

Give Your Kids the Gift of Absence

Time and attention are not the only ways to bless our children.

[Amy Julia Becker](#)

When we first moved to Connecticut five years ago for my husband's job, I decided that I would go without childcare. Our kids were six, four, and two at the time. I wanted to be their source of stability in the midst of their dad's new job, a new town, new friends, and a new house.

In the years since then, I've learned that time is not the only gift we give our children. In fact, I've learned that, while parental presence is certainly crucial to children's development, so too is parental absence. I used to think my children's wellbeing depended entirely upon my presence, but now I believe that it is equally important to entrust them to the care of other people.

Just a few weeks ago, my husband and I had planned to leave town for a weekend away. The childcare we had in place fell apart at the last minute when my extended family came down with the flu, so I texted a babysitter to see if she could help. "That would be great!" she said. And it was.

That weekend, the babysitter and her mother—who happens to be our kids' Sunday School teacher—sent me photos of my kids climbing in the nooks of trees near an old train tunnel and one of my daughter Penny (who's afraid of dogs) sitting with a contented smile next to our babysitter's dachshund. The next time I saw the mother, she asked if she could "steal our children" again because they'd had so much fun. What began as a source of stress—scrambling for help—turned into an unexpected gift, and in our absence, the kids enjoyed themselves, demonstrated courage and resilience, and became more connected to our community.

Christians talk frequently about [the importance of presence](#), but Scripture makes it clear that absence also has its place in the process of discipleship.

One of the central tenets of Christianity is the incarnation, the belief that God took on a body in the form of Jesus. In Eugene Peterson's words in *The Message*, when God became flesh, God "moved into the neighborhood." The presence of Christ on earth—and the presence of the Holy Spirit even now among Christ's followers—speaks to the significance of God's presence among people. "I will be with you" is a refrain found throughout the Bible, and as such, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of God's presence in, with, through, and among us.

And yet Jesus' ministry also took on the form of absence. He often "withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). He promised his disciples that it would be better for him to go away, because the gift of the Holy Spirit would follow his departure. He remained absent for days, even after learning about his friend Lazarus' sickness. When Jairus pleaded for him to give immediate attention to his daughter's healing, he stayed away for a time. And he also sent the disciples out to minister in his name, without him at their side.

Gospel writers never spell out the purpose of Jesus' absence in these stories, and scholars debate the reasons for some of these incidents. (Was he abiding by ritual practices around death? Was he asserting his divine authority?) Nonetheless it's safe to say that absence played a notable role in his ministry, and that he withdrew at times to attend to his own needs and to grow the disciples' leadership.

As the mother of three young children, I'm learning more and more about how an *intentional* commitment to absence is a gift I give to my children, and also a gift God offers to me.

When Jesus withdrew from his disciples to pray, he took care of his own spiritual needs while also modeling what it means to live in a state of dependence on God. Similarly, when I withdraw from my children to pray,

take a walk, or have a cup of coffee with a friend, I am practicing self-care and also modeling it for my kids. Self-care forces me to admit my humanity, my neediness, and my limitations. It echoes the invitation God offers us through the Sabbath. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Those who rest like God find themselves free like God, no longer slaves to the thousand compulsions that send others rushing to their graves.” In the same way, those who withdraw like Jesus find themselves *restored* like Jesus, no longer panicking about all the things that have to get done today.

Years ago, when I tried to take care of my kids without relying on other people, I yelled a lot. I resented my life. And I gave God the silent treatment. When I finally came to a breaking point and reached out for help, not only did I restore some balance to my own spiritual and personal life, I also saw God’s provision in the midst of my own depletion.

In the years since then, multiple young women have come into our family’s life as I have sought out good care for our children. Not only have they blessed us, but their lives have been affected by our family, as well. Our oldest child has Down syndrome, and two of her babysitters have gone on to become special education majors in college while another has become a pediatric occupational therapist. Family members, too, have helped out with our kids. My son, by spending some weekends with my mother and aunt, has been able to develop his love of gardens. For a time, our daughter Penny read books with an older neighbor across the street, which brought great delight to them both.

Altogether, inviting these people into our kids’ lives has led to relationships of mutual blessing—giving and receiving from one another in a way that tethers our family to our community.

In addition to practicing intentional absence—which puts my kids into relationship with others—I have also learned to practice what I might call *intentional negligence* by allowing my kids to play without any adult supervision at all. In a world of “helicopter parenting” (or even “[bulldozer parenting](#)” of late!), giving kids a little space helps them learn how to handle conflict, grow in independence, and learn resilience in the face of adversity. (Of course, parents need to use good judgment about when and where such “negligence” is appropriate.) Jesus sent his disciples out into the villages without him so they could learn about leadership, make mistakes, and return to him to learn more. As parents, we too can send our kids out into the backyard, the neighborhood, or the woods so they can make mistakes and grow. We can send them to school with incomplete homework, send them to our friends to talk through problems, and, when our own resources prove inadequate, send them to the church (and other communities) for equipping.

Work, too, provides opportunities to practice intentional absence. In our household, I have taken on the role of the “lead parent” who stays home when it snows or when a child is ill. I work part-time and limit work travel in order to provide consistency for our kids. Nonetheless, I believe that parental absence for the sake of work—both paid and volunteer work outside of the home—can also benefit children. I want our kids to grow up knowing that both moms and dads have vocations inside and outside the home.

A friend of mine once told me the story of being at a summer camp where he observed two married counselors taking a walk together during free time. My friend watched as the couple walked away from the crowd, away from the campers, hand in hand. His parents were getting divorced at the time, and that simple picture of marital love gave him a different vision for his future. He called their action a “ministry of absence.”

By walking away, that couple gave my friend a gift. In the same way, we receive a gift from God when we accept the invitation to admit our own needs and depend upon God’s provision for us and our children. And we give our children a gift when we balance our faithful presence in their lives with our faithful absence.

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