

The changing scenes of life

Six to twelve: the golden years

The period between six and twelve is the time when we have the most opportunity to bring our children up in godly ways. Chris and Kathryn Carmody (Ascot, Perth, Western Australia) give us the benefit of their experience in bringing their children through these years.

TRADITIONALLY you were either a child or an adult. Thus the Bar Mitzvah was for thirteen-year-old Jewish boys to indicate their coming of age and taking on the responsibilities of the 613 commandments pertaining to the Jewish religion. The girls had their Bat Mitzvah at twelve years of age. Most cultures seem to be the same; the girls mature quicker than the boys.

In Western cultures there now seem to be three distinct stages before adulthood is reached. There is the early childhood period, up to about five years of age. We then have the period up to about twelve years of age. The third stage is from about thirteen years to the time when full adult responsibility and independence is reached, usually eighteen to twenty, though unfortunately in some Western cultures this last stage is taking upwards of thirty years in total!

This article covers the child stage: six-to-twelve-year-olds. We have called this period the Golden Years as the children are not so dependent as in their early childhood years, but are still very mouldable and impressionable to godly ways. From our experience, the onset of puberty can be very quick and intense. This can become very apparent when looking at photographs of the previous year's summer holidays, and suddenly noticing how your children have been transformed in twelve months or so.

Circumstances

We need also to mention that our experiences as parents are based upon our own particular circumstances. Our family situation is that we live in a Western cultural society that would be considered very middle class on a world scale. We mention this as we are aware many of the

readers of the *Testimony* live in circumstances very different from our own, and we respect those different pressures.

Some of our particular circumstances are:

- 1 Due to the employment situation of the head of the house, holidays are a regular part of our lifestyle.
- 2 The children have always had their mother at home after they have finished school. The mother being at home is rapidly becoming a privilege, even in Christadelphian homes. The realities of economic pressures are making this harder for the next generation of Christadelphian mothers to maintain this ideal.
- 3 Some of the teenage pressures we face are due to the fact that there is only seventeen months age difference between child one and child two, and fourteen months between child two and child three.

Time

We have found that the period of time that our children were in the six-to-twelve age bracket has gone so fast that it is hard to accept that it is now in the past for our family. Time is the enemy in family life that we have to fight against. There is the temptation to think that there is plenty of time available when we are bringing up our children. We can too easily become distracted through personal and ecclesial pressures, and not give our children enough attention, especially in those formative years when they will respond so readily to guidance and direction.

Culture

During the childhood stage, where possible we should attempt to immerse our children into ecclesial life and the extended Christadelphian culture. This process is enhanced if we can eliminate as much as possible the modern media in all their various forms from our homes. Ideally the major influences in our children's lives should be the Scriptures and a positive ecclesial environment.

The school environment doesn't have to have a negative impact upon our children.

We made the effort to search out a government primary school that was small in size and (after having an interview with the Principal) to our liking. The Principal is an active member of the Baptist Church, which tends to influence his more conservative values. Some brethren and sisters now have the option of sending their children to a Christadelphian school, or to home school their children. Whatever arrangement you choose or have access to, there will always be some challenges to face. Prayerful and thoughtful consideration must be given to all education options that are available. Children can be very good witnesses to the Truth in their school environments.

The regular attendance as a family at organised ecclesial activities—whether it be the memorial meeting, mid-week Bible class, the Sunday night lecture or family nights—indicates to your children that the ecclesia is the centre of your family life. You don't want to give your children the impression that the ecclesia is just one part of your life, and that you have many other interests outside the ecclesial sphere. If you do this, don't be surprised if your children follow your lead and establish unhelpful liaisons with this ungodly world.

The ecclesial environment can seem limited at times to a child. We have found that attending Bible School regularly in our own local area, as well as Bible Schools in other parts of the country, has helped our children appreciate that there are many Christadelphians scattered over a large part of the country. We also believe it helps our children to appreciate that the family and ecclesial rituals that we practise are also practised by many other Christadelphians and ecclesias.

All things must be done with wisdom. One sometimes hears of brethren and sisters who spent every holiday they had as a child at a Bible School, with no special family holidays. We think there needs to be a balance in family life in the Truth between regularly attending ecclesially organised activities and enjoying your own family times together or family holidays, maybe with another family.

In the home

This six-to-twelve period of your children's life is a great opportunity to make the reading of the Bible in your home a central focus of your evening rituals. We have found that one portion of the daily readings is sufficient. This is the opportunity

to discuss with your child principles that come out of the reading and which can be applied to their daily circumstances. It is important to make the daily reading enjoyable and not drawn out for children.

This is also a period of life in which the children are not overly burdened with school homework or attending Christadelphian youth activities. The children are therefore receptive to any activity that you can organise that involves you with your children and their developing interests.

Friends

If your children are fortunate enough to be in an ecclesial environment where there are other children, they have now reached the age group where they enjoy going to each other's homes at weekends, especially on Sunday afternoons and during holiday periods. This is also a great opportunity for your children to notice how things may be done differently in other families, which does not mean that they live a better or worse life in the Truth than their own family. These experiences will help your children to appreciate that, although many things are done the same in Christadelphian homes, there is still room for a great deal of variation. Also, the children may also learn that, just because another family does things a certain way, this doesn't mean your family will change the way it lives the Truth.

If your children don't have friends in the meeting this can make life very difficult for them. It may mean making a considerable extra effort to visit other ecclesias or attend regular Bible Schools so that the opportunity to make friends with children their own age is possible. As parents we are more adaptive than our children, and it may be beneficial if we have the option of changing our ecclesia, better to meet the needs of our children.

Perfect families

There is no perfect family in the Truth. The closer we look the more we realise how we all face the same problems. Some just handle the difficulties better than others—sometimes! One of the closest examples to a perfect family was surely that of our Lord, yet even in that family there were misunderstandings, conflicts and difficulties that had to be worked through.

Although there are no perfect families in ecclesial life, it never hurts to observe what other families do and to ask questions on how they overcame certain difficulties. An understanding

of another family's difficulties and successes can be of great advantage to your own. There is no wisdom in trying to work out everything yourself when others have been through similar experiences. Family life in the Truth should be like a chain of relationships linking from grandparents to parents to children. This arrangement should support wisdom, strength and vitality in ecclesial life.

All our efforts as parents are in the hope that our children will grow up to be self-motivated

to live a godly life. The extra effort we make to become involved in our children's lives while they are in those golden years of childhood between six and twelve will make the teenage years much easier to bear.

"Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate" (Ps. 127:3-5).

Children with special needs and disabilities

The subject of children with special needs and disabilities is immense. The range of need is so diverse that even to attempt to deal with one specific area of need, for example, hearing impairment/deafness, would raise issues that were not common to all hearing-impaired children and their families. In this article Michael Lockett (Clevedon, UK) and Judith Barnes (Bristol Horfield, UK) express some thoughts and recount some observations from both their professional involvement and their personal experience. Within these limits it is hoped that the families facing these many challenges will find help and support. The authors are very aware that some couples reading this article may be struggling at this moment with feelings of grief, anger, denial and depression.

AT THE OUTSET it is important to remember that every child is an individual. They may have a disability or some special educational need (SEN), but it is often the attitude of other people that puts limits on them. All children, although they may be labelled with some problem, be it medical or educational, are above all else children. As such they deserve love, understanding and nurture, and that is our task, whatever role we play in the family unit.

We know that members of the wider community often offer unsolicited advice to parents, which can be very hurtful. We are more blessed than those who do not have our eternal hope. This

is our great and abiding comfort. The role of the ecclesial family is to accommodate the whole family, including the child with SEN. It is usually much clearer how this can be achieved in the case of physical disability. The challenge can be greater for us all when the child has social and communication difficulties. These are often classed as a 'hidden disability'. The ecclesia may only see a withdrawn or 'naughty' child. We appeal to all readers of this article to offer loving interest and practical encouragement to all families, that *all* their children may grow and 'wax strong in spirit' (Lk. 1:80). Parents and guardians also need access to secular, unbiased information that enables them to make prayerful decisions regarding their own children.

Initial reactions

Everyone who has become a parent for the first or subsequent time knows the great surge of emotions that erupt on the arrival of a new child to nurture. Without experience, though, it is difficult to imagine the severe emotional turmoil that can be felt when, at whatever stage, a special need or a medical condition is diagnosed or recognised. This often results in an utterance wrung from an anguished heart, 'Why me?', and 'Why my child?'

How do parents cope with their feelings, which can manifest themselves in guilt, anger, self-pity,