

PITCH: WHY KIDS NEED GOOD STORIES. HOW TO GET YOUR KID OFF THEIR SCREEN—TRY A BOOK.

It seems odd that a person trained to cut things out of the body would carve out time to write children's books. Today we'll talk with Dr. Charles Page. And we'll learn why? Dr. Chuck is an author, speaker, father of five kids and the founder of Spoonful of Courage, a Christian ministry aimed at inspiring people with hope and faith—in small doses.

Q: Dr. Chuck. What are you seeing in kids that has motivated you to write children's books?

A: Here's what I see every day in the office. Mom or dad hauls the kids with them to their office appointment. And the kid's eyes are glued to their hand-held device. In a sense that's a good thing. Kids probably need a little distraction when mom is talking about having her gallbladder removed.

Having raised five kids, I know that sometimes Mom and Dad need a break. And it's easy just to shove a screen in their face and take a breather.

Recent studies show that teens spend about 8.5 hours/day on the screens. Tweens about 5.5 hours. The studies suggest that kids grow in their 'screen addiction' as they mature into adults. I believe this increase in screen time correlates with the rise in anxiety, depression, and mental health issues in kids.ⁱ

Studies in the UK show that spending more than 4 hours on a screen negative affects kid's emotional health.ⁱⁱ And here's some scary statistics: Research shows even one hour of screen time per day increases the risk of anxiety and depression in kids.ⁱⁱⁱ

Q: How do children's books make a difference and possibly reverse some of these trends?

A: Well, let's be realistic. I don't think we're ever going to reverse some of those trends. It's already embedded in culture. Kids are relational. More than anything, children crave to be connected with the people they love. Picture books are a good tool to disconnect kids from their screens and have some one-on-one interaction. It's a way to build a relational bond and create memories—whether its with Mom, Dad, Grandma, or caregiver.

Getting your kids off their screen and interacting with them sends a message. They are important and are worthy of time. They are valuable. Nothing could be more beneficial to a kid's state of wellbeing and emotional health than to know they are loved.

Q: Current studies show that people are reading less and spending more time on their screens. Give us your take.

A: Yep. The trends are dismal. It goes beyond Johnny can't read. Now the question is, "Does Johnny even know what a book is?"

I think one the greatest challenges for the younger generation is distinguishing between what is real and what is unreal. We know that readers are leaders. And that's because books make us think. And parents send an important message to kids—even when they are toddlers—that books are important. So, why not set a precedent to kids that reading should be a priority. And we do that—at an early age by reading them books. It's a concept which is caught more than it is taught.

Q: Can you give us some personal examples of how this works out in your family?

A: Most of my adult life, practicing surgery, I'm worn out when I get home. Putting my kids in my lap and reading them a book—is a quick way just to connect with them. I've noticed that when kids are attention starved they tend to act out. Although they are unconscious of it, kids are saying, "I'm going to misbehave until you spend time with me." The big goal of parenting is trying to stay in the game. So that when the time comes, our children know they come to us for help.

Now my wife, Joanna, is more intentional. She mastered the art of spending time with kids at bedtime. Long after I'm sleeping in a coma, she read picture books to our kids. From an early age my wife modeled the importance of reading. And I believe her influence has made a significant impact in the emotional and mental health of our kids. (FYI—they are far from perfect).

The old adage is true. *The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. I think Joanna modeled these principles with our kids... and that has made the difference.* My wife instilled in their brains the importance of reading. I give her—and God the credit.

Q: Tell us about your family and how this habit of reading books has influenced them.

A: We have four kids in college and 1 at home. After getting a seminary degree in apologetics, Jacob studies law at UT Austin. He plans to focus on constitutional law. Jonathan is a senior at Boyce in Kentucky. He speaks 3 languages—Hebrew/Greek/Spanish and read old books—the ones with sentences that are so long I can't even understand them. Georgia is a Texas Aggie and considering law. George has illustrated a kid's picture book with me about a Father and his sons, unconditional love and acceptance. And Jane Aubrey Rose is at Taylor University studying journalism and editing the school paper.

Q: And what about the one still at home?

A: Charlie is a tennis player. He's reading books about the game and getting into biographies of famous tennis stars.

Q: We've talked a little about the emotional and intellectual importance of reading. Let's talk a little about content. Does what parents and caregivers read to their kids make a difference?

A: I believe content makes a huge impact. Kids these days are bombarded with all kinds of stuff. At an early age, kids are forced in the worldview and culture battle. And I maintain that many children's books are influencing kids in a negative way.

As a Christian, I believe books leave a spiritual impact.

Q: Don't you think you're being biased and influencing readers with your Christian worldview?

A: Everyone believes something. And every writer writes from a frame of thinking. James Sire described it as *the universe next door*. Every person on the planet has assumptions in which they place faith in.

Agnostics believe that the reality of God can't be proven—and therefore they think they don't have enough evidence. Atheists believe in unbelief. The secular/existential/postmodern framework suggests that all paths are equally valid.

We want kids to become intellectually honest and learn how to think through these issues. I maintain that parents have a responsibility to teach kids how to think, how to filter what they hear and read. I believe when kids learn how to think and process ideas, they will learn to discern truth from falsehood.

Most of my children's books don't mention the Bible. I want to capture their imagination with things that are good, beautiful, and true. Even with a fiction kid's book, children can root themselves in reality. And as I've mentioned, kids are struggling these days to understand what is real—and what they perceive to be real.

Q: Do you suggest that parents read books to their children with beliefs contrary to their own?

A: Some parents may disagree with me. I think we should, under wise supervision, read books that suggest different ways of thinking. From an early age, it's important for kids to realize that not everyone agrees on topics. And from an early age, we need to teach our kids to think critically. We need and remind them that there are books out there that are misleading.

We need to reinforce to kids, *'Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own truth'* (or reality). You can't breathe underwater, no matter how hard one may want to. We have to help them understand the *Ideas have consequences*.

Parents need to emphasize to kids not to believe everything that's in print and how to filter things. A little healthy skepticism can be an asset down the road. If you're a parent, think about this. What kind of books are your children going to be forced to read in college?

As a Christian, I believe a valuable tool/skill we need to instill is ability to evaluate books, ideas, and situations from a Christian framework. And we've got to start early. Culture may be beating us to the punch.

Kids, under progressive supervision, need to not only know *what* they believe, but *why* they believe it.

Q: What kind of topics do your books cover?

A: *Climbing the Upside-Down Tree*, the book Georgia illustrated, delves into living life based on unconditional approval. Kids, from birth, are ingrained with the idea that their acceptance is based on their performance. If you're not strong or fast enough, then you don't make the team. If you don't make the grades in high school then you don't get accepted into college.

This book reminds kids of a different way of seeing themselves. In the story the father loves his son—without conditions. Ultimately, as the son understands this, it gives him courage to climb the tree. But Padsó's performance is motivated out of love and gratitude instead of guilt and shame.

That's a message that every kid needs to hear.

The *Lizzard in Lizzy's Gizzard* tells a funny story about a girl who swallows her pet lizard on a whim without thinking about the mess she's gotten herself into. It's a book which reminds readers about reality. Choices and consequences, how to think creatively, how to cooperate with others in tough situations. And the Lizard also learns some great lessons. He suffered an injustice.

Q: That's an interesting story. What life experience caused you to come up with a story like that?

A: Well part of my job as a surgeon is to retrieve objects out of people's stomachs. Razorblades. Toothbrushes. Batteries. Pennies. Safety pins. People swallow all kinds of things. And they swallow them for different people. Some people are justifiably crazy. They have Schizophrenia. Others do stupid things without thinking them through.

Sometimes we leave these ingested foreign bodies alone. Sometimes we take them out with an scope. And sometimes they require surgery.

Q: Any more kid's stories which are based on your experience?

A: *Climbing the Upside-Down Tree* and *Azi's Gift* both come experiences in Africa. For the past 20 yrs. I've traveled to Africa on short-term mission trips. Sometimes I go to hospitals and fill in for surgeons who need a reprieve. Sometimes we go through villages and share the good news of the gospel.

What impacts me the most are the kids. And there are lots of lesson kids in more affluent cultures can learn from these kids. As far as resources go, they have little. Most run around in bare feet. Many are suffering with malnutrition. Many, because of the HIV epidemic, have no parents and must care for their younger siblings. They are so creative and make their own toys, soccer balls made of plastic sacs and strings, cars and toys made of wire. There's tons of things western kids—who have all kinds of gadgets, plenty of food, and strong support systems—can learn from the kids.

My wife worded the dedication on *Climbing the Upside Down Tree: To the kids of Africa, who's feet are often bare but who's hearts are often full.*

Q: What's the spiritual message behind these children's books about Africa?

Azi's Dance is pretty direct. It contrasts the Christian faith with traditional African ones. The GuleWamkulu are traditional dancers who remind Africans of their roots. This book presents a Christian message in a way kids can understand it. It's a good tool to help parents explain the gospel to kids in a way they can comprehend it.

Climbing the Upside-Down Tree never mentions God. On one level it discusses Father-son and parent relationships—reminding people of how relationships should be. Kids are under so much pressure these days. And I think parents push kids to perform. I see it in athletics—tennis, baseball, and basketball but also in the academic arena. Kids are smart. They catch the hidden message—one's worth depends on how well they perform.

This message is so ingrained in people's thinking, sometimes people approach God in the same way. We think we can win God's approval by doing something. Whether it be jumping through religious hoops and rituals or whatever. This book can be a reminder for kids (and their parents) that God—like a good father invites us into relationship. And when we meet those conditions—giving up self-effort, self-will, and self-determination—entering into relationship with our heavenly Father—everything changes.

A Christian doesn't work *for* approval. We work *from* our Father's approval.

Q: Tell us about the Christmas book?

Fluffy is a handmade Christmas tree ornament crafted by a youngster named Zach. And Fluffy wants, more than anything, to get to the top of the tree. As Zach grows over the years, the snowman ornament slowly climbs the tree—but makes the other ornaments jealous and resentful. Over the years, Fluffy's

body breaks down and falls into the pieces. The worn-out ornament is forgotten and left in a box. Until the box rattles. Fluffy finds new hope and a new purpose as he finally gets to the treetop. The theme centers upon how God can use our tough life events—like bullying, losses, and loneliness—and transform them. I think that’s a positive message everyone needs to hear.

Q: So how can people connect with you, Dr. Chuck?

A: We have a lot of free resources on spoonful of courage.com—but that’s more for parents. And for kids—since most are already online—let’s give them some good options. We’ve got to start with where most kids are. And most kids are online. We have video Read Alouds which your kids can watch—with the goal, hopefully, of helping them disconnect and get into books. We’ve got some free links which

Free Links to Free Read Aloud Videos:

The Lizard in Lizzy’s gizzard: <https://geni.us/VkEj>

Links for Fluffy’s Christmas Gift: <https://geni.us/jfYL7B>

Climbing the Upside-Down Tree links: <https://geni.us/hbQA>

Azi’s Gift links: [Click ONE or ALL of these \(geni.us\)](#)

ⁱ [Five-Year Trends in US Children’s Health and Well-being, 2016-2020 | Pediatrics | JAMA Pediatrics | JAMA Network](#)

ⁱⁱ [Overload of screen time ‘causes depression in children’ | The Independent | The Independent](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Screen Time Linked To Increase Of Anxiety And Depression In Children \(moms.com\)](#)