

Growing Kids God's Way?

A Critique of Growing Families International

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An Introduction to GFI: The Need for Inquiry

Growing Families International (GFI), the creator of a church-based series of parenting curricula currently claims over 500,000 parents in over 3500 churches and 34 countries utilizing their material. The parenting modules extend from birth through the teenage years. Recently, GFI translated their material to secular publications (e.g., Babywise) This presentation focuses upon four of the teaching modules: Preparation for Parenting, newborns to age four months (PFP); Preparation for the Toddler Years, from five to fifteen months (PFTY); Growing Kids God's Way, for toddlers through elementary school age (GKGW); and Reflections of Moral Innocence, the GFI sex education curriculum for all ages of children.

My first exposure to GFI came through clinical experience in early 1997. Being a therapist in private practice, supervising a number of interns for a Christian counseling center, and evaluating intakes for the lay counseling ministry at my church allow me exposure to a wide cross-section of individuals. I began hearing stories that disturbed me greatly: a mother presented her three-year-old as "rebellious and disobedient" for behaviors that were, in fact, healthy and appropriate for a pre-schooler; a Sunday School teacher of young couples shared astonishment at the pride a young mother expressed for allowing her three-month-old infant to cry for forty-five minutes; a pastor was dismayed and concerned by the verbal chastisement he heard from one parent toward another church member for her "lack of spirituality" in nursing her newborn infant on demand. The common thread between these and a number of other examples was a profoundly literal and rigid adherence to a parenting program. That program was GFI's.

Concern regarding these reports led to a personal examination of the material. While I saw good guidelines relating to, for example, learning another's "love language" for healthy communication or concern for protecting the sexual innocence of children, I was troubled at the overall tenor in its approach to parenting. My concerns were not only in the content of the material, but also in its negative perception of children, the legalistic tone of the presentation, and the adherence of its followers that verged on idolatry.

Even more disconcerting was that this self-proclaimed "truly biblical" model of parenting offered meager attention to a child's need for a renewed heart, the working of the Holy Spirit within our children as they develop or in us as we parent. This lack of integration of guidance through the Spirit of God seems to lend itself to a style of parenting sorely lacking in grace, empathy, understanding, and compassion. For example, while in GFI mothers are informed that their instincts toward their babies are unscriptural and ungodly, others would say that these experiences are more likely to be ministrations of the Holy Spirit. In GFI, there is a fundamental assumption that following the rules will produce the desired child. To believe that any of us have that kind of ultimate power over our children completely negates both the doctrine of free will and the working of God in our child's life; besides Adam and Eve had the perfect Parent and still chose to sin!

I presented my concerns at the American Association of Christian Counselors World Conference in November 1997, and the response to my presentation was rather alarming. From a small GFI constituency, I received personal attacks, for which I was prepared given past experiences. What *was* a surprise was the overwhelming response from the majority of conferees that carried this one single message: "Thank you for speaking out against this program." This sentiment was conveyed in many ways, but without exception contained terms like "having the courage to..." and "having guts..." Simply to present concerns about a parenting model being extensively taught within the Body of Christ takes courage and guts? Those responses, in and of themselves, warrant a serious and prayerful examination of GFI. What are so many people afraid of?

The material presented here is by no means exhaustive. It is only representative of certain aspects of the GFI material, primarily those that relate to emotional, psychological, and sexual development. There is also discussion on concerns regarding the internal integrity and consistency of the GFI material; these concerns raise ethical questions pertaining to the claims of GFI and must be addressed if we are to be able

to discern their claims accurately. I have also included comments on cultural concerns, certainly an issue worthy of further evaluation. Other subjects that still need to be addressed are those of moral and cognitive development. As in other areas, GFI makes claims based on their own assumptions without references, support, or corroboration of proven theory and research. Many of their claims, in fact, stand in opposition to well-regarded and accepted data. These are certainly topics of importance; hopefully, they will be addressed more fully in the future.

This will, no doubt, appear to be a one-sided presentation. There are two reasons for this. First, since the GFI material is based almost exclusively on the ideas and beliefs of one source, Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, it is impossible to do anything but a circular analysis of their claims. They provide only rare examples of research or other corroborative support of their material from general revelation; from special revelation, their scriptural basis is in proof-texts.

The second, and more obvious reason, is concern that this model is being accepted within the conservative Christian community without scrutiny or examination. With titles like Growing Kids God's Way and other allusions to "God's plan," it is often unquestioningly accepted as the ultimate, exclusive, and infallible model for raising children.

GFI states that their focus and intent is to present a biblical model for raising children who are moral, self-disciplined, and obedient to God. While these goals are certainly admirable, any theory of parenting is based on the psychology of the authors, whether or not that psychology is acknowledged. Likewise, it is certain that the underpinnings are based on a particular theology. Since both areas of inquiry are man-made attempts at understanding God, both are fallible. Considering the authoritative claims GFI makes regarding an area as close to the heart of God as parenting children, we can do no less than to attempt—through the prayerful leading of the Holy Spirit—to examine these claims in light of God's Truth as revealed through both special and general revelation.

In reviewing this material, recognize the human biases on both sides. My goal is not to convince but rather to expose readers to information they may not be aware of and to raise questions that need to be asked.

Concerns Regarding Emotional Development

Relevant issues concerning emotional development are simply not presented in the GFI material. The overriding focus of the material is order and obedience; emotional or psychological health is typically either ignored or subsumed under a rubric of "correct" behavior (as defined by GFI as "obedience"). In other words, a child is "healthy" to the degree that he is unquestioningly compliant and obedient to the parents' rules. Peppered throughout the material, in fact, are statements that clearly admonish the parents for their lack of "sobermindedness" if they consider the emotional and /or psychological stages or well being of their child. Because of this, a concern arises in evaluating the GFI approach; God has revealed, through various channels of general revelation, a large body of literature and scientific research that is not in conflict with His character or parenting of us as His children. However, these findings often are in conflict with GFI proclamations.

The stakes are high. If the Ezzos are wrong, GFI and parents strictly enforcing this model are not only ignoring revealed Truth; they are, perhaps, inflicting harm upon the most defenseless of the defenseless under the banner of following God's commands. In light of the severity of these concerns, and the fact that the GFI model contains little in the way of cited research or supportive data from any source other than two fallible human beings, it behooves us to examine, to the best of human understanding and God's revelation, the design of the Architect.

The Ezzos only refer to a very few examples of psychological developmental theory or research, and then derisively. The examples that are given are, without exception, the most extreme and godless choices possible; all are personalities who tend to provoke fear in the hearts and minds of many Christians (e.g., Freud, Skinner). Advances in child research or more balanced models of child development are completely ignored.

In an attempt to balance the equation, a presentation will follow below, utilizing an object-relations, self-psychological perspective that is not only in harmony with non-Christian experts (such as Margaret Mahler, Donald Winnicott, Harry Guntrip, Heinz Kohut, Daniel Stern, T. Berry Brazelton, and Penelope Leach), but is implicitly, and often explicitly, supported in the writings of Christian specialists in human

behavior (such as Bruce Narramore, Henry Cloud, John Townsend, Paul Warren, Ross Campbell, and William Sears).

If there is validity to the understanding we currently have regarding child development, it appears that those strictly enforcing the GFI model may not only run the risk of undermining a baby's capacity for trust, but unknowingly may be contributing to a disorder of the self in their child. The desired result of an exceptionally obedient child may be realized; however, the form of obedience created may actually thwart the capacity to internalize empathy, gratitude, and love.

Where does that capacity come from? How do we help our children develop a love affair with God that results in grace-motivated obedience and morality? From a psychological developmental perspective, it comes from the growth of a healthy "self," which includes the development of healthy boundaries. According to Drs. Cloud and Townsend in their book Boundaries, the foundation of self-development lies in the bonding experience of the infant with the parents. These psychologist authors, in fact, suggest that "attachment is the foundation of the soul's existence" (p.64). This perspective stands in stark opposition to the GFI material, which states that incorporating attachment theories in parenting "foster[s] a codependent relationship, in which the child becomes emotionally dependent on the mother's immediate presence and the mother's identity on being needed" (PFP, p.54). Not giving value to the need for emotional attachment as the prelude for healthy development, the Ezzo model substitutes "teaching obedience and self-discipline." While Donald Winnicott, renowned pediatrician and psychologist, urges us to rejoice in the "primary maternal preoccupation" that defines the mother's emotional experience of symbiosis with her infant, GFI says, "Following your maternal instincts...is incompatible with scripture" (PFP, p.142). Where child specialists unanimously agree that consistently and promptly responding to a young infant's needs provides the roots of trust, security, love, and interdependence, GFI claims that "demand feeding" and "demand attention," even of newborn infants, will "train" the baby to become addicted to pleasure, maintain a pattern of demanding immediate gratification, and keep the child self-centered.

Providing that a sturdy attachment and the resulting internal security derived from a mom's sensitive ministrations to him have laid a foundation in the first few months, the baby's God-designed preprogramming propels him into the next stages of development: those that have to do with the baby slowly but surely moving away from complete dependency toward autonomy or independence – the next steps in the development of a fully alive creation of God. This process is not always smooth sailing for child or parent – in fact, it rarely is! This, of course, would create conflict in the GFI model, since it firmly dictates a need for tight control of behavior, self-discipline, and obedience from the child.

This process, referred to as separation and individuation, includes three critical phases necessary for the development of a healthy self: hatching, practicing, and rapprochement. During the period of hatching (which occurs approximately from five to ten months), the baby begins to view her world with wide-eyed wonder as she both physically and emotionally begins to push away from mom and push toward the excitement of the outside world. It is a time of exploration through touch, taste, and feel; through these discoveries, a baby is provided with the basis for feeling safe enough to take life-affirming risks in the future.

While the hatching baby is still a little frightened of these new experiences and still relies a great deal on mom for reassurance and encouragement, the practicing child (between ten and eighteen months) takes great delight in the ability to do things "by self." The exploration takes a new turn as the child's emerging self pushes towards the dawning realization that he is capable of many new adventures without mom. Physical, cognitive, and emotional development coincide to create within the child a short period of *healthy* omnipotence – short, that is, if needs are met appropriately and the parents impose safe limits. Either extreme at this level, whether permissive parenting (lack of boundaries and limits) or authoritarian parenting (excessive and rigid boundaries), can result in the child being "stuck" at this "omnipotent" level of development. This can be a challenging time for parents; particularly Christian parents who are fearful that the omnipotence means their child is "spoiled" or is intentionally being disobedient.

It is at this level that the GFI material introduces their Preparation for Toddlerhood, from five to fifteen months material. In reading this material, it is clear that the above developmental issues are either ignored or unknown. The seven chapters provided, in fact, often seem to be in direct opposition to basic developmental principles; for example, one entire chapter is titled "Highchair Manners" and focuses on "self-control training with hands." Regardless of verbiage to the contrary, the message to the baby is loud

and clear, "Exploration is what mom decides it will be, how mom decides it will be and when mom decides it will be, and it better not be messy!" It's interesting to note that GFI makes claims that following their instructions will promote cognitive development (p. 48, PTY). According to Piaget and other major cognitive developmental experts, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the type of restrictions that the Ezzos demand (e.g., training the baby to keep her hands on the side of the tray, never to drop food, not to attempt to hold the feeding utensil, not to play with food), if anything, would thwart the exploratory play that promotes both cognitive and emotional development.

There is a parallel description of control and order in the enforced use of "playpen time." The Ezzos claim that this parent-controlled, timed use of solitary play either within the confines of a playpen or strictly limited to the space on a blanket nurtures the growth of boundaries and cognitive development. While no one would argue that a playpen can, at times, be a helpful tool in containing an active baby, the claims regarding emotional and cognitive growth are simply not supportable.

In all areas, babies are taught to obey at levels that are not consistent with their capabilities. This skewed perspective results in what could be dangerous interpretations of a child's behavior. For example, the Ezzos claim, "But if you find that your child clings to you, refuses to go to Dad or siblings, and cries when you leave the room, it may be the result of too much playtime with Mom. In this case, the child is overly dependent on Mom for entertainment" (PFTY, p. 66). Those understanding cognitive and emotional development know that the opposite is often true: for a eight to nine months old, dismay at mom's leaving indicates good attachment and is not only normal, but is a sign of cognitive and emotional health.

The third and final stage of the separation-individuation process, "rapprochement," takes place between eighteen and thirty months and revolves around the child progressively facing the realities of the world and giving up her omnipotence. The child slowly realizes that she can't do everything. There is a movement back toward mom and security, but with a different flavor. This time, the child brings with her a sense of self that isn't a mirror reflection of the parents' qualities; she has her own thoughts, feelings, and personality. A rapprochement-level child is sometimes pretty difficult to live with; he can be negativistic, oppositional, angry, and temperamental. All of these characteristics revolve around the toddler's need to set his own boundaries; they are a way of saying, "I'm me, and you're you – and sometimes we don't agree!" The parents' handling of this predominant theme is critical for healthy development. To assist in securing a healthy sense of personal identity, the parent can provide necessary lessons by providing appropriate "narcissistic wounding," which means that the parent gently leads the child to the reality that the child is not, in fact, the center of the universe. The way to do this, according to Dr. Paul Warren, is to "ease off pampering...the toddler's priorities must be interwoven into other people's priorities. The child no longer always comes first. This is just as important as the initial pampering (referring to parenting of babies) to instill the new lesson: *I can trust fully, even though I am not at the center of the universe.* (p. 45, *My Toddler*). How is this accomplished? By parents being both the authoritarians (by setting rules and maintaining role as "the one in charge") and the consultants (who help solve problems and validate the child's feelings, choices, and identity). What happens when a child's parents only assume one role rather than integrating both? The consultant-without-authoritarian parents will probably tend to lean towards too many leniencies, while the opposite parent may be too harsh. This second parent, the authoritarian, is the one of concern when examining GFI. The recommendations for eighteen- to thirty-month-old children are often simply out of alignment with a respectful view of the emerging new little creation that needs encouragement (with limits!) toward early attempts at independence.

Erik Erikson (1968) refers to this period as "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt," and although analytic thinkers have historically related this to toilet training, the overall concept of the dilemma of the developing self can be generalized in the theory. The goals of this stage relate to self-control over one's impulses (autonomy), healthy pride in oneself, the beginnings of the ability to make good choices, and an emerging sense of one's own sense of mastery. It is also at this stage, because of the fragility of that emerging self, that the child is acutely susceptible to feelings of shame. This is another area of deep concern regarding the GFI model. Regardless of the claims to the contrary, a lack of understanding of developmental needs renders the model highly shaming and, at times, degrading. What I found to be a potentially devastating example of this lack of understanding is found in the advice in "Thoughts on Potty Training" (PFTY, p 113), where the Ezzos state: "As a general rule, parents who trained their children to first-time obedience have fewer problems in potty training than those parents who do not. If

soiling continues to be a problem with a child over two and one-half years, hold him accountable for his own accidents. That means he must clean up himself and his soiled clothes.” The specific directive is potentially damaging enough since many children, particularly boys, are simply not able to completely potty train by age two and a half. Of even greater concern is the apparent lack of comprehension of the child’s needs and capabilities. Outside of the aforementioned autonomy dilemma, many two-and-a-half-year-olds are just learning how to imperfectly dress themselves and address personal hygiene needs as emerging-but-immature large motor skills, and only nascent fine motor skills exist. To expect and hold a child responsible at this level for such a task as cleaning himself from soiled pants is not only inappropriate, but sets up interactions between parent and child than can lead nowhere but to frustration, anger, and shame. Even more relevant, perhaps: why would the parents take such a position on such an inconsequential issue? If parents can justify enforcing this type of expectation of a child without giving thought to the ramifications, it is of grave concern that those parents are relinquishing a desire to know their children as God knows their children; understanding for their child is being exchanged for a set of rules that provides exclusively for the parents’ ease, comfort, control, and image. Given the legalistic fervor in which some GFI parents adhere to the Ezzos directives, these kinds of dictums are disturbing.

Unfortunately, during this time period some parents view their children as “selfish” and “disobedient” simply for doing what God designed them to do. For Christian parents, this often gets translated into “sinful.” If parents don’t understand that what they’re experiencing is part of God’s developmental plan, they become afraid that their children’s sinful nature is running amuck, so they clamp down even harder, becoming more demanding and rigid. It is normal to assume that during this stage your healthy child will probably embarrass you by misbehaving at church or at the grocery store! How can a parent handle this as both authoritarian and consultant? By providing an environment that is safe enough for the child to say “no” (as a way of encouraging the child’s own boundaries), as well as setting and keeping age-appropriate limits and boundaries with the child (to help him develop the capability to respect other people’s boundaries). By the age of three, the following tasks should be mastered:

1. The ability to be emotionally attached to others, yet without giving up a sense of self and one’s freedom to be apart.
2. The ability to say *appropriate* no’s to others without fear of the loss of love.
3. The ability to *take* appropriate no’s from others without withdrawing emotionally. (Boundaries, p. 73)

These tasks are, once again, consistent throughout the literature of cognitive, moral and psychological development as being the model for the foundations of adult maturity and interdependence.

How does this align with Growing Kids God’s Way, the follow up to the previous two GFI manuals? If we’re looking at the issue of self-development and boundaries, the material can be a bit confusing. One could make the argument that, in fact, there is a preponderance of material relating to personal boundary setting (e.g., learning table manners, respecting others’ property, or an “appeal” process allowing children to question a parent’s decision) which on first glance might indicate a healthy arrangement. A closer investigation of the material, however, makes it clear that mom and dad make all “moral” decisions for the child, regardless of the age. In this paradigm, the child’s thoughts, opinions and perspectives are not valued or listened to unless “new factual information...not a personal opinion, analysis or commentary” (GKGW, p.258) can be contributed by the child through a prescribed appeal process. What is a moral decision? The manual provides a full 334 pages to describe detailed descriptions of what these behaviors are, from detailed “Christian” mealtime etiquette with different required behavior between “Dinner at Home with No Guests” and “Buffet Style Dinner with Guests in a Home,” (GKGW, p.301-305) to “no bad talk” (GKGW, p.248). Along with this myriad of inconsequential dos and don’ts are some helpful guidelines and tools for parents in providing healthy structure, boundaries, guidance and discipline for their developing child. The problem is that no distinction is made between relevant, important teachings and ones that often border on the ridiculous. All are presented as equally salient aspects of godly parenting. One particularly consistent theme throughout is that the child is forbidden to use the word “no” to a parent, regardless of the request. Since, particularly with younger children, “chastisement” (spanking) is the stated preferred method of “discipline,” children learn early not to disobey or challenge. The “appeal” process offered with its detailed guidelines is no doubt helpful for older children and teens but is certainly not an option for a young child. There is simply no recourse; the child must obey first time, every time in a way that is “immediate, complete and without complaint or

challenge" (GKGW, p. 256); to take it even further, the child is expected to unflinchingly do so cheerfully and with a smile!

Imagine a three-year-old expressing anger at a parent using this model. Or a child who doesn't want to share a favorite toy. What about a two-and-a-half-year-old who throws a tantrum? More terrifying are issues surrounding dangerously inappropriate commands to the child, who is not, by definition, allowed to say no. Research strongly indicates, for example, that girls in authoritarian religious homes are at higher risk for intrafamilial sexual abuse than the normal population. This sad-but-true empirical finding is even more pronounced among fathers who are considered to be more outwardly religious than internally faithful to God and who do not experience God's love as the primary basis of their faith (Seymour, 1987).

Even without these frightening considerations, is it even possible to truly become the unique and fully alive person designed by God when the parents' ideas, standards, and often needs, *always* have to be right; *always* take precedence? When the child is viewed as "rebellious" if she doesn't view the world in exactly the same way as her parents, and is, in fact, spanked if she asserts her own boundaries? The answer, according to experts, is a resounding "No!"

What might be the predictions with this type of developmental arrest? The majority of child experts claim that this type of model more often than not leads to the development of a false self that may look "good" on the outside, but is, in fact, a poor and empty substitute for the real self that never had the opportunity or environment for growth and expression. This child, described by Winnicott and others, will typically take one of a number of "survival" routes: he may continue to develop into a people-pleasing, overly compliant individual who goes through life appearing to be "real," but is nowhere near the vibrant individual God originally designed him to be; she could strongly rebel either during the re-emergence of these earlier developmental stages during adolescence or after having moved away from home (experts claim that this type of "rebellion" would actually be a hopeful and healthy move, giving the young person a chance to separate and find her own self—her own identity—certainly not an idea compatible with the GFI stance). He might "break" completely during adolescence or early adulthood (through depression, addictions, etc.) under the internal tension of having to deny the self in the service of others; or she may take on the characteristics of the rigid system to which she was exposed. Given the authoritarian approach within GFI and the strong religious component, one might predict that a large percentage of children would choose either the "people pleaser" tactic, or a rigid, unshakable "likemindedness" and strong identification with the authority figure (i.e., parent).

If theorists and researchers are correct, the preceding characteristics would predispose one to a disorder of the self. Dr. James Masterson (1981) has described a model of narcissistic development that aligns quite closely to these implications. In his model, Masterson clearly defines two types of narcissistic stances; the exhibitionistic and what he calls the "closet narcissist." We are much more familiar with the exhibitionistic form as outlined in DSM IV; characteristics include a grandiose sense of self-importance, fantasies of perfection, a sense of entitlement, hypersensitivity to criticism, and a lack of empathy for others. For the exhibitionistic narcissist, the parent idealizes the child to shape the child to his/her own needs. The child defends against the painful feelings associated with a lack of support for the real self by identifying with the parents' idealization. The child then grows up focused upon maintaining an inflated sense of self, which must be admired and adored through the "perfect mirroring" of the grandiosity by others. This type of narcissist demands fusion in terms of "likemindedness" and fully expects others to perceive and understand the world the same way as he. This persistent need for perfect mirroring to support the grandiose self is the focus of the developmental arrest for this individual.

With all narcissistic disorders, the false self is structured to defend and create a shield of distortion and pleasure for the impaired real self. According to Klein (1995), "It is the role of the false self to save the individual from knowing the truth about the impaired real self, from penetrating the deeper causes of unhappiness, and from seeing the self as it really is: vulnerable, afraid, and unable to let the real self emerge." The false self serves to protect against what Masterson refers to as "abandonment depression," the collective range of painful affects—including depression, anxiety, panic, rage, guilt, helplessness, and hopelessness.

Where the exhibitionistic narcissist relies upon his demand for perfect mirroring to maintain his false self, the closet narcissist instead withdraws and exhibits the following types of behaviors: Depression, difficulty with self-assertion, apparent clinging in relationships, difficulties expressing anger, an inadequate sense of self and low self-esteem, and denial of destructive impulses.

These two styles seem to be opposite, but are actually flip sides of the same coin. Where the exhibitionistic narcissist appears to lack a need for others, except to reflect his grandiosity, the closet narcissist is exquisitely dependent and vulnerable to others, particularly the primary objects, the parents. Although the intrapsychic structure of both types of narcissistic disorder is the same, they develop for different reasons. Most often in the early stages of development for the closet narcissist, the caregiver attacks or neglects the child's own normal grandiosity, rather than supporting it, and insists that the child provide her own mirroring needs as a condition of receiving any nurturing or approval from the parent. In other words, if she is "obedient" to the demands and requirements of the parents, she may receive something in return. This child withdraws the narcissism "into the closet" because it is simply too painful to leave the healthy grandiose self exposed. For self-protection, the child accedes to the parents' demands. Instead of seeking mirroring from others, she idealizes others—seeking "likemindedness" with them creating within her a distorted form of identity and sense of worth she maintains by living in submission to, and dependent on, the powerful and idealized other. Because of this profound need for fusion with the idealized other, the closet narcissist is even more "vulnerable to failures of likemindedness and ensuing depression" than the exhibitionistic counterpart. (Klein, 1995).

How this might these characteristics look within the church? The exhibitionistic person would tend to present as self-righteous and authoritative, projecting his sinfulness elsewhere (as it is entirely incompatible with his need for perfectionistic grandiosity!). This person, regardless of the external language used, unconsciously believes himself to be exceptionally special and unique, even to God. One gets a clear sense that if he were really honest, he'd admit that God is, in fact, quite lucky to have him! He is typically judgmental, critical, rigid and prejudiced; all, of course, in the name of God. This allows him to project all his "badness" onto others in order to maintain his sense of grandiose perfection. This type of narcissist often is found in roles of authority, power, and leadership, as, quite often, charm camouflages his not-so-attractive attributes. The grandiosity and critical nature in this individual very often hide nicely behind the cloak of righteousness and the need to stamp out sin and evil...in all those other people!

For the closet narcissist, the picture looks different. This individual is the one who believes herself to be so worthless, not even Christ can really save her. Regardless of her words, she believes her salvation to be rooted in unrelenting selfless tasks, unquestioning obedience to authority, always being cheerful and pleasant (even though she is patently depressed), and never complaining. She is often a dedicated and dutiful church member, as her need to be in total submission to an omnipotent other is necessary for her well being. Unfortunately, she is unable to internally comprehend true grace, making her obedience far more connected to a desire to please those around her than God.

For both types of narcissistic disorders, the individual is in an unending battle between the desire to allow the self to "be born" and a terror of the ensuing abandonment depression if the false self fails in its protective functions. The exhibitionistic style remains on its quest for perfect adulation, while the closet style conforms to the dictates of those around her. To run the risk of being authentic, one also runs the risk of abandonment, shame, humiliation, and unbearable pain. In light of our relationship with God, either of these scenarios is tragic when one considers that the hidden self, is, in fact, the person God had in mind when He wove us in the womb for His purpose and His glory. Even more tragic is that, although individuals stuck at this level of development may *seem* to demonstrate Christian behaviors by appearing loving and obedient, their "godly" actions are typically rooted in fear, emptiness, and the need for external narcissistic supply, rather than the compassion, empathy, and gratitude that come from the thankful and joyful heart of one who is loved simply for being who God designed her to be.

In developing this material, I noted an interesting conundrum concerning issues of narcissistic development within the GFI material. For example, children are not allowed to be demanding, while parents seem to have the right to be extremely demanding. Even newborn babies are to be trained out their need for immediate gratification; yet GFI parents require their own "gratification" to be met first time, every time by their children. Woven throughout the material is an underlying premise that children are the unquestionable bearers of a sinful nature, while parents are uniformly represented as bearers of God's image. One cannot review the material without pondering on the implications of such contradictions

Concerns Regarding Views on Sex Education

GFI has developed its own “comprehensive” sex education curriculum, Reflections of Moral Innocence, which is to be used for all ages of children up until marriage. This material, according to The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County (who did an extensive evaluation of the GFI program), “presents the greatest concern for children.” They continue, “As in Growing Kids God’s Way, the Ezzos state that God’s Word is not specific on the topic of providing sex education for our children, but, if the recommendations given by the Ezzos are not followed, frightening things will happen to parent and child because they [the Ezzos] speak from a biblical perspective.” (1996)

What has provoked this reaction? Basically, it’s due to the fact that the GFI material is built upon the premise that the knowledge of sexual anatomy as well as the anatomical function of the sex organs takes away from childhood innocence. They further imply that this knowledge is evil and corrupting in itself. Couple this with the explicit contention that children are inherently perverse and corrupt and must not have their “evil imaginations activated” (RMI), and one gets the overall tenor of the entire program. Their perspective extends, for example, to describing sexual anatomy and the sexual implications of menstruation exclusively through the metaphor of a flower, banning children from attending art exhibits that include any form of nudity including statues (equating this with allowing your children to view pornography), and not providing any information on sexual function or behaviors – even on your child’s wedding night!

The Ezzos are certainly correct in their belief that children in our society are being overwhelmed and inundated with sexual material they are unable to process. They are also correct in their statement that sex education is the responsibility of the parent. But outside of that, their model stands in direct contradiction to experts on child development and human sexuality in both secular and Christian communities.

While the Ezzos’ perspective reflects secrecy, fear, and the “evil” nature of children, other well-respected Christian child experts such as Josh McDowell (1987), Dr. James Dobson (1982), Grace Ketterman, M.D. (1981), Dr. Bruce Narramore (1991), Paul Warren, M.D. (1994), Dr. Ross Campbell (1984), Jay Kesler (1988), and John Nieder (1984) describe sex education focusing on positive attitudes, direct-but-age-appropriate explanations regarding body parts and function, openness, and a natural, comfortable approach. The contrasts between the two schools of instruction are quite striking. Where the Ezzos instruct parents to “help [your eighteen-month-old] to get control” of his sexual perversity and passions by enforcing a “Don’t Touch!” demand when the child touches his penis (if the child self-explores after this command, it is considered to be “disobedience,” with resultant punishment), Ketterman states, “Let me suggest that you try to allow the infant to explore the genital area, just as he does his eyes and nose.” Ketterman’s contention that sexuality needs to be treated by parents as another part of God’s wonderful design is echoed by other experts. Where Gary Ezzo believes that calling a penis a penis triggers “sexual thoughts and sensations,” leading the child to think about “sex, not urination,” others contend that not discussing sexuality in a natural, respectful way creates an environment of fear and taboos leading to distorted and unhealthy attitudes about sex. Experts believe that punishing a child for having curiosity about his genitals creates a preoccupation with them, while Ezzo contends that punishment roots out the curiosity.

How about preparing one’s child for marriage? GFI states that no sex education is to be provided outside of the flower metaphor, believing that the couple will discover the realities on their own. Once again, other Christian experts disagree. Whether it’s Ed Wheat, M.D. (1984), Clifford and Joyce Penner (1994), or Norm Wright (1984), those trained and experienced in helping Christians prepare for marriage (and in treating the resultant dysfunction when preparation has been faulty) strongly encourage direct – and even explicit – instruction on both physical and psychological sexual functioning before the wedding night.

A primary concern regarding the GFI material is, once again, the implicit message of fear and guilt.

It seems to insinuate that if you want to follow God, you will do it their way. In this case, the message takes on a frightening tenor that seems to imply that parents will be responsible for raising sexual perverts if GFI methods aren’t followed. GFI states that they developed their views from a “biblical perspective,” that theirs are the “basic truths of human sexuality,” and they assure parents that their “goal [is] to put courage in you” for listening to “God’s voice” (all quotes from RMI); the bases for these

assumptions aren't addressed. Even more troubling are some serious claims made that are not only erroneous but are potentially dangerous. Gary Ezzo states, "Boys who get excited about women's clothing have been exposed to their moms' early on"; this is but one example that strongly implies the development of immorality, sexual perversions, and fetishes for not adhering to rigid GFI directives. It's interesting that the obvious implication is that being aroused by women's clothing is perverse and negative, when in a healthy adult sexual relationship, being aroused by a spouse in intimate apparel can be a delightful addition to desire and sexual play! But to address the darker meaning of Ezzo's pronouncement, GFI is simply inaccurate; this type of perversion is known to develop when a substitute attachment object is needed because comfort, nurturing, and human contact are not sufficiently provided.

It would be ill-advised not to factor in the dangerous component of the potential for sexual abuse concomitant with undisputed parental power, an inability of the child ever to say "no" to parents, and the secrecy inherent in this particular program; and please don't make the tragic mistake of believing Christians don't sexually abuse their children. As cited in an earlier section of this paper, the rates are actually higher than for the normal population. In my own practice, I have worked with a number of women whose sexually abusing fathers were everything from Christian college deans to pastors to elders. The horrendous tragedy of every one of these cases is that the fathers' exploitation of their daughters was actually perpetrated under the guise of a "God-given right" to teach one's daughter properly about sex. I am in no way suggesting that GFI promotes such exploitation, but I am suggesting that the structure of the program could be misused in diabolical ways.

One might wonder, in reading through the GFI directives, how one protects his or her children from contact with material in our society that might undermine GFI's position, or might expose children to something GFI considers improper. According to experts, this issue is often a major argument for providing healthy and comprehensive sex education at home; if kids don't hear it from parents, they'll hear it on the playground or the locker room. The Ezzos deal with this dilemma through their recommendation to build and function solely within one's own "moral community," an attitude that others feel leads to religious isolationism and a disquieting spirit of divisiveness in the church.

In response to such concerns, in their public statement regarding GFI (10/16/97), the elder board at Grace Community Church of Sun Valley, where Gary Ezzo was a staff member and where their programs began, states that GFI parents tend to insulate their children even from other Christian children who are not indoctrinated with GFI principles. This, according to their statement, has resulted in some GFI parents severing all relationships with non-GFI families, and includes not allowing their children to attend church youth functions (since these functions might be attended by those not "in the community" and non-Christian children). This has even extended to GFI developing their own private "Community Schools" where children can be enrolled by invitation only. Grace contends that "To some degree, GFI teaching is directly responsible for encouraging this attitude."

Although this highly important subject warrants more thorough assessment, this introductory presentation will hopefully provoke enough concern to prompt readers to prayerfully read and evaluate the primary sources for themselves.

Cultural Concerns

While at the AACC Conference I was approached by a Peruvian missionary. He described his anger and dismay at missionaries disregarding the needs and characteristics of the indigenous people by imposing the GFI model, which is "totally inappropriate for many cultures." He felt it was disrespectful, at best, and unscriptural at worst. "If this is the biblical model, why does it not line up with cultures other than those consistent with middle-class America? Is God's Word not applicable across all periods of time, across all cultures? Is the Bible only for you Americans?" His words were humbling and shocking – and painfully true. We Americans tend to label our brand of Christianity as ultimate Truth. How arrogant.

This issue has been addressed in less poignant ways by others who have examined the GFI material from a cultural perspective. Thomas Giles, in his article "Are Ezzos Culturally Insensitive?" (*Christianity Today*, 8/19/93) comments on the pejorative manner in which the GFI material defines certain cultures: "The Ezzos say, 'Primitive societies are at the end of the human spectrum because of depravity, not the beginning. You cannot bring Third World maternal disorder into a complex American society. There is no justification for Christians to look at godless societies to discover how to biblically parent.'" Ezzo further

emphasizes his position by stating that “There is no light in these [primitive] societies. So why are you looking to a godless society to find out how to biblically parent?” (Giles, *Christianity Today*, 1993).

This attitude is prevalent throughout the material, from Preparation for Parenting to Reflections of Moral Innocence, where “the primitives” are consistently aligned with deprivation and immorality. According to Diane Komp, professor of pediatrics at the Yale School of Medicine, “There are troubling ethnic implications to [the Ezzos; statements] that smacks of xenophobia,” adding that the Ezzos’ position apparently does not integrate the fact that many of their pejorative statements regarding “the primitives” also apply to lower-economic, and Afro-American and Hispanic communities within our own country. This certainly pertains to committed Believers in other nations as well.

As I consider these things, I can’t help but wonder Jesus feels about it all.

Concerns Regarding Misrepresentations, Distortions, and Contradictions

Although there seem to be some valuable aspects of the GFI material in providing directives for new parents, it is difficult to sort out what claims and pronouncements are sound advice and what are unsubstantiated opinions of the authors. This is primarily due to a finding that the material seems to offer advice and theories based on misrepresentations, half-truths, or data unsupported by research and supplemental material. The Ezzos, to date, have not provided material or advocates to dispel this contention. As I was becoming acquainted with the GFI material and beginning to have questions about their approach, I contacted GFI headquarters personally and requested a reference list that supported their claims. I was eventually “bumped up” to one of the Ezzos’ assistants, who stated that he was “unable to answer any of my questions,” but told me someone would get back to me. I never received a response to my request. Neither have several other sources who have made similar requests. When asked about this typical response in an interview, Gary Ezzo stated that specialists on his resource list are “too important to be bothered with the trivia served up by the critics” (Kelly Griffith, *Bradenton Herald*, 1997). At the time, by the way, I was not a critic—just curious.

I also began to query GFI moms on the material and was told that the program was “completely biblical” and had sound philosophical underpinnings. However, as I examined the material for myself, I found that both contentions were untrue. Many of the GFI authoritative assertions can be accepted as Truth only if one accepts proof-texts as ultimate and unquestionable scriptural truth, or does not, perhaps, have an adequate educational acquaintance with philosophical and psychological theoretical knowledge to be able to discern between schools of thought.

The areas presented here are of particular concern due to the fact that they address critical issues in development and health and are presented by GFI as proven truth. In addition, the GFI contentions often stand in stark opposition to extensive research findings and positions supported by well-known and well-respected Christian child specialists. Scripturally, the proof-texts often appear to be inconsistent with the character of God, the ultimate loving Parent of Grace.

I have listed and commented on a number of these claims. This listing is certainly not exhaustive.

Regarding Emotional Development:

Misrepresentation of addiction development and behavior:

Throughout the material, authoritative claims are made that are neither substantiated nor proven through scriptural reference; they are typically inflammatory and fear producing. One example of that style of presentation: in support their concept of “establishing a biblical mindset” (in reference to parent-controlled feedings and sleep times of newborns), GFI states, “But pleasure has a way of becoming addictive. The gratification drive becomes a problem in child training when the child becomes dependent upon or conditioned to receiving immediate gratification in his ongoing development” (PFP, p. 24). This implies that meeting the needs of a newborn will result in the baby becoming addicted to the immediate pleasure provided, and this will set the stage for the demand for immediate gratification throughout the levels of development. The very use of the word “addictive” is inflammatory, particularly for Christians wanting to do what’s best for their child. A review of addiction theories and research reveals that the

family dynamics providing fertile ground for any addiction are not in providing pleasure, but rather in the *lack* of legitimate, age-appropriate pleasure in the forms of comfort, nurturing, and soothing. Addiction is not about life-affirming pleasure, but is rather rooted in a child learning to rely on a substitute form of dependable nurturing when God-given needs are not met through caring and responsive caretakers.

This type of skewed presentation regarding addiction and immediate gratification is representative of much of the GFI material; there is simply no distinction made between what is healthy and normal at one age and level of development and inappropriate at another. For example, the GFI model relates a newborn's need for immediate gratification to the baby's attempt to "manipulate" the parents; the child is seen as being capable of attributes, however, that are just not in alignment with God's design as proven by a vast amount of research. While something approximating immediate gratification is, in fact, *appropriate* for a newborn (given the mental, physical and psychological capacities of the baby) it is not appropriate for an older child; however this distinction is not made in the GFI material. The assumption is that meeting the immediate need of a newborn equates to meeting the needs of a toddler in the same way. GFI material gives no attention to an understanding of how and why a child moves from the need for immediate gratification towards delayed gratification, but rather assumes that the child is capable of whatever the parent demands, whenever the parent demands it.

Crying

Control of a child's crying and "whining" seems to be of major concern in this model; however, GFI offers a frighteningly incomplete understanding of an infant's crying behavior. In regard to the newborn, the Ezzos state (while presenting their design for parent-controlled naptime), "Crying for 15-20 or even 30 minutes is not going to hurt your baby physically or emotionally. Especially if the cry is a continual start-stop cry. He will not lose brain cells, experience a drop in IQ, or have feelings of rejection that will leave him manic-depressive at age thirty" (PFP, p. 134). For the two-month-old (in regard to dropping the middle-of-the-night feeding), it is stated, "This may involve some crying, which may be as short as 5 minutes or off and on as long as 1 hour" (PFP, p.136).

This attitude towards a baby's cries is rooted in a couple of assumptions. One is that the baby is self-centered, and must learn from the time of birth that it is not the "center of the universe"; this theme is consistent both overtly and covertly. The other is that babies only cry because they are, "hungry,...tired, wet, sick, bored, frustrated, out of their routine, fed too often, or simply because that is what normal, healthy babies do" (PFP, p. 141). While all of these, of course, are true, it's disconcerting that experts recognize pain and discomfort as primary reasons for crying in young infants (Child Development, p. 138), but in GFI these are not even mentioned. Crying is an infant's only form of verbal communication—how else did God provide for a baby to express her needs? How else is she able to say, "Please hold me, I'm scared," "Pressure causes my ears to hurt when you lay me down," or, "My tummy hurts; I need you to please burp me"?

The GFI model supports its stance with the following statement, "Praise God that the Father did not intervene when His Son cried out on the cross (Mt. 27:46). If He had stopped the process, there would be no redemption for us today" (PFP, p.144). Considering the whole counsel of scripture, it seems more likely that our model for responding to our babies is based on the numerous passages that consistently teach and remind us of how tenderly God hears our cries and responds to us exactly at our place of need. This portrait seems to be a more accurate portrayal of a newborn's cries than God incarnate on the cross.

But to GFI, empathetically responding to the infant is "emotional" rather than "soberminded" and is equated with "demand attention." In fact, when asked how much time it is appropriate to hold a baby, GFI responds, "Parents should be more concerned with what is an inappropriate amount of time to hold their baby. The amount of time can either be too little or too much, but the latter is often the case with demand-feeding" (PFP, p. 185).

The GFI program claims that "babies under the PDF (parent-directed feeding) plan tend to cry less in the long run than babies who are demand-fed." They report that the reason is that "infants put on a routine become confident and secure in that routine. Their lives have order and they learn the lesson of flexibility early in life." (PFP, 146). Even if true (they offer no documentation and research indicates the opposite), this could result in a pretty tragic assumption. Research and observational studies of

institutionalized children consistently indicate that there are two types of babies who cry the least: those with highly responsive parents who respond quickly and consistently, and those babies who learn that their cries will go unheeded, and so give up hope (Dennis, 1973; Provenance and Lipton, 1962).

Obesity

In a brief statement regarding adult obesity, GFI states that “feeding problems in infancy, such as overfeeding or disregarding healthy eating patterns, may result in eventual obesity” (PFP, p. 143). This is yet another unsubstantiated argument for their PDF feeding style; they further state, “A mother who picks up her infant and offers him the breast each time he cries is teaching him that food is his source of comfort, not Mom” (PFP, p.145).

Once again, an extreme is presented (“each time he cries”); in addition to this, for very young babies, mom’s breast and feeding *are* comfort! The real problem here, as in many other cited areas, is the implication that later problems with food are due to not using the Ezzo method. According to a large body of literature including extensive research, if anything, the opposite is true.

While the etiological roots of eating disorders, including obesity and compulsive overeating, are varied and complex (genetics, biochemistry, sociocultural concerns, modeling), the family constellation factors that seem to contribute to dysfunction around food revolve around perceived deprivation and issues regarding power. In light of this, it’s interesting that so much focus in the GFI material is on food; they say, in fact, “Your choice of feeding philosophy will actually determine your child’s hunger patterns, sleep patterns, and even his basic disposition” (PFP, p. 49). They then proceed to center the entire model on issues relating to food and control. In PFTY, two of the seven chapters presented (for babies 5 to 15 months) are, again, about food and how to control behavior surrounding food (“Mealtime Activities,” “Highchair Manners”). From the parent-controlled feedings of the early months, five-month-old babies begin their “training” of “self-control” with their hands (e.g. keeping their hands at their sides in the highchair, not playing with their food, not putting messy hands in their hair). The Ezzos say, “Mealtime is not playtime. Do not touch your plate, only your food.” Control issues surrounding food continue to be a major focus within each GFI parenting manual.

According to experts, this type of a model can set up a child for a vulnerability regarding food. Lynne Nieto, R.N., M.S.N., and Certified Specialist in Eating Disorders, recently stated in a personal interview, “The parent who consistently engages her child in a struggle of control over what is eaten, how it’s eaten, and when it’s eaten, may, in the end, condemn her child to eating problems later in life.” She continues, “In infancy, withholding food to comply with a schedule is perceived by the infant as deprivation and abandonment. She cognitively cannot determine if the breast will ever arrive; therefore, building trust is replaced with despair. When the child is older and senses she has no power within the family unit, food can provide the tool by which she exerts power in a family that gives her little autonomy or individuation. Food can become both a self-supplied means of nurturing and a weapon of defiance. In an authoritarian family where the child has little sense of independence or healthy sense of power, the one thing she may feel she *can* control is what goes in her mouth.”

“The Harvard Mental Health Letter” (14/4, 10/97) further develops this idea in their discussion of anorexia nervosa: “Most anorectic women are serious, well behaved, orderly, perfectionistic, hypersensitive to rejection, and inclined to irrational guilt and obsessive worry....She wants to be strong and successful, but is afraid of asserting herself and separating from her family.” They continue by reporting that anorectic girls often come from “enmeshed” families where “everyone in the household is said to be overresponsive to and overprotective of everyone else. Conventional social roles are maintained, but individual needs are not met, feelings are not honestly acknowledged, and conflicts are not openly resolved.” Daughters are expected to be “good girls” who excessive work to “please parents and teachers” through perfectionistic behavior and achievement. Many other experts from a wide variety of psychological orientations, including Christian specialists such as Raymond Vath, M.D. (1971), echo this view.

Compulsive overeating and obesity are closely related to these more “studied” eating disorders; however, the etiology becomes more complicated as genetic issues related to weight and the weight of the parents become more salient variables. If one family pattern is consistent throughout the literature, however, it is that of food being used as a substitute for nurturing, a weapon for power, and a form of control. If these characteristics align with any type of parenting model, it is one composed of rigid rules,

high expectations, and lack of emotional communication and understanding – certainly not demand feeding!

Separation Anxiety

Within the GFI model, separation anxiety is another area lacking understanding in God’s design of both cognitive and emotional development. GFI claims that separation anxiety is due to too much time and attention from mom, rendering the child unable to separate without anger and despair. How they’ve arrived at this conclusion is unknown and unstated. What *is* known through extensive research and child observation studies, however, seems to be virtually the opposite of the Ezzo position. Separation distress, which appears across cultures and settings, typically emerges when the child is about eight months old. It rises to a peak in the middle of the second year, and then begins to decline (Kagan, 1978, p. 72). Little ones are actually hard-wired to experience separation anxiety! It is not a negative response in an infant or young toddler, but is often a sign of healthy attachment (The Child, p. 217). It also announces the child’s emerging emotional separation from mom; he begins to see her as separate, and no longer symbiotically attached. In addition, separation anxiety is a normal and healthy gauge of a child’s developing cognitive capabilities, indicating that the child is beginning to be able to maintain a mental representation of the mother; after all, if he “lost” her when she left the room before having this capability, he wouldn’t even know what was lost!

Given comprehensive support from so many realms of scientific inquiry, it seems almost absurd to conclude that normal separation anxiety is representative of inadequate parenting. The real tragedy is how parents are being taught in GFI to view and respond to these normal, legitimate feelings and expressions of their children. In this case, the separation anxiety would provide evidence of a demanding or “spoiled” child who needs even *less* time with mom, or is, perhaps, deserving of “chastisement” for being rebellious!

Discipline

Discipline is *the* overarching theme within the GFI model. One must read the material oneself to gain a full appreciation for this assertion. What is worthy of discipline? For a GFI newborn, it’s being “demanding,” “manipulative,” and “self-centered,” which are dealt with through enforcing the “delayed gratification” and “self-discipline” of parent-controlled feedings and sleep time. For a baby five to fifteen months, it is committing a “highchair violation” (GFI term) like playing with food or banging on the tray at mealtime, sucking one’s thumb, moving off of the assigned blanket during playtime, or not getting an “immediate and complete response” (PFTY, p.76) to a required answer or action from your baby.” It is a shy child who does not respond to an adult (GKGW, p. 141). It is an eighteen-month-old who “steals” another child’s toy. For those beyond two years, the “discipline” utilized is “biblical chastisement” (spanking).

Although the GFI model includes two lesser “levels” of reprimand, by the age of two chastisement is initially “used more than levels one or two. Parents should reserve levels one and two, the warnings and mild reprimands, for borderline cases that are less common” (GKGW, p. 196). There is, in fact, an entire chapter dedicated to promoting spanking as the first choice for discipline; both implicit and explicit is the contention that this is, without question, “God’s Way.” Other types of proven-effective discipline, such as “time outs” and natural consequences, are discredited as not being primary forms of godly discipline. The chastisement is to be carried out with a “biblical rod”; a “somewhat flexible, not stiff or unbending” instrument (GKGW, p.220). This has been described to me by GFI adherents as being a wide strip of rubber tubing, a thin razor strap, or a large glue stick.

This is another area where a misinterpretation of scripture provides a major construct for the GFI model. Chastisement is used exclusively to mean spanking in the GFI material; it is implied that this is God’s primary use of the term as well. Ezzo states, “Our society calls it spanking; the Bible calls it chastisement. Chastisement means to inflict pain with controlled force on an individual to amend an inner attitude” (GKGW, p. 209) to support his interpretation of Proverbs 22:6 (“Train up a child in the way he should go and when he grows old he will not depart from it”). A study of the scriptures, however, reveals that there are 76 verses relating to chastisement from God. Those verses include chastisement to mean the following: instruct, correct with loving guidance, teach, counsel, write on your

heart, exhort, encourage, warn, rebuke, and admonish, among other meanings. The GFI interpretation is, at the very least, limited.

What warrants chastisement? In general, whatever is considered to be rebellion by the parent. It can relate to not obeying correct “Christian Etiquette for Mealtime Behavior (GKGW, Appendix 4), such as “Do not lean on the table,” not “eating what one is served,” or throwing a plate of food across a room. It can be stealing a \$25.00 toy from a store when you’re nine years old, or “stealing” a toy away from another child when you’re eighteen months old. It can be “whining.” It is always warranted for saying “no” to your parent. It can be a major act of defiance or balking at mom picking your clothes out for you. Considering the lack of understanding of developmental issues in the GFI material, this presents a potentially dangerous situation. Particularly since there is no “grace,” a child must obey first time, every time, “without challenge or complaint”; not to do so is disobedient rebellion. The stated perspective of “principle” in the GFI material becomes lost by the wayside in a myriad of do and don’t directives (over 300 pages!) that allow the parent to consider any infraction of their rules to qualify as worthy of chastisement. Sadly, even need-based behaviors, such as thumbsucking (past the age of two), are redefined as disobedience.

What do others say about discipline? Whether it is Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, or Penelope Leach from the secular realm, or Dr. James Dobson, Dr. Ross Campbell, Dr. Paul Warren, Gary Smalley, or Dr. Bruce Narramore from the Christian perspective, the view is quite different from the Ezzo position. Dr. Campbell, for example, in How to Really Love Your Child, tells us that using corporal punishment as a principal means of behavioral control can be dangerous for some very important reasons. First of all, spanking alleviates healthy guilt. “Corporal punishment degrades, dehumanizes, and humiliates the child. As a result, a child may feel the beating is punishment enough in itself. If the corporal punishment is instituted with enough frequency and severity, there will not be sufficient guilt provocation to enable a child to develop an adequate conscience” (pp. 87-88). The second reason corporal punishment used excessively can be so damaging is what’s called *identification with the aggressor*. This is a guilt-escaping mechanism in which the child identifies (sides with) the punishing parent, coming to the place where he feels the parent being aggressive and punitive is right. The Ezzos address this by stating, “If spanking teaches violence, how do you explain why children whose parents never spanked them are so violent?” (GKGW, p. 208). We’re never told how they’ve come to such a conclusion or if they have any data supporting such a contention.

This again points to a consistent concern within the GFI model. The Ezzos build a strong case for spanking on some very faulty presuppositions, a distorted offering of the data, and misrepresentations. For example, they state that “there are no legitimate studies at this time to support [that spanking isn’t a necessary and useful element of discipline]” (GKGW, p. 207). There is, in fact, an enormous body of literature on studies regarding corporal punishment and the consequences of authority figures role-modeling aggressive or punitive behavior; check into any database at any library. Along with this, once again, exaggeration is used to support their beliefs. No Christian child specialist would completely negate the use of spanking under certain circumstances, but in the GFI model, it is *the* primary, and exclusively “godly,” tool of modifying a child’s behavior. No one would even dispute that spanking often works, as the Ezzos assert, but godly discipline is supposed to be aimed at developing healthy, mature behaviors, not controlling behaviors out of fear. As can probably be guessed, children who are primarily spanked for punishment tend to lie more often and misbehave when they are away from the authority figures; they just learn to hide better! Rather than internalizing the correct behaviors that lead to self-control, the need to behave becomes based on external fear and avoidance of punishment. How tragic that so many Christians never move beyond this view of a demanding, capricious God who punishes if we don’t “toe the line.”

Dr. Bruce Narramore, in Help, I’m a Parent, presents a more balanced, and decidedly biblical, picture of toddler discipline that includes (1) not rewarding misbehavior, (2) rewarding good behavior, and (3) extinction (pp. 51-54). He believes that spanking is certainly a helpful tool in the discipline arsenal, but states that it does not solve the underlying problem and suggests spanking only under certain conditions (Chap. 8) Instead, Narramore, like most specialists, chooses to utilize logical and natural consequences as a more effective means of disciplining whenever possible.

“Chastisement” is of particular concern when considering child abuse, even though GFI claims that it is “emotional mothering [that] can set the stage for child abuse (PFP, p. 153)”; it is rather interesting that maternal emotions are assumed to be angry and abusive! It would seem more likely that abuse would

occur in a home where the positive emotions that accompany attachment are minimized or denied, while obedience and parental power are magnified – particularly in light of the license GFI gives to parents to spank a child into submission at the parents’ discretion. Most certainly, this does not include everyone using GFI, but one does not have to listen too long in the counseling office before hearing of children in this program who are spanked repeatedly even for minor infractions, sometimes close to the point of reportable child abuse.

The secrecy element of GFI chastisement raises an even higher red flag of concern. Although their website discussion page is only available to registered adherents to their program, confused GFI parents have contacted me regarding their growing worry over situations that appear on this GFI site. Due to confidentiality issues, I am unable to print these dialogues; let it suffice to say that many are heartwrenching descriptions of children being treated in cruel ways by those assigned by God to provide guidance and nurturance. If GFI has nothing to hide, why not make these discussions public? One can get the flavor of these concerns by reviewing the GKGW single parenting supplement, which advises parents not to chastise in public, to be careful about neighbors hearing children’s cries in apartment buildings, and to instruct one’s children to not tell anyone – even the child’s other parent in a divorce situation – about occurring chastisement, due to potential “misunderstandings.” In light of the current epidemic of child abuse, these injunctions are frightening. Built into this model is the assumption that all Christian parents are spiritually and emotionally mature, and can utilize this type of license in a godly manner. My experience in the counseling office and through evaluating research is that this is a tragic assumption to make. Unfortunately, being a Christian does not guarantee health, only forgiveness.

Issues of Internal Consistency and Integrity

Models of parenting contradictory to GFI are presented in a skewed, distorted, and highly pejorative manner.

This finding is consistent throughout the material. For example, the extreme permissive parenting model GFI presents as the alternative to their model would be dismissed by virtually *all* Christian parenting specialists as humanistic, radical, and unbiblical. The theorists GFI provides to build their case are the most liberal of the liberal. Names like Darwin, Freud, and Skinner are used, while secular theorists and researchers who provide data consistent with scripture are blatantly missing. The message is clear, one must accept one of two positions: That of GFI, or that of anti-God secular humanists. This message is another constant throughout the GFI program: GFI is good; all other parenting techniques, *including* those endorsed by well-respected Christian experts, are bad. If you choose to follow God, you will follow GFI.

A primary target of the GFI model is what is known as “attachment-type parenting,” which they portray as the hallmark of permissive and ungodly parenting. For reasons unknown, GFI feels a need to discredit the concepts of attachment to such a degree that their presentation is profoundly skewed. They have, without question, redefined “attachment” in a way that is inconsistent with any other material found in the literature.

For example, an unsubstantiated statement in the GFI material (p. 54, PFP) claims that attachment theories “have a mystifying and drawing effect on deeply wounded people. Mothers, especially, who in their own lives suffered under the hands of abusive fathers, experienced emotional neglect in childhood, or lost a child to death are the most susceptible to the promises offered.” In other words, apparently only emotionally disturbed people are drawn to emotionally bond with their babies! As often the case, research points to just the opposite: mothers who behave in unempathic ways towards their babies are often the products of poor mothering themselves (Ricks, 1985). Consistent with this are theoretical beliefs that the mother’s capacity to attach and empathetically respond to her baby’s needs are largely a result of having received this empathic attunement as an infant (Davis & Wallbridge, 1981). Often the mother who hardens her heart to her baby’s cries and needs may unknowingly and unconsciously resent giving her child what she herself didn’t receive (Searles, 1986).

Because of this GFI bias against the concept of attachment, relevant theories are completely misrepresented. Once again, only the extreme-of-the-extreme concepts are presented, even in theoretical considerations. For example, Otto Rank and birth trauma-theory are explained and described in detail as the roots of attachment theory and are used to support the contention that, “To date, no one has ever demonstrated a relationship between the birthing experience and later neurosis” (PFP, p.59). The Ezzos

are absolutely right, but it doesn't have much to do with attachment theory! Otto Rank is a minor player in any concept of attachment.

Although attachment theory has been studied for decades, names like Bowlby, Spitz, Harlow, Brazelton, Ainsworth, and Mahler, who are highly respected and undisputed pioneers in understanding attachment, are not even mentioned in the GFI material. Neither is the massive body of literature and research supporting the belief in an attachment style of parenting as valuable, even crucial, to healthy child development. Visiting any library (even the one in your church), one would be hard pressed to find even one author or specialist in any area of child development that will not give credibility to bonding and attachment. A recent review of one database alone (PsycInfo) revealed over 4,000 articles on attachment in various species, and over 1,700 on human attachment alone! This is a very disturbing finding when you consider that the GFI material tells parents, "Attachment parenting theories are faddish and not well-grounded on an impeccable body of empirical data" (p.59, PFP).

Confusing and ambiguous use of terminology

Consistent throughout the GFI material is a mixing of terms within one presentation, leaving the reader confused about what's actually being stated. For example, in the section on Bonding with Your Baby (PFP, p.167), sometimes the word "bonding" refers to a single act, and at other times seems to reflect the entire concept of parental bonding and attachment. One is just not sure of the definitions presented. Is "bonding" the overall concept of a mother/child relationship, or just the issue of mother/child interaction immediately after birth? One is asked to reject an entire overarching principle based on a presentation of a narrowly defined and often ridiculous example (e.g., Otto Rank's birth trauma theory).

Another, even more concerning area where this occurs is in the "flip flop" between discussions of newborns and young children. One parenting directive can be presented as pertaining to both in the same sentence; one often doesn't know what or to whom the material pertains.

The Ezzos present their material calling themselves "professionals" (PFP, p.60).

This seems to be misrepresentative of their levels of expertise. In terms of education, to date, all we are told about the Ezzos is that Gary has a "degree from Talbot Theological Seminary" and Anne Marie "has a background in pediatric nursing." When queried about concerns regarding their qualifications, Mr. Ezzo chose to not address the question, but rather stated, "(Again) who are the critics? What are their families like? Are they sought after by young parents as role models to be emulated?... We ask, qualified by whose standard? And surely, education does not make them credible nor does a certificate. We know plenty of lactation consultants who are in desperate need of parent education" ("Q & A with Gary Ezzo," by Kelly Griffith, *Bradenton Herald*, 1997). If the Ezzos choose to present their material from the point of their experience as parents, that is certainly acceptable; that, however, does not qualify them to label themselves as professionals.

Lack of supportive data and research.

Throughout their material, GFI makes sweeping statements and dictums regarding parenting and child development, but rarely includes supportive material from other sources. Even though a highly authoritative tone permeates their contentions, they are almost completely devoid of any research to back up claims (PFP contains a total of 23 references, most are related to the argument for GFI philosophical underpinnings. PFTY, GKGW and RMI cite no references, outside of a few scriptural proof-texts.

For example, their PDF model of parent-controlled scheduled feeding and sleeping is said to regulate metabolism (p.66, PFP), reduce the chance of colic (p. 68, PFP), and mature the "stimulus barrier" more quickly (p. 69, PFP) – while attachment parenting and demand feeding lead to neurological disorders (pp. 68-70, PFP), metabolic disorders (pp. 55-56, 70, PFP), and postpartum depression (p. 60 PFP). Absolutely no research or supportive data is cited to back up these claims. The GFI material presents the Ezzos as the sole source of knowledge, wisdom, and experience for their program; and although Gary Ezzo claims that GFI has a medical peer review board with "hundreds of pediatricians," he refuses to cite them, stating "these people are too busy to be bothered with trivia served up by the critics" ("Q & A," Kelly Griffith, 1997). Also, the proponents of GFI argue that, since the material is biblically based, citations from secular sources are unnecessary. However, in reviewing the material, it is inherently clear that the

“biblical base” is almost exclusively proof-texts based on the Ezzos’ own theology. I find this potentially dangerous for any area of inquiry, particularly one as important as child development and parenting.

Double Messages

Other aspects of this material that are confusing, and make it extremely difficult to analyze, are the double messages inherent in the presentation. There are often two opposing, mutually exclusive requirements of parenting behavior; what might be strongly stated on one page is refuted on another. It goes something like this:

- A child must obey first time, every time/Don’t be inflexible.
- Four pages of do’s and don’ts are given for correct table manners/Don’t be legalistic.
- Page after page of truly arbitrary controls is provided/You’re building moral character.
- Let your two-month-old cry for an hour; you can’t allow her to control you/Teach your children about love and compassion.
- Teach your children to be independent/A child must obey without challenge.

Exclusive adherence to the GFI model and actions demanded of parents through guilt and shame (the explicit and implicit message is that either one can follow the GFI way, or one can choose not to parent in the way God desires) stands in direct opposition to the statements giving permission for personal differences. Which message does the parent believe?

Another potential problem in these double messages is that they are used to support whatever argument necessary to answer criticisms of the overall model: “Yes, but, it says right here not to be legalistic,” “Yes, but the book specifically says there’s a difference between scriptural principles and applications,” “Yes, but the book warns you to feed your baby if she’s hungry,” “Yes, I did chastise my child for crying when I left him in the church nursery, but he knows the routine; he was being willfully disobedient,” “Yes, but it’s people misusing the program, not the program itself.”

This confusion is made possible by the by the enormous amount of detailed material (GKGW is 334 pages long) that often seems to contradict itself in different sections of the manual. I found myself thinking, “Didn’t I read the opposite of that earlier?” but it is next to impossible to flip through page by page to figure out what was read when! This inconsistency not only produces confusion, but also allows for literal justification of both sides of often-mutually exclusive concepts; one can simply “proof-text” to justify either side. As in the scriptures, one must examine and understand the entire counsel of material, and the character of the author, to truly interpret the message.

“The Dangers of Permissive and Authoritarian Parents”

This is actually a quote off of the general GFI website. This was particularly puzzling since an examination of the GFI material puts it squarely in the camp of a strongly authoritarian parenting style according to the researcher who coined these terms, Dr. Diana Baumrind. In fact, its rigid alignment with an authoritarian model is the most clearly known and commented-on aspect of the GFI model by others who have reviewed it. As in other instances, GFI has taken a term coined and generally understood to mean one thing, and redefined it to their benefit. It is well known through research that authoritarian parenting is damaging to children, and tends to produce dependent children who can often play out compliant roles, but have difficulty initiating, asserting themselves, and feeling confident. They tend to be discontented, distrustful, self-centered, and often hostile. According to the Baumrind descriptions, authoritarian parenting is that of “old fashioned strictness” which follows a “traditional” viewpoint. In this style, “obedience is viewed as a virtue, and conflicts between child and parent are met with punishment and force. The child is expected to do what the parent says without argument. The children of Authoritarian parents are not given much freedom or independence.” (*The Child*, p. 280). I invite you to read the GFI material for yourself and come to your own conclusions on these definitions.

Misrepresentations of Philosophical Positions

This is consistent theme throughout the GFI material. Positions that do not agree with the GFI are grossly distorted and maligned, as in the case of attachment parenting. An interesting aspect of GFI, however, is the contradiction inherent within their own model. For example, a great deal of time and energy is spent vilifying the “godless” concept of behaviorism, yet the GFI model is clearly based on distinctly behavioral presuppositions. There is an undeniable belief that imposing GFI parenting

techniques will create a certain type of child, namely one who is compliant and obedient. No one can deny that the model will tend to do just that, at least initially and superficially; but for Christians it is an area of sinful pride that tells us we have ultimate control over our child's personality, free will choices, sinful nature, temperament and, most importantly, the unique work of the Holy Spirit in our child's life. It is not only sinful pride; it is behaviorism at its best.

Conclusions

I have attempted to present a number of concerns regarding the Growing Families International parenting model. From reading the early literature and interviewing colleagues of the Ezzos, it is apparent that the original intent of their model was a sincere attempt to help parents develop and rear godly children. For that, there is appreciation and respect. However, the GFI model has taken on a life of its own that has proven to be dogmatically legalistic, divisive within churches, and – I, along with numerous others believe – rife with the potential for harm to babies and children. How this has emerged from the original intent is unknown; perhaps it is due to mankind's sinful nature – a nature that doesn't disappear by becoming a parent.

It has been interesting throughout this examination of the GFI material to note the following: Babies are taught from the day of birth not to be demanding, and yet the parents are encouraged to be extremely demanding of their child's behavior. Children are not allowed immediate gratification (even as newborns), yet parents are given the right to have immediate gratification of every request ("first time, every time"). Babies are implicitly the bearers of the sin nature, while parents seem to embody the attributes of God's image bearers. Time after time, babies and children are expected to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their God-designed level of development in order to satisfy the (often-arbitrary) comfort of the parents.

What, if anything, does this all mean? Perhaps nothing. But perhaps the temptation to legalistically adhere to such a parenting model is related to an inability to tolerate one's own selfishness, sinfulness, and finiteness. Basically, it's saying, "I will project out those 'bad' aspects of myself I find intolerable to face or admit." Theologically, it relates to the underlying core of original sin: humankind struggling with his (or her) desire to be God. Socio-politically, it's played out through prejudice and injustice. Morally, it structures a system of obedience and "rightness" based on fear of punishment, abandonment, or disappointing others. It is regression to the Law and a rejection of grace. It is, emotionally and psychologically, a primitive level of narcissistic development we are designed to pass through in early childhood, but certainly not to act out in positions of authority and power as parents.

I'm certainly not saying that proponents of GFI are uniformly struggling with their own sinfulness; what I am saying is that this type of legalistic model in any discipline, whether it be parenting, political, or social, sets up a model that plays to the insecurities of individuals.

Further support of this concept comes from the overall tenor of the GFI material; hence, the "thank you for having courage" statements I have heard multiple times regarding my willingness to critically examine it. People are afraid to challenge, I believe, because of the shame and guilt flavor within the GFI material. If one loves God, if one wants to please God, one will, of course, use GFI. In fact, the implicit message throughout is that one is lazy, selfish, ungodly, or emotionally damaged if there is challenge to the GFI model – and similar charges have been made explicitly by GFI toward critics. It is a powerful message that stirs vestiges of the childhood need to please authority. The power seems to not be from scripture, however, but from the ability to induce shame and guilt in readers who both desperately long to raise their children in a way acceptable to God, and may be themselves vulnerable to the desire to please – compounded with fear of the resultant consequences if they don't. We all too frequently relinquish to man the desire to please authority that belongs solely to God. A brief review of history tells us the danger of such willingness, whether it be a political ideology or within the Church.

The GFI model contains a myriad of specific and detailed instructions for raising children. Within those instructions are gross distortions, blatant misrepresentations, and dogmatic assertions that are at best unsubstantiated, and at worst duplicitous. Perhaps these claims are made out of naiveté; perhaps from a desire to offer THE definitive model for godly parenting. Regardless of the reason, regardless of the intent, what was originally presented as "God's Way" often results in anything but. Age-appropriate, God-given needs are labeled as sinful. Mothers indwelt by the Holy Spirit are taught to ignore God's

moving within them as “emotional.” The knowledge of Christian medical and child development experts is being replaced by unsubstantiated opinion. Children are indirectly learning that God is first and foremost a God of rules, punishment, and control rather than the Author of unmerited love, freedom, mercy and grace.

It is a well-known concept that our image of our Heavenly Father originates in our internalized relationships with our earthly parents. As He provides the supreme model through His parenting of us, we are to emulate a model of Him to our children. Creating His reflection then, is what it truly means to grow kids God’s way.

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