Three Times the Bible Tells You to Quit Bugging Your Children

If you're reading this, odds are you are an involved parent. (Deadbeat parents don't tend to read publications subtitled, "Family Faith on the Go.") That said, let me add this: We could all back off our kids a little more. A 2013 study titled "Parent and Child Traits Associated with Overparenting" that appeared in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology found that kids whose parents are overly involved (aka helicopter parents) were more anxious, weaker at problem solving and less open to new ideas.

Below are three occasions when the Bible encourages us to try a little benign neglect and let our kids practice the values we've worked so hard to teach them.

Be Not Afraid

In both the Old and New Testaments and in more than 30 separate books – including all four Gospels – Scripture tells us not to be afraid. And yet the 24-hour news cycle of our society and our anxiety about the world in which we live leads us to ignore that advice. So, here we have nearly 100 separate instances of us being told not to be afraid, and we still don't listen – sounds like when I ask my kids to brush their teeth. The point is that we can breathe, give them a little room, let them make us proud, and trust that they will.

Let the Children Come to Me

Three out of four Gospels tell us that some of Jesus' followers brought children to him to be blessed. It must have been a big deal, because Matthew, Mark and Luke all thought it necessary to tell us about a moment that reads a bit more like

a rerun of HBO’s “Entourage” than a Scripture passage. In a misguided moment, the Bible says, the disciples spoke to those who brought the children and “rebuked them” (Mt 19:13). The apostles seemed to believe that things that are sacred must also be solemn; that children were to be kept at arm’s length, that they were somehow less able than grown-ups to appreciate what Jesus had to teach. Jesus knew better. He knew that children often learn better through experience unfiltered by (us) well-meaning adults.

The Prodigal Son

Nope, not that part. Not the ending where the father forgives the prodigal son and welcomes him home with the fatted calf. The beginning part. The part where the father lets the prodigal son take his part of the inheritance, who then blows it on “loose living” (Lk 15:13, RSV) and ends up wishing he could eat what the pigs are having. The part we often miss is that the prodigal son is not protected from his mistakes. He is not sheltered from them. He makes them and learns (the hard way) what a knucklehead he was. By the time he arrives home, he has changed. We parents of the 21st century can only pray we’ll have the strength to let our kids falter, fall and fail the way the prodigal papa did.