

Come, follow me: How to become a parent-shepherd

“Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, leading the ewes with care” (Is 40:11).

One of our primary tasks as Catholic parents is to lead our children toward a maturing faith and a deepening relationship with Christ. Our task is to raise disciples. But an increasing number of young adults [are abandoning the Faith](#). They don't see God as relevant to their lives. The explanations for this changing consciousness are multifarious – not the least is the aggressive secularization of the culture. One possible explanation might miss the attention of parents and commentators: the rise of the alpha child.

The alpha child moves to dominate her parents or to displace them as the parent. It leads to chaos.

Without a strong shepherd keeping them clear of danger and directing them where they should go, sheep panic and run around aimlessly, causing injury to themselves and other sheep. Something like this is happening to our kids.

Today, many parents are distancing themselves from the authoritarian parenting style with which we grew up. We don't want to scare or coerce our kids into compliance; we reject a mindset that says children should be seen and not heard. We want our homes to be egalitarian, with the opinions of all encouraged. But we have taken a wrong turn. In our understandable impulse to find a better way to raise our kids, we have lost something essential to their flourishing: parenting.

Yes, we've lost parenting.

Some of our homes have become so democratized that nobody is in charge. With nobody leading, many children take the lead. It's bad for them and miserable for their parents.

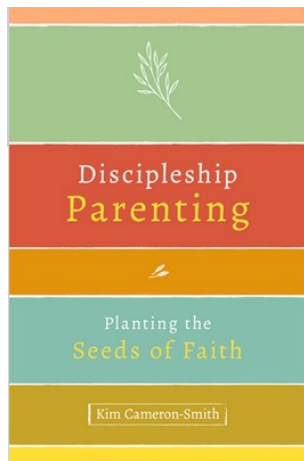
How alpha can help or hinder our parenting

According to developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld, human relationships operate in two complementary modes: dependency and caretaking. In simple terms, one person seeks to have a need met and the other person is moved to provide for that need. It's a dance that draws us together.

In relationships with our peers (a friend or a spouse), this dance is reciprocal: We take turns being the seeker and the provider. This mutuality is one aspect of mature love. However, in the parent-child relationship, the parent should always be in the alpha mode and the child in the dependent mode (at least when they're minors). The parent is the answer to the felt need in the child, never the reverse. The parent is the answer, never technology, popular culture or the child's peers.

When our child seeks us and we provide, and we both feel confident in these roles, the relationship is healthy and satisfying. Our child feels at ease in our care when we exude a strong, caretaking presence. Because he's at rest psychologically, this child can get on with the task of growing up emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. So alpha instincts serve an important purpose in our parenting.

'Discipleship Parenting'



Kim Cameron-Smith's book, ["Discipleship Parenting: Planting the Seeds of Faith"](#) (OSV, \$18.95)

connects Catholic parents to their fundamental mission: to raise children who know and love God, and who are so in love with Christ that they can't help but share his message. Parents are called to be discipleship parents who evangelize their children to become disciples. This book offers seven tools to foster ideal cultivation of the discipleship soil: love, balance, play, merciful discipline, empathy, radiant faith and a strong marriage. Pre-order the book at osvcatholicbookstore.com.

According to Neufeld, when a child moves into the alpha position with the parent, it's a sign that something isn't right. The child may develop an "alpha complex." Alpha goes awry, leading not to a satisfying dance, but to dysfunction. An alpha complex manifests in different ways. The most common manifestation is what I'll call the dictator alpha: The child orders her parents around, stomping and screaming if she doesn't get what she wants when she wants it. The spoiled character Veruca Salt in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" is a typical dictator alpha: She demands until her parents comply. Toddlers have meltdowns because they lack mature self-regulation, but we're talking about an older child who explodes when a parent doesn't do what she expects. The child imposes consequences on the parent!

The conductor alpha tries to orchestrate and direct how a parent parents him: "No, that's not how you buckle my

seatbelt. Do it like this.” “You’re the mother; you’re supposed to make my breakfast when I wake up.” A conductor alpha isn’t necessarily obnoxious. He might be quite pleasant, but he’s worried you’re in over your head. You see, this is alpha out of place. This child is taking responsibility for the parenting, which makes it impossible for him to rest in your care. If he can’t take for granted that you have things under control, he becomes preoccupied with doing your job instead of playing, learning and maturing.

The helper alpha takes care of her peers or siblings instead of allowing a parent to do it. We want our kids to be compassionate, but a helper alpha helps because she doubts the competence of the adults around her. She feels compelled to take over. In fact, helper alphas often make a situation worse or harm the person they’re trying to help. You might see an adult alpha get in the way at the scene of an accident despite the presence of emergency personnel. The alpha is helping because she needs to help, not because her help is needed.

In all these manifestations, the alpha instinct no longer serves its intended purpose – to be the answer to a need in another person. The alpha drive is very intense in these children, but it’s rooted in alarm, not self-confidence or compassion. Alpha children may appear mature and independent, but it’s an illusion. They’re really in a state of panic.

While it might rub some people the wrong way, the parent-child relationship is meant to be hierarchical, with the parent in the lead and the child following. This is how culture, faith and even language are transmitted from one generation to the next. This is the way it’s always been, and it’s the primary way children move through stages of emotional and spiritual development.

Leadership lessons from Jesus

How did Jesus Christ make mature disciples out of a bunch of

guys who constantly tripped over their own egos? He didn't live with his disciples in a democratic cooperative. He didn't take a vote to determine their mission. He didn't ask for their input about how they would live or where they would go. No. There was no question who was in charge: Jesus.

Jesus led with strength and wisdom, but not through intimidation or domination. He didn't kidnap the disciples. He invited: Come, follow me. And they came because he was the kind of leader they wanted to follow. He was trustworthy, wise and humble. They knew he was on their side. They watched how he prayed, how he dealt with conflict, how he managed challenges. They watched him, they loved him, and they wanted to be like him.

Their loyalty to and trust in him allowed him to guide and shape them into disciples who eventually built the early Church, leading like he led.

Inspiring our children to follow our lead

If our children won't follow us, we can't lead them; if we can't lead them, where will they go? The popular culture, their peers, their private impulses will be their guides. They will be sheep running around aimlessly, causing harm to themselves and others.

Our children need our shepherding. We don't have to lead like the grown-ups who scared the wits out of some of us when we were little. We can lead our children like Christ led his disciples: with wisdom, strength and humility. While we can't demand that our children follow us, we can invite and inspire it, like Jesus.

We invite and inspire our children to follow us by becoming the answer to their deepest needs for closeness, belonging and significance; by creating rituals for family prayer and worship; by defining our family's mission and showing our

children how to pursue it. We invite and inspire it by establishing clear boundaries and rules for behavior; by making it safe and easy for our children to depend on us. We invite and inspire it by making it clear that we're on their side, even when they mess up; by conveying a confident caretaking presence, even when we aren't sure what we're doing.

In this way, we become parent-shepherds, more easily leading our children where they need to go.

Kim Cameron-Smith is the founder of the Intentional Catholic Parenting online ministry and the host of the Gentle Catholic Parenting Podcast.