

From Us to You

You may be a young couple who recently had your first baby and are asking yourselves: What have we gotten ourselves into? Or you may be going through premarital counseling and are looking forward to your life together which, you hope, will include having children. Perhaps you already have several young children and are feeling overwhelmed. Maybe you're simply looking for what you hope is another useful book on parenting, knowing there's always more to learn. You may be a single, widowed, or divorced parent who is looking for ways to be a better parent, or an experienced parent or couple who is looking for a good parenting book to use in mentoring or to give to your own adult children.

Whatever your situation, and whatever your purpose for picking up this book, we want you to know that we share a vital bond because, like you, we care deeply about parenting. We believe that being a parent is one of the greatest joys, privileges, and responsibilities with which God has entrusted us.

Sadly, however, we live in a culture that in many ways diminishes the role of a parent and the task of parenting. Often the not-so-subtle message is that a career or some other avenue of self-realization is superior to the so-called dull and dreary drudgery of changing diapers, doing the laundry, and taking your children to an endless litany of ball games, piano recitals, and dance lessons. When your child finally enters college (if they do), you're told in no uncertain terms that you're no longer needed—except, of course, to pay the bills! And even well-intentioned but misguided church leaders may urge you to give your growing child independence—or at least 'more space'—but in so doing remove you from your God-ordained significant guiding and nurturing role.

It's a terrible mistake to cut the ties between parents and children for the sake of your child's 'need' for personal independence or even for the church to do its 'necessary ministry.' Instead, youth workers and others will do well to respect the God-given design of the parent-child relationship and to strive to nurture and equip parents so they can fulfill their God-given calling as a parent. Rather than interfere with or even take over this relationship—which not only lacks humility but fails to respect the divine design—community and church leaders should challenge parents to step up to their role (unless, of course, the parent-child relationship is overly dysfunctional, whereupon ministry to the parents and equipping them for the task becomes even more vital). In these and many other ways, parents are diminished in our world today.

What a shame! The world desperately needs parents who engage in parenting that is *realistic*, *relational*, and *responsible* ('3R parenting')—but more on that in a moment. We need moms and dads who embrace their God-given role as parents

with humility, grace, commitment, a sense of stewardship,¹ love, and a healthy dose of humor. Over the years, raising four children has brought immense joy and occasional grief. Being

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a parent has been exhilarating and excruciating. In the words of Charles Dickens, it has been 'the best of times' and 'the worst of times.'² Yet we wouldn't exchange the joy of being parents to our four children—two girls, two boys

(ages 24 to 15 at the time of writing)—for anything. Nothing can compare to bringing a new life into the world and then over a couple decades nurturing that young life, by God's grace, slowly but surely into mature adulthood.

The Three 'R's' of Parenting

Well, then, let us tell you a little bit about this book. In this (hopefully) engaging and accessible volume, we seek to introduce current or prospective parents to the three 'R's' of parenting: *Realism*, *Relationship*, and *Responsibility*. Each of these emphases is borne out by a tension we perceive especially in young parents: between idealism and realism;

1 Our view of parenting is that it is a stewardship from God. See also Paul David Tripp, *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 13–20, who distinguishes between 'ownership' and 'ambassadorial parenting,' the latter of which is parenting that is not possessive but performed on God's behalf. Later in the book, he lists five indications of putting one's identity in one's children rather than in Christ: (1) an undue focus on success or (2) one's reputation, (3) a desire for control, (4) an emphasis on doing rather than being, and (5) making parenting too personal (pp. 80–83).

2 See the introduction to Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, referring to the French Revolution.

between relationship and task orientation; and between a responsible engagement with your children and a permissive stance. Within this framework, we propose an approach to parenting that accentuates the need for realism, a focus on relationship, and taking our responsibility as parents seriously, especially during our children’s most formative years.

Tension	Proper Parenting Emphases (3 ‘R’s’)	Parenting Weakness
1	Realism	Idealism
2	Relationship	Task Orientation
3	Responsibility	Permissiveness

Figure 1: Three Tensions in Parenting

Many, like us, start out their parenting journey with great hope and boundless enthusiasm, only to gradually awaken to the messy and challenging reality of life as a parent. Others feel inadequate and are unsure if they’re up to the task. While bringing up children isn’t easy, we believe that parents can absolutely rise to the challenge! Adopting the values and proposals we present here in a spirit of hopeful realism is sure to make a difference in raising children who aren’t characterized by rebellion, foolishness, and unwise decision-making but exemplify joy and maturity in growth, eventually identifying marriage partners for life along with a personal calling.

At the outset, we’d like to ask you a simple question: *What’s your goal in parenting?* Truth be told, many—even those who have been parents for many years—never take time to formulate their parenting goals or reflect on their parenting philosophy. We didn’t either—at first. As a result, we do the best we can, but many of us ‘fall’ into parenting (as one might

‘fall’ in love) and probably aren’t as effective as we could be if we consciously developed parenting goals and objectives. But what should our goals be and how should we seek to accomplish them? In this little book, we hope to provide a *framework* laying out God’s design for parenting. In this way, you won’t find yourself constantly reacting to the latest crisis or disciplinary issue but instead act out of your God-given identity and role as a parent in keeping with God’s larger purpose for you in Christ.

About This Book

Now, you may wonder: Who are the authors of this book? Let us tell you a little bit about ourselves. We’re not parenting experts, but parents like you. We’re not professional speakers who travel the worldwide lecture circuit to talk about parenting. Nor are we professional counselors who can draw on a long case log of people who have come to them with their parenting problems. We’re a mom and dad, a Christian couple, who believe in mentoring and making disciples. We love God and love the joy and the challenge of being parents. We love God’s Word and what it says about marriage and the family, and we dearly love our children—not as some form of idolatry but as God’s unique persons, gifts for us to cherish and to help develop for Him.

You may also ask: How is this book unique and distinctive? In short, it’s written not by an individual man or woman but by a married couple—both a mom and a dad *together*—who’ve had the joy of raising four now-grown, thriving children. As you read this book, you’ll hear both of our voices interwoven with each other—male and female, husband and wife, father and mother—in a way that reflects the partnership (and occasional struggle to move toward a unified perspective) that we believe is so vital in parenting. Also, we embrace a

biblical-theological approach, that is, we seek the Scriptures from beginning to end to see what they can teach us about a given topic—in our case, parenting.³ That is, our approach is not primarily sociocultural (focusing on dry family structures and traditions), psychological (dealing with emotions, honing communication skills), or counseling-oriented (addressing problems in sexual sin, drug addiction, rebellious teenagers, etc.).⁴ While we touch on some of these issues along the way, they are not our *primary focus*. Instead, we seek to construct a firm *biblical foundation* for parenting, based on who God has revealed Himself to be in His Word and on the purpose for which He created us as human beings in His image—male and female, and as parents. In doing so, we hope to help parents be proactive and hope to help them avoid some of these counseling issues that typically arise in today’s family.

Not that we’ve done a perfect job—far from it. As a matter of fact, I’m slightly embarrassed to say that *before* marriage and children, the only ‘C’ I got in seminary was in a course

3 We tried to keep this book succinct so it is useful for young couples who want to be grounded in parenting essentials. For the necessary background, see our book *God’s Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), in which we explore the biblical-theological foundations of manhood and womanhood according to God’s design. For a biblical foundation for marriage and the family, including chapters on singleness, divorce and remarriage, and homosexuality, as well as issues related to parenting (chaps. 7 and 8), see Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); or more succinctly by the same authors, *Marriage and the Family: Biblical Essentials* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), including chap. 4 on reproduction and parenting).

4 For a principle and tradition-oriented approach to parenting in what a previous edition called ‘common sense parenting,’ see Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Family* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

on parenting!⁵ Along the way, we've certainly made our share of mistakes. However, we've learned a few parenting lessons and have tried to make the necessary adjustments along the way. Hopefully you'll be able to do a better job than we did as you're equipped with some of the practical and biblical insights we have learned and share in this book.

This book should also prove helpful for growing families in making the nec-

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essary adjustments to round out their parenting experience. Mentors might find this a useful tool for discussing parenting with their mentees. We want this to be a fun and practical tool that can make a difference in the lives of people who can use the input. The volume includes nine relatively short chapters in three parts, with a touch of humor to keep things light-hearted.

At the same time, *unlike* a fair share of parenting books on the market (Buyer, beware), these parenting proposals aim to be *biblically based, theologically grounded, and missionally oriented*, emphases that are integrally interwoven within the texture of this book. Every chapter begins with a section entitled 'What's Up?' that poses a few introductory questions based on a short reading of a relevant Bible passage intending to prepare you spiritually for the contents of the chapter. At the end of each chapter, you will find a concluding por-

5 It was an online course taught by the inimitable Buck Hatch at Columbia International University called 'God's Blueprint for Biblical Parenting.' Incidentally, I also took his course on marriage and did marginally better, pulling a B minus (my two worst grades in seminary). What am I doing writing this book? All I can say is, hopefully grades don't always tell the whole story of who a person really is. I believe I've learned a lot since then, so please continue reading and judge for yourself.

tion entitled ‘What’s Next?’ aimed to be practical in nature and to facilitate discussion and integration of the practical and spiritual teaching in the chapter, useful for mentoring and counseling, as well as small group study.

Parenting with Perspective and Purpose

Primarily, we’ve written this book to help young couples gain *perspective* on the entire parenting process so they can parent with a coherent *purpose*.⁶ While many young couples start out with lots of idealism and live largely in the present, facing the challenges as they come, much can be gained by understanding the *life cycle of parenting*: from infant to toddler, all the way to the teenage years and young adulthood.⁷

Also, we want to assist young couples to develop a

parenting vision that’s inspirational, comprehensive, and holistic. This will help you to fill your sails so you can fulfill God’s calling for you as parents, and you’ll be equipped to parent with perspective and purpose.

At the same time, don’t be given to excessive worry or be unduly anxious or overwhelmed. Don’t overestimate your role as parent; rest in the fact that God is ultimately your child’s

‘Rest in the fact that God is ultimately your children’s perfect Parent ; you’re merely His instrument in your child’s life.’

6 Cf. Tripp, *Parenting*, 12, who also affirms the need for a big-picture approach to parenting, what he calls a ‘big gospel parenting worldview.’

7 There may be some of you reading this book who are young couples still debating whether to have children or not or at least to delay having children until you are better off financially or otherwise more prepared to do so. For those of you, you may want to read the following book whose authors encourage young couples to go ahead and have children *now* rather than delaying: Steve and Candice Watters, *Start Your Family: Inspiration for Having Babies* (Chicago: Moody, 2009).

perfect Parent—you're merely His instrument in your child's life. Certain boundaries will naturally be set by the nature of the child, his or her natural inclinations, and even their individual calling from God. Every child is different, and most certainly children have minds of their own. Also, while guiding your child is important, don't be too heavy-handed. You won't want to destroy your child's individual sense of personhood and personality or get in the way of his or her personal relationship with God and the calling He has on their lives.

Ready, Set, Go!

Rather than stumbling along or moving aimlessly through the maze of the parenting landscape, we are convinced you'll benefit from parenting with purpose and perspective. To do this, we'll try to help build a *realistic* framework for parenting. You'll learn more about the importance of viewing parenting as cultivating a set of—at times messy, but infinitely rewarding—relationships: parents with God, parents with each other, parents with children, and children with God. You will hear us issue a clarion call not to abandon your children to the high winds and torrential waves of the culture! Otherwise, don't be surprised if they're spiritually tossed around or even swept aside by the currents of our times. Few assignments in life are more rewarding than helping a child develop a sense of mission, calling, and a connection with God and others in this world.

So, are you ready to join us as we explore the joy-filled lifetime journey of being a parent according to God's design? Come on then, let's get started!