ADULTS SAVING KIDS
*Founded by Alvin Erickson*

Session 2

# Wolves Are Real

*Not Every Influence Has Your Child's Best Interests at Heart*

## Looking Beyond the Surface

In our first session, we talked about the many voices that influence children. Most influences are not inherently good or bad; teachers, coaches, friends, relatives, pastors, media, and technology can all play positive roles in a child's life. But not every influence is healthy. Some people seek to guide children, while others seek to use them. As parents and grandparents, we need to understand the difference.

## What Is a Wolf?

When the Bible speaks about wolves, it is describing people who exploit others for their own benefit. A wolf is someone who places their own desires, needs, ambitions, or pleasures above the well-being of another person. Not all wolves look dangerous. In fact, many appear kind, generous, helpful, charming, or trustworthy, which is often what makes them effective.

> *Children can be harmed by people they know, admire, trust, or depend upon—not just by strangers.*

## Wolves Do Not Announce Themselves

One of the greatest mistakes parents make is assuming harmful influences are always obvious—they are not. Manipulative people rarely introduce themselves as manipulative, and predators rarely introduce themselves as predators. People with unhealthy motives often gain influence gradually. They build trust, offer attention, meet needs, create dependency, and position themselves as the person who understands the child best. This process may take weeks, months, or even years, which is why awareness is so important.

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## Why Children Are Vulnerable

Every child has legitimate needs. Children need:

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|---|---|---|---|
| **Belonging** | **Acceptance** | **Encouragement** | **Identity** |
| **Purpose** | **Affection** | **Guidance** | |

Healthy adults help children meet those needs in healthy ways, whereas unhealthy adults often use those needs to gain influence. A child who feels lonely may be drawn to someone who offers friendship, a child who feels misunderstood may be drawn to someone who seems to listen, and a child searching for identity may be drawn to someone who offers acceptance.

> *The need itself is not the problem—the question is whether the influence is healthy.*

Before we can understand the role of a shepherd, we need to understand something about sheep. When Jesus described His followers as sheep, He was not insulting them; He was describing a reality. Sheep are vulnerable, easily led, do not always recognize danger, and can wander into situations they do not fully understand. Children share many of those same characteristics. Most children are not vulnerable because they are bad, but because they are young, still learning, lacking life experience, and have not yet encountered many of the manipulations, pressures, and deceptions that exist in the world.

As parents, we often evaluate our children by asking whether they are respectful, do well in school, have good friends, or are responsible. Those are important questions, but there is another question we should ask: Where might my child be vulnerable? A child can be intelligent, talented, well-behaved, and deeply loved—and still be vulnerable to manipulation, deception, unhealthy relationships, peer pressure, or harmful influences. That vulnerability is not a character flaw; it is part of being young. Understanding this changes how we parent: instead of assuming our children will simply figure things out, we begin preparing them for situations they have never faced before, which is why children need shepherds.

> SCRIPTURE
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> **Read Matthew 18:1–14.**
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> Jesus speaks His most severe warning: take advantage of one of my vulnerable ones and you will be in the eternal fire. And to make sure people get the message, He says it twice.

## One Grandfather's Wake-Up Call

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

For many years I believed that if children were raised in a loving Christian home, they would naturally be protected from most serious dangers. Life taught me otherwise. I learned that good children can still be manipulated, loving families can still be surprised, and strong values alone do not automatically prepare a child to recognize unhealthy influence. Children need more than protection—they need preparation. That realization eventually changed the direction of my life and ministry.

## Watching for Influence

One mother told me she became concerned whenever she noticed a sudden change in one of her children. A child who was normally cheerful became withdrawn, a child who was usually open became secretive, and a child who once enjoyed family conversations no longer wanted to talk. She learned not to panic, but she also learned not to ignore those changes. Children often communicate through behavior long before they communicate through words, and paying attention to changes can help parents identify influences that deserve a closer look.

## The Goal Is Not Fear

The purpose of this session is not to make parents fearful. Most adults who interact with children are good people doing valuable work, and the goal is not suspicion, but awareness. Parents who understand influence are better prepared to help their children navigate it wisely.

> *We do not prepare children by teaching them to fear everyone; we prepare children by teaching them to recognize healthy and unhealthy influences for themselves.*

THIS WEEK

### One Thing to Try This Week

Choose one of the following practical action steps to implement this week:

- Talk with your child about someone they admire and why they admire that person.
- Pay attention to any recent changes in your child's mood, friendships, or interests.
- Discuss with another parent the difference between healthy influence and unhealthy influence.

## Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to think about the following questions:

- When I think about danger to my child, do I tend to focus on strangers while overlooking people my child already knows and trusts?
- What needs might make my child vulnerable to unhealthy influence right now?
  - belonging
  - acceptance
  - identity
  - friendship
  - encouragement
  - attention
- If someone wanted to gain influence with my child, what approach would likely be most effective?
- Have I ever assumed that because my child is intelligent, responsible, or well-behaved, they are less vulnerable to manipulation?
- Do I know enough about my child's friendships, online activities, interests, and influences to recognize when something changes?
- If my child were approached by someone manipulative, would they feel comfortable talking with me about it?
- Am I spending more time trying to protect my child from danger, or preparing my child to recognize danger for themselves?

**The purpose of these questions is not fear—the purpose is awareness.**

Children do not become safer because we worry more; they become safer when we understand their vulnerabilities and intentionally prepare them for the influences they will encounter.

REMEMBER

## Key Takeaways

- **Not every influence in a child's life is healthy.**
- **Wolves rarely announce themselves.**
- **Harmful influence often develops gradually through trust and relationship.**
- **Every child has legitimate needs that can be met in healthy or unhealthy ways.**
- **Children are vulnerable, not because they are bad, but because they are still learning.**
- **Good children can still be manipulated.**
- **Awareness is not fear.**
- **Preparation is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give a child.**