't scientists, let's look at the simple basics of the teen brain.

During adolescence, the brain goes through a tremendous period of growth. The part of the brain that helps adults use critical thinking skills, the prefrontal cortex, is still being wired during the teen years. So when teens are making decisions, they are using a different part of the brain, the amygdala, which is easily overstimulated and affected by raging

hormones and volatile emotions. This often results in the inability of teens to control their emotions and impulses as adults have learned to do.

So What Does This Mean in My Teen's Life?

It means that teens' developing brains play a major role in how they respond to everything—from dating to alcohol and drugs, to peer pressure and relationships. And you know those video games your teen loves playing? They can be the developing teen brain's enemy.



Dating and the Teen Brain

Oh, the excitement of young love! Sweaty palms, racing hearts . . . but not enough activity in the part of the brain that helps to make moral, logical decisions. Brain scans of teens have shown that they experience something similar to being under the influence of drugs while they are in a romantic relationship. So, parents, it's crucial for us to be vigilant and to help be a biblical compass for our dating teens.

Alcohol and Drugs and the Teen Brain

Because their brains are still under construction, alcohol and drugs are particularly damaging to the teen brain. Teens are also more sensitive to alcohol than adults, and they start to notice the warning signs of alcohol later than adults do. So by the time their brain says, "Stop!" it's likely too late. It is our job as parents to have honest conversations about the damaging effects of alcohol and drugs and to know where our teens are, who they are with, and what they are doing.

Video Games and the Teen Brain

Here's a disturbing fact about those video games your teen plays and their effect on the brain: The teen brain has

Because their brains are still under construction, alcohol and drugs are particularly damaging to the teen brain.

(“What Were You Thinking??” . . . cont.)

neurons that are in a critical developmental stage, and if they aren’t being used, they shrivel up and die. Ouch. So when teens are playing hours upon hours of video games, the part of their brain with the developing neurons is NOT being stimulated. In fact, brain scans taken while teens are gaming show that there is very little activity in the prefrontal cortex. That’s why it’s so important that parents set limits on the time their teens spend on activities like video games. Encourage more healthy activities that actually help the developing teen brain—like physical activity, reading, playing a musical instrument, and so on.

So What’s a Parent to Do?

Parents, as crazy as it sounds, it’s our responsibility to be our teens’ surrogate brains during these formative years. Does this mean we should hover and micromanage and make all of our teens’ decisions for them? No. That would be disastrous. Our teens need to learn to make rational, God-pleasing decisions to help launch them into becoming productive and mature members of society.

Helping Our Teens Make Sound Decisions

When our teens have decisions to make, big or little, here are some simple talking points for parents and teens to help guide teens through the process:

1. What is the decision that needs to be made?
2. What are the pros of this decision?
3. What are the cons of this decision?
4. Is this decision God-pleasing?
5. What steps need to be taken to put this decision into action?

Eventually, through much practice, our teens will be able to make their own sound decisions. But parental guidance during their formative years is crucial!

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“He Did WHAT??”

Well, your teen did it. He did something you never thought he’d do, or she said something you never thought she’d say. Now, as a parent, you need to do something about it. Try these tips to keep calm and help guide you through the tough conversation that needs to happen with your teen:

1. Take a deep breath. One might not be enough, so take a few deep breaths. Keep in mind what you just learned about the developing teen brain.
2. Don’t ask, “What were you thinking?” because that’s a pointless question after the fact. Instead, you could say, “Help me to understand what led you to make this decision.” You might be surprised at the answer or the internal path your teen traveled that led to his or her words or actions.
3. Examine the action in light of God’s Word. What does the Bible say about this?
4. Talk about repentance and how we all need God’s forgiveness. After asking for (and receiving) God’s forgiveness, does your teen need to apologize to you? to someone else? Make a plan for your teen to do that. We once required one of our sons to write an apology letter to a classmate AND to her parents for some inconsiderate words he said. Talk about an uncomfortable yet memorable life lesson!
5. Discuss disciplinary consequences of your teen’s actions. Your teen’s developing brain does

not get him or her off the hook here. Having behavior guidelines and fair and age-appropriate consequences is actually doing your teen a favor in the long run.

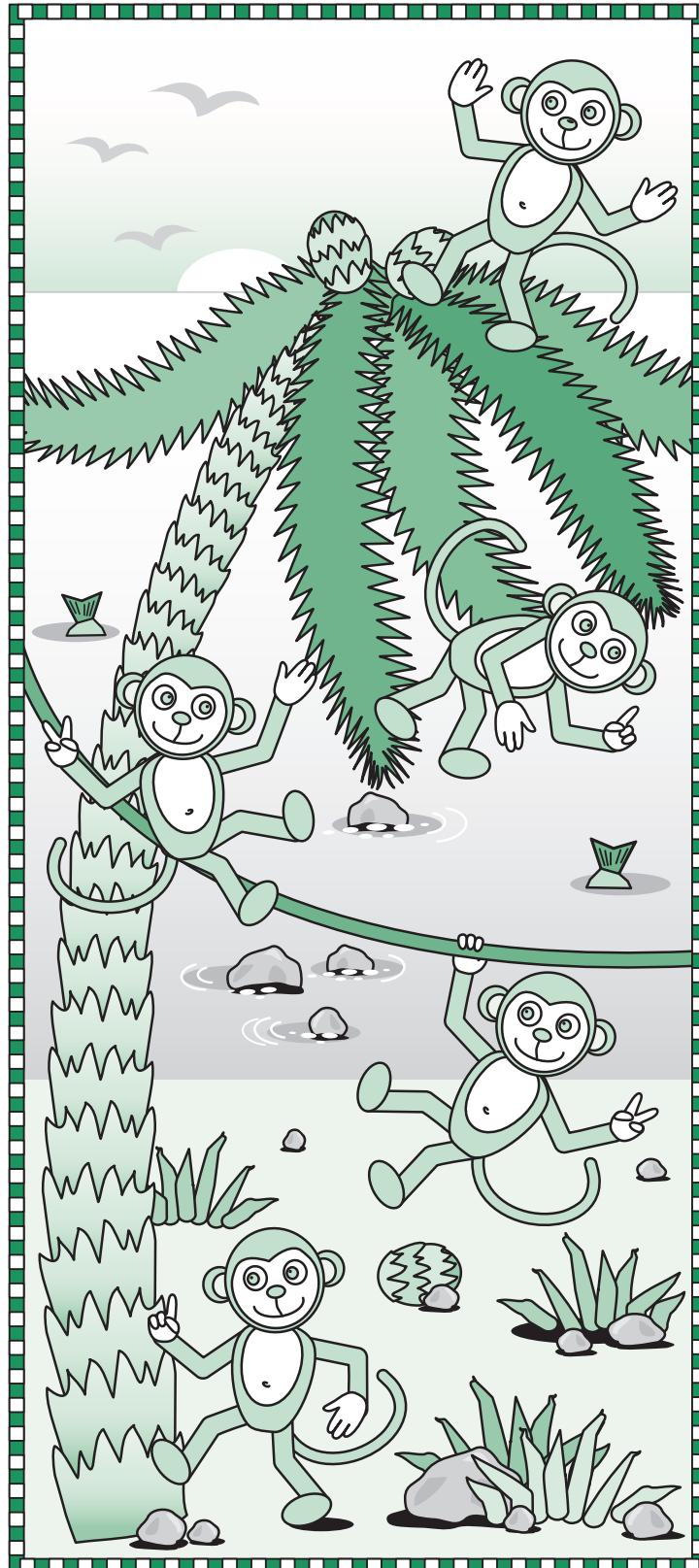
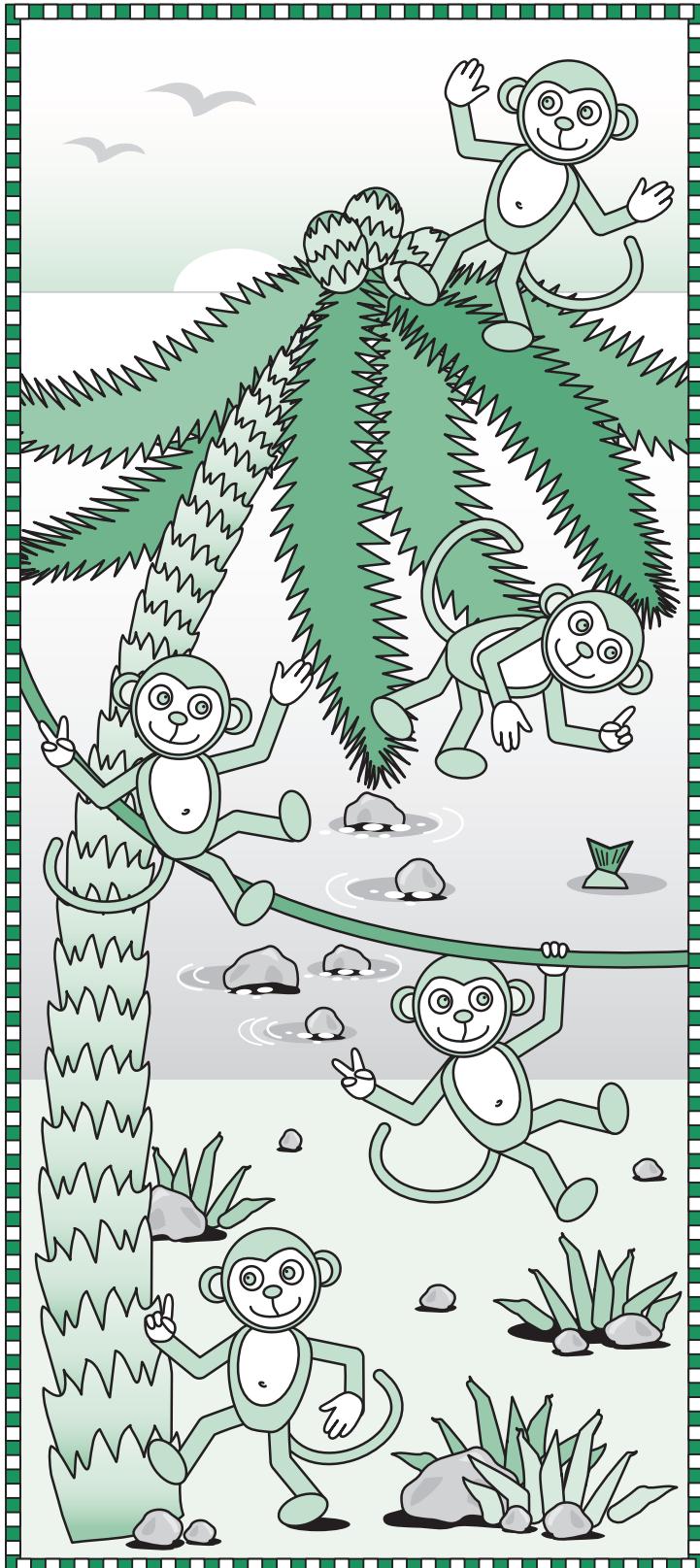
6. And don’t forget to acknowledge and praise your teen for the times he or she does make sound, mature choices. Trust me! Your teen will. There is hope.

And remember—our teens, like us, are sinful. Though we may have a better understanding of the science behind the developing teen brain, and in spite of all of the guidance we give our teens, they are going to do things that are stupid and irrational and infuriating. That’s life. That’s human nature. But that’s where the grace part of parenting comes in. Let them know you love them, and confess that thousands of years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth and you were a teen, you did stupid things too. Tell them you forgive them, and remind them about the importance of repentance and the beauty of forgiveness, won by Jesus on the cross.

Ann Jahns and her husband, Thad, are blessed to be the parents of three young men—two in college and one in graduate school. Ann is the Director of Marketing at WLCFS-Christian Family Solutions in Germantown, WI, and she and her family belong to Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in West Bend, WI.

Interested in learning more about the developing teen brain? WLCFS-Christian Family Solutions offers an educational presentation entitled “What’s Going On in There? The Teen Brain.” For more information, call 888-685-9522 or e-mail presentations@wlcfs.org.

Can you find the ten differences between the pictures?



**How many are your works, LORD! . . .
The earth is full of your creatures. Psalm 104:24**

Solution to the puzzle can be found on the back page.



THE CARDBOARD STORM

Carol J. Lemke

Over the summer when older children get bored, you could have them develop a puppet skit to teach smaller children about Jesus. Originally written for Lutheran Parent, the following article gives insights that might encourage you to use puppets to teach about Jesus.

Kayla arranged the little cloth people in her backpack, selected a few handmade props, and danced down the steps. Her friend Andy was waiting in his car. A cardboard boat was perched on top of his blue bag.

"Hi, Andy. How long do you think it'll take us to get there?"

"Maybe ten minutes. It's just a few miles. Did you bring the hairnet?"

"You bet! There are also a hundred colorful paper fish that won't slip through the net."

"It's neat that we have this chance to try out our new puppet story on real live kids before we're 'fed to the sharks' in front of our own high school critics next week." Kayla and Andy were nearing the end of their junior year in high school. Their puppet ministry had started as a class project.

"Yup! It's also neat that the teacher in this early childhood program let us pick any story we wanted to tell, as long as it includes a Bible lesson. Did you bring the signs?"

"Sure did. *Faith, hope, and trust* are glued on to straws so your disciple characters have plenty to hold on to."

Upon arrival at the school, Kayla and Andy set up the puppet show behind a table draped with a large tablecloth. The cardboard fishing boat captivated the young students' attention as soon as they entered the room.

After introductions were made by the teacher, Kayla and Andy told the Bible story of Jesus calming the stormy sea. Their puppet characters talked to one another in dramatic voices. Their presentation lasted only a few minutes, and the kids were tuned in for every bit of it.

The simple script emphasized the disciples' fear (something to which children can relate). The script was also able

OODLES OF IDEAS

Although he didn't use puppets, Jesus did use parables and picture language to help people visualize and connect with some of the lessons he taught. Puppets can help create "living" characters and construct situations (like a storm at sea) that might otherwise be difficult to explain.

Puppetry is also an inexpensive way to get kids actively involved in a Bible story.

Puppetry works well when trying to . . .

- make a point in home devotions.
- work through a relationship problem or talk about a disciplinary issue.
- do an interactive bedtime Bible story.
- enable children to entertain one another by sharing a Bible lesson they've learned.
- have a child retell a story to find out how much of the story is remembered or to reinforce a lesson you've just taught.

For the most effective lessons . . .

- let biblical truth shine through, especially the comforting gospel messages.
- teach the puppeteers to think about their audience.
- repeat the main message and key words several times.
- apply the Bible truth to real life.
- allow the puppet characters to talk to one another and to God in prayer.
- include simple and safe sound effects. (How would

you create the sounds of a terrible squall and crashing waves?)

Simple puppets can include . . .

- tiny finger puppets with faces on finger tips.
- gloves with faces made with buttons, lace, ribbons, and felt pieces.
- hand faces (thumb and finger mouth) with a scarf or fabric for a body.
- dolls or stuffed animals.
- balloon faces with baby-clothes bodies.
- sewn puppet patterns.
- paper bag puppets (paper lunch bags are a good size for small hands).
- more elaborate, store-bought styles.

EASY PUPPET STAGE

Use business-sized envelopes to make stages for craft-stick puppets.

- Cut a window in the front, leaving a half-inch border.
- Cut a large slit along the bottom edge.
- On paper that fits inside the envelope, draw and color scenery that can be seen through the window.
- Draw and color characters and props for your story.
- Mount the puppets on craft sticks.
- Insert and maneuver the puppets through the slit at the bottom of the envelope.

to dramatically emphasize Jesus' awesome power—power even over the forces of nature. (Kids understand this too.)

Kayla and Andy demonstrated the faith and hope the disciples had shown when they called on Jesus to save them. Trust also played strongly into the story as they watched Jesus calm the storm with these words: "Quiet! Be still!" (Mark 4:39).

A simple application of faith, hope, and trust followed the Bible story in a student-teacher discussion that included the puppeteers as well.

"People's problems today are sometimes referred to as the storms of life. What are some of the 'storms' that hit us and people around us?" asked Kayla.

"What are some of the things that 'rock your boat?'" Andy added.

Student responses included sibling fights, school and social problems, an absent parent, and sick grandparents. There was no shortage of examples from the children. The teacher explained to the children that our faith can be strengthened by reading and studying God's Word. She told them that Jesus is always near, and we can call on him whenever danger threatens us. They worked through several real-life situations together, reminding one another that God is always aware of our problems

and is there to help. They found comfort in hearing once again that God is all-powerful and that he will turn even the bad things of life into blessings and new opportunities to grow in our faith. They discussed the power of prayer, expressing their confidence that Jesus can and does answer every believer's prayers.

After the discussion, the teacher invited students to compose their own prayers. She encouraged them to remember to pray for other people who might be experiencing hard times in life or have special needs.

On the way home, Kayla and Andy discussed small improvements they could make before presenting their message to their high school class. Maybe they didn't need the paper fish or the hairnet. Perhaps it would work to have middle-grade students write their worries and cares on the cutout fish and trust that they truly are in God's control as they are caught up and carried away in the fishnet.

Kayla and Andy mainly wanted to share the simple truths of the Bible. They had a good way to present those truths, using the visual aid of puppetry to interest students and help them get the message of faith, hope, and trust.

Carol (Endresen) Lemke is a retired WELS teacher who enjoys eight grandchildren, volunteering, watercolor painting, and traveling. She lives in W. St. Paul with her husband, Carl.

HOW CAN WE TEACH OUR LITTLE ONES?

Joel Nitz

How do we begin teaching our small children about Jesus? When do we begin? Some parents might be skeptical about a child's ability to learn at a very young age. Most toddlers struggle to be potty trained, so how can we expect them to grasp spiritual truths? We might be tempted to think that we should wait until little children are older before teaching them about Jesus.

Of course, if we really believed that, we wouldn't instruct our little children about anything. But we do instruct our young ones all the time. They can learn what "No!" means. They learn when it's time to eat, go to bed, and get up. They're interested in all the sights, smells, and sounds around them. They're ready to learn. We just have to be sensitive to how they learn—what their learning strengths are and what their limitations are.

This age group learns by example and by hearing simple phrases repeated over and over again. We involve the very young in the spiritual life of the home by showing and telling.

What can we show our little children to communicate spiritual truths? They will follow our example. "Like father, like son" the saying goes. If we spend time each day studying God's Word in the presence of our children, we communicate that God's Word is important. Saying prayers at mealtime and bedtime teaches our young children to pray regularly, even before they are able to say their own prayers. My wife and I were thrilled when our son folded his hands to pray with us at the age of 15 months.

Little children love to look at pictures. Research suggests that a high percentage of what we learn at an early age is accomplished by sight. Children's Bible story books and animated videos draw children's interest. Toddlers may not understand all the

words of the Bible story, but they usually can identify a picture of Jesus. They are able to follow a simple story line. And they can begin to formulate simple inferences. For example, from the account of the three men in the

INVOLVE THE VERY YOUNG IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE HOME BY SHOWING AND TELLING.

fiery furnace, even very young children can understand that fire is hot and dangerous and that prayer is a very powerful spiritual tool.

What can we tell little children? Never underestimate the power of God's Word. From Paul's words to Timothy, we can conclude that very young children are among those affected: "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

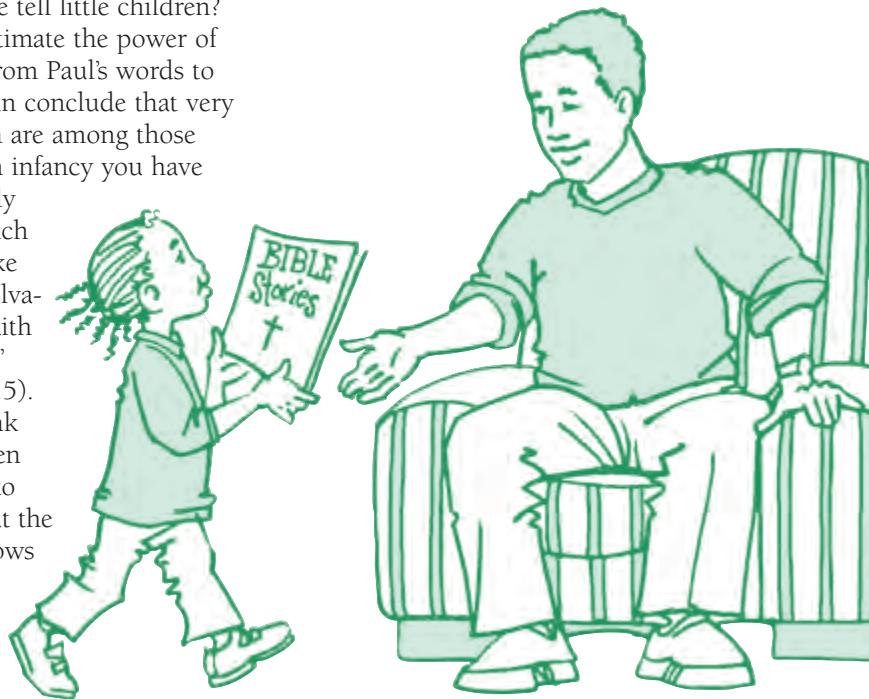
We may think that our children are too young to understand, but the Holy Spirit knows how to talk to children. Reading Bible stories in simplified

versions to children, no matter how young they are, is never a fruitless effort. We may not see immediate results, but we trust God's promise. His Word will accomplish what he desires.

Music and singing also touch the hearts of young children. When our son was small, he loved to listen to Kids' Praise songs over and over again. A little girl who attended our church's vacation Bible school often sang "Jesus Is the Way" at home to her Jewish father.

By all possible means, let us show and tell our little children about our Jesus. Let us remind them daily that he loves them. We make a lasting impression on our children by presenting God's truth to them at every opportunity. Christ is for children.

Pastor Joel Nitz serves Messiah Lutheran, Lacey, WA. The congregation members continue to proclaim the gospel in their community while waiting for the reconstruction of their church building lost by fire in October 2017.



HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS READY FOR KINDERGARTEN?

Heather Bode

A puff of moondust . . . an everlasting footprint . . .

We're all familiar with Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. But what led up to that moment? The 1983 movie *The Right Stuff* chronicles the lesser-known journey of the years preceding that momentous step: the search for America's first astronauts and all that this career required mentally, physically, and emotionally.

A child's first step into a school career is also momentous: mentally, physically, and emotionally—not only for the child but for parents as well. The decision that was once solely based on age has gotten bogged down in a labyrinth of questions. Is my little astronaut ready for kindergarten? Does he or she have the "right stuff"? And what, exactly, IS the "right stuff" for today's educational landscape?

Houston, We Have A Problem . . . Times Have Changed

I have the fondest memories of kindergarten. I loved my teacher, my friends, and the projects. We had nap time and even swimming lessons at the local pool. But I was *always* home by lunchtime. That was then . . . this is now.

A 2017 study published by the National Center for Education Statistics found that the percentage of children enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs continues to rise: 60 percent of kindergarteners in 2000 were in full-day programs. By 2015, the percentage was over 80. And as the schedule has changed, so has the curriculum.

A current kindergarten teacher explains her state's curriculum changes like this: "Even within the last five years, we've seen huge changes. Students used to be required to recog-

nize 36 sight words by the end of the year. Now that number is 88 . . . and the words are difficult . . . like *there* and *their*. In math, today's kindergartner needs to be able to add and subtract and even problem solve. It used to be more of an 'exploration' of these concepts. Now, it's required that they

are ready to learn when they get there. Can they focus on an activity that isn't exactly riveting? Can they put a project away even if it isn't completed? These are tough tasks that are crucial to classroom success.

Playing games like Red Light/Green Light or Simon Says can be helpful

Kindergarten readiness is less about what your child already knows upon entering kindergarten but more about whether they are ready to learn when they get there.

perform and apply them by the end of the year."

Individual states are revisiting their entrance age requirements. A common question for any parent of a summer baby is, "Will you start them when they're 5 or wait until they are 6?"

Mission: Control

How do we know a child is ready to master those 88 words? Current practices look to a child's ability to self-regulate as a key to determining kindergarten readiness. But what is self-regulation?

J.L. Cook, author of *Child Development: Principles and Perspectives*, puts it this way: "Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and control our own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, altering them in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes the abilities to inhibit first responses, to resist interference from irrelevant stimulation, and to persist on relevant tasks even when we don't enjoy them."

In other words, kindergarten readiness is less about what your child *already* knows upon entering kindergarten but more about whether they

indicators as to your child's ability to self-regulate. They know what the rules are . . . but can they stick to them? Can you?

We Have Liftoff!

The one study that can never be conducted (and scientists realize this) is the one that demonstrates whether sending your child or waiting an extra year was the right decision. So we pray and ask for God's direction. We keep our personal motivations in check (see page 8) and work daily to do our best to equip our "astronauts." We love them to the moon and back and do everything we can to instill in them an understanding of their heavenly Father's love for them as well.

Daniel 12:3 says, "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

Heather Bode's background is in elementary education, although she has traded in her red pen for a blue one. She is a member of Valley View Lutheran Church in Helena, MT, where she is the mom of five little astronauts. Her last one blasts off this fall!

"ASTRONAUT" FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Illustration: Shutterstock



"Grandpa, I thought you said we were going to salute Old Glory. Where is she?"

Parents Crosslink

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Solution for puzzle p.3

How amazing would it be if every child's kindergarten experience was like a soft and successful lunar landing? It can be . . . if we analyze ourselves and what's best for our child.

Traditionally, age has been a factor in determining kindergarten readiness. Studies show that older children do perform better (at first) on literacy and math skills. But those early leads fade over time. By third grade, most children have evened out and it is hard to determine the "old" students from the "young" ones.

Even more telling is a recent study published by the *American Journal of Public Health*, which followed eight hundred children for 20 years, starting in kindergarten. The findings proved that those kindergarteners with strong *social and emotional skills* were more likely to graduate from college and hold jobs by the age of 25.

Make sure your motivations are not based on you:

- I need to get rid of preschool/day care bills.
- It would be "convenient" transportation-wise.
- I want my child to be in the same class with friends.
- I want my child to be able to perform better in sports.

Focus on your child:

- My child can separate from me easily.
- My child can take direction from/listen to other adults and peers.
- My child can care for self and others.
- My child can share and can resolve problems.