

# OpenTheo

## #85 Should I have a vasectomy? And other family questions

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Is using punishments on children a form of coercion? What do you think about contraceptives? What children's resources would you recommend?

Resources mentioned in the show: Youth & Childrens Work

<https://www.youthandchildrens.work/> Sally Lloyd-Jones: <https://www.sallylloyd-jones.com/books/jesus-storybook-bible/> Bob Hartman:

<https://www.lionhudson.com/contributor/mr-bob-hartman> Andrew Peterson:

<https://www.andrew-peterson.com/the-wingfeather-saga> Phil Vischer: <https://mrphil.tv/>

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## Transcript

The #AskNTYRIGHT-Anything podcast. Hello and welcome along to the show once again, it's Justin Briley, Premier Theology and Apologetics editor sitting down with renowned New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, today, taking your questions on family and parenting and the show brought to you in partnership as usual with SBCK, Tom's UK publisher and N.T. Wright online who put out Tom's online video teaching courses. Got some really good news for you actually, we're going to be launching a new YouTube channel soon featuring all of the show material from the last two or three years and all of those questions that have come in and been answered by Tom.

Popular demand, this is responding to lots of people ask, "When are you going to get the show up on YouTube? We love it on podcast. We'd like to have it available on video too." So that's what we're doing. So look out for more about that coming soon this autumn.

We'll let you know more as soon as it's available. Thanks to Disc Golfa who got in touch on the podcast, left a review and a rating and said, "I'm so thankful that Tom and Justin sit down to answer listener questions. The podcast has been a real encouragement to me as I myself seek answers to difficult questions.

What I love about the show is you can tell that both Justin and Tom truly believe the gospel from the way they care for listeners. Both people that agree with them and especially those that hold a different view. Tom's humility in answering difficult questions while still clinging to the truth of Jesus is an inspiration.

Thank you very much. And if you can leave a rating and review of the show as a podcast, then that always helps others to discover the show as well. If you know someone who'd enjoy this podcast, why not tell them about it as well.

Right now, time to get into today's program.

[Music] Well, welcome back to today's show and we're taking your questions on parenting, children and even books for children as well on today's show. Tom, you're a parent and a grand parent.

I think you've spent some time recently with the family in Scotland and was a chance to draw together. I think much of your family, not all of it. How many children and grandchildren do you actually have at this point? Maggie and I have four children and from those four children, we have six grandchildren.

Our first three children have one each and our youngest son has three who range those grandchildren range from 16, the oldest down to I guess he's about eight months now, the youngest. So it's been a rich time with much to and fro and they don't see each other very often, but it's lovely when the cousins do get together because especially the three oldest ones being only children, the cousins are in a sense the most important relatives they have in their generation. So this has been very exciting for Maggie and me to be with them and to watch them and learn from them and try and steer them in a sense in some of the right directions perhaps.

One of the most commented on shows that we had was not for the theology but for the lovely moment when one of your grandchildren interrupted you asking for a pack of cards. That was me. Yes, it was really cute.

Anyway, look, obviously many people who write in are at that stage in their life where they're still raising children and well I'm interested in these questions because I'm in that stage of life myself along with my wife Lucy. But Nicole in Missouri USA wants to ask about discipline and bringing children up and that sort of thing. Firstly, you want to know if there are any parenting resources you recommend but given that you've talked so much about the subversive nature of living in the kingdom of God, I'm wondering how

you would apply that thought to parenting.

So here's again, I'll read this out in full Nicole's sort of background here to her question. She says, "I do my best to parent out of rest and peace to build relationships and trust as I decipher my children and point them to Jesus." Part of this means I don't use punishments of retribution or consequences intended to make them feel bad about what they did like spankings or timeouts, taking away privileges, adding chores, etc. Because I don't think it's right to send the message I get to cause you pain if you don't do what I say.

Now to me that screams empire. Of course, I do train them in what's right, I hold them accountable to their actions, allow the natural consequences of changing things in the environment to make sure everyone is safe and respected, I help them build skills and reliance on the holy spirit that will hopefully help them make a different choice next time and I teach them how to restore relationships and make amends. It's generally referred to as positive, peaceful, respectful, gentle or conscious discipline for reference, but using punishments or consequences to try to make my kids a baby seems coercive and manipulative.

But as you might imagine, I get a lot of pushback on this. I'm told I'm not parenting my children in a biblical way. I've done quite a bit of study in this and feel that those who tell me these things are pulling six verses out of context and are trying to make scripture answer questions that the text isn't asking.

But sometimes I do wonder if maybe I'm the one not honoring the scriptures since I'm going against a long standing tradition. Anyway, all of that to ask Tom, if you might feel comfortable addressing this, what does it look like to parent from a place of rest and peace in light of Jesus' finished work on the cross? And what are perhaps some Christian parenting resources you feel comfortable recommending? So there you go, Nicole, obviously feels that she's happy with the way she's doing it, but has been told that it's not the biblical way of doing it, Tom. Yeah, yeah.

No, I do see that. And I apologize, though I did read the questions when you sent them a little while back. I haven't actually had the time since then to look up even online parenting resources that I might approve of.

A long time ago when Maggie and I were parents for the first time, i.e. 40 years ago, I did read a few books then on parenting, some of which I sort of approved of and some of which I didn't. And I wouldn't want to go back and revisit that now because I'm sure there's a massive other stuff which is out there. I think as well, there's such a cultural variance between America, Britain, different parts of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, etc.

And all that we do and say in this regard is yes, it should be driven by the gospel, but it should also be wisely rooted within local culture. And subverting that local culture of the

culture is, for instance, irreducibly violent or whatever, as some cultures tragically are, and especially in parts of the world where, for instance, violence against women and girls is just the norm, which strikes terror into my heart because I've never lived in a world like that. And I think a lot has changed when I was younger, when I was growing up, then being beaten spanked as a punishment was kind of normal.

It didn't mean you're a bad person or altogether. It just means you've stepped over the mark here and we want to try and help you realize this is not a good way to be. Now myself now, if I was starting again, I wouldn't want to go that route.

It's been very interesting for Maggie and me watching our own children as they are bringing up their children, and particularly our youngest son who has three children, there's a close interaction between those three children. And sometimes when three children are indoors together doing stuff, there are going to be bits of friction and the parents have to deal with that friction while respecting each of the individual participants. And I've learned a certain amount from observing how that goes.

I think the idea that you never punish in the sense of never withdrawing privileges or never imposing time out or whatever, I would think that's going a bit far. And I think the language of coercion and manipulation, which is very much a boo word in some parts of our culture today, may be unhelpful there, because actually these small people do need to be guided into the right paths. And if guiding means actually saying, no, sorry, there's a guardrail on the side of the road.

And it's there for a reason, namely, if you stray too far over that way, there's traffic coming the other way, and there'll be a big crash. So it seems to be putting guardrails around our children's lives and saying, no, sorry, if you persist in going that way, we're going to have to have time out. And I'll come and talk to you about it, if you like, helping them to think, helping them to be wise, so that it isn't, you know, the Psalm says, don't be like a horse or mule with no understanding whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, just in case.

We've got to become people and to train our children to be people who realize that some things really are deeply unwise. And I look back to times when my parents said a very firm no to me, which I am, oh my goodness, I'm grateful they did that, because I was about to go over a cliff or whatever. And if that means timeouts, if it means appropriate withdrawal of privileges, I would do that.

In terms of smacking, of beating, whatever, I know that is commanded in certain passages in the Bible, particularly in Proverbs. It's very interesting that it isn't reinforced in the New Testament, and that Paul says to parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. That's leaving it quite open, but there are some parameters there.

Don't do stuff which would make your children get resentful. They'll be resentful for a minute, of course, if you take away privileges or whatever. But there's a wisdom there, just as Paul also gives commands to children, children obey your parents, because as a general rule, the parents have your best interests at heart.

They may not always get it right, but this is a good place to start while you're growing up. So I think we have to be very careful about being too prescriptive one way or another, but to follow Jesus with the rule of love, realizing that God's love is very, very demanding. It isn't soft soap stuff.

God loves us so much that he doesn't want to leave us as sinners as we are. God wants to direct us into the paths of wisdom and truth. So we have to be people who know how to do that with our families.

That's tough. I recognize it. I see it in my own family, but that's where we've got to go.

Yes. In terms of recommending some resources, by the way, and I fully understand, Tom, you're not a stage in your life where you'd be necessarily interacting with these sorts of things at the moment. But from Premier, at least, who produces podcasts, Youth and Children's Work is a great digital resource where we resource not only those who run youth groups in churches, but also parents with helpful resources on how to share their faith and bring up children and all sorts of contributors to that.

But I'll make sure there's a link from today's podcast to that. [Youthandchildrens.work](http://Youthandchildrens.work) is the website if anyone wants to avail themselves of that. We'll come to some other resource suggestions a bit later.

This is another interesting one, Tom. We get all kinds of questions into the show, I tell you, and this was one that maybe stop and think, "Korren, in New Jersey, USA, wants to ask about having a vasectomy, stopping having children." Says Tom and Justin, "My husband and I are both big fans of the podcast. Thanks for the time you take to do it." So we have two children, an almost three-year-old girl, and an almost one-year-old boy.

We absolutely adore them. Thank God for them. But we're pretty sure that is wise for us to be done having any more children for multiple reasons, respecting our physical, emotional, and financial limitations.

Now, we want to give our two kids the energy and resources we can give them and not divide ourselves between any more children as we're also both working. We also feel like we have very little time and energy for one another right now, which is hard. So first off, any encouragement and advice to very tired parents in the trenches would be deeply appreciated.

But secondly, what advice do you have as far as considering a vasectomy as a contraceptive option? We pause a little at the permanence, but we also have come to

realize that God has blessed us as a very fertile couple. We just want to invest in the kids we already have. Any advice or other things you would think we should consider when weighing our options? So two different questions there, obviously.

Firstly, any advice on parents who are obviously in that very tiring point of life, young children, both working, trying to keep everything running in the house. And then perhaps your thoughts on, well, you know, contraceptive issues and where you, if you think there are any sort of, yeah, specifics we should be aware of. Yes.

I mean, the question of being tired parents, that's almost saying the same thing in two different ways. If you've got young children, you are going to be tired. And you need to have kind of safety mechanisms that you need to maybe if one of the children is still being bottle fed or whatever, you know, a night on and a night off so that you're getting at least one night sleep out of two or three or whatever it may be.

And it's very difficult when both are trying to work, especially to balance that out and to give one another the space that we need. And there are many, many families around the world, you know, thinking simply in terms of modern Western European or American families, it's still difficult enough there. But if you imagine yourself in many other parts of the world, it's hugely difficult and you just have to get through as best you can.

And to recognize what tiredness does to you in terms of whether it's being short-tempered or depressed or whatever it may be. And those are real issues. And we have to be able to talk about them with one another and perhaps be part of support group of other young families.

And if you're in a church, which has a family's ministry or whatever level, to be able to share frustrations and anxieties and so on with others, that's a great help because we're none of us alone in this. There are many, many people going through it all the time. And obviously Maggie and I, we had our four children within seven years.

Our oldest of the four was not quite seven when the youngest was born. So my goodness, looking back now, how did we manage? I have no idea. Partly because I have an amazing wife who managed to do what she did.

So I would say that there is no easy answer, but we do need to take evasive action and to find ways through maybe there's an aunt who can come by and help from time to time. Or maybe there are times when we can dump them with grandparents for two or three days. Speaking hours of grandparents, I want to say, yes, do that please.

We will then be exhausted at the end of it, but that's fine. We're happy to help from time to time with that. So find wise patterns of support in terms of limiting the size of one's family.

That that's been an ongoing debate for a long time within many churches actually. And it

seems to me that most churches would say now that there are wise medical ways of limiting the size of one's family. Different people have different views on this in China recently.

There was what for quite a long time. It was absolutely one child and no more. They've now extended that because they've suddenly realized they're going to be a nation of old people.

And that's a very odd way of social engineering. In modern Britain and North America, two always seems to me rather a small number, but then I was one of a family of four and we've had four. So who am I to say? But it seems to me, whichever medical route or quasi medical route you go, there are various ways of addressing this question.

And I would say all bets are on. Pray about it, discuss with a pastor, discuss with your doctor what may be best for you. I would say don't rush into something, but yes, there may well be routes like the one you describe, which might be right for you.

But I would say don't be too hasty. Think about it, pray about it, and then okay, this is like marriage itself. Certainly a vasectomy is a lifetime decision pretty much.

I mean, there may be medical alternatives now later down the track, who knows? But in general, that's that's it for life. Okay, if you're comfortable with that, going to live with that for the next half many years, then if that is right for you, okay, I wouldn't say no to it. You don't tend to have sympathy, Tom Ford, obviously the Catholic approach on this, which is that any sort of way of inhibiting your natural fertility is wrong in that way.

I understand that though. I think the Roman Catholic approach has been grown out of a kind of natural theology, a kind of supposed law of nature, which actually I think has been too finicky as though, you know, within a marriage, every act of intercourse takes place within a larger narrative and to insist that every act of intercourse must itself in and of itself be capable of producing children. I think misses the point of what the married state and the married life is all about.

And I don't want to be rude about the Roman Catholics because they have struggled in a way which many of the rest of us haven't to think things through. And I admire and applaud that. But it's very interesting that if you start with natural law or whatever, then you're arguing out of a creation which is itself groaning in travail, interesting metaphor granted the subject matter, rather than starting with the notion of new creation, where as we see in the New Testament, all sorts of things are now happening which you wouldn't have been able to deduce from a natural law based on the creation as we observe it.

So there are huge issues there which I wouldn't want to get into. And I haven't actually had this conversation very often with my Roman Catholic friends. But when I do, I sense

still a disquiet that the theological development of that particular topic in Catholic thinking may need to be revisited, but it's very hard to revisit it because of the structure of the way Roman Catholic theological development actually happens.

So I kind of respect it, but it seems to me they've dug themselves into a hole which it's quite difficult to get out of, leaving quite a lot of couples feeling just a little bit guilty because they're doing something at the Pope said you shouldn't do, or they're not doing something which Pope said you should do, and that has caused a lot of people anxieties about other aspects of the faith. And it seems to me that's a shame to put yourself into that position. Let's talk about a few resources that we might be able to recommend.

Firstly, Wesley in Ohio says, "You've been very influential, Tom, in helping my wife and I understand God's purposes for earth and hope for the resurrection. Now we both grew up in churches that overemphasized heaven as a destination, and even now in our current church we feel like Platonist references and ideas separating us from the resurrection everywhere. Now we really want to help ground our children's understanding of the resurrection, but there are very few books for toddlers and older that are grounded in our embodied future.

Just today we've got a book about Easter, but at the very end it says that Jesus rose again so that we could go to heaven. It doesn't even mention our own resurrection. So any books to recommend to young children, and have you considered writing a series for different ages? I'm sort of surprised by hopes been awful for younger people I suppose.

Now again I'm not expecting you to be boned up on all the latest children's resources that are out there, Tom, but I don't know, just in terms of perhaps even the classics and that sort of thing. Where would you go if trying to help children to engage these ideas? I mean I grew up with the Narnia stories. They were being published as I and my sister who's close to me in age were children and my mother read them to us one by one in first editions, and I still think they're wonderful.

However Lewis himself was a sort of Platonist and at the end of one of the Narnia stories, old Professor Kirk shakes his head and says it's all in Plato, it's all in Plato, bless me, what do they teach me in these schools? And I now think no it isn't, it's all in the Bible actually. Plato will take you in the wrong direction, but Lewis did believe in the bodily resurrection and he did believe in a very solid new creation. I just don't think he ever reconciled those so that at the end of the last battle, the last in the sequence of the Narnia stories, and there is a whole new creation further up and further in, and I think that's where Lewis's biblical Christianity actually overcomes his Platonism, but it leaves all sorts of loose ends on the way as a children's story is bound to do.

You can't knock all the balls into all the holes all at once. And sadly, because I haven't been parenting close up myself over the last many years, I haven't been seeing what's out there or sharing in parents discussion groups to see what else is there. Over against



some others, I do think that there are strong Christian themes in the Harry Potter novels.

I haven't read all of them, but I think I read the first three in the last one. And the first one is quite unashamedly, redemption comes through self giving love, which sounds to me rather like a Christian theme. And there are other things in Harry Potter.

I know some people are very scared about Harry Potter. We've had that discussion, I think, on the program before, but I'm afraid and I would love to know what people think. And if you or they have got ideas, I'd be happy to pass them on to my children for the benefit of their grandchildren.

But I'm not up in that current children's Christian literature world. Yes. And I've got to say, actually, I think probably Wesley puts his, in my experience, at least the finger on it, that actually there aren't, frankly, that many books aimed at children and young people that really do actually engage this more nuanced understanding of the kingdom of God and so on.

And that hopefully, as a new generation of theologians and creatives arise, is something that we can start to see. And I think these things often take time to percolate into the general culture. But having said all that, you know, some books that I've always found very helpful just on a biblical front, you know, Sally Lloyd Jones' storybook Bible is very good at helping to develop the bigger narratives and themes rather than just sort of speaking into, you know, just sort of using sort of moralistic tales and that sort of thing.

That here in the UK, Bob Hartman has some excellent books as well on that level. I haven't, Bob Hartman, I don't know if you've come across books. I don't know.

Yeah. No, he's a wonderful, both a performer and storyteller, and he's written lots of wonderful books. Actually, one of them with Paul LaGouda recently, who you know, of course.

Paul was a student of mine, I'm proud to see. Indeed. Indeed.

Now, I haven't read these, but I've heard they've come highly recommended. Andrew Peterson is a singer-songwriter in the USA, and he's recently written a children's book series called The Wing Feather Saga, which I think is very much inspired by Tolkien and Lewis and others. But I think, again, I've heard great things about that being very much in a very imaginative fiction series that really does is really grounded in a sort of a Christian worldview and, you know, not simply how to get to heaven type of worldview.

It'd be wonderful if you could put those in a link, both for my benefit and for the benefit. Yes, I will. I'll pursue them.

Great. And lastly, a friend of this show and the unbelievable show, Phil Vischer, who for years has been the sort of the Disney of the Christian world in terms of he produced

what many evangelical parents will know of as veggie tales. He's produced these wonderful sort of talking vegetables stories.

He's gone on to do some really interesting work as well in other ways. He's what's in the Bible series, puppeting and that sort of thing, actually takes pretty grown-up themes, if you will, and transplants them into a very helpful, creative, fun children sort of setting. Great.

And so those are just a few recommendations from me at least as someone who has been parents and children in more recent years. And we will link to some of those. And as I said at the beginning of the show, youthandchildrens.work is our sort of place for all of that from Premier.

Final question, Tom. This is a quick one. But a couple of people, Elmeri in New Zealand and Felicia in Florida wants to know, are you thinking of writing a children's book or taking some of your work and putting it into a children's Bible of some kind? What's your answer? I have written the text for a children's Bible, which at the moment is being illustrated.

And I've been going to and fro with the publishers about the illustrations and how they should work because a children's Bible in the nature of the case has comparatively few stories compared with the whole Bible. So this question, how you select and arrange. But also very few words per story, so that I think I've got 150 stories and I'm allowed 150 words per story give a take.

So that's very tight so that the illustrations have to carry a lot of the sequencing and the larger themes for which there just isn't the space in the words. But I've been determined to include Paul in there, which most children's Bibles don't, to make it quite clear that the end of the story is Revelation 21 and not, you know, that you know, there's New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth and not the other way around. I wait to see if we can get the illustrations to work so that this actually comes across.

I'm always rather touched when people, no doubt, seeking help for me to fill the long blank hours of my retirement, come up with all these wonderful extra projects for me to write. I do actually have one or two things I want to do without sitting down to do a CS Lewis Narnia series. Thank you very much.

Wouldn't that be nice? I'm sure my publishers would be delighted if I suggested such a thing. I do not know that I have the capacity even to begin it, but still. Well, there you go.

I mean, well, I mean, how old was Lewis when he started writing Narnia? He must have been into his 50s, was he? Into his 50s. I mean, Lewis died quite young. He was born in 1898, died in 1963.

So he's only 65. No, I'm 72. So I'm obviously passed my prime for all that stuff.

Well, anyway, whatever it might look like, look forward to seeing what emerges. I'm sure we'll talk about it when it emerges. But for the moment, thank you very much, Tom, for giving your thoughts as a parent and a grandparent.

And I hope this has been helpful to any parents and grandparents listening. For now, thanks very much and see you next time. Thank you for listening to today's show.

And next time on the program, deconstructing faith and atheist objections. That's what Tom will be tackling. And we've heard a lot of stories recently, haven't we? Of major Christians deconstructing their faith, well, Tom will be responding to some of that and some listener questions.

Just a reminder that you can find out more about our show partners, NT Right Online and SBCK with the notes in today's show. And we're excited to let you know that thanks to popular demand, we'll soon be launching a YouTube channel where all of the video versions of this show will be able to be accessed. To find out more about the program at [askNTRight.com](http://askNTRight.com), if you can support us, we'll send you an exclusive show ebook as well, 12 answers to questions about the Bible, life and faith.

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