

## **FamilyLife Today**<sup>®</sup> Transcript

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### **Where to Go to School**

Guest: Shelly Wildman  
From the series: First Ask Why (Day 3 of 3)  
Air date: September 6, 2019

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**Bob:** When our kids were little and learning to walk, they would take a few awkward steps and then fall down. We'd cheer them on, lift them back up, and they'd start over again. Shelly Wildman says, "As our kids grow, the same thing is going to be true about how they learn to walk with Christ; and we need to be parents who help them back up and cheer them on, on the journey."

**Shelly:** The world needs our strong families. The world needs our Christian kids to become Christian adults to stand on their own two feet and make a difference in their world. They are not going to be in our world forever. They need to be trained so that they will go out and do the work too. It's so important. Our world needs our kids.

**Bob:** This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. What can we do as parents to make sure our children learn how to walk faithfully with Christ? We're going to talk more with Shelly Wildman about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. One of the challenges all of us face as parents is when our kids are three or four or five, we start thinking about—"Okay, who are we going to subcontract their education to"; right?

**Dave:** Oh, I thought you were going to say, "Who are they going to date at three, four, or five?" [Laughter]

**Bob:** Was that what you were thinking about that?

**Dave:** That's when we started thinking about it: "You're not dating anybody. That's what I'm telling them." No; you're right.

**Bob:** It's our responsibility as parents to guide and shape and mold our kids. We're going to do some subcontracting along the way, and that could mean that you say, "Well, I'm going to do the lion's share. I'm going to be the homeschooling parent and do some of this"—although the homeschooling parents I know still do a lot of subcontracting to the coop—

**Ann:** Yes; right.

**Bob:** —for the this or the that; right?

**Dave:** Yes.

**Bob:** Then there are the folks who say, “Oh, I’m going to subcontract it to the Christian school down the street,” and then some who say, “I’m going to subcontract to the public schools.” We’ve got a guest joining us the week who made an intentional decision about schooling that really started to fuel intentionality in everything they were doing as a family.

Shelly Wildman joins us on *FamilyLife Today*. Welcome, Shelly.

**Shelly:** Thank you.

**Bob:** Shelly is the author of a book called *First Ask Why: Raising Kids to Love God Through Intentional Discipleship*. Shelly is a mom of three, now, adult children. She and her husband live in Wheaton, Illinois. So, you faced this kind of decision about—“What are we going to do with our kids?” How did you and your husband wrestle through that?

**Shelly:** I have to really preface this conversation by saying, “We are very fortunate in where we live.” We have excellent public schools. So, we knew they were going to get a great education.

**Bob:** That’s a good option if you choose that option.

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Shelly:** Great option. I know that that is not the case in many parts of the country.

**Dave:** Right.

**Shelly:** Having worked in education for many years, my feeling is that schooling is for education; and character development is my job. I, of course, want my children’s teachers to help in that regard.

You know there might be places in the country where it would be absolutely no way would I ever put my kids in public school. So, I do have to preface it by saying, “We are very fortunate”; but with our firstborn, obviously, we started to pray, “What are we going to do,” because we have every great option available to us. We both felt like God was calling us to put our kids in public school. We thought, “Well, why?”

A big part of that was the missional aspect. We wanted to know our neighbors. We knew we had non-Christians neighbors. We knew that kids who were going to be on our daughter’s soccer team were going to be from her school. How else would we get to know our neighbors if we weren’t really involved in our community? So, we felt God just saying, “Put your kids in

public school.” We always said, unless something went terribly wrong, that was going to be our choice.

**Bob:** I’m curious because you said you felt like schools are for education / character is our job. There are a lot of schools today that feel like—“No, character is our job, and we’re going to mold and shape the thinking of your kids.”

**Shelly:** Right; I know.

**Bob:** Did you face any of that with your kids in public school?

**Shelly:** You know, I can really only think of a couple of times where they, maybe, had a situation come up in school where they were teaching something that was really different or anti-what we were believing.

**Bob:** Right.

**Shelly:** I actually took it upon myself to address the situation with the teacher. Honestly, the teachers just backed right down. There was one—I’ll just tell you specifically—my oldest daughter was in a gifted reading class. It was a pull-out situation. I think she was in fourth grade, and that teacher—her reading teacher was going to talk about the Day of the Dead. It was, you know, the festival in Mexico.

My daughter came home, and she said, “Mom, I’m really scared to go to reading tomorrow.” I said, “Why?” She said, “Well, we’re sort of talking about the Day of the Dead. I don’t really get it, and it’s kind of creepy. I don’t really understand it.” So, I started looking it up online, and I felt like there was a little bit of satanic undertone. I just said, “You know what, Kate? You don’t have to go to reading tomorrow. You just stay in your regular class. I’ll call your teachers, and I’ll explain it.” So, I did.

First thing in the morning, I called her reading teacher. I said, “Hey, you know, Kate’s not going to come to reading today.” Her teacher said, “Can I ask you why?” I said, “Sure. You know, you are talking about the Day of the Dead, and we’re a Christian family. It kind of goes into a little bit of stuff that is antithetical to what we believe. You know, I’m not going to make a big deal about it; but I will just keep her in her regular class today.” The teacher just, right away, said, “Oh, well, then, we just won’t talk about that.” I was like—“Okay. Great. Problem solved.”

So, I was very involved. I was PTA President. I was very involved in all of their classes. So, you know, being in public school / being called to public school isn’t necessarily a cake walk. You’ve got to be involved; but I had well-intentioned friends tell me, if I did not choose their choice of schooling, I was not doing the most that I could do for my kids. I thought, “Well, we’ll see how this all turns out in the end.”

I have had opportunities to talk with each one of my kids. Nothing ever came up that we had to pull them out of school, and I had the opportunity to ask each one of them, as they ended high

school, “Did we do the right thing? Was this okay?” Every one of them said, “I am so glad I went to public school.” They had a bird’s eye view into what was going on in the world; and that is, I think, the whole concept of this book: “Why are we here? We are not here to isolate ourselves. We are not here to take up space in this world. We are here to make a difference for Christ?”

**Bob:** We’ve always said, here at FamilyLife, that parents need to make this decision based on their situation—

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** —their circumstances—

**Ann:** Their kids.

**Bob:** —based on their kids / based on the values you have—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —as a family—and as you said, “Not every place is Wheaton, Illinois.”

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** The point here is not this is the right choice or the wrong choice. The point is it’s an intentional choice.

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —driven by a value. While you were making this choice about their education, you were also aware, “If we’re going to do this, then we have to be intentional.”

**Shelly:** Very involved.

**Bob:** Intentional, not just in what they are doing in school, but supplementing the education they are getting with the character formation that you’re now assuming responsibility for. You guys picked out values like kindness and service and stewardship and compassion. These were some of the things that you said, “We’re going to make sure we raise kids who are kind kids who are service oriented, who have compassion for others.” You made this a part of the rhythm of your family.

**Shelly:** Yes. Honestly, the best place to exercise those—it was in public school. You have lots of opportunities to minister to people.

**Ann:** I think for us that was one of the hardest decisions on our plate at the time—was: “What school should we send our kids to?” I knew that I couldn’t homeschool.

**Shelly:** Me too.

**Ann:** I knew that I—

**Shelly:** That was not going to happen.

**Ann:** Yes; but it was like it's a hard decision. So, we had both routes in our past. We didn't like the curriculum they were using in the public school when our son started. So, he was in a Christian school. There are pros and cons—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Ann:** —each way I think.

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Dave:** Well, I would say one of our biggest questions—and I'm sure you dealt with this—because we did the public school—was the peer pressure. It wasn't just the curriculum in the school part. It was the kids, and I know Wheaton, Illinois, is probably not a lot different than most any other community in the world in terms of temptations right there. How did that work out for you guys?

**Shelly:** Again, we tried to be the house that kids would go to. Then I made sure, as much as I could, I tried to know my kids' friends at school—again, being involved was really important. Then I always—always—told my kids that, you know—“If you get yourself into a situation that you know isn't right / that gives you a bad feeling—whatever it is—you always call me, and I'll be your out. Blame me”; and a couple times, they did. They were at a friend's, maybe, watching a movie they didn't feel great about; and they would call me and say, “Mom, can you come and get me?”

**Dave:** Did you ever have any time where your kids struggled, and you were like—“Man, if they weren't in this environment, this probably wouldn't happen”? I mean did you ever have—

**Shelly:** Oh, sure.

**Dave:** —regret?

**Shelly:** Not a regret, necessarily—lots of time of prayer. Yes; when, maybe, those doubts crept in or they had friends that I wasn't so sure about; but yes, when you put them out there, it's a risk. It is a risk.

**Bob:** What you're doing along the way is the beginning of a process that will ultimately culminate in letting go? I mean when you drop off your kid at kindergarten for the first day, you're taking a step in letting go.

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** When you let them go to a friend's house for a sleepover or even for a birthday party and you walk away and you're not there, you're letting go. When they are 16 and you give them keys to the car—

**Shelly:** The worst.

**Ann:** Yes.

**Bob:** —all of these are gradual steps toward this time when you will let go and when they will stand on their own feet—not that they'll never call you again and not that you lose your voice but your parenting job—for the most part, you've done the lion's share of it at that point. That day needs to be in the back of our mind as we are training our kids.

**Shelly:** Absolutely. I work with young moms at my church, and we had a kindergarten expert—she was—a teacher come in one day and talk with the moms. She said, “The best thing that you can do to prepare your child for kindergarten is to begin letting go right now.” I was like—“Yes; preach that”—because, man, I know so many parents who have adult children who have not, yet, let go.

The world needs our strong families. The world needs our Christian kids to become Christian adults to stand on their own two feet who make a difference in their world. They are not going to be in our world forever. They need to be trained so that they will go out and do the work too. It's so important. Our world needs our kids.

**Bob:** But the letting go issue for parents—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —involves risk.

**Shelly:** It does.

**Bob:** This is something you understand at a visceral level—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —because of what happened when you were growing up.

**Shelly:** Yes; I talk in the last chapter of the book about my childhood. When I was 11 years old, my nine year old brother went to summer camp. He did not come home. He drowned while he was at camp. You know, often, people are so shocked when they hear that. I say, “You

know what? It's okay because God used that experience in my life in a big way. It's really the main thing that brought me to Him."

When I was in high school—I did not write this in the book—but I went on a mission's trip to Mexico, and I met a girl on this trip from another church in California. She was asking me about my family, and she said, "What is your dad do?" I said, "Well, my dad is a farmer." "Do you have siblings?" "Yes, I have two sisters." She said, "Oh, your dad is a farmer, and he doesn't have anyone to give the farm to." I said to her, "Well, I had a brother, but he died. He was my dad's only son."

The minute I said those words—the words of John 3:16 just came like piercing into my heart: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." I knew what it meant for a father to lose his only son. I mean I had seen that pain. I had walked that pain, but it was like—"Wow! So, the sacrifice that God made—it wasn't like second best. It wasn't just like—'Oh, I'll try this.' It was like the biggest, most valuable thing that He could give."

So, God used my brother's death; but He also used my brother's death in my daughters' lives because when it came time for them to go to summer camp, I had to struggle. I had to wrestle. I knew that it would be a really great thing for them; and yet, it was really hard. So, the camp that they went to was about six hours north of us, and we would put them on a bus over at the college. They would go on a bus up to camp. They'd be gone for two weeks at first. Eventually, they all spent the whole summer there; but the first time I put my oldest daughter on the bus, I was a wreck that entire day—just—I cried the entire day.

I went home, and my other two kids were doing something around the house. I don't know what; but I sat in a chair, I think, for about four hours. Like, I couldn't move. I was so—it was so hard; but I knew God was calling me to do this hard thing. So, again, to follow that up, several years later, my girls all went to the same camp. They all were formed by it in many, many ways. So, several years later, I was on a trip with my youngest daughter, Julia, and we were in England.

I met up with a friend that I had met through blogging, and we were at her home. She was asking my daughter—she said, "So, you know, aside from your church and your family, what do you think has formed your faith more than anything?" She thought about it for a minute; and then she said, "You know I would have to say summer camp." Right then, I was like—"Oh, Lord, you know, following Your sovereign plan for my kids is so much better than anything that I could have done."

If I had chosen to hold my kids close—I could have easily said, "You're never going to summer camp because look what could happen." They would never have grown to experience the Lord in the way that they did.

**Bob:** When my oldest had just graduated from college, she had a heart to want to go to Southeast Asia and to serve as a teacher there with an organization that sends Christian

teachers in hopes that they can be an influence but also, maybe, share the gospel in that situation.

This is a country that could be hostile to the gospel, and I remember her calling one day. She said, “I just found out where my co-teacher and I have been assigned. The town we’ve been assigned to is 250,000 people; and as far as we know, we’ll be the only two Christians—

**Shelly:** Wow.

**Bob:** —in that town. I thought, “No; that’s not what I had in mind for you.” [Laughter] “I was looking for the one that had the church where you could go at night, and you could”—

**Shelly:** Right.

**Bob:** She was thrilled with that news. She was going into enemy territory.

Well, I remember a few weeks later I was watching a movie about the Civil War; and in the movie, Stonewall Jackson—do you remember the general—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —Stonewall Jackson?

**Shelly:** Oh, sure.

**Bob:** He was asked by one of his soldiers—and this is apparently true from history. He was asked by a soldier—he said, “How do you keep your composure on the battlefield,” because Jackson was known as somebody who didn’t flinch. He said, “My theology, sir, tells me that I am as safe on the battlefield as I am in my bed if I am in the will of God.” I heard that in the movie; and I thought, “My daughter is as safe in Southeast Asia as she is on the streets of Little Rock if she’s in the will of God.”

Fear, for our safety—we need to protect our kids; right? We shouldn’t be careless; but if they are in the will of God, He’s got them.

**Shelly:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** Even if they should perish in that situation—

**Shelly:** That’s right.

**Bob:** —Jim Elliot would tell us—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** —“If you perish doing the will of God, that’s how you want to go out.”

**Shelly:** Right.

**Dave:** I love your last chapter title because I think what we’re talking about right now is trust.

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Bob:** The long road—

**Dave:** Long road—

**Ann:** —toward trust.

**Bob:** —to trust.

**Dave:** —to trust.

**Shelly:** It’s hard.

**Dave:** Trusting God / trusting your kids—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Dave:** Man, I’ve just listened to both of you and go—“Way to go!” You talk about courage, seriously. I was just inspired by hearing both your stories about your kids. I don’t know if we have that kind of faith—we do—but it would just inspiring to think I know so many parents that wouldn’t let go.

**Ann:** I think we live in a culture that seems so fearful that we parent out of fear.

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Ann:** We’re afraid that the culture will infect our kids instead of having the mindset—“No, our kids will affect the culture.”

**Shelly:** That is it. That is it exactly, Ann. It—yes; you know, we’re not here to just to take up space and to live our little, happy life under our roof; you know? We are here to affect the culture around us. It’s our responsibility. It is our job to strengthen our kids so that they will go and do that.

**Bob:** At the same time that our oldest was headed to Southeast Asia, our second daughter was headed to college in Manhattan. [Laughter] She was going to college in the Empire State Building which is where the Kings College was meeting at that point.

**Ann:** Really?

**Bob:** It was a year after 9/11.

**Dave:** Wow.

**Bob:** I'm thinking, "Well, if there were going to be another target in New York"—

**Ann:** Yes.

**Bob:** —"maybe, the Empire State Building would be a target?"

**Ann:** Did you think that—even leaving her, did you have all those thoughts?

**Bob:** Yes. I remember being up in New York and walking along 34<sup>th</sup> Street with her at 11 o'clock at night with the traffic and with the—I mean it's bustling at 11 o'clock at night. I'm thinking, "I'm about to drop an 18-year-old"—

**Shelly:** Right.

**Bob:** —"off in the streets of New York." That's where you have to say, "Okay, is this God's will?" If it is, it comes with God's protection.

**Shelly:** Yes; what do we know about God? What do we believe about God? Is He faithful? Does He love our children more than we do? You bet! He can be trusted.

**Bob:** Yes; that's right. Well—

**Dave:** Yes; when we were driving out of Chicago—great city—

**Shelly:** Yes; it is.

**Dave:** You know? But when we dropped out middle son, Austin, off to go to Moody and his girlfriend was in our backseat as we drove out of that city—and they ended up getting married his junior year—but I can remember looking in the rearview mirror back at that—

**Shelly:** Yes.

**Dave:** —skyline and hearing sirens—because that's what you hear in cities like New York and Chicago.

**Bob:** Right; right.

**Dave:** I never hear a siren in the suburb where we live near Detroit. I remember having that fear, "What are we doing"—

**Shelly:** Right.

**Ann:** Yes.

**Dave:** —and yet, at the same moment, thinking, “God can be trusted.”

**Shelly:** Yes; yes.

**Dave:** God was trusted, and He had a great plan for him.

**Shelly:** That’s right.

**Bob:** I think all of us as parents need the courage that comes from these kinds of stories—

**Dave:** Yes.

**Bob:** —from hearing other parents say, “You can trust God in the midst of this.”

And then, to have a book like *First Ask Why*, that helps you think, “Okay; this is my job, and I’m going to do my job. I’m going to trust God with my kids; but I’m going to make sure that I’ve done all I can do because this is a part of my assignment—a big part of my assignment as a mom or as a dad. It’s a seasonal assignment because it comes in the—for most of us—in the middle of life.

**Dave:** Yes.

**Bob:** You may have other things that you feel God calling you to. You may need to postpone those until you’ve gotten done with Job One. There is another season ahead where you can go on and write books or host radio programs or other things; right? But be about the big job God’s called you to because this is important and first ask why / first ask for the intentional question.

Shelly, thank you for the time with us this week to talk about this.

**Shelly:** Thank you. It has just been a pleasure to be here.

**Bob:** You know we use the word intentionality a lot, it feels like, on *FamilyLife Today*; but that’s because we think marriage and family is something we should all be more intentional about. David Robbins who is the President of FamilyLife® is here with us today. Is this something that’s been a part of your marriage from the beginning?

**David:** Absolutely. There was an intention to be intentional. [Laughter] But then we had mentors about 15 years ago give us a process that we’ve done four times. It is—each season, it has shaped us so significantly. I just love the conversation about knowing your “Why” /

knowing intentions with each one of your kids; but I think sometimes we get bogged down in the details and wanting to craft this perfect, Instagram-worthy statement we can share with everyone, instead of just knowing, “What’s our rudder?”

In this season, where are we going to invest our time? Where are we going to put our money? How are we going to focus on each kid in unique ways and what they are dealing with in this season? This process was quite simple. It just took getting away for a few hours, listing out values, ranking them together. Then we put them on a piece of paper, put it in a Ziploc bag, and put it in our shower and prayed for two months—each time.

It was amazing just knowing, “Okay; we don’t know all the details and the wordsmithing is not perfect; but this is what’s surfacing in this season. Let’s put that down on paper and just start praying.” As you do that for a season and pray over it, it leads to action.

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