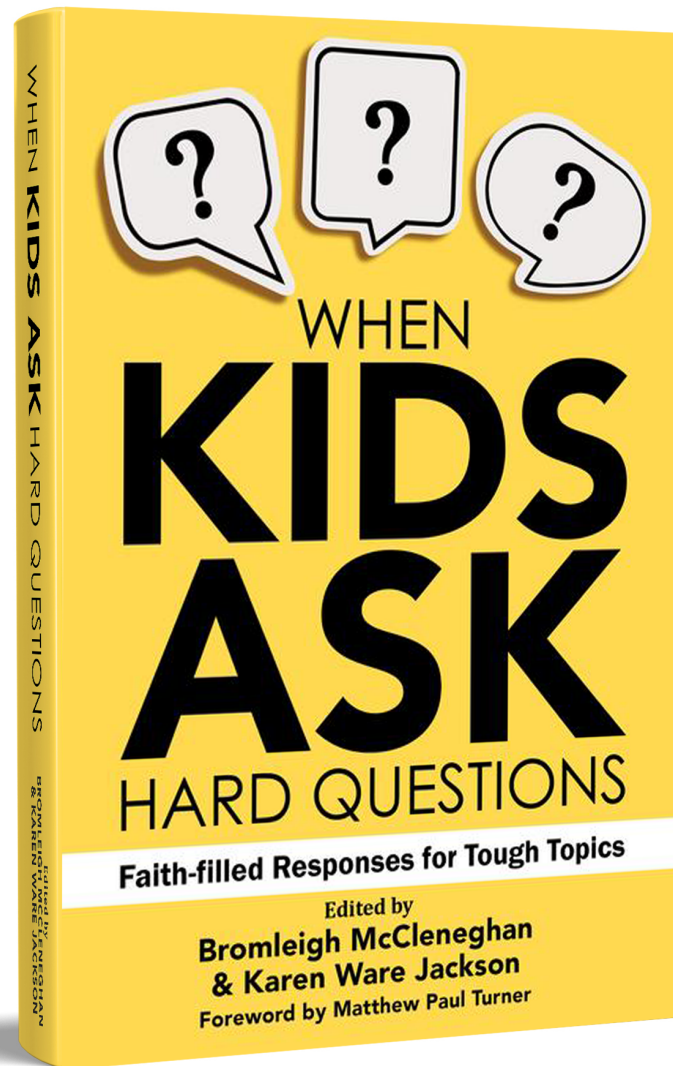


Study Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Small Groups



What to Expect Inside This Guide

This study guide is written with direct notes to the facilitator/leader of a small group. If you are a church leader or pastor picking up this guide, choose a facilitator who will be welcoming, who knows how to listen, and who can delegate well. Make sure the room is set up with snacks and beverages and feels comfortable and inviting. These topics are difficult to tackle (“hard questions” is in the title, after all), so make the room as comfortable as possible to help your group feel at ease.

A special note to church leaders: because you will most likely have parents in these small groups, make sure to provide childcare. When you are in the planning stages, discuss the best time to hold the small group. That may mean a lunch-time session if you are in a smaller community or a Sunday morning session if you are in a commuter church. Talk to parents about what works for their schedules, and plan to offer childcare or activities for children in order to give them space to be fully present.

This guide is intended for use by small groups that include parents and caregivers (caregivers = adults that care for children in a family system who are not parents or guardians). Your group may be either of all parents, a mix of Sunday school teachers, caregivers, and other leaders, or it may consist of community members and faith leaders. Whatever the group makeup, this guide will serve your group.

There are particular questions designed for parents and caregivers. You will find those questions in green. If you don't have any parents or caregivers in your group, just skip right past those or adapt them for your context.

Regarding the Questions for Reflection

Inside this guide you will also find discussion questions for each session. The guide is divided into six sessions, which follows the six sections of the book. The questions are there to guide and engage discussion; most likely, you will not get to all of the questions each time you meet. You will find some of the same questions in several sections. These repeated questions are there to help your group think through these sessions thematically, with a connected thru-line. They questions are a way to connect sessions as this text is a collection of essays by different authors. The question you will see repeated in each session is:

What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?

You will also find journaling topics scattered throughout. Though it isn't necessary to ask your participants to journal their responses after each session, it may help those in the group that are more introverted or who process internally. You may also choose to hand out the set of questions after each session so members of your group can process these questions on their own outside the group setting.

These topics are difficult, which is the reason the book was put together in the first place. Kids *do* ask *hard* questions. Be sure to reassure your group that discussion and work around these topics will help these topics become less taboo or overwhelming. The more these topics are discussed, the more children will begin to care about and process these subjects, and consequently their faith will also grow.

Session 1: Who Am I?

Opening

Open the group by reminding the caregivers or the small group attendees that we all come to these essays with a different understanding of our bodies and our embodied experiences. We need to remember as we discuss these topics as adults, we carry our experiences in our bodies. When children ask these questions, they haven't been on earth nearly as long as we have, and we must remember not to project our own unresolved, unhealthy coping mechanisms upon them. Instead, let us recognize them in ourselves. This group is also not intended to be group therapy, so if such things arise, the leader is advised to remind the group that they are there to study and support each other, not act as therapist for each other. Also make it clear that this group is not a place to offer judgment or to judge someone else's parenting choices, but to support each other in raising faithful children.

The first set of essays reflects on "our bodies and our souls." In these essays, there are big topics such as gender identity, body image, and addiction. If your group does not get through each and every topic in the time allotted, that is okay. This may be an opportunity to encourage the group to journal and reflect upon these questions further or to split into smaller groups or pairs to discuss these vulnerable topics.

Questions for Reflection

- Has your child ever asked these questions? What was your response? Did reading an essay on these topics change your response in the future?
- Did you ask any of these questions as a child? How did the adults in your life respond? How did that shape you?
- What did you learn about yourself in reading these essays?
- Did you see your child, yourself, or your family reflected in any of these essays?
- What essay made you the most uncomfortable? Why?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?

Suggested Question for Journaling

- What essay caused you to have the most emotional response? What were you feeling? What did that essay teach you about yourself and, if applicable, your life as a parent?

Closing

As you close this session, remind the people in the group that each section or essay could bring about unexpressed discussion or feelings. Be sure to check in with them and remind them the group is a safe and brave space to do some self-awareness work together. Remind them parenting isn't for the faint of heart and remind those who are not caregivers that we make baptismal promises to care for children in our midst. We can enhance those promises by approaching these topics in a thoughtful, kind, and honest manner.

Session 2: Who Are We?

Opening

Remind the group of the great questions offered at the end of “Being a Friend” and the essay on divorce for further thought and discussion. Open this session by reminding the group that we may be bringing childhood wounds or trauma into the space. Ask the group to be accountable to each other and remind them that in studying these vulnerable topics and discussing childhood, we bring valuable knowledge from our own experiences. Encourage the group to maintain healthy boundaries while being kind and supportive. Come to the session equipped with resources you can pass on at the end, such as mental health professionals, hotlines, or recommendations from a pastor or church leader. If you are meeting in a faith community, be sure to touch base with a pastor or church leader to pass on their contact information as well.

Questions for Reflection

Additional note for leaders: Some of these essays have longer lists of questions, and if the group wants to focus there, you can devote time to these excellent questions.

- The essay “Being a Friend” lists several helpful sets of questions for reflection at the end. What question was the most powerful for you? What does it mean to be a “good friend”?
- **Parents and caregivers: What would you have done in the story described at the beginning? What if your child came home to share they had gotten “The Will Touch” that day?**
- What did you learn about yourself in reading these essays?
- Did you see your child, yourself, or your family reflected in any of these essays?
- What essay made you the most uncomfortable? Why?
- What language do you use when discussing foster families or blended families? Did either of the essays change your perspective?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?

Closing

As you close out this session, “take the temperature” of the room and offer if this session brought up painful memories from childhood or from adolescence. If so, let them know you would be glad to help connect them to a pastor or just to hold space to talk after the session. Remember those resources you brought with you? Go ahead and have them ready to pass on. If the group seems to be emotionally equipped, let them know that in the next session, you will be tackling grief and loss. Giving them this heads up will prepare them mentally and emotionally for the next session.

Session 3: Why Did This Happen?

Opening

As with the previous session, the topics in this particular session are delicate and vulnerable. It is perfectly acceptable and, in fact, encouraged for you to open this session with the caveat that if anyone needs to leave the session or take a break, they can.

As you wade into topics of loss and grief, remind the people present that grief is not linear; it is a journey. In our Western (U.S.) context we often try to hide grief, so name it:

This session may bring up feelings of grief for you. We all grieve in different ways, and grief is not linear. One grief is not larger than another. As we work through our grief over the years, the pain may become less sharp, but it never goes away.

In this session, if you just get through one question, that is okay. If you feel that everyone in the room needs to take a break halfway through, that is okay as well. As the leader, be cautious; you are facilitating the conversation, not trying to manage grief and loss for all involved.

Questions for Reflection

- Has your child asked questions like these about a family member or infant loss? How did these essays make you think about future interactions with your child?
- What did you learn from these essays about grief and loss that you wish you knew before you'd read them?
- What are some successful strategies you have developed in dealing with grief and loss in your family?
- Could you add an essay to this section? Where are the tender spots for you as you read these essays?
- Did these essays make you think differently about grief and loss? How?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?

Closing

As with the previous session, close out Session 3 and “take the temperature” of the room. Offer that if this session brought up painful memories, you would be glad to help connect them to a pastor or just to hold space to talk after the session. Be sure to have contact information handy for folks who need extra resources or recommendations. Remind the group that you have worked through three sessions of “hard questions.” These are difficult topics to discuss and address because it brings up our own issues with which we must wrestle. Let them know that in the next session, you will be tackling racial injustice, discrimination, and hatred. It is good to give the group a heads up. If the group is racially diverse, it will allow space for people who are uncomfortable with the topic to opt out or in. If the group is primarily or entirely white, remind them that this session will not tackle all the work white people need to be doing to address their own complicities in systems of oppression. The answers will not come in one

session. Remind them to use the extra resources at the ends of the essays and do their own work, possibly in small groups, and that the goal is to be actively antiracist as we navigate this world.

Session 4: What am I Afraid Of?

Opening

As you begin this session, keep in mind that people will be entering the conversation from different points. It is a good idea to discuss up front that hateful and oppressive language won't be acceptable during the conversation. If you have a racially diverse group, remind the group that whatever the discussion during the session, white people have their own work to do in learning, growing, and "unlearning," both individually and with other white people in their lives in order to be allies. It is also a good idea to note that racism in the United States is systemic and that many comments and attitudes that uphold these systems have become "socially acceptable," such as making the comment that one is "colorblind." Set the stage for the conversation up front by naming it:

Some of you will find this conversation uncomfortable or difficult to be a part of. However, as we read in the essays, conversations about the sin of racism are essential in our broken world. Sit with the discomfort, listen, and if you are a person who identifies as "white" spend more time listening to people of color and their lived experience. Fight the urge to defend yourself or argue.

If the majority of your group is from the dominant culture, make sure to give space to people of color to talk, and create a brave, safe space. People of color should not do all the emotional labor in these discussions.

Questions for Reflection

- What discussions have you had with your child about race?
- If you haven't talked to your child about race, what are the barriers?
- Did any of these essays make you uncomfortable? Why?
- How do you talk to your children about gun violence? What is your family policy on visiting homes of gun owners?
- Many of these essays inspire a call to action. However, is it also paramount to educate one's self and become aware of the systemic oppression that is pervasive in the United States. Where did you hear a personal and/or a communal call to action?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?
- What steps will you take to be actively antiracist? What steps will you take with your family and in your faith community?

Closing

It is likely that you were not able to get to all of the discussion questions. It is likely you may have gotten stuck talking about lived experiences. It is difficult and uncomfortable to recognize one's own internalized racism and implicit bias; the readings listed at the end of the "Courage and Hospitality" essay are a great place to start as people do their own antiracist work. At the end of the session, give people an opportunity to go home and journal about this session. Remind the group that if this feels overwhelming, each essay includes great resources for further exploration and learning on their own. Encourage white people in the group to start a book club or a small group they can be accountable to, pick a suggested text or media resource and dive in. The goal is not to be perfect, the goal is to continue to listen more, to learn, and to

be antiracist. The lives of our neighbors depend on it. Let people in the group know that you will be discussing essays centered on Judaism, Islam, and mass incarceration.

Session 5: What's Going On?

Opening

As you gather the group today, go ahead and name the fact that in this book “hard questions” and therefore discussions around these essays are understandably difficult. It is, however, necessary to have them. As you move into this new set of essays, ask the group to again be thoughtful, respectful, and inclusive in their comments. Depending on your faith community, you may already engage in active interfaith work. If the group starts to move toward action, as the facilitator you may want to caution them that Christian groups, especially white Christian groups, have had a history of co-opting movements, so it may start with calls across town or across your region to other faith leaders to ask how to be present with them. In the wake of anti-Semitic vandalism or attacks against mosques, Christian leaders have a unique opportunity to use their power and stand in solidarity with siblings of other faiths. This discussion may lead to action, but it also may lead to deeper study and more conversation with interfaith organizers. Let your group know that there are all sorts of resources in this book for further research.

Questions for Reflection

- How did you react to the essays about interfaith relationships? As a Christian, what did you learn about other faiths in these essays?
- How do you recognize and appropriately honor children of other faiths that may come into your home or are friends with your children?
- Did the essays give you any ideas you may try in the future to honor other religious traditions with your children and their friends? If so, how will you move forward?
- In talking about mass incarceration or the legal system with your children, how did the essay make you think differently about those conversations?
- Many of these essays inspire a call to action. However, is it also paramount to educate one's self and become aware of the systemic oppression that is pervasive in the United States. Where did you hear a personal and/or a communal call to action?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?

Closing

It may be that the group did not get to all of the discussion questions with such large topics to tackle. You may want to send home a few of these questions as “homework” for the group to tackle by journaling on their own time. If the group feels frustrated or like they have hit an emotional wall, be sure to let them know that this book is a resource to go back to again and again. As children grow and develop, what they need will change. The book offers possible strategies and approaches to these vulnerable topics. As you move into the last session, the group may be feeling as if they want to continue beyond the small group setting. It may be a good idea to discuss next steps after Session 5. Maybe the group will want to meet in smaller groups or continue the conversation in a different configuration. Give them some time and space to think about it as you move toward the last session of the book study.

Session 6: What's Fair?

Opening

In this final session, the essay topics are varied, and each of them is a rich area for discussion. Start the session by reminding the group that these discussions can continue. Spend some time discussing breaking into smaller groups or to come back together as a group again in a new season of the year. For instance, you may want to make this a Lenten study or a summer study. Go ahead and open up this final session with naming how difficult this final session may be. There are discussions about white supremacy and how philanthropy can be toxic; there is an essay about money and one about technology. Some people have real trouble discussing these matters in front of others.

Make it clear that these topics are not necessarily comfortable for everyone to hear, but they are important. Remind them, as you did at the beginning of this journey, that this group is not a place to offer judgment or to judge someone else's parenting choices, but to support each other in raising faithful children. Remind them again that each essay lists practical ways to begin or continue these conversations with children, as well as further readings. You won't find all the answers within an hour-long small group.

Questions for Reflection

- Building on the discussion in Session 4, did the essay “Truth and Lies” help you think about talking about race with your child? How?
- Did any of these essays make you uncomfortable? Why?
- How do you discuss money in your family?
- How do you frame charity, philanthropy, and donations? Did this essay make you re-think how you view philanthropy?
- What essay made you think differently about your faith, God the Creator, and/or your identity as a child of God?
- Where have you seen “toxic charity” on display — either in your life or in a faith community?
- What rules does your family have around technology usage? What are the struggles your family encounters in balancing your use of technology with your children?

Closing Session 6 and the Small Group Study (for now)

Take this time to talk to the group about what they have learned. You may want to list the learnings on a graffiti sheet or a white board in the room. Take time to talk about what you want to learn and what action steps you want to take moving forward. Be sure to leave time at the end of the session to make some promises to each other. Take about 5 to 10 minutes to talk about how you want to move forward—both individually and communally. What promises can you make? Do you want to split into smaller groups so that you can continue conversations and be accountable to each other for what challenges may lie ahead? How will you engage your fellow parents and caregivers in your circles on these some of these topics as you move forward? When you have written out your action steps, ask someone in each group to be the one that holds the group accountable.