

study guide for

Parenting Beyond Belief



On Raising
Ethical,
Caring Kids
Without
Religion

with contributions by

Richard Dawkins, FRS	James Herrick
Mark Twain	David Koepsell, JD, PhD
Penn Jillette	Amy Hilden, PhD
Bertrand Russell	Amanda Metskas
Julia Sweeney	Amanda Chesworth
E.Y. "Yip" Harburg	August Brunsman IV
Dr. Jean Mercer	Ed Buckner, PhD
Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons	Robert E. Kay, MD
Tom Flynn	Dan Barker
Kristan Lawson	Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dr. Donald B. Ardell	Margaret Downey
Stephen Law, D.Phil	Rev. Dr. Roberta Nelson
Bobbie Kirkhart	Matt Cherry
Noell Hyman	Emily Rosa
Stu Tanquist	Anne Nicol Gaylor
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how to use this study guide



Parenting Beyond Belief is the first major book devoted to the joys and challenges of raising children without religion. It includes contributions from over thirty writers living in three centuries and writing from a wide variety of perspectives. This study guide is intended to walk readers through some of the salient points and issues raised in the pages of *PBB* while encouraging a deeper engagement with some of the questions underlying the essays.

The guide can be used as a reader's companion or as a discussion guide for groups. In either case, the study guide – like the book itself – is intended only as a starting point. These resources can serve as a catalyst for complex and often long-overdue conversations about faith, reason, ethics, wonder, honesty, knowledge, fear, hope, and what it means to be human—conversations that should form the heart and soul of our parenting and our explorations of ourselves.

Questions and comments are welcome and encouraged. Please contact editor Dale McGowan at dale@ParentingBeyondBelief.com or visit www.ParentingBeyondBelief.com.

About the cover:

The image on the cover has become one of the most discussed aspects of the book. The FAQ in the following pages addresses the question, but book groups might consider beginning with their own discussion of that image:

- What was your very first reaction to the image, and how did that reaction change?
- There are many symbolic elements present. How many ways can you interpret the image?
- What are the plusses and minuses of having a symbol with multiple meanings on a book of this type?

Answers to some common questions about **Parenting Beyond Belief**

Is this the first such book?

There have been some excellent shorter books and booklets on parenting without religion, with more limited scope and by smaller presses. *Parenting Beyond Belief* is the first comprehensive parenting book by a major publisher on raising children without religion. We hope it isn't the last!

How big is the audience for this kind of book?

Enormous—and growing. In 1990, 8% of respondents to a USA Today poll identified themselves as non-religious. By 2002 that sector had grown to 14.1%. A minimum of seven million non-religious parents are raising children in the U.S. today—and doing so with limited resources. It is estimated that over 10 million “nominally religious” parents attend church for social and structural benefits and would welcome a secular parenting book.

Why do secular parents need a resource specifically for them?

Religion has much to offer parents: an established community, a pre-defined set of values, rites of passage, a means of engendering wonder, comforting answers to the big questions, and consoling explanations to ease experiences of hardship and loss. *Parenting Beyond Belief* demonstrates the many ways in which these undeniable benefits can be had without the harmful effects of religion. It is also intended to show secular parents, who often feel isolated in their disbelief, that they are far from alone.

You mention “the harmful effects of religion.” What harmful effects?

Honest questioning is too often disallowed in religion, the word “values” turned on its head, and an “us-vs.-them” mentality reinforced. Many feel that fear—of God, sin, doubt, and difference—is more prevalent with religion than without, and that children often learn to obey authority rather than develop their own judgment.

Does the book intend to convert parents away from religious parenting?

Not at all. The book is a resource to help parents who have *already* decided to raise their children without religion to do it well. Many religious readers have praised the tone of the book, which encourages co-existence, not conflict. Anything that helps parents to be better parents, regardless of their beliefs, is a good thing.

How can you not believe in God when...[fill in the blank]?

A fine question, but that's not our topic. Though the book includes one essay with the classic arguments for and against religious belief, that's not the main purpose—and if we spend too much time arguing about disbelief itself, we will *never* get to parenting! Readers wishing to engage those fascinating and worthy questions should look to the many outstanding books exploring basic questions of religious faith and doubt. This book is for those who have *already* investigated those questions and decided that religion is not for them.

Should religious believers feel threatened by this book?

Quite the opposite. A quick glance through the contents shows that believers and nonbelievers share most of the same values. Like people of religious faith, nonbelievers value love, honesty, kindness and generosity, are captivated by wonder and moved by the mysterious, seek consolation in times of loss, and treasure the companionship of others. We want to raise children who are ethical and caring. Nonetheless, polls indicate that nonbelievers are the most mistrusted and feared minority in the U.S. This fear is groundless—and this book can comfort people of faith by helping them realize that there is nothing to fear from nonbelievers. Our shared dreams for our children show that we are far more alike than unlike.

Isn't the book just encouraging indoctrination in a different direction?

It would be dishonest for secular parents to limit their children's freedom to think for themselves, especially in questions of belief. And honesty emerges in the book as one of the most heartfelt values among nonbelievers. Honesty, after all, is what led us to question religion in the first place. Author after author in this collection underlines the importance of creating a truly honest and open environment without indoctrination of *any* kind.

Is the book disrespectful toward religious people?

Some of the contributors are quite straightforward in their disagreement with certain *ideas*, but never disrespectful toward religious people themselves. The book takes the basic position that religious belief is an understandable human phenomenon—though at times an unfortunate one—and that the beliefs themselves can be questioned honestly without belittling the people who hold them.

Do the thirty contributors always agree?

Not by a long shot! One of the strengths of the book is that it practices what it preaches by offering a diversity of opinions. What other book would have two ministers and Penn Jillette? There's even a point-counterpoint in which two authors square off on the question of what to do with the Santa Claus story in secular families. And this is precisely the model we want to present to our kids—not lockstep agreement, but a healthy, open, friendly exchange of ideas and an invitation to sort it out for yourself.

What topics are covered?

The book begins with personal essays (by such secular parents as Julia Sweeney, Penn Jillette and Richard Dawkins), followed by chapters titled Living with Religion, Holidays and Celebrations, Being and Doing Good, Meaning and Purpose, Dealing with Death, Questioning, the Wonder of Science, and Seeking Community.

How can children be taught moral behavior without religion?

The chapter titled "Being and Doing Good" is devoted to this very topic. Behaving morally makes *sense*, and most people behave well for sensible reasons—even if they think they are relying on commandments. Psychologist Dr. Jean Mercer contributed an essay describing the six stages of moral development. Children are more likely to move to the higher levels of development and to retain a more nuanced and reliable moral sense if they learn the reasonable principles of ethical behavior than if they rely on parental or scriptural authority.

Dealing with death must be a challenge.

It always is, isn't it? Even those who believe in an afterlife tend to cry at funerals and try hard to delay their own passing. There's no greater challenge for a human being than knowing life will end. But an increasing number of people have come to believe that the mature thing to do is to come to terms peacefully with mortality rather than pretending we don't die after all. The insights of philosophers on the topic are included in the book, including some really valuable consolations.

What could possibly replace Heaven as a consolation in the face of death?

First of all, don't forget that along with hope of Heaven comes fear of Hell. The naturalistic view dispenses with *both*. Most of our remaining fear of death is based on our failure to really grasp nonexistence—something we already "experienced" before birth, after all. We weren't afraid then. Why fear a return to that fearless condition? The Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons has written a marvelous, practical essay for the book on how to talk to children about death without recourse to supernatural illusions.

What's a minister doing in a book about raising kids without religion?

There are two, in fact. Kendyl Gibbons and Roberta Nelson are ministers in the Unitarian Universalist denomination. Many people aren't aware that the majority of UUs are nonbelievers who still want the other benefits of belonging to a church fellowship. Kendyl's experience of taking secular families through grief and loss is powerfully evident in her writing. Dr. Nelson writes about the need for religious literacy.

Isn't it important for kids to feel part of something larger than themselves?

Sure it is. Fortunately as human beings we are already part of many things larger than ourselves. Our families, our communities, humanity, and the interconnected web of life on Earth are just a few examples of larger things that give us purpose and context. Setting religion aside does not suddenly make us islands unto ourselves. It can and should underline our interconnectedness and reliance on each other.

The cover photo has raised some eyebrows.

It has indeed. The beautiful cover image of two hands with palms together is a sort of Rorschach test that reveals and challenges our preconceptions. Christianity inherited this gesture as a position of prayer from pagan religions in the ninth century, so "prayer" leaps first to the Western mind. But in the East, the same gesture is called the *anjali mudra* and signifies a respectful greeting between equals.

After a moment looking at the cover, we realize they aren't praying hands after all—we're seeing the hands of two different people, an adult and a child. But the influence of religion is so strong that many of us will *still* see only prayer. A more fitting idea might be this: **when we move beyond belief, we turn not to a god but to each other, with mystery and meaning undiminished.** The image also celebrates the parent-child bond—some even see it as a parent-child "high five"! This rich and multifaceted image, like the book itself, challenges us to see possibilities beyond the religious.

Do you expect opposition to the book?

A little of that can be expected, and honest debate is welcome. But many readers who were worried that it would be "anti-religious" have expressed pleasant surprise after reading it. "Remarkably even-handed" is a common response. Though some contributors are strongly critical of religion, others express a continuing affection for it. The first sentence of Julia Sweeney's essay, for example, is "I loved being Catholic." Others urge secular parents to be religiously literate, to empathize with believers, and to applaud the good works of religion—at the same time urging them to stand up against the hatred, ignorance and divisiveness that can also flow from religious belief.

So religion isn't all bad?

Of course not. Like most human creations, it's a mixture of good and bad. We should embrace the best elements while finding our way out of those that are undesirable. The most important freedom we can give our children is the freedom to *think*, to *discern*, to determine for themselves what's good and what's bad in anything. But when we place ideas beyond critique, the bad survives along with the good—and that's not good for anyone. Only if we agree to put all of our ideas on the table can we work together to separate those that are unworthy and life-destroying from those that are noble and life-affirming.

Chapter One PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Julia Sweeney Navigating Around the Dinner Table

In an essay at turns hilarious and touching, comedian Julia Sweeney recounts her own experience of growing up happily Catholic, gradually giving up her belief, then struggling to raise her adopted daughter without the convenient answers and simple religious comforts she had as a child.

QUESTIONS

1. Sweeney notes that she answered her daughter's question "What happens after we die?" with "To be honest, darling – we decompose." What was your reaction to that? Is there an age at which you think kids are ready for this level of directness? She went on to explain decomposition, rather poetically, as a return to the natural world. If you were initially shocked by the decomposition answer, did this approach help redeem the idea?
2. "No, we don't believe in things like that." How might a parent confidently voice and own his or her convictions while honestly allowing children room to think for themselves?
3. The author also recounts a wincingly familiar situation for secular parents in her daughter's "petulant and snotty" response to a religious statement by her grandmother. How can secular parents help children avoid crossing the line into disrespect in these moments while voicing their honest feelings?
4. Sweeney is the first of several authors in the book (see also Tanquist, Rosa, and Cherry) to discuss the Pledge of Allegiance dilemma. It's a sticky situation – as the Ninth Circuit noted, the constitutional case is open and shut: the words "under God" should not be part of a pledge recited in religiously neutral public schools. Most authors agree that kids should ultimately decide for themselves what to do – skip the pledge, skip "under God," substitute "under laws," mumble, or just go ahead and say it. But at what age are they able to make that choice – and how can parents best help and support them?
5. Julia Sweeney has had great success in telling the stories of her own religious "deconversion." What do you think accounts for her success in voicing religious criticism when other voices are often shut out?

Norm R. Allen, Jr. Thinking My Way to Adulthood

Norm Allen, Executive Director of African American Humanists, tells of growing up in a Baptist home with one unusual feature: an open invitation to question anything, even the existence of God, and an assurance that he would be loved and accepted no more or less based on his answers.

QUESTIONS

1. Despite growing up in a religious home, Norm Allen was able to think his way clear of religious ideology. What crucial factors made this possible?
2. Allen describes the fear of Hell as a constant and unnecessary "psychological burden" that he bore as a child. What are some other unnecessary burdens of fear that can haunt childhood, and how might parents alleviate them?
3. As Executive Director of the Association of African American Humanists, Norm Allen confronts what seems like a paradox: though the Bible was used as the primary affirmation of slavery and one of the main obstacles to the Civil Rights Movement, black Americans are overwhelmingly religious. Why do you think secularism tends (at the moment) to be overwhelmingly white and male?

Richard Dawkins, FRS
Good and Bad Reasons for Believing

On the tenth birthday of his daughter Juliet, Oxford biologist and ethologist Richard Dawkins gave her a letter describing something of singular importance to him: the value of evidence and honesty as the basis for our beliefs.

QUESTIONS

1. Dawkins wrote this letter to let his daughter know the high value he places on evidence as the basis for one's convictions. If you were to communicate a single highest value to your child in writing, what would it be, and at what age would you want it read?
2. Dawkins is often accused of being disrespectful in his attitudes toward religious ideas. He has answered by distinguishing between respect for people and respect for ideas, suggesting that the latter must be allowed if the word 'respect' is to have any meaning. What does 'respect' mean, and how is it different from 'agreement'? Are all ideas automatically respectable? How can we make this difference clear to our kids?
3. Unlike Sweeney, Dawkins encounters a great deal of resistance and criticism for his approach. What do you think accounts for this – and should he do anything differently? Are there specific passages in this essay that you would have rephrased? Why?

Emily Rosa
Growing Up Godless: How I Survived Amateur Secular Parenting

Emily Rosa (now a college student at CU Boulder) describes her own upbringing as a child in a secular family, including an usually public introduction to skepticism and the scientific method.

QUESTIONS

1. "Try not to raise grim, cynical, god-obsessed atheist children. Along with the usual secular values (such as appropriate tolerance/intolerance, morality, critical thinking, appreciation for reason and science), don't forget to impart social graces, playfulness, and humor." Rosa describes a very real pitfall. How can we best encourage critical thinking and skepticism in our children without engendering a "grim, cynical" attitude? Does your own parenting include enough playfulness and humor?
2. Even as a child, Rosa (with the support and encouragement of her parents) recognized an opportunity to positively and appropriately engage a type of non-critical thinking in our culture. List places your own child might find a similar opportunity (book reports, science fairs, class projects, etc). Discuss the challenges and opportunities inherent in such opportunities and how you would help your child to navigate them.

Bertrand Russell
from The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell

Philosopher Bertrand Russell lost his parents as a very young child. The courts ignored the instructions of his freethinking father to have him raised without religion—despite which, he became one of the foremost freethinkers of the 20th century.

QUESTION

1. "Wishing me to be brought up without superstition, [my father] appointed two Freethinkers as my guardians. The Courts, however, set aside his will, and had me educated in the Christian faith." How do you respond to the inevitable concerns of others for your children upon learning they will be raised without religion? Write an "elevator speech"—a concise response, ten seconds at most—that can address such concerns in a positive way.

Anne Nicol Gaylor I'd Rather Play Outside

Freedom From Religion Foundation founder Anne Nicol Gaylor remembers her upbringing in a freethought home and her interactions with religious neighbors and friends.

QUESTION

1. "I think a large number of people attend church for purely social reasons, and if families find their society elsewhere, the *raison d'être* for churchgoing just doesn't exist." Do you agree with Gaylor's assessment of the reason many people attend church? If so, do you feel a loss of that advantage (especially if you grew up in the church)? How do you fill that need without church?

Dan Barker My Father's House

Dan Barker's "de-conversion" from fundamentalist minister to freethought activist provides a fascinating backdrop for his reflections on parenting. Dan first raised children in a Christian home and now raises a daughter in a freethought home.

QUESTIONS

1. Barker notes that his daughter is free to choose her own beliefs but admits that he and his wife would be "disappointed" if their daughter chose a religious worldview—and would love her no less. Would you be disappointed if your child adopted religious beliefs? Would your level of disappointment depend on the denomination or degree of dogma in question—for example, Buddhist, Episcopal, Pentecostal, Baptist, Catholic?
2. Barker quotes Richard Dawkins' strong assertion that a child should never be labeled with a belief system—called, in other words, a "Catholic child" or an "atheist child." How do you avoid (consciously or unconsciously) labeling your own children with your beliefs? How can we prevent our children from labeling *themselves* too early—by declaring themselves to "know," at the age of six or nine or twelve, that God exists or doesn't exist?

Penn Jillette Passing Down the Joy of Not Collecting Stamps

Penn Jillette has been a nonbeliever for a long time but only recently became a father. He reflects on raising his kids without religion, noting that you don't have to "teach Atheism." An absence of religious indoctrination, he says, is enough to give kids room to think for themselves.

QUESTIONS

1. "Atheism is a religion like not collecting stamps is a hobby." Do you agree? How do you respond to those who suggest atheism is a religion?
2. Jillette urges secular parents to identify more visibly and more publicly as nonbelievers. Do you agree that this is important? What advice do you give your children, if any, about publicly voicing religious doubts?

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Chapter Two LIVING WITH RELIGION

Pete Wernick, PhD Parenting in a Secular/Religious Marriage

Marriages between partners of different beliefs present special challenges. For parents, the challenges are further increased. Pete, a humanist, and Joan, a Catholic, are both seriously engaged in their belief systems, yet by conscious planning and hard work, they've made a solid and lasting marriage and parenting team.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the specific ways in which Pete and Joan made this marriage and parenting team work where other “mixed marriages” (see Tanquist) have failed?
2. Do you know anyone in a religiously mixed marriage? What is the mix, and what are the issues raised?
3. Do you think there are some worldviews that simply cannot effectively mix in marriage or parenting? Which, and why?

Roberta Nelson, DD On Being Religiously Literate

Rev. Nelson suggests that knowledge of religion is an important part of cultural literacy and provides a number of ways to achieve that literacy without indoctrination.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the author's assertion that religious education is an important part of cultural literacy?
2. What might you add to her list of ways to promote religious literacy in your kids? What kinds of religious situations would you rather *not* have your children exposed to?

Stu Tanquist Choosing Your Battles

When Stu Tanquist married his wife, he was an apathetic agnostic and she was a devout Catholic. Over the years he became more skeptical of religious claims, which introduced friction into their relationship—especially related to their daughter. Eventually the dissonance became too great, the marriage ended, and Tanquist was raising his daughter with limited support, confronting many issues including religion in the public schools.

QUESTIONS

1. Some might say Tanquist's “two rules” about authority suggest anarchy or radical permissiveness. What is your attitude about parental authority? How do you communicate that to your children?
2. The Pledge of Allegiance makes another appearance here. Did you think the teacher was right to bring up Tanquist's daughter's choice? How would you respond in the same situation?
3. Religious influences are not uncommon in public schools. Choirs sing “Ave Maria,” teachers wear religious icons, and the Pledge includes reference to God. Some of these are not the least problematic, of course. Where do you draw the line? At what point do you say something—and how?

Margaret Downey
Teaching Children to Stand on Principle—Even When the Going Gets Tough

Margaret Downey's son had no problem identifying as a nonbeliever in his New Jersey Boy Scout troop—but when the family moved to Illinois, the new troop leader confronted the family and expelled Margaret's son. Margaret's essay describes her family's experience, placing it in the context of her own upbringing in a mixed-race family.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe the Boy Scouts of America, as a private organization, should have the right to exclude gays and atheists? If so, should limits be placed on their use of public resources, including presence in schools?
2. Is there a difference between excluding atheists and excluding Jews or Muslims?
3. If you think the exclusion is unacceptable, what is the best way to address it? How might Tanquist's list of considerations (*Choosing Your Battles*, sidebar, "Weighing the Options") come into play in your answer?

Ed Buckner, PhD
Secular Schooling

Why should secular parents support public schools (or oppose "vouchers")? Is moral education possible in secular public schools? Why should parents of all perspectives support the separation of church and state within public schools? Ed Buckner proposes answers to these questions and more, describing what separation is (and is not), and notes that secular schools are not the same as "atheistic" schools.

QUESTIONS

1. Give an elevator speech—no more than ten seconds— about the importance of religious neutrality in public schools.
2. When someone claims that public schools are "atheistic," how might you respond in a way that would not only counter the claim but put the person more at ease?
3. Why should people of religious faith *also* want religious neutrality in public schools?
4. How can you respond when claims are made that ours is a Christian nation, and that church-state separation is "a lie" or "historical revisionism"? As always, make your response as constructive as possible by empathizing with the questioner.

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Chapter Three HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

Jane Wynne Willson Humanist Ceremonies

Though religious expressions have come to dominate rites of passage and the marking of other important life events in much of the world, there are meaningful and emotionally satisfying ceremonies available to serve these intrinsically human needs without supernatural overtones.

QUESTIONS

1. Which of the ceremonies and celebrations described by Willson do you find most attractive—and which least? What do you think accounts for the difference?
2. How can you most comfortably welcome and involve religious relatives in humanistic events such as naming and coming-of-age ceremonies?
3. What are some respectful yet effective ways to address the desires of religious grandparents to have children baptized, confirmed, or otherwise involved in religious ceremonies?

Dale McGowan, PhD Losing the “Holy” and Keeping the “Day”

The calendar of holidays need not be diminished in the least when a family moves beyond belief. Most formerly religious holidays have a fully secular parallel expression today, with meaning intact. Add to that an array of new secular holidays to select from, and the possibilities are endless.

QUESTIONS

1. Which of the secular holidays described by McGowan seem worthwhile and attractive—and which seem contrived, possibly even making you roll your eyes? What do you think accounts for the difference?
2. How do you bring out the emotional and humanistic side of holidays without resorting to the supernatural?

Tom Flynn: Put the Claus Away Dale McGowan: The Ultimate Dry Run Noell Hyman: To Easter Bunny or Not to Easter Bunny?

It isn't the most urgent issue in the secular family, but the question of intentional childhood myths taps many of our central concerns, including honesty, fact and fiction, reward and punishment, and trust. Tom Flynn suggests we do away with the mythologies of childhood, while Dale McGowan and Noell Hyman find reasons to keep and even cherish them.

QUESTIONS

1. Many secular parents claim that children are traumatized when they learn the Santa story is a myth and that parent-child trust is jeopardized. Others say this concern is baseless, that children are often relieved at the restoration of sense, even excited to be on the adult side of the belief divide. Do you think the Santa myth is harmful to children? Were you upset or traumatized when you learned the truth?
2. Dale McGowan finds the Santa myth a useful and harmless critical thinking “dry run.” Do you agree? Are the parallels between religious belief and Santa belief meaningful, or overstated?

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Chapter Four ON BEING AND DOING GOOD

Gareth Matthews, PhD Morality and Evil

Secular parents may think they can avoid discussions of the problem of evil, but Gareth Matthews suggests otherwise. Making sense of the problem of evil, and the fact that evil often comes from good, is one of the central intellectual struggles of childhood.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of religious parenting in discussing morality and evil? What are the advantages and disadvantages for secular parents?
2. How might the Euthyphro Problem relate to discussions of parental authority?
3. Do you think questions of age-appropriateness come into play in questions of evil? In what ways, and why?

Jean Mercer, PhD Behaving Yourself: Moral Development in the Secular Family

Jean Mercer describes Kohlberg's six stages of moral development and the interplay of emotion and moral reasoning.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you think are the most important influences on the development of moral reasoning and moral behavior?
2. How can parents encourage moral reflection in children?
3. In what ways can parents help children move from simple reward and punishment models to the more advanced stages of moral reasoning?

David Koepsell, JD, PhD On Being Good for Good Reasons: Commandments vs. Principles

David Koepsell distinguishes between "commandments" and "principles" as the underpinnings of moral behavior. Rather than choosing between them, Koepsell suggests that morality tends to be grounded in a combination of the two.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between a commandment and a principle?
2. How effective is the Golden Rule concept in your own parenting?

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Chapter Five

VALUES AND VIRTUES, MEANING AND PURPOSE

Shannon and Matt Cherry

Double Vision: Teaching our Twins Pride and Respect

This essay, along with “Seven Secular Virtues” (McGowan), draws a distinction between pride and arrogance. Pride, properly understood as self-esteem, has long been recognized as an important human virtue. Shannon and Matt Cherry go on to a nuanced description of respect, noting a difference between respect for a person and respect for that person’s ideas—an understanding they hope to instill in their twin daughters.

QUESTIONS

1. The authors offer this summation of their main job as parents: “Seeking to bring out the best in our children so that they can have the best in life.” Write a one-sentence summation of what you consider to be your central task as a parent. The Cherrys’ sentence came in at eighteen words; see if you can be similarly concise.
2. The list of values we hope to instill is certainly long, but the authors selected two as the focus of this essay: pride and respect. Name the 2-3 values that top the list of those you hope to instill in your children.
3. Pride is variously depicted as the ultimate sin and (by Aristotle) as the crown of all the virtues. Discuss the different forms, positive and negative, that pride can take.

Dale McGowan

Seven Secular Virtues

Dale McGowan offers a list of seven “secular virtues,” not as a comprehensive list of human virtues, nor as a list that applies only to secularists. Like the traditional virtues, they are qualities to which we aspire – often with great difficulty.

QUESTIONS

1. The author says this list is “carved not in stone, but in butter,” inviting readers to add or subtract from the list. Make your own list of seven admirable qualities you wish to instill in your children. Try to limit yourself to seven.
2. McGowan says that nonbelievers too often fail to empathize with the religious impulse. Does the religious impulse seem utterly foreign to you? If so, what do you think accounts for the difference between your view and that of someone for whom it is not only comprehensible but indispensable?
3. Many readers are surprised to learn that the unchurched provide the lion’s share of volunteerism in the community, and that the more secular a wealthy country is, the more generously it gives to the developing world. Why do you think humanism as a life stance fails to get credit for these correlations?
4. In what ways do you encourage gratitude as a virtue in your children?
5. Compare the original seven virtues (faith, hope, charity, courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom) to McGowan’s seven (humility, empathy, courage, honesty, openness, generosity, and gratitude) and to your own seven from question 1. What are their respective strengths and weaknesses as moral imperatives? How much common ground is evident?

Donald B. Ardell, PhD
Supporting Your Children in Their Quest for the Meaning of Life!

Life without meaning and purpose would be unbearable. But there is no universal, inherent meaning that applies for everyone. What is called for, says Dr. Don Ardell, is a conscious quest for meaning.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you define your own meaning and purpose? How might you encourage your children to find their own meaning?
2. How do you know when you've hit on a purpose for your life that is authentic?
3. How would you respond to someone who worries that self-selected meaning and purpose leaves us free to choose anti-social or destructive purposes?

Annie Laurie Gaylor
What Your Kids Won't Learn in School

Freethought scholar Annie Laurie Gaylor presents a flying overview of some famous religious doubters, including many probable surprises. Such a list can serve as a counterpoint to the common assumption that the great figures of the past and present are believers.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think such a listing of famous freethinkers has merit? Why or why not?
2. Are there any surprises on the list for you—figures you had thought or assumed were religious believers?
3. It is common for religious parents to point out that this or that admirable person (Martin Luther King, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa) was devoutly religious. How can a secular parent most effectively draw a child's attention to the motivating disbelief of an admirable doubter without seeming to indoctrinate?

James Herrick
Parenting and the Arts

"If you are looking for comfort, if you are looking for consolation, if you want the meaning of life handed to you on a plate – don't go to the arts. Whether it is for parents or children, or their interaction, the arts can disturb and should not avoid the difficult areas of life. But art is not to be feared, for it can also stretch the imagination – art is wonderfully elastic, and it can stir creativity. Art is a wonderful stirrer, and a stirrer of wonder."

QUESTIONS

1. James Herrick suggests that the arts permit the exploration of such humanistic ideas as communality, diversity, human sympathy, otherness, freedom and truth. Considering the list of secular virtues you created earlier in this chapter, are there other aspects you might add to this list – other areas of human concern that literature, drama, and other arts explore?
2. Herrick names several pieces of literature for children that explore issues of human diversity, including *The Crucible*, *His Dark Materials*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Can you name others of particular value for teaching the acceptance of difference?
3. Discuss Herrick's assertion that "Art cannot be cheery – it must face the depths."

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Chapter Six DEATH AND CONSOLATION

Noell Hyman The End, As We Know It

Noell Hyman reflects on the difference between the conception of death she held as a Mormon and the naturalistic conception that now frames her discussions with her own children, whom she is raising without religion.

QUESTIONS

1. Hyman's retelling of conversations with her children will be familiar to many nonbelievers. Share a conversation that you have had with your own children around similar issues.
2. Hyman is one of several contributors who suggest that death is a topic of conversation to be embraced with children, not avoided or soft-pedaled. Are there any questions from a young child about death that you could see yourself deflecting or otherwise avoiding – violent death, death of the child's parents, the decay of the body, etc? Is your answer dependent on age?

Kendyl Gibbons, DD Dealing with Death in the Secular Family

In a wide-ranging essay, Rev. Kendyl Gibbons gives practical advice on how to help children understand and cope with death without recourse to supernatural illusions.

QUESTIONS

1. Have your children been touched by the death of a close friend or family member? Did you take the initiative in addressing it, or take questions as they arose? How did you feel about your ability to address their concerns?
2. Gibbons offers five affirmations to offer in the face of death: Acknowledge its reality, validate sadness, acknowledge the unknown, celebrate individuality, and affirm continuity of life. Are there other messages you think children should hear when contemplating death?
3. Are you concerned about what Gibbons calls the "cultural trivialization" of death by (for example) films, television, and video games? How might a parent best mitigate against such trivialization?
4. What would you say to someone who suggests that talking openly about death with children is "morbid"?
5. Without referring to a divine being who has a plan for humans, how can parents buffer or ease children's exposure to horrible human events like the Holocaust or Darfur?

NOTES

Chapter Seven WONDERING AND QUESTIONING

Mark Twain Little Bessie Would Assist Providence

Many of Mark Twain's late writings were explorations of his own disbelief and of the influence of religion. Little Bessie was a satire in several chapters that went unpublished during Twain's lifetime. It tells of the impertinent religious questioning of a wildly precocious little girl and her devout mother's appalled attempts to answer.

QUESTIONS

1. Christianity was a defining feature of the life and work of C.S. Lewis, a fact that is well known. Religious disbelief was a defining feature in the life and work of Mark Twain, a fact that is *not* well known. What do you think accounts for this difference? Does it matter?
2. Do you think Bessie raises valid questions and that her mother's stumped responses are realistic – or has Twain created a religious straw man?

Robert E. Kay, MD Thoughts on Raising a Creative, Curious, Freethinking Child

Child psychiatrist Dr. Robert Kay offers fifteen thoughts on raising children without religion.

QUESTIONS

1. It has been suggested that there are essentially two parenting philosophies. One believes that parents must actively do X, Y and Z if children are to succeed and flourish. The other claims that parents' main role is to remove impediments to a child's self-directed growth. Kay is clearly in the second camp. Which better describes your parenting philosophy?
2. Kay is one of several contributors to identify "I don't know" as a great answer too seldom heard. Are you comfortable admitting ignorance in front of your kids?
3. *"The bottom line of freethought is this: you can think whatever you want, but to live in community with other human beings, you sometimes have to control your talk and your behavior."* Where do you draw the freethought line, especially when it comes to the expression of whatever is in a child's mind?

Amy Hilden, PhD The Family Road Trip and the Self Behind My Eyes

Wondering is a formative experience for the growing human mind, says philosopher Amy Hilden—and the more unstructured and self-directed, the better. She describes her own wonderings as a child staring out of the car window on family road trips as her first sojourn into the philosophy of mind.

QUESTIONS

1. Between organized sports, homework, music lessons, tutoring, children can often end up overscheduled, leaving little time for unmediated play and thought. Name ways in which your family's schedule allows for such open time—and ways in which it could allow for more.
2. *"What if we welcomed wonder?"* How can we (as Hilden puts it) give our children "permission" to engage in open-ended, self-directed wondering?
3. Hilden asks, *"How many of you have been told, 'you think too much' and 'you take things too seriously'?"* Have you ever been accused of this? What parental strategies can we use to protect children from these wonder-killing statements?

Margaret Knight
Excerpt from *Morals Without Religion*

“In January 1955 psychologist, broadcaster and humanist Margaret Knight stunned post-war Britain by suggesting in two talks on the BBC’s Home Service...that moral education should be uncoupled from religious education.”¹ This brief excerpt from that talk is intended primarily to recommend a closer look at Knight’s elegant and thoughtful writings.

QUESTIONS

1. Knight warns in particular against a certain variety of non-answer to children’s questioning (“*Well, dear, you’re not quite old enough to understand yet, but some of these things are true in a deeper sense*”)—a form of fallacy known as special pleading. Yet sometimes kids *do* ask questions that can’t be fully answered at their level of understanding. How can we reply to such questions without resorting to special pleading?

Stephen Law
Does God Exist? from *The Philosophy Files*

The arguments for and against belief in God are many centuries old. Stephen Law presents all of the major arguments in the form of an accessible dialogue among friends.

QUESTIONS

1. The dialogic form has been a philosophical favorite since Plato. Do you find it effective as a means of presenting ideas?
2. It is clear by the end that disbelief has presented the stronger case—at least in Law’s view. Do you think this is because the case *is* stronger, or could Law have bolstered the case for belief? If the latter—how?
3. How might you encourage your kids (or yourself) to engage such sensitive and important questions with friends who believe differently? Is there a benefit for such dialogue beyond “evangelizing”?

NOTES

¹ From the British Humanist Association website www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentviewarticle.asp?article=1770.

Chapter Eight JAW-DROPPING, MIND-BUZZING SCIENCE

Dale McGowan Teaching Kids to Yawn at Counterfeit Wonder

“A lot of people believe that you can’t experience wonder without religious faith,” says Dale McGowan. “If that were the case, this book would have to sound the alarm. Childhood, after all, is our first and best chance to revel in wonder. If parenting without religion meant parenting without wonder, I might just say heck with reality.” But the wonder inherent in a scientific worldview can positively eclipse religious wonder—if we consider implications along with facts.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the author’s claim that religious wonder is essentially a “counterfeit” of real wonder? Why or why not?
2. McGowan lists several wonder-inducing scientific ideas. What others can you add?
3. Name several ways in which the wonder-inducing side of science can be brought home to children.

Amanda Chesworth Natural Wonders

Amanda Chesworth continues the contrast between fictional and scientific wonder, suggesting that one of the primary privileges of a parent is the opportunity to provide children with “brain food.”

QUESTIONS

1. Chesworth echoes Mercer’s essay by warning against fear and reward as sole motivators and Kay’s essay by warning against rote learning. Yet we all use fear and reward to some extent in our parenting, and some degree of learning is done by rote. How can we keep limits on these less desirable techniques?

Kristan Lawson The Idea that Changed the World from *Darwin and Evolution for Kids*

Kristan Lawson presents the theory of evolution in a nutshell, along with several activities designed to illustrate the principles of natural selection.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is evolution considered so central to the nontheistic worldview?
2. Time for another elevator speech: Describe how evolution works in twenty seconds or less.
3. Ignorance about our direct relationship to all other life is widespread, especially in the U.S., where a larger percentage of the population believes in astrology than in evolution. What do you think accounts for this? Does it matter?
4. Another elevator speech: in ten seconds or less, explain why evolution should be taught in science classrooms and creationism should not.
5. Discuss creative ways in which our evolutionary heritage can be brought to a child’s attention.
6. Do you feel sufficiently well-versed in evolution to answer your child’s questions about it? If not, what resources can you turn to (other than the Lawson chapter)?

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Chapter Nine SEEKING COMMUNITY

Pete Wernick Building the Secular Community—However Slowly

Pete Wernick describes his own attempts to build humanist community by creating a sort of “church without God”—and shares some honest critiques of the current humanist infrastructure.

QUESTIONS

1. Many humanists smile and nod when they read Pete’s account—both hilarious and sad—of a pathetic humanist holiday party. Something is definitely missing from many gatherings of this type and from the humanist movement in general to date. What do you think it is—and how can it be rectified without turning to the supernatural?
2. What elements of family support are present in religious communities—and how might these be achieved without supernaturalism?

Amanda Metskas and August Brunzman IV Summer Camps Beyond Belief

More than ten years have passed since Camp Quest, a summer camp for the children of freethinking families, first opened its gates in Kentucky.

QUESTION

1. Camp Quest has grown to five camps in four states and one Canadian province. From what you know of the camps after reading the essay, does it appear to be on the right track? Does it appear to meet your own family’s needs? Why or why not?

Bobbie Kirkhart Let’s Get Organized

Bobbie Kirkhart describes the major freethought organizations, with reference to the “kid-friendliness” and family orientation of each.

QUESTION

1. Which of the listed organizations seems a good fit for you and your family? Which less so? Why?

NOTES

Contributing Authors

NORM R. ALLEN, JR. is the executive director of African Americans for Humanism (AAH), editor of the *AAH Examiner*, the international newsletter of AAH, and deputy editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine. Allen has edited two books: *African American Humanism – An Anthology* and *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion*.

DONALD B. ARDELL, PhD publishes the *Ardell Wellness Report (AWR)*, a quarterly newsletter in continuous circulation since 1984, as well as the weekly electronic AWR, with 350 editions in circulation. He is director of the largest wellness website, www.SeekWellness.com. His first book in 1977, *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs and Disease* is credited with starting the wellness movement.

DAN BARKER is the author of *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher To Atheist*. He is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin (www.ffrf.org), an organization working to keep state and church separate and to promote freethought. He has five children.

AUGUST E. BRUNSMAN IV has been the Executive Director of the Secular Student Alliance since 2001. August is also the Director of Camp Quest Classic.

ED BUCKNER, PhD has been a professor, a school administrator, and executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism. He and his wife Lois Bright have edited several books and published Oliver Halle's *Taking the Harder Right*.

MATT CHERRY is executive director of the Institute for Humanist Studies, which serves as a resource for and about the freethought movement, author of *Introduction to Humanism: A Primer on the History, Philosophy, and Goals of Humanism*, and president of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations.

SHANNON CHERRY, APR, MA, is the president of Cherry Communications and its subsidiary Be Heard Solutions. Shannon publishes the highly-recommended e-zine, *Be Heard!* and is the co-author of *Become Your Own Great and Powerful: A Woman's Guide to Living Your Real Big Life*. She and partner Matt have twin girls.

AMANDA CHESWORTH is Educational Director for the Committee for the Scientific Investigations of the Paranormal (CSICOP). Her work includes the Inquiring Minds Program, Camp Inquiry, Imaginary Worlds, and serving as editor of *Darwin Day Collection One*.

Oxford ethologist **RICHARD DAWKINS, FRS** is among the most accomplished and celebrated living contributors to science and its popular understanding. His first book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), became an immediate international bestseller, followed by the seminal classic *The Blind Watchmaker*. His other bestsellers include *River Out of Eden*, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, and *The God Delusion*. In 2005, a *Prospect Magazine* poll named Dawkins the third most influential public intellectual in the world. Dawkins is a Fellow of both the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Literature. Since 1996 he has served as Vice President of the British Humanist Association. He is married to actress Lalla Ward and has one daughter, Juliet.

MARGARET DOWNEY is the founder of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia and editor of *The Greater Philadelphia Story*, a newsletter written by and for the Atheist community. She is also a Secular Humanist Celebrant and current president of the Atheist Alliance International.

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ANNIE LAURIE GAYLOR co-founded the Freedom From Religion Foundation with her mother, Anne Nicol Gaylor, in 1976. With Dan Barker, she is co-president of the Foundation (www.ffrf.org). She is editor of FFRF's newspaper, *Freethought Today* and author of *Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So*, *Betrayal of Trust: Clergy Abuse of Children*, and *Women Without Superstition: No Gods - No Masters*, an anthology of women freethinkers (1997). She and Dan have one daughter.

The **REV. DR. KENDYL GIBBONS** is the senior minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. She is co-dean of The Humanist Institute, is active in the interfaith clergy community of Minneapolis, and serves as an adjunct faculty member of Meadville/Lombard in Chicago and the United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities.

EDGAR YIPSEL "YIP" HARBURG, among the greatest and most beloved lyricists of the 20th century, was also author of such classics as "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," "April in Paris" and "Paper Moon."

JAMES HERRICK has worked for thirty years in the humanist movement in the UK. He is former editor of the *New Humanist* and *International Humanist*. His writings include "Vision and Realism: a hundred years of *The Freethinker*," *Against the Faith: Some Deists, Skeptics and Atheists* and *Humanism: An Introduction*. He is a co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association.

AMY HILDEN, PhD received her doctorate in Philosophy, with a supporting program in Feminist Studies, from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her current scholarly interests include developing arguments in support of reclaiming the Enlightenment values of free and independent thinking, rationality, and a humanistic understanding of progress. She lives with her husband and two teenage children in Minneapolis.

Better known as "Agnostic Mom" online, **NOELL HYMAN** contributes monthly columns to the Humanist Network News, the weekly e-zine for the Institute for Humanist Studies, and is an expert writer for the website ClubMom. An energetic mother of three young children, Noell and husband Israel are currently involved with numerous podcasting and blogging ventures.

PENN JILLETTE is the Emmy Award-winning illusionist/entertainer/debunker of the duo Penn & Teller. Author of several books, star and producer of such films as *The Aristocrats* and *Penn & Teller Get Killed*, Jillette's current efforts are split between a live national talk show, the Showtime series *Bullshit!* and a daily live show in Las Vegas. Penn is married to producer Emily Zolten Jillette, with whom he has two young children, Moxie (born in 2005) and Zolten (born in 2006).

ROBERT E. KAY, MD is a retired psychiatrist who graduated from Tufts University Medical School and did his residency at Walter Reed General Hospital. After serving in the Army, he settled in Philadelphia where he has treated both adults and children in many different inpatient and outpatient settings.

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STEPHEN LAW, D.Phil. is lecturer in philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London and editor of THINK, the Royal Institute of Philosophy's new popular journal. He is the author of several popular introductions to philosophy, including an illustrated children's introduction to philosophy titled *The Philosophy Files* –The Guardian's number two best-selling British title for the year 2000.

KRISTAN LAWSON is a writer and entrepreneur. Founder and publisher of Jolly Roger Press in the 1990s, Kristan is also a renowned travel expert, authoring several major travel guides for California and Europe.

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JEAN MERCER, PhD is a developmental psychologist with a doctorate from Brandeis University and is Professor Emerita at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey. She has been a Board member and officer of the New Jersey Association for Infant Mental Health for many years and is the author of a number of books and articles about early development.

AMANDA K. METSKAS received her M.A. in political science from The Ohio State University in 2005 and is currently a PhD candidate in the department of political science at Ohio State. She has been involved with Camp Quest Classic (Ohio) since 2003, and is currently serving as the President of the Camp Quest Classic Board of Directors.

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At age nine, **EMILY ROSA** produced a study on Therapeutic Touch that was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, creating a media sensation that put her in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the youngest person to publish serious medical research. She just finished two years of university at CU-Boulder with an academic interest in forensic psychology.

Grammy Award-winning comedian **JULIA SWEENEY** is also an actor, playwright and monologist. Her monologue *Letting Go of God*, which chronicles her journey from faith to philosophical naturalism, was Critics' Choice for the Los Angeles Times and Pick of the Week for the LA Weekly. She is the author of *My Beautiful Loss Of Faith Story* and was the 2006 recipient of the Richard Dawkins Award for raising public awareness of the nontheistic life stance. She is the adoptive mother of a seven-year old girl named Mulan.

STU TANQUIST is a national speaker, seminar leader and published author with over 20 years of experience in the learning and development industry. He facilitates learning on variety of topics including critical thinking. Stu holds three degrees including an M.S. in Management. In his free time, he coordinates the South Metro Chapter of the Critical Thinking Club of Minnesota.

Bronx-born Coloradoan **PETE WERNICK, PhD** earned a doctorate in Sociology from Columbia University while developing a career in music on the side. His bestselling instruction book *Bluegrass Banjo* allowed "Dr. Banjo" to leave his sociology research job at Cornell to form Hot Rize, a classic bluegrass band that traveled worldwide. Pete has served as President of both the International Bluegrass Music Association (1986-2001) and Family of Humanists (1997-2006).

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