



DISCERNMENT—Teach children to see agendas.

Teaching Children to Recognize Hidden Agendas

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Why Discernment Is Critical

Most harm does not arrive announcing itself as danger.
It arrives as **attention, kindness, opportunity, flattery, or belonging.**

Children are naturally trusting. That is not a flaw — it is a strength.
But without discernment, trust can be exploited.

Discernment teaches children to notice *intent*, not just behavior.
It helps them understand that not everyone who is friendly is safe, and not everyone who offers something has their best interest at heart.

When my son was about three years old, I took him shopping in a large department store. He thought it was great fun to hide among the clothing racks and wait for me to find him.

After the third or fourth time, I realized we needed to have a conversation.

I explained that most of the people in the store were good people who would never hurt him. But I also told him there might be one person in the store who did not have good intentions and that was why he needed to stay close to me rather than wandering off by himself.

Something interesting happened.

He stopped hiding.

But he did not become fearful.

He learned an important lesson: most people are trustworthy, but not everyone is.

Discernment is not teaching children to fear people. Discernment is teaching children to recognize that not all people have the same motives, character, or intentions.



What Often Goes Wrong

Many parents assume discernment will develop on its own. It doesn't.

Children are often taught:

- “Be nice”
- “Give people the benefit of the doubt”
- “Don’t judge”

Without guidance, these messages can unintentionally train children to **ignore warning signs**.

Another mistake is teaching fear instead of discernment. Fear shuts children down. Discernment **sharpens awareness**.

What Discernment Actually Is

Discernment is the ability to ask:

- “What does this person want from me?”
- “Is this request for *my benefit* or theirs?”
- “Does this feel respectful or pressuring?”

Discernment is not suspicion of everyone. It is **awareness of motives**.

The Parent’s Role

Parents must actively teach children how to think — not just what to avoid.

This means:

- talking openly about persuasion
- naming manipulation when it appears
- helping children notice patterns
- observing changes in behavior after interactions

Discernment grows through conversation, not rules alone.



Real-Life Examples

Example 1: Everyday Discernment (Young Child)

Watch a commercial together.

Ask:

- “What do they want you to do?”
- “Do they want your money?”
- “Do you really need this?”

Children learn early that **not all messages are neutral**.

Example 2: Social Discernment (Elementary Age)

A child befriends someone who pressures them to break rules.

Instead of forbidding the friendship, ask:

- “How do you feel after being with them?”
- “Do they respect your no?”
- “Do they make things better or harder for you?”

Discernment teaches children to evaluate relationships, not blindly accept them.

Example 3: Grooming Awareness (Preteen / Teen)

A person offers:

- special attention
- secrecy
- gifts
- favors
- compliments tied to compliance

Teach children:

“Anyone who asks for secrecy or special access is crossing a line.”



Discernment and Kindness

Kindness does not require compliance.

Children can be:

- kind *and* firm
- respectful *and* cautious
- compassionate *and* protected

Discernment allows kindness to operate **with wisdom**, not naivety.

Teaching Discernment Through Questions

Use curiosity, not lectures:

- “What do you think their goal was?”
- “How did that make you feel?”
- “What would you do differently next time?”

Children learn best when they arrive at conclusions themselves.

Discernment in the Digital World

Online environments magnify manipulation.

Teach children:

- people online curate versions of themselves
- attention is often monetized
- images are designed to provoke emotion
- not all influence is obvious

Key rule:

“If someone benefits from your attention, they are influencing you.”



Common Mistakes Parents Make

1. Teaching blind trust
2. Avoiding hard conversations
3. Overreacting to early warning signs
4. Assuming good intentions equal safety

Discernment is learned — not assumed.

Discernment at Different Ages

- **Young children:** recognizing persuasion
- **Elementary:** evaluating friendships
- **Teens:** identifying manipulation and grooming

Discernment deepens with maturity and practice.

One Guiding Principle

Discomfort without explanation is still valid information.

Children do not need evidence to pause or leave.

Biblical Wisdom

"Test everything. Hold on to what is good."

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Discernment is not suspicion. It is not cynicism. And it is not fear.

Discernment is the ability to evaluate people, ideas, opportunities, and influences wisely.

Scripture does not call us to blindly trust everything we encounter, nor does it call us to assume the worst about everyone. Instead, we are encouraged to think carefully, ask questions, and evaluate what we see and hear.



Children are naturally trusting, which is one of their strengths. But trust without discernment can leave them vulnerable to manipulation, pressure, and unhealthy influence.

Teaching discernment helps children learn to ask:

- What does this person want from me?
- Is this for my benefit or theirs?
- Does this feel respectful or pressuring?
- Is this influence helping me grow or pulling me in the wrong direction?

Discernment allows children to remain kind and open-hearted while also becoming wise and difficult to deceive.

Wisdom does not require fear.

It requires learning to test what enters our lives and holding on to what is good.

"The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps."

— Proverbs 14:15

explains why:

Wise people think before they trust.

Practical wisdom/application

Most people hear:

"Test everything. Hold on to what is good."

and think about doctrine, theology, or false teachers.

That's certainly part of it.

But discernment applies to everyday life as well.

Imagine a parent teaching that verse to a teenager:

Someone wants you to keep a secret. —**Test it.**

Someone pressures you online. —**Test it.**

An influencer tells you happiness comes from buying something. —**Test it.**

A friend says, "Everybody is doing it." —**Test it.**



Someone asks you to ignore your discomfort. —**Test it.**

Discernment teaches children to pause, think, and evaluate before they trust, follow, or comply.

Final Takeaway

Discernment teaches children to be wise without becoming fearful.

It equips them to navigate a world where motives are not always transparent.

Children who learn discernment are harder to deceive — and far less likely to be isolated.

One Thing to Try This Week

Option 1: Watch a Commercial Together

Ask:

"What do they want from us?"

Option 2: Discuss a Friendship

Ask:

"What makes a good friend?"

"How can you tell when someone is using you?"

Listen more than you speak.

Option 3: Spot an Agenda

The next time you encounter:

- an ad
- a social media post
- a news story
- an influencer

Ask together:

"Who benefits if we believe this?"

Wisdom Principle: Test everything.