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1:30 PM Fri, Aug 27, 2010 | Permalink | Yahoo! Buzz
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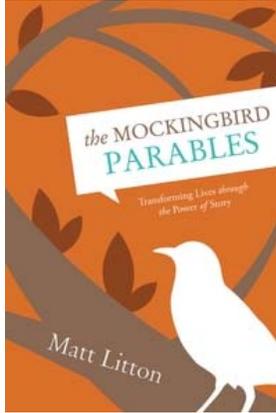
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Matt Litton, a father of four and high school English teacher, has devoted a whole chapter in his new book, *The Mockingbird Parables* (Tyndale House, \$14.99), to what he has learned as a dad from Atticus Finch, the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Please welcome Matt as he shares his insights on this beloved book with the Dallas Moms Blog.



Atticus Finch, the hero of Harper Lee's beloved novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is renowned for his courage and moral stands against racism and injustice. But when you look closely at his interactions with his children Scout and Jem, you notice something else: he is a pretty darn good parent. I devote a chapter to Atticus Finch as a parenting role model in my book, *The Mockingbird Parables*. In fact, there are so many great parenting lessons we can take from Atticus that it was difficult to pick just one.

My wife and I have four children and that means a number of things when it pertains to writing -- mostly that I might as well park myself at the kitchen table because there is not a space in our house that is truly quiet. As surely as I began to write this piece for the Dallas Moms Blog, I overheard my middle two children (boys just over a year apart) in the living room, their discourse becoming agitated, followed by the shuffle of feet, cries of "No!" and "Mine!" As I considered the level of intensity of the skirmish and whether it warranted me getting up, I heard the thump of one brother falling to the floor and the immediate cries of pain from the victim (directed for my hearing in hopes that punishment might be leveled more swiftly). "Is anyone bleeding?" I yelled - because in our house with three boys and a rambunctious little girl, it is an appropriate question.

I know this scene by heart. My youngest boy has pushed his older brother and when I ask him "Why?" his response is consistently "Because..." or "Well, he did (this) first..." So there is my topic played out before me by my own son. My wife and I are working with this one to help him understand that no matter what anyone else does, he is solely accountable for his actions. We live in a culture that rarely demonstrates personal accountability - how can we teach this life lesson?



In *The Mockingbird Parables*, I talk about one of the Finch's neighbors - the mean old Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. She sits on her porch and shouts hateful insults at Atticus's children, Jem and Scout, whenever they pass by. She questions their behavior, their mental health history, even their legitimacy! Honestly, if she taunted my kids like that, I might be down at her house for a talk. The children are terrified of this woman (they think she hides

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a pistol under her shawl). Atticus's discipline of his children is always bent toward instructing them and teaching them accountability.

This is borne out in the illustration of the trouble Jem gets himself into with Mrs. Dubose. After facing the sick old woman's insults day after day, Jem finally loses his cool and goes raging into her front yard destroying her flowers with a baton he had bought for Scout. When Atticus returns from work that evening, he questions Jem about the incident and tells him, "... to do something like this to a sick old lady is inexcusable. I strongly advise you to go down and have a talk with Mrs. Dubose...Come straight home afterward."

I think it is critical that he does not offer to go to Mrs. Dubose's house with Jem and help him apologize. It would be tough for me not to at least walk my son down to oversee this apology, but Atticus wants Jem to go alone. One of the greatest lessons we can teach our children is that they should take complete responsibility for their own missteps.

Jem going alone to apologize to Mrs. Dubose is a terrifying proposition, so scary in the eyes of the children, that Scout believes that Atticus might be sending Jem to his death. While it seems that Mrs. Dubose deserves some of the blame in this matter because of the way she treats the children, Atticus doesn't focus on her. His discipline (or lesson) is to make Jem see that he should always be in control of his actions no matter the situation.

This is a lesson that prepares Jem for the firestorm of insults and criticism he will receive from the town when his father takes a very unpopular court case. It is essential that Atticus makes no excuses for Mrs. Dubose. By focusing solely on Jem's response, he is reasserting the truth that no one else can be blamed for his decisions and missteps -- no matter how despicable the actions or how justified a response might seem.

This is a powerful message in a culture that skews personal accountability with phrases similar to my guilty six-year-old standing before me in the living room "But, he did (this) to me..."

So often I think we derail our efforts to make our children accountable by allowing them to point the finger elsewhere. Which takes me back to my living room, and my little boy who is still trying to justify his actions by telling me what his brother did to deserve the push.

So I will keep Atticus in mind as I hold my son accountable, hoping that he will grow older with a sense of self-control and understand that he is not simply a victim to circumstances, but has the power to manage his destiny with his own decisions.

I hope I am empowering my son with this teaching. I will also remember (as I am disciplining my children) another significant lesson that Atticus reminds us all as parents: they are watching me very closely, and they will be taking notes when I run into my own Mrs. Dubose, because no matter how I instruct them, the way I live my own life will surely be reflected in the nature of my children as adults.

PHOTO: Matt Litton

Matt Litton is a writer, educator, and speaker. He and his wife, Kristy, have four children. They live in Cincinnati. Visit Matt at mattlitton.com or on Facebook [here](#).

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12:50 PM on August 28, 2010

Atticus has always been my role model as a parent. I wish we could all be as wise as Atticus.



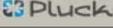
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8:35 PM on August 27, 2010

How true!! Children are watching and learning from our actions daily. What a great article with excellent advice!!!

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