

# OUTGROWING THE GREENHOUSE

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR KIDS FROM THE WORLD  
(WITHOUT OVER-SHELTERING THEM)



AN HSLDA COURT REPORT INTERVIEW WITH

**GREGG HARRIS**



## A CONVERSATION WITH GREGG HARRIS

*Interview by Jennifer Olmstead*

Ever wished you could sit down with Gregg Harris—father of Josh, Joel, Alex, Brett, Sarah, Isaac, and James—and find out his secret to raising driven, passionate, and grown-up teenagers? Recently, we did, and we hope you’ll enjoy having a seat at the table for our conversation as Gregg discusses his thoughts on the “greenhouse model,” raising kids willing to do hard things, and learning to let them go.

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### THE GREENHOUSE, THE COLD FRAME, AND THE FIELD

**JENNIFER OLMSTEAD:** Back in the early nineties, you used to talk about the “greenhouse model,” which forwarded the idea that it’s in your children’s best interest to be sheltered inside the greenhouse until they reach maturity—like seedlings. But when we look at the things your kids have accomplished at young ages—Alex and Brett started TheRebellion.com at age 16, published *Do Hard Things* at 18, then progressed to the national Rebellion conference tour; Josh started speaking and founded New Attitude at 17, then published *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* at 21—frankly, it doesn’t seem like you’ve kept them in much of a greenhouse. Just the opposite, in fact! Has your opinion changed?



**GREGG HARRIS:** Well, let's look at the metaphor of the greenhouse—or the hothouse, as some have called it. You don't transfer plants right from the greenhouse into the field. Before that transfer, plants go through an intermediate process called a "cold frame." A cold frame differs from a greenhouse in that it doesn't have as much temperature control. There's much more fluctuation of temperature than in the greenhouse. There, the plants get used to changing temperatures so they don't go into shock out in the field. That's where the plants are "hardened."

Similarly, there are transitional involvements and activities that allow our children—once they're well-rooted morally, doctrinally, and spiritually and have a strong sense of what they believe and who they are in Christ—to progressively be exposed to different points of view.

Unfortunately, many parents make the mistake of exposing their children to conflicting points of view before they are rooted, which creates a feeling of rootlessness and a lack of identity. At that point, the children can't interact with these new ideas from a position of strength or confidence, but instead are feeling pushed around by every wind of doctrine. The Scripture refers to this in Ephesians 4:14 when it says that we're no longer to be like children, pushed around by every wind of doctrine and the cunningness and craftiness of men in their attempts to deceive.

Because of this tendency, the strategy we've adopted for our family is making our home a place where people learn to think for themselves and discover what they believe at a very young age. We have not owned a television for 35 years. That doesn't mean that we don't see films; we have a nice video projector and a large library of films. But we're not bombarded by television advertisements and by mindless television that's only intended to entertain and that is often teaching more by its aesthetics than its actual narratives. And when we do watch films, we narrate. We discuss what we've seen and talk amongst ourselves, forming opinions.



**HARRIS CONT'D:** There are also books, like Ralph Moody's *Little Britches*, that we read together as a family when each child gets to that place where he or she can understand and appreciate them. We determine what we agree and disagree with, and the children develop their own opinions while being informed by ours. And we approach the Scriptures with the same intensity! We've explained to our children that the Bible is like a map; if you don't use it, you're going to end up hopelessly lost. When your kids start studying the Scriptures in more than a devotional fashion—when they start using it as a handbook, as light upon the path—they become young people who study their Bibles with an interest in “What does the Bible say about what I'm doing now?” They begin to turn to the Bible and let it speak for itself concerning the things they care about.

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## DEVELOPING DECISION-MAKERS

**OLMSTEAD:** So, they've begun to develop a biblical worldview and think for themselves... . When do they go from developing their own opinions to making their own decisions? Do you just let them loose in the candy store on their 13th birthday or what?

**HARRIS:** As far as the teenage mind goes, there's no doubt about the fact that teenagers are still growing. You see this especially in that transitional period around puberty, where one minute, your son is standing there talking and looking like a man, and the next minute, he's chasing the cat through the house like he did when he was 5-years-old.

**OLMSTEAD:** As a girl with three brothers, I can definitely testify to that.



**HARRIS:** Yes. And that doesn't necessarily mean he's a late bloomer or that he's immature. It means he's traversing that middle ground between manhood and boyhood. He's retaining his boyishness, which I feel is a very good thing.

If you put that young man into team sports—or something similar—when he reaches 14 or 15, certain parts of his brain start being exercised. They'll be exercised when he has to take a play and transpose that play into what's actually happening on the field and how the other team is responding. In real time, he has to adjust his strategy and bring it into line with what's actually happening. That's a very healthy mental process necessary for men to develop.

To some degree, you get the same thing when you're playing a simulation—a video game. The mind is acting in real time and responding to it. If you train those parts of the brain with challenges, they will become stronger. If you delay those processes by not allowing the young person to make any decisions or have any responsibility, there are certain parts of the brain that do not develop. When that happens, you get the phenomena of an indecisive young person who lacks a sense of direction.

**OLMSTEAD:** I think I see where you're headed—if you delay and keep the decision-making process away from your child's development...

**HARRIS:** ... you're going get to a 20-year-old who's still acting, emotionally, like a 13- or 14-year-old.

**OLMSTEAD:** So this is the hardening process, then: allowing your children to take control of situations in which they can exercise decision-making abilities?

**HARRIS:** Exactly.



## LIFE IN THE COLD FRAME

**OLMSTEAD:** I'm sure parents are wondering how, outside of teams sports and video games, they can allow their children to exercise their decision-making, character-building abilities without just shoving them right out into a big field of negative influences? I mean, what if Tommy hates T-ball?

**HARRIS:** Well, I think one of the resources we do not avail ourselves of enough is a strong local church. And surprise, surprise—sinners are in the church! You do not have to go to the worst part of town to find sinful people; they're sitting next to you in the pew! You don't have to search for immoral people in order to expose your children to conflict or differences of opinion.

You just don't exclude your children from your own life of interactions.

For example, a dad takes his son with him into a meeting where there's going to be a sales presentation—his dad could be either giving or hearing a presentation. The young man is being encouraged to put himself in his dad's shoes, either to not be swayed by false arguments or to not be put off by the potential buyer's reasons to not buy the product. Vicariously, he enters into the fray; he begins to engage. On the way home, the dad can talk to his son about what happened: "Here's what I should have said that I didn't. Here's why I said what I did. What would you have said? What did you think about what I said?"

When you do this kind of thing, you draw your children into imagining themselves being responsible, being in charge, having real decisions to make.

Another example is to take them with you when you witness. I don't mean you have to be the guy out with the megaphone, although that can be well done. You



might just be a coffeehouse evangelist who goes in, sits down in the same coffeehouse every few days, and instead of reading the paper and ignoring everyone, you're the guy who welcomes the people who come in, asks them to sit down, and gets to know them.

When your children are there with you, they can watch you engage with this person who more than likely has an entirely different worldview. You can provoke dialogue, ask questions—sometimes even have a healthy argument—and your children are sitting there going, “Wow, there are really people who don't believe Jesus Christ is Lord?!”

**OLMSTEAD:** And the best thing about that, in my opinion, is that they're witnessing the dialogue. You're not only exposing them to a different worldview; you're demonstrating a mature, gracious approach to engaging a different worldview.

**HARRIS:** They quickly realize that not everyone is going to just drop to their knees when they realize what the Bible says. [laughs]

But yes, we want our kids to walk with the wise. The challenge of our culture is to find more opportunities to include our children in our everyday lives. We have a tendency to spend time with our kids in a purely recreational sense. We go on vacations, and that's when we're together. We do things that are so artificial that there's very little real training that goes on. To include them in our normal routines, in our work, in our ministry, in our just being a good neighbor in the community, in our involvements and activities, in being an activist in some way—is making them a sidekick, an apprentice. And that's the strategy... *That's* the cold frame.

**“WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO SPEND TIME WITH OUR KIDS IN A PURELY RECREATIONAL SENSE.”**



## EVERYDAY DIALOGUE

**OLMSTEAD:** Okay, so you've got the kids in the cold frame. How do you know at what point they've been sufficiently "hardened" by the "fluctuating temperatures?"

**HARRIS:** There's a point at which they're able to handle rapidly changing moral climates, where they learn to be a part of the dialogue. The person at the coffee-house says something off-the-wall, and you hear your son or daughter say, "Well, what about this?" You hear them engage that person. You're starting to hear them find their own voice. And you hear this because you're there with them, watching it happen.

My daughter is interested in becoming a midwife, so she's being mentored in a birthing center where there are a number of midwives who don't come from the Christian tradition. She told me the other day that in conversation with these people, she's discovering how much more her beliefs entail—even about specific things—than she even realized. When she hears these conversations, she realizes that she has a strong position, but she hasn't been in a position to articulate it before. She doesn't always articulate that position; but she does realize, "Wow, I feel differently, and it's because of this."

See, she's going through the hardening process in a cold frame environment. There's safety. There's a certain level of trust. Yet you're intending for them to be exposed to different points of view both within the church and outside the church. Again, you're not looking for drug dealers and immoral people.

You're looking for neighbors.



## BEARING THE YOKE

**HARRIS:** Even though the passage is obscure, and even though the context doesn't concern child raising, there's a really applicable statement found in Ezekiel. The verse says, "It is good for a young man to bear the yoke in his youth." And we're not talking about breaking child labor laws here or saddling your children up like oxen. What I think it's saying is that young people need to feel the weight of responsibility at an early age in order for them to taste the exhilaration of having made an important contribution.

A lot of kids know that the chores they do are "make-work." If they don't do them, someone else will. They don't count for anything life changing. I think about kids growing up in the Depression era, where their "chores" were a big deal. It was very, "If you don't get out there and sell this apple, then we're not going to make it, and the lights will be turned off... ."

**OLMSTEAD:** Yes, and then when they *did* bring home the money, they did so with an enormous sense of self-worth, since they had saved the day!

**HARRIS:** Right. They've contributed. And I'm not saying you have to be in dire circumstances or give away all your money here, but we parents need to be able to explain the weight of their contributions.

A mom says to her daughter, "Your taking time to fix dinner is allowing me to take time out with your father to go out with a client and help his career. If I don't go, it's going to hurt his chances, so I'm going to go with him, and you're going to stay home for your siblings and keep the house clean. If you do this, you are contributing to the final result of our family prospering."



**HARRIS CONT'D:** That's what I mean by narrating. If they don't make that connection, they don't work with a will. And that's what the verse is talking about when it says, "It is good for a young man to bear the yoke in his youth." Young people need to taste the exhilaration of making important contributions.

For instance, when a family goes on a mission trip, a youngster might be able to serve in some way that allows someone to hear the gospel as a direct result. The young person comes back from that trip and says, "Wow, my life does count. It's not something that starts later. I can use my time now in a way that makes other people's lives better. I can store up treasure in heaven now, and even though my circumstances and my resources are limited, the way I use what I have now will have a direct effect on what I'm able to do later."

As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. You want your children to be having their twigs bent in a very intentional manner that leads to greater and more accessible fruitfulness. You want them to bear their fruit out in the field.

**"YOU WANT  
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If they don't bear their fruit in the field, you end up with a greenhouse tomato: it's pithy and bland and has no character. Yes, we're just talking about a tomato here, but think about those qualities in the life of a young adult. Do we want pithy, bland kids without character?

Now, I do need to be clear on one thing here. Don't be afraid of the accusation that you're protecting your children too much. If you're not getting that accusation from the culture we live in, then you're not protecting them enough. But there is a time for them to be transferred to the field so they can bear fruit.



## MAKING THE TRANSFER

**OLMSTEAD:** Okay, now this seems like the hard part. How do you make that transfer without being too hands-on or too hands-off? And how can you help find the “field?”

**HARRIS:** I think it depends on their calling. First of all, I’m an advocate for finding the Solomon in your field and learning from him. “The Solomon” is the epitome of excellence in what you would like to do with your life. If you want to be a great chemist, you need to find out who’s the Solomon in the field. Where is he working or teaching, and how can you get in a relationship where you are walking with the wise?

The second part is this: where are you most likely to find an environment with fellow enthusiasts, or comrades in arms? Where are you likely to find other young people who, like you, hope to be useful to God and make a difference in their lifetime? That’s the field you want.

History is filled with stories of small groups of young enthusiasts who go on to challenge and leapfrog over one another. And they make history, whether it’s in history or business or any other field. You always find a little cluster of what I call “delight-directed students.” What they’re driven towards is their passion—which means “something they’re willing to suffer for.”

You want your children to be the likeminded enthusiasts of passionate people with moral integrity. That’s where fruit is born

**“I’M AN ADVOCATE  
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## FIELD RESEARCH

**OLMSTEAD:** So what happens to the parent-child relationship when the kids have gone from the cold frame into the field? How does the parental role change?

**HARRIS:** Well, once your kids are pursuing their calling, and it's taken them away from home, you want to keep the dialogue going. We want them to bounce what they're thinking off of us.

The mistake many parents make here is that they're too critical too quickly—they don't let their kids talk long enough. They're so worried about them making a wrong decision that they won't even allow them a chance to get the sentence out. They jump on it and say, "Oh, no, that doesn't sound like a good idea!" We communicate our fears to our kids, and instead, we need to be able to let them talk. We can gently influence our kids from a distance (and I'm not talking about manipulating, here). We can listen to them, pray for them ... and it's at this point that our authority shifts over to being very much like a pastor's authority.

**OLMSTEAD:** More of a counselor.

**HARRIS:** Right. And the way that a good pastor talks is this: he doesn't tell them what they have to do; he tells them what he would do, if he were in their circumstances.

**OLMSTEAD:** Good point. And from personal experience, I've found that's when the relationship between the parent and child really begins to experience a lot of growth.

**HARRIS:** It does. When they're young, you make decisions for them, but when



they're older, you begin to start talking like a pastor, saying, "If I were you, this is what I would do, but it's your decision and I respect that." That allows the parent's voice to be weighty in the mind of their child without being dominant.

**OLMSTEAD:** And it conveys the message every young person covets—that is, "I trust you, I respect you, and I know you can make a good decision."

**HARRIS:** We should trust the grace and the goodness of God in one another. We should be able to say, "I respect you, and I'm confident that you will make a good decision in this situation, and I want you to know that whatever your decision is, I will be here to advise you, maybe even to help you.

**"WHEN THEY'RE YOUNG, YOU MAKE DECISIONS FOR THEM, BUT WHEN THEY'RE OLDER, YOU BEGIN TO START TALKING LIKE A PASTOR."**

"And yes, I'll be up-front with you: there are some decisions I will help pay for and others that I won't help pay for, but I want you to know that I know for you to go the distance and be the responsible person you need to be, it's necessary for you to make decisions that we will not always agree on."

I mean, I don't want my kids to be tame! I want them to be dangerous ... to the enemy.

**OLMSTEAD:** Just not to you or to themselves, right?

**HARRIS:** [Laughs] Yes. We raised our kids to be forces to be reckoned with; now we have to reckon with them!



## BUILDING SIDEWALKS

**HARRIS:** One final note here on the environment in which I raised my kids: I tried to give each one of them something wonderful that they can do that's challenging—something they want to do.

**OLMSTEAD:** Like what?

**HARRIS:** Well, Joshua wanted to get into professional cartooning. So, I invested in some professional supplies and an easel and the right kind of pens. As he began to show some ability, I commissioned him to illustrate a book that I had written, *21 Rules of This House*. I asked Josh, "Would you like to help me develop a book that would illustrate each one of these rules for kids?" And he did that, and then we went on to do two other books the same way.

You want to give your kids something to do—not something that they have to do, but something that they get to do. And you can expect it to cost money sometimes! Later, my second son, Joel, was excited about music. As soon as he expressed that interest, I went out and bought him a really nice keyboard before he was really mature enough to appreciate the razzle-dazzle features it possessed. My wife has always laughed that it was like throwing a log on a spark.

I was premature that time, but he's grown into it. He's now a musician, has a music studio, and is very talented.

**“YOU WANT TO  
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NOT SOMETHING  
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My point is this: don't just put up fences. Build sidewalks. If all you know how to do is build fences, your children will learn to climb them.

**“DON'T JUST PUT UP FENCES. BUILD SIDEWALKS.”**

Facilitate things that are good and safe and wholesome. You'll keep them engaged in something that they enjoy doing—something that typically comes with some sort of social life—and the combination of those things is a training ground for learning how to enjoy doing hard things.

**OLMSTEAD:** And enjoying doing hard things, making developed decisions, and bearing fruit in the field ... that's the culmination of the greenhouse, the cold frame, and the hardening process?

**HARRIS:** Yes. And it happens by the grace of God.



**JENNIFER OLMSTEAD** is a homeschool graduate and the daughter of late HSLDA board member Jim Carden. After surviving both the cold frame and the greenhouse amidst three cat-chasing brothers, Jennifer graduated from *Patrick Henry College* in 2009. She married her cat-chasing husband, Aaron, soon after, and they now live in northern Virginia with their adorable daughter, Serena, and golden retriever, Jaime.

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