BEYOND BEHAVIOUR

Reaching the Heart of Your Child

A Workshop for Parents

Three Peaks School

An Ambleside International School, Cape Town

Drawing on the insights of:

Dr Helen Webb (Charlotte Mason's "Beloved Physician")

Tedd Tripp, Shepherding a Child's Heart

Charlotte Mason's Philosophy of Education

Session Overview

This 60-minute workshop draws together two rich streams of wisdom about raising children: the Charlotte Mason tradition (particularly the work of Dr Helen Webb, Charlotte Mason's close colleague), and the biblical framework set out by Tedd Tripp in *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. Both share a conviction that runs counter to much modern parenting advice: **the most important thing about your child's behaviour is not the behaviour itself.**

What lies beneath the surface — in the heart, in the desires and motives that drive action — is where the real work of parenting takes place. Whether you come to this from a Christian perspective or simply as a parent who wants to raise a child of deep character, this session offers a framework and practical tools you can begin using immediately.

Format: Approximately 40 minutes of presentation, followed by 15 minutes of small-group case study discussion, and a 5-minute closing reflection.

1. Opening — Common Ground

⏱ **5 minutes**

Every parent in this room knows the moment. Your child has done something wrong — perhaps they've lied, refused to obey, been unkind to a sibling, or melted down in a shop. And in that moment, you have to respond. You feel the stress rising. You wonder: *Am I handling this right? Am I too harsh? Too soft? Why does this keep happening?*

Whether we come to parenting from a Christian faith perspective or not, we share something fundamental: a deep desire for our children to become people of good character. Not merely well-behaved on the outside — compliant, quiet, doing what they're told — but genuinely kind, honest, courageous, and self-governing from within.

Tonight we want to explore a question that both the Charlotte Mason tradition and the Christian Scriptures ask us to consider: ***What if the most important thing about your child's behaviour isn't the behaviour itself?***

> **SPEAKER NOTE:** *Pause here. Let the question land. This is the thread that will run through the entire evening.*

Our Two Sources Tonight

Tonight we're drawing on two streams of wisdom that come from different centuries and different contexts, but converge on something remarkable.

The first is the Charlotte Mason tradition — the educational philosophy our school is built on. Charlotte Mason was a British educator in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose ideas about children, learning, and character have shaped schools around the world, including ours. Tonight we'll be drawing particularly on a paper called *Training in Character*, written in 1902 by Dr Helen Webb. Webb was a physician and one of Mason's closest colleagues — so close that Mason gave her the affectionate title "Beloved Physician," borrowing the term the Apostle Paul used for Luke. Webb's paper applies Mason's philosophy directly to the practical, daily work of forming character in young children, and it remains one of the most helpful things written on the subject.

The second is Tedd Tripp, an American pastor and counsellor who spent over thirty years working with families. His book *Shepherding a Child's Heart* has become one of the most widely read Christian parenting books of the last generation. Tripp brings a deeply biblical framework to parenting — rooted in the conviction that the heart is the control centre of a child's life, and that our job as parents is to be shepherds of that heart, not merely managers of behaviour.

What is striking is how much these two voices agree. Both insist that character is formed from the inside out. Both see the parent's role as guiding and shepherding rather than merely policing. And both take the long view — asking not "how do I get through today?" but "who is my child becoming?"

2. What Is "Character"?

⏱ **7 minutes**

Two Forces That Shape a Person

In her 1902 paper *Training in Character*, Dr Webb defined character not as something we're born with, but as something that is achieved — built over time by two interacting forces.

The first force is **the tendencies with which each individual child is born**. Webb reminds us that every child arrives as a unique person, with their own personality wired in from the start. Some children are naturally amenable and easy-going. Others are spirited, intense, and full of strong desires. Webb insists we should not mistake strong passions for a "bad" child — what such a child has is "strong passions, strong desires, an appreciation of desirable objects, a quick intelligence." These children simply have more raw material that needs to be guided.

The second force is **the external influences that surround the child from birth**. These begin shaping the child long before they can even understand them. Webb writes that from the very first day of life, those who care for an infant are "every day and hour, rightly or wrongly, either in a positive or a negative way, helping or marring the character of the future man."

Character, then, is the ongoing product of *nature meeting nurture* — of the child's inborn tendencies being shaped by the environment we create around them. This should both humble and encourage us as parents: we cannot control everything about who our child is, but we have enormous influence over who they are becoming.

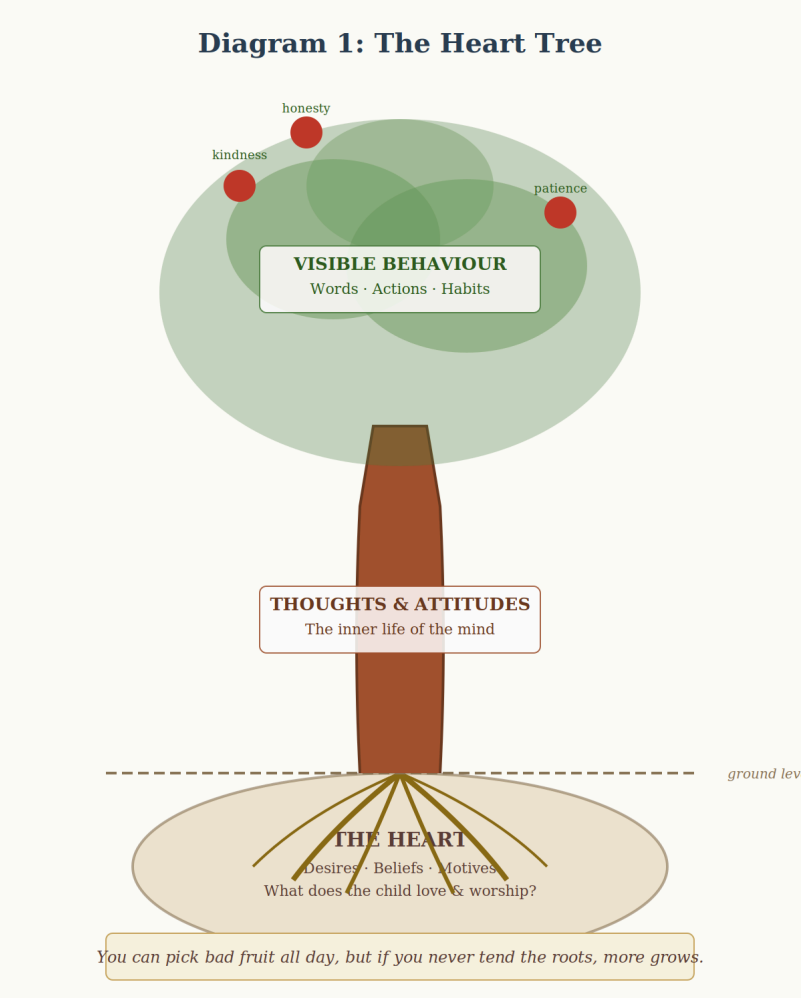
The Biblical Lens: The Heart

The Christian Scriptures take this a step further. They teach that the heart is the control centre of a person's life. The book of Proverbs puts it this way: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). What a person thinks, loves, and desires in their heart will overflow into what they say and do.

Tedd Tripp makes this the foundation of his entire approach to parenting. He writes that a person's behaviour is always a reflection of their heart. The things we say and do — the "fruit" of our lives — grow from the roots of what we desire, believe, and worship in our hearts.

This is not only a theological claim. It is something every parent can observe. When your child lashes out at a sibling, there is always something underneath the behaviour: frustration, jealousy, fear, a desire for control, a longing for attention. The behaviour is the visible tip. The heart is the vast mass beneath the surface.

> **SPEAKER NOTE:** *Introduce Diagram 1 here. Walk the parents through the tree image slowly. Roots = heart. Trunk = thoughts/attitudes. Fruit = visible behaviour. The key point: you can pick bad fruit all day long, but if you never tend the roots, more bad fruit grows.*


Diagram 1: The Heart Tree
honesty
kindness
patience
VISIBLE BEHAVIOUR
Words · Actions · Habits
THOUGHTS & ATTITUDES
The inner life of the mind
ground lev
THE HEART
Desires · Beliefs · Motives
What does the child love & worship?
You can pick bad fruit all day, but if you never tend the roots, more grows.

3. The Behaviour Trap

⏱ **8 minutes**

This is where most of us get stuck. Our children do something wrong and we react to what we can see — the tantrum, the defiance, the unkind words. We become, in Tripp's phrase, "behaviour managers" rather than shepherds of the heart.

Consider a familiar scene. Two children are fighting over a toy. One is screaming, the other is clutching the toy and refusing to share. The typical parental response is a *justice* question: *"Who had it first?"* Tripp points out that this addresses only the surface. What is actually going on in each child's heart? One may be struggling with selfishness — "I want what I want." The other may be wrestling with a sense of entitlement — "I deserve this." Both are displaying a heart that says, "My happiness depends on getting what I want."

Addressing only the behaviour — taking the toy away, putting them in separate rooms, giving each one a turn — may restore peace in the short term. But it leaves the deeper issue completely untouched. And that deeper issue will show up again tomorrow, in a different form.

Webb's Warning: Weeds Grown in the Night

Dr Webb saw the same pattern over a century ago. She observed that parents commonly let faults grow during the early years — finding the baby's defiance "funny" or "high-spirited" — and then later try to stamp them out with punishment.

> *"These weeds have grown in the night while you slept, dreaming that while baby is so little, nothing can make much difference."* — Dr Helen Webb

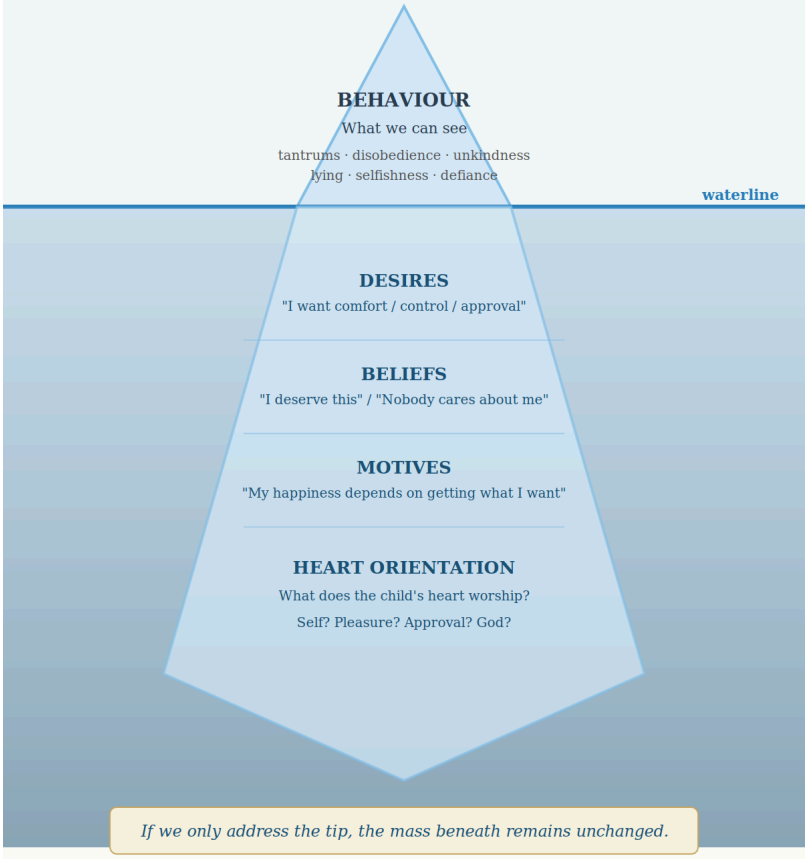
She gives vivid examples: Tommy's disobedience was tolerated because he was "so high-spirited, it was funny to see him do one thing when he was told to do another." Will's selfishness grew because "he was such a pet one had to give him everything he asked for." By the time these children reach four or five, parents are wringing their hands **asking what to do about faults that should never have been allowed to take root**.

The convergence point is striking. Both Tripp and Webb are saying: **don't wait until the behaviour is a problem and then try to fix it. Go deeper, go earlier, and address what is forming beneath the surface.**

SPEAKER NOTE: *Introduce Diagram 2 here. Walk through the iceberg. Above the waterline: the behaviour everyone can see. Below: the desires, beliefs, motives, and heart orientation that drive it. If we only address the tip, the mass beneath remains unchanged.*

Diagram 2: The Iceberg

What we see vs. what drives behaviour



If we only address the tip, the mass beneath remains unchanged.

4. The Parent as Shepherd

⏱ **10 minutes**

If our job is not merely to manage behaviour, then what is it? Both the Charlotte Mason tradition and the biblical framework give us a richer vision: the parent as **shepherd**. A shepherd is not a policeman. A shepherd knows the sheep, walks alongside them, guides them toward good pasture, and protects them from danger.

Three dimensions of this shepherd's role are worth drawing out.

a) Authority as Safety, Not Tyranny

Tripp draws a powerful picture of what parental authority is for. It is not about holding children under your power. It is about creating a circle of safety within which the child can grow. The purpose of your authority is to empower your children to become self-controlled people living freely under God's wisdom.

Think of it this way: a toddler near a busy road needs a fence. The fence is not there to oppress the toddler. It is there to keep her alive while she is too young to understand the danger. Parental authority is that fence. As the child grows, the fence can move outward, giving more freedom as the child demonstrates readiness for it.

Tripp emphasises that children rarely run from a home where they feel genuinely loved, understood, and respected. The parent who exercises authority kindly — as one who truly loves the child — will find that the child is far more willing to submit to that authority.

b) Acting as a "Will" for the Young Child

This is one of Dr Webb's most profound insights, rooted in Charlotte Mason's philosophy. Very young children cannot yet govern their own will. They cannot turn their own thoughts from temptation to right action. Their attention flits from moment to moment. When a toddler looks you in the face and says "I won't," it is not a deep rebellion — it is a passing whim.

> *"Before he knows good from evil, we must choose good for him and see that he does it. Traces of the path of Duty are in this way marked out in the brain-cells long before that robust goddess can be expected to walk along it in broad daylight."* — Dr Helen Webb

Webb compares this to feeding a child with a spoon before they can hold it themselves, or carrying them before they can walk. It is not an insult to the child's personhood — it is a service to it. We are laying down tracks of good habit that the child will later walk along when they are ready to manage their own conduct.

c) The Long View

Both writers insist: we are not raising obedient children. We are forming self-governing adults. Every interaction is a brick in the edifice of character.

Tripp asks parents to think about who their child will be at 25, not just how to get through today. Webb uses the image of the seed and the gardener: "In nature's methods of

development there is no haste, but no time is lost." Every moment of patient guidance is doing its quiet work, even when we cannot yet see the fruit.

For Christian parents, this long view is anchored in the conviction that we are not the ultimate shepherds of our children — God is. We do our part faithfully, knowing that the work of forming a human heart is ultimately in His hands. For all parents, this is an invitation to patience: character is not formed in a crisis. **It is formed in the thousand small moments of daily life.**

d) Where Your Children Are Right Now

Your children are between the ages of 4 and 12. Webb identifies this as the second great period of character development — the season when a child "takes gradually into his own hands the management of much of his own conduct." This is the transition point: your child is moving from being guided by you to governing themselves.

That makes this the most consequential window you have. Some of you are seeing the fruit of good habits laid down early — the child who obeys readily because obedience has always been the path of least resistance. Others are noticing patterns that need redirecting — the child whose small habits of defiance or selfishness have quietly taken root and are now becoming harder to shift.

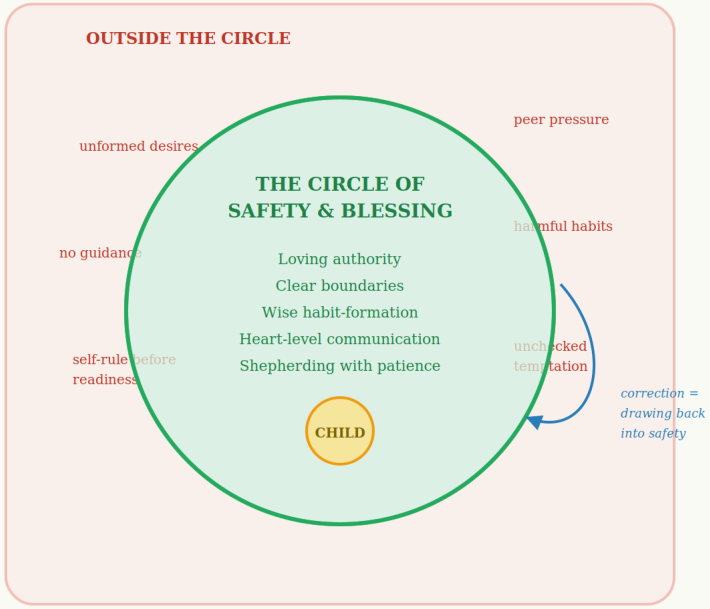
Wherever you are, hear this: **it is not too late, but the work matters now more than ever.** Webb writes that if we have done our part wisely in the early years, the child will find it "a comparatively easy matter to walk along the right path" when they begin managing their own conduct. But she also speaks to those who missed the early window. The tools are the same — **thought-turning, habit-formation, patient shepherding** — even if the work is harder. And Tripp reminds us that the heart can always be reached, at any age, because the conscience is always there to appeal to.

What you do now — how you shepherd the heart, not just manage the behaviour — will determine what your child has to work with when they step into adolescence. The habits, the self-knowledge, the capacity to examine their own motives — these are the gifts you are giving them in this season.

> **SPEAKER NOTE:** *Introduce Diagram 3 here. The circle of safety. Inside = loving authority, clear boundaries, wise habit-formation, heart-level communication. Outside = where the child is left to their own unformed desires. Correction is not punishment — it is drawing the child back into the circle of safety.*

Diagram 3: The Circle of Safety

Authority as protection, not tyranny



The purpose of parental authority is not to hold children under your power, but to empower them to be self-controlled people. (Tripp, adapted)

5. Practical Tools — Reaching the Heart

⏱ **10 minutes**

Now we move from the "why" to the "how." Three practical approaches, drawn from our two sources, that you can begin using this week.

Tool 1: Thought-Turning

Source: Dr Helen Webb / Charlotte Mason tradition

This is especially powerful for younger children (ages 2–6), but the principle applies at every age. When a child begins to veer toward wrong behaviour, do not make a battle of it. Instead, redirect their attention toward right action. Don't dwell on the wrong — gently and cheerfully turn them toward the right.

Webb gives a string of examples. A baby refuses to eat: instead of scolding, talk about something interesting — what the cat did, what they saw on their walk — and the mouth opens. A child refuses to get dressed: instead of a battle, say "Let me see, which arm shall we put in first?" and the dressing goes merrily forward. A child won't go to bed: a cheerful conversation and "Who will get to the stairs first?" gets the thing done.

> *"The thing to do when the little seed of evil appears is to avoid giving it too much importance and marking it in the child's consciousness by talk or opposition. The wise mother does not dwell upon the difficulty, and before the child knows it, turns him into the path of right action."* — Dr Helen Webb

The principle is this: **the impression left on the child's mind should be of the right action done, not of the battle fought.** Every time a child does the right thing — even if they were redirected into doing it — another brick is laid in the foundation of good habit.

Webb is careful to note that this is not a magic trick done once. It requires constant alertness, ingenuity, and adaptation as the child grows. What works at eighteen months will not work at three, and what works at three will not work at six. But the principle endures: *turn the thought, don't fight the battle.*

Tool 2: Addressing the Heart

Source: Tedd Tripp, Shepherding a Child's Heart

For children old enough to reason — typically your 6–12 year olds — we can move beyond redirection to genuine heart-level conversation. This means moving past the *what* of the behaviour to the *why*.

Tripp distinguishes between the "when" (the circumstances), the "what" (the behaviour), and the "why" (the heart motive). Most parenting stops at the "what." We say "Stop hitting your sister" or "Don't speak to me like that" and consider the job done. But Tripp urges us to go further.

Instead of simply correcting the action, help the child see what was going on inside them. You might say: "You wanted that toy so badly that you were willing to hurt someone you love

to get it. What does that tell us about what your heart was really after?" Or: "When you lied about brushing your teeth, what were you trying to protect? Were you afraid of getting in trouble? Let's talk about what's making you feel that way."

This is not interrogation. It is shepherding. **You are helping the child develop the capacity for self-reflection** — the ability to see their own heart, which is a skill that will serve them for the rest of their life.

Tool 3: Appealing to the Conscience

Source: Tedd Tripp, Shepherding a Child's Heart

As children grow, they develop a conscience — an internal sense of right and wrong. Tripp urges parents to work ***with* this conscience, not against it**. Rather than imposing rules from the outside and enforcing them with rewards and punishments, we can help the child see for themselves the gap between who they want to be and what they have just done.

Tripp gives the example of a child who is grumbling and complaining. The temptation is to say "Stop complaining!" But a more effective approach is to help the child see what their complaint reveals about their heart. Are they ungrateful? Are they demanding that the world serve them? Are they forgetting the good things they have been given?

For Christian parents, this is where the gospel becomes vividly real in daily life. You can say to your child: "You couldn't do the right thing in your own strength — and that's exactly why we all need God's help. Let's talk to Him about it." The conscience becomes the bridge between the child's lived experience and their need for grace.

For all parents, the principle holds: *an appeal to the conscience* — helping a child see for themselves that they have fallen short of their own best self — is far more powerful than any external punishment. It develops character from the inside out.

6. Case Studies — Small Group Discussion

⏱ **15 minutes**

Break into groups of 4–5 parents. Each group receives one scenario card. Take about 10 minutes to discuss, then we'll briefly hear from each group. For each scenario, discuss:

1. What is the visible behaviour? (The "what")

2. What might be going on in the child's heart? (The "why")

3. How would you respond in a way that addresses the heart, not just the behaviour?

Scenarios for Ages 4–6

Scenario A1: The Broken Crayons

Leah refuses to share her crayons at school. When the teacher insists, she snaps three of them in half rather than let another child use them. That evening, her mother hears about the incident from the teacher.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour here?
- What might Leah's heart be "saying" through this action? Consider: is this about crayons, or about something deeper?
- How might you respond in a way that reaches Leah's heart — without simply punishing her or lecturing her?
- How might "thought-turning" have worked in the moment at school?

Scenario A2: The Bedtime Battle

Every evening, 5-year-old Noah turns bedtime into a drawn-out negotiation. He needs water, then the toilet, then one more story, then he's scared, then he's hungry. His parents are exhausted and have started giving in to keep the peace. The pattern has been escalating for weeks.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What might Noah's heart be seeking through this pattern? (Consider: attention, control, anxiety, something else?)
- How would you distinguish between genuine need (fear, thirst) and a heart that is learning to manipulate?
- What role might good habit-formation (Webb) play in preventing this kind of pattern?

Scenario A3: The "I Can't" Child

Four-year-old Amahle says "I can't" to everything: putting on her shoes, packing away toys, climbing the steps. She is physically capable of all these things and does them happily at school. At home, she collapses into helplessness and waits for someone to do things for her.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- Why might Amahle behave differently at school than at home? What does this tell you about what's going on in her heart?
- How might you use thought-turning to address this, rather than either doing it for her or scolding her?
- What long-term character issue might be forming if this pattern continues?

Scenarios for Ages 7–9

Scenario B1: The Small Lies

James (age 8) has started lying about small things — whether he's brushed his teeth, whether he's finished his reading, whether he fed the dog. None of the lies are about big things, but the pattern is growing. When caught, he shrugs and says "I forgot" or "I thought I did."

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What might be going on in James's heart? Why might a child lie about small things rather than big ones?
- How would you move past the "what" (the lie) to the "why" (the heart motive)?
- How might you appeal to James's conscience without shaming him?

Scenario B2: The Sore Loser

Seven-year-old Daniel cannot lose at anything — board games, races in the garden, even casual contests with friends. When he loses, he cries, accuses others of cheating, or quits mid-game. His parents have started quietly letting him win to avoid the meltdowns.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What might Daniel's heart be telling him about where his value and identity come from?
- What is the danger of "letting him win" as a strategy, from a heart perspective?
- How might you help Daniel see what his reaction reveals about his heart, in a way that is kind rather than shaming?

Scenario B3: The Comparison Trap

Eight-year-old Refilwe is becoming increasingly preoccupied with what other children have — their clothes, their phones, their holidays. She frequently says "It's not fair" and has begun asking for things the family cannot afford. She recently told her mother, "Everyone else's family is better than ours."

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What desires and beliefs in Refilwe's heart might be driving this? What is she looking to possessions and status to give her?
- How would you address her heart without simply saying "be grateful"?
- How does the "long view" shape your response? What kind of person do you want Refilwe to be at 20?

Scenarios for Ages 10–12

Scenario C1: The Cruel Comedian

Sophia (age 11) is increasingly unkind to her younger brother, mocking him in front of friends and making jokes at his expense. When confronted, she says "I was just joking" and accuses her parents of overreacting. Her brother has started avoiding her.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What might Sophia's heart be seeking through this mockery? (Consider: status, power, insecurity, peer approval.)
- How would you move past "Don't be mean to your brother" to a conversation that reaches her heart?
- How might you appeal to her conscience — helping her see the person she is becoming?

Scenario C2: The Homework Rebel

Twelve-year-old Thabo, who is bright and capable, has begun refusing to do homework. He says school is "pointless" and that he shouldn't have to do work he finds boring. His marks are slipping. When pressed, he becomes sullen and withdrawn.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour?
- What might Thabo's heart be wrestling with? Is this laziness, or something deeper?

- How might the distinction between “willfulness” and genuine “will” (from Webb) help you understand what’s happening?
- How would you address Thabo’s heart while also maintaining the standard that homework must be done?

Scenario C3: The People-Pleaser

Ten-year-old Grace is the “perfect child” — always obedient, always helpful, never in trouble. But her mother has noticed that Grace is anxious, unable to make decisions without checking whether her parents approve, and recently admitted she “doesn’t know who she is when no one is watching.”

Discussion Questions:

- What is the visible behaviour? (Note: “good behaviour” can also be a heart issue.)
- What might Grace’s heart be worshipping? What is she building her identity on?
- Why is it important to address the heart even when the behaviour looks fine on the outside?
- How does this scenario challenge the idea that parenting is simply about getting children to behave well?

7. Closing — The Long Harvest

⏱ **5 minutes**

Let's return to where we began — to the image of the tree. The roots. The trunk. The fruit.

Character is not formed in a day. Webb uses a beautiful metaphor from nature: when we plant a seed, a never-ceasing process of growth begins — sometimes active, sometimes resting, but never wasted. She writes that there is no haste in nature's methods of development, but no time is lost. The same is true of the work you are doing as parents. Every gentle redirection, every honest conversation about what is really going on in your child's heart, every moment of patient shepherding — these are seeds planted. You may not see the harvest today. But it is coming.

Webb also offers this encouragement about prevention: if we can form good habits early — by guiding our children into right action before they even know they are being guided — we will be astonished at how few faults there are to punish later. The child who has walked the path of right action from the beginning will find it a comparatively easy matter to continue on that path when they are old enough to choose it for themselves.

For the Christian parents among us: remember that you are not the ultimate shepherd of your children's hearts. God is. You are His instrument. The Psalmist writes, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1). Do your part faithfully, but hold your children with open hands before the God who made them and loves them even more than you do.

For every parent here tonight: take heart. The fact that you are here, thinking about these things, willing to look below the surface of your child's behaviour to ask what is really going on — that already says something about the kind of parent you are becoming.

Your Take-Home Challenge

This week, when your child does something wrong, **pause before reacting.** Before you correct the behaviour, ask yourself one question:

What is the heart behind this behaviour?

You won't always get it right. You don't need to. But the habit of asking that question — of looking for the roots beneath the fruit — will begin to change the way you parent. And over time, it will change the way your child grows.

Sources & Further Reading

Dr Helen Webb, *"Training in Character"* (1902), published in *The Parents' Review*, pp. 526–539. Webb was a physician and close colleague of Charlotte Mason, who gave her the title "Beloved Physician." This paper is the primary Charlotte Mason–tradition source for this workshop. It is reproduced as Ambleside Schools International's *MTTP Pedagogy Session 3.10: Training in Character*.

Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Shepherd Press, 1995). Chapters referenced in this workshop: Introduction ("The Centrality of the Gospel," "Shepherding"), Chapter 1 ("Getting to the Heart of Behaviour"), Chapter 13 ("Safety Rather than Danger," "The Rescue Function," "Honouring Defined"), Chapter 17 ("Childhood Training Procedures" — "Addressing the Heart," "Appealing to the Conscience," "Developing Character," "Interpreting Behaviour in Character Terms," "A Long-Term Vision").

Charlotte Mason, *Home Education* (1886) and *A Philosophy of Education* (1925). Mason's broader philosophy, of which Webb's paper is an application, provides the educational framework used at Three Peaks School as an Ambleside International School.

"In nature's methods of development there is no haste, but no time is lost."
— Dr Helen Webb, 1902