ADULTS SAVING KIDS

Founded by Alvin Erickson

Skill 3

Discernment

Teach children to see agendas.

Helping Children Look Beyond Appearances

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, and while that is a strength rather than a flaw, trust without discernment can easily 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.

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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 there might be one person 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: that most people are trustworthy, but not everyone is.

> *Discernment is not teaching children to fear people; it 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, but it doesn't. Children are often taught to "be nice," "give people the benefit of the doubt," and "don't judge." Without guidance,

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these messages can unintentionally train children to ignore warning signs. Another common mistake is teaching fear instead of discernment.

> *Fear shuts children down, whereas discernment sharpens awareness.*

What Discernment Actually Is

Discernment is the ability to evaluate motives by asking: "What does this person want from me?", "Is this request for my benefit or theirs?", and "Does this feel respectful or pressuring?"

> *Discernment is not a generalized suspicion of everyone; it is an active 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 behavioral patterns, and observing changes in behavior after interactions. Discernment grows through ongoing conversation, not through rules alone.

Real-Life Examples

EXAMPLE 1

Everyday Discernment (Young Child)

Watch a commercial together and ask key questions: "What do they want you to do?", "Do they want your money?", and "Do you really need this?" Children learn early that not all messages are neutral.

EXAMPLE 2

Social Discernment (Elementary Age)

When a child befriends someone who pressures them to break rules, avoid forbidding the friendship outright. Instead, ask evaluating questions: "How do you feel after being with them?", "Do they respect your no?", and "Do they make things better or harder for you?" Discernment teaches children to evaluate relationships rather than blindly accept them.

EXAMPLE 3

Grooming Awareness (Preteen / Teen)

When an adult or peer offers special attention, gifts, favors, or compliments tied to compliance, teach children to recognize the warning signs. Be especially cautious when someone asks them to hide a relationship, conversation, gift, or activity from their parents or another trusted adult.

Teach children clearly: "Anyone who pressures you to keep secrets from trusted adults or asks for access to your body, private information, or personal life in ways that make you uncomfortable is crossing a boundary."

Discernment and Kindness

Kindness does not require compliance. Children can be kind and firm, respectful and cautious, as well as compassionate and protected.

> *Discernment allows kindness to operate with wisdom rather than naivety.*

Teaching Discernment Through Questions

Use curiosity instead of lectures by asking: "What do you think their goal was?", "How did that make you feel?", and "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, making it essential to teach children that people online curate versions of themselves, attention is often monetized, images are designed to provoke emotion, and not all influence is obvious. A key rule to instill is:

> *"If someone benefits from your attention, they are influencing you."*

Common Mistakes Parents Make

Common parenting mistakes include teaching blind trust, avoiding hard conversations, overreacting to early warning signs, and assuming good intentions equal safety.

> *Discernment must be intentionally learned, not assumed.*

Discernment at Different Ages

Young children
Recognizing persuasion.

Elementary
Evaluating friendships.

Teens
Identifying manipulation and grooming.

Discernment deepens over time with maturity and practice.

One Guiding Principle

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Discomfort without explanation is still valid information.

Children do not need evidence to pause or leave.

Biblical Wisdom

SCRIPTURE

"But test them all; hold on to what is good,"

1 Thessalonians 5:21

Discernment is not suspicion, cynicism, or fear—it 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 greatest 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?", and "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.

SCRIPTURE

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

Proverbs 14:15

This proverb 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 directly to everyday life as well. Imagine a parent teaching that verse to a teenager: when someone wants you to keep a secret, when someone pressures you online, when an influencer tells you happiness comes from buying something, when a friend says "Everybody is doing it," or when someone asks you to ignore your discomfort. In each case: **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**.

THIS WEEK

One Thing to Try This Week

Option 1: Watch a Commercial Together

Watch a commercial together and ask: “What do they want from us?”

Option 2: Discuss a Friendship

Discuss a friendship by asking questions like “What makes a good friend?” and “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, or an influencer, ask together: “Who benefits if we believe this?”

Wisdom Principle: Test everything.

Scripture Acknowledgment

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