



You asked it:

THE NO PERFECT PARENTS
EDITION

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ANY AGE



Discipline: How can I provide just the right structure to protect and empower our kids?

BY JANEL BREITENSTEIN

So discipline doesn't really ping in my head as the most fun part of parenting. But I try to picture it like railroad tracks. A locomotive can go a long way and do a lot of good with just the right level of structure.

But without it? A train wreck. (And some of my parenting days definitely seem to meet that criteria.)

Good discipline is complex. We can't apply a one-size-fits-all approach to our kids, because God made each child unique, with different heart attitudes and different responses to different stimuli. He disciplines His own kids differently, and in kindness, leads them to repentance (Romans 2:4).

You might think, *If I don't discipline my kids the same for every offense, it'll be unfair.* But in reality, one child might be crushed by a loss of screen time while another wouldn't think twice about it. And most of us wouldn't say it's "fair" for one child to

endure a painful consequence and another to have one for which he couldn't care less.

NOT JUST CONSEQUENCES

"Discipline" comes from the same root as "disciple": to teach. Rather than punishing, our goal is to guide them toward better future choices. We're doing that even before our kids hit a year old, right? *No, don't spit peas in my face. Yes, give me kisses! No, don't reach into the toilet. Ugh.*

Your mind may have already wired "discipline" together with "consequences." But a big part of discipline is praising kids for what they do right, rewarding what's God-honoring in them, and feeding a relationship that "walk[s] by the way" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Wondering about discipline in the terrible twos? [Check out this podcast on discipline for kids from 0 to 2 years old.](#)

That means good discipline can include a breakfast date together, a long talk about the bad day at school, or snuggling with a chapter book before bed to say, *I love you just because*.

Discipline means preventative teaching, too. It might look like

- Reminding your child of your behavioral expectations before an event.
- Talking about issues before they happen, to give your kids a “script” of what to say or alternatives to avoid temptation.
- Praising good choices and offering rewards.

CREATING A DISCIPLINE PROFILE



Doing a little legwork ahead of time may help your discipline hit its target: the heart. And that may mean less discipline in the future. Bonus: This allows you to keep cooler emotionally—which means your discipline is proactive and thoughtful.

With the goal of wisdom in how to discipline your child (rather than manipulation), prayerfully consider the following questions with your spouse:

- **What does my child love?** Try to make a list of at least 15 items, both general and specific. Does your child love being around people? A TV show? The iPad? Staying up late?
- **What does my child hate?** At least 15 items, both general and specific. Doing the dishes? Being alone in their room?
- **What is my child’s love language?** This can heighten our awareness of the areas our children most long to feel affection—and can help us exercise sensitivity in that area. It also tells you what ways to best reconnect after discipline and how to reward when your child makes a good decision.
- **What are my child’s chronic misbehaviors?**
- **What attitudes and “heart hungers” do I suspect**

[Need practical help for raising young kids?](#)

Q. What are age-appropriate chores for my kids?

[Grab our guided list!](#)

Q. Are sleepovers a bad idea or no big deal?

[Check out the pros and cons.](#)

are beneath those misbehaviors? Consider why your child is lured by those particular pitfalls. Do they find their identity in their performance? Others' approval? Their comfort, security, control...?

- **What environments trigger my child's misbehavior?** Consider environmental factors that unsettle your child (need to rest, food, overstimulation, being late, feeling rejected, not receiving individual attention, making a mistake or doing something wrong, or simply being in the cart too long at Target). Without coddling, lead them away from temptation.
- **What can I take away? What measured amount of pain can I add** (like extra chores)?
- **To what discipline measures does my child respond most?**
- Allowing a little wiggle room for particular factors, **post the consequences alongside their infractions, and post it where the child can see.** For smaller children, consider pictures or simply a consistent response to similar infractions so the child knows exactly what will happen when they choose a certain behavior.
- **Consider making note of your own behaviors (like yelling or shaming) you hope to avoid in discipline.** What strategies will be part of your discipline plan (like not rushing to get out the door), so it's emotionally healthy for all of you?

Remember: Your goal in parenting is to train a child's heart, which changes his actions—not to crush his spirit or simply manage his behavior.

Q. Got more on discipline?

Check out FamilyLife's FREE Art of Parenting video series!

Questions to Consider

IN THE MOMENT

Leading neurologist Dan Siegel recommends asking three questions:

1. Why did my child act this way?
2. What lesson do I want to teach in this moment?
3. How can I best teach this lesson?

Again, our goal isn't to create little Pharisees who groom their outside behavior. So we ask questions to help our children get honest about their hearts. Like these:

- What was going through your mind when you made that choice?
- What did you really want at that moment?
- What could you have done differently?
- Who (or what) had control of your heart? (Is there a chance you loved that more than you loved God?)

**HERE'S TO A FEW LESS
TRAIN WRECKS, RIGHT?!**



How can I help when my kid is stressed out?

BY LISA LAKEY

School, friends, activities, social media ... even (gasp!) parents. Life can sometimes overwhelm even the chilliest kids. One thing I not-so-quickly learned when my kids are feeling anxious or overwhelmed? Stressed kids need calm adults.

My kids need me to listen and help them sort out stress, even when there's little I can do to fix it. But I can't do that if I don't know what they're feeling.

So (especially during the school year) I try to remember to regularly ask my kids four questions to gauge what's going on in their hearts and minds.

1. HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY?

Kids don't feel the exact same way from day to day. Knowing what's behind my son's emotions helps me be more patient and offer solutions to ease his stress.

Tip: Kids need help labeling their feelings. For example, fear can mask itself with anger. Ask questions to dig a little deeper.

2. WHAT'S ONE GOOD THING?

Every kid I know loves to share with adults about their day. But this question offers more than just recalling the day's events. It gives me a peek inside the day-to-day things I miss. And it also gives us all (especially the grownups) a moment to realize that no matter the amount of stress and anxiety, our days weren't all bad.

Tip: Consider writing these "good things" on bits of colored paper and placing in a jar. Weekly or monthly, pull them out to review and hold on to when it's hard to remember the good. "I will remember the deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 77:11).



3. WHAT'S ONE STRUGGLE?

After we share our good things, we each get to share one thing that bothered us that day (my friend calls this game “high and low”). It can be minor or not-so-much.

If the person is okay with discussion, the rest of the family can weigh in. But they can also choose to stop it there and move on.

✦ **Tip:** At the end of the day, take time to check back in with those struggles. *I know you didn't want to talk about that fight with your friend earlier, want to talk now?* There might be something underneath that argument.

4. HOW CAN I PRAY FOR YOU?

One night, my son's struggle he shared was for the red-tailed skink he had caught that day (and mom and dad made him release). Yes, his tender heart was broken over a lizard. But at bedtime, he asked me to pray for that skink and him—to find comfort, strength, and help in the One bigger than our earthly struggles. And I hope he knows I always will.

Sometimes I know how to pray for my kids. But other times I struggle to know exactly how to approach God on their behalf. Especially as they grow older.

I've been holding on to Romans 8:26 a lot lately—“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

✦ **Tip:** Don't let prayer become a stress point. Allow God's Spirit to step in on your behalf, even as you keep praying. And pray *with* your kids. Teach them to take their concerns, worries, frustrations, and fears to God. Remind them the God who created them cares about the big *and* little things in their lives.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”

(1 PETER 5:7)

Q. How can I let go of the mom-guilt?

Find out how you can realistically deal with feelings of failure.



When (and how) should I talk to my child about sex?

BY TRACY LANE

If you think about it, parents have a few options when it comes to the sex talk. Your child's classmates could tell him about sex. Or an older sibling could tell her. The internet could gruesomely inform your naïve child.

Or you, as their parents, could tell them what they need to know ... at the times they need to know it ... in ways that they should hear it.

OPENING UP THE SPACE IN YOUR HOME FOR FUTURE CONVERSATIONS

Both parents should be on board with the idea and be willing to inform and direct young minds to the truth of God's design. Ideally, the sex talk won't be a singular occurrence. Hopefully, sharing the information will open up the space in your home as a place of regular conversation about sensitive topics with two open, involved parents.

I want our girls to feel comfortable talking

to their dad about sex. I want my husband to know that he will talk to our girls about the value in and protection of their bodies, too.

The more we can discuss delicate issues, the less shame there will be in the years ahead. And the more the girls will see us as experts to discuss ideas they overhear outside of our home.

Passport2Purity can help with "the talk" for older kids.

TELLING YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEX AND GENDER

The foundation we set in our home, with talks about sex on multiple occasions, has been a gift. Don't shy away from talking to your young child about their body.

Potty training is an opportune time to do this. You're explaining how to appropriately use their "private parts" in terms of the toilet. You

might as well add in the intentional design and identity that comes with those specific parts. Use that waiting time! Your child is a captive audience.

Our beginning conversations went something like this: God made girls, and God made boys. Girls and boys are different because God wanted them to be different. God knew it would be good to make some people boys and some people girls. He created each of our bodies. He created each one just the right way with love and care.

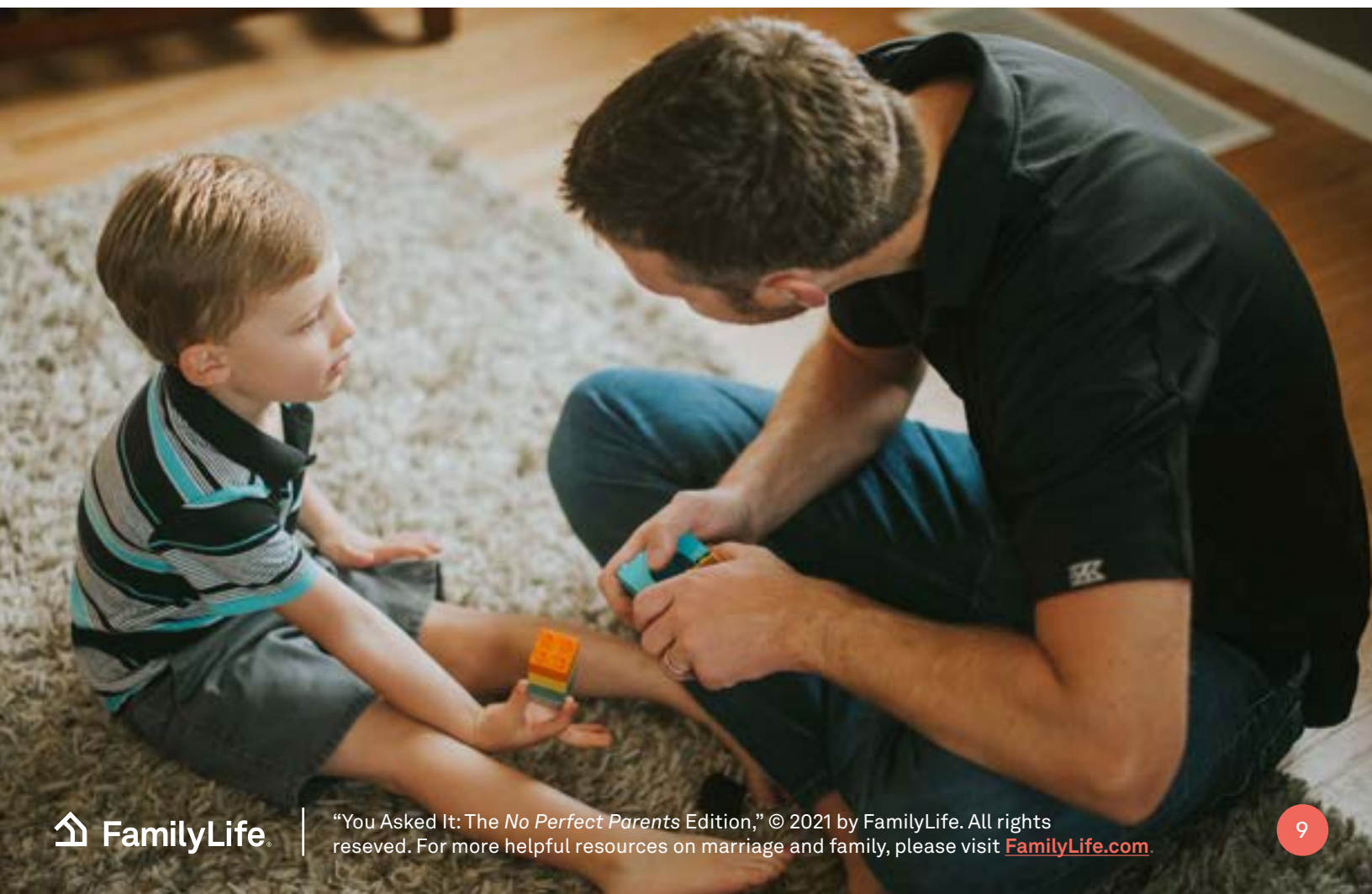
On occasion, I read to them parts of Psalm 139: “You knit me together in my mother’s womb.” Then I’d say, “That means God formed you and made you in my tummy! ‘You were fearfully and wonderfully made.’ He made you so *carefully*. And He did such a great job on you! He made you to show the world who He is!”

When you’re ready for more guided conversations, it’s hard knowing what to say. So books are an easy help for you and your child. *God’s Design for Sex* is a five-book series to give you and your child an engaging, age-appropriate script to follow, starting at ages 1-3. We also found a book at our local library that was helpful called *It’s Not the Stork*.

THE SOONER THE BETTER

The sex and gender conversations in your home don’t have to be big, awkward productions. They don’t have to be embarrassing. And they certainly don’t need to be all planned out.

But they do need to happen. The sooner the better. And they need to continue, the more often the easier. They absolutely must be rooted in biblical truth about how God designed our bodies and gave us the gift of gender and sex.





How can I help my child deal with their anger issues?

BY LAURA WAY

A child's anger issues can trigger any number of emotions in a parent: defensiveness, rage, sadness, fear, uncertainty, worry. Like physiological responses, emotions are not wrong or sinful; both types of reactions communicate something.

As parents, we'll be more likely to respond helpfully—rather than react unhelpfully—when acknowledging our own responses to our children's anger. This keeps those responses from controlling how we behave ... just like we want our children to gain the ability to do.

1. CHECK YOURSELF: WHAT DO YOUR CHILD'S ANGER ISSUES STIR UP IN YOU?

God blessed me with two intense children capable of shockingly intense emotions, both positive and negative. That level of intensity can be intense for me as their mom. Their joy

can be positively, gloriously contagious—as can their ear-splitting rage.

When my kids explode and I explode right back, serious false beliefs drive my reactions.

If they are failing in some way, it means I am failing as their parent.

I cannot handle this.

I can't be okay if they're not okay.

There's something wrong with them.

This is all my fault.

Fear and shame drive those beliefs. And they've led to unhelpful, sometimes hurtful, reactions toward my children.

In truth, I didn't always know how to handle my own anger issues. So when I encountered

theirs, it sent me straight into “fight or flight” mode ... which just continued the cycle of anger in our family.

My destructive reactions—attempting to stifle their yelling with yelling louder, or shutting down and retreating from heated interactions with them— signaled I needed personal boundaries to keep their drama from becoming mine.

Gradually, with a lot of support, counseling, and encouragement (because anger issues are more common than you think), I began to slow down in those moments. I noticed what was stirring up inside me, addressed it (or at least, set it aside to be addressed at a later moment), then focused more fully on empowering my child to deal in healthy ways.



How can I help my kids be friends with each other?

[Scan for ideas to help your kids have closer sibling relationships.](#)

2. CHECK THE SITUATION: CAN EVERYONE BE SAFE?

When anger issues arise, a parent’s job is to make sure everyone can be safe both physically and emotionally.

Working to become emotionally safe as parents is a prerequisite for us being able to help kids with anger issues. Then we can check the space around us, making sure our kids are not a physical danger to anyone else around. This might mean removing an aggressive child from the situation or excusing siblings to another room for a time.

Start with a verbal reminder: “It’s okay to be angry. It’s not okay to hurt people.”

Now is the time to begin (or continue) building an environment where any feeling is accepted (though every expression may not be).

To begin, get into the habit of naming feelings as they arise for yourself and your children. Not only does this reinforce that feelings are normal, but gracious naming of feelings also lets people know they are *seen*, builds emotional literacy, and defangs those frighteningly intense feelings.

Then we can start to talk about better ways to express anger.

3. CHECK FOR THE HEART OF THE MATTER.

Not only is a compassionate response to anger the one we see our Heavenly Father model, it’s also more effective.

Fear and shame (as opposed to healthy guilt)

are not good motivators for heart change in adults or children. Romans 2:4 tells us “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.”

I’ve seen my daughter’s panicked anger dissolve simply by telling her, “I love you no matter how you feel.” I can testify that when my kids feel safest with me—to be themselves as they are in that moment—we get to the heart of their anger issues sooner.

Sometimes that “heart of the matter” is anxiety or shame coming out sideways from something that happened at school or with

friends. And sometimes the core issue is they are hungry, dehydrated, overstimulated, or under-rested.

Both of my children also have some sensory sensitivities (something I didn’t realize until I sought help for their intense behavior). Some agitation can be avoided with a little planning and forethought in our daily habits. We need to consider how these matters play into reactions and behavior.



How can I lead my family spiritually? 15 Ideas

1. Schedule family time at least one night a week.
2. Use circumstances to teach your children to trust God.
3. Protect your family from evil.
4. Help your teenagers navigate, and at times restrain, their passion (2 Timothy 2:22).
5. Set spiritual goals for your children.
6. Take one or two of your children on mission trips.
7. Catch your kids doing something right—and let them know you caught them.
8. Date your kids.
9. Inspect what you expect.
10. Do a breakfast Bible study. Study the book of Proverbs.
11. Hug and kiss your kids and your spouse.
12. Ask for forgiveness when you fail.
13. Pray with them.
14. Call them to a spiritual mission to do what God wants to do with their life.
15. Persevere and don’t quit.



How can I prepare my kids for peer pressure?

BY JANEL BREITENSTEIN

My kids are quick to inform me, amidst my media censorship at home, that anything they watch won't be close to the words popping out in their public-school hallways like toast. After homeschooling for years, these are hallways we chose strategically as Christians.

How can we deal?

1. MAKE CONVERSATION MORE IMPORTANT THAN CENSORSHIP.

Like shielding our kids from disease, hiding our kids from any exposure can be misleading. We can think they're robustly healthy—until the weakness of their immune systems reveals itself from the very lack of exposure.

Obviously Scripture still rings true: "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33 NIV). But what if our children don't learn how to love people different from them, or only through distant labels? If our

kids don't learn to "resist the devil" and watch him flee? If their list of "what not to do" grows, but without compassionate dialogue about the "other side"?

Then we're not helping them gain the muscle needed from lifting the weight of these issues. Not alone, but together.

As their experiences expand, our conversation and supporting moral trellis build alongside—and maybe a few steps ahead.

2. ARM YOUR KIDS FOR PEER PRESSURE BY ACTIVELY DEVELOPING THEIR MORAL CONSCIENCE.

One of the best ways to protect our kids from peer pressure is to help them shoulder ownership of their own convictions, rather than piggy-backing on ours.

If our kids can't answer the questions their peers ask—"Why don't your parents let you date?" "Why can't you see that movie?"—it becomes a lot harder to stand against the tide.

So we can hand kids more than a rule. We can help them nurture their own convictions.

3. UNDERSTAND THE BATTLE FROM THEIR VANTAGE POINT.

What questions are their hearts asking in the tornado of peer pressure?

Do they feel:

- Ostracized or isolated?
- Angry that they can't participate?
- Annoyed with everyone's stupidity? (It's possible.) Arrogant, even?
- Afraid of what everyone will think?
- Apathetic?

Ask them to tell you what this is like around them. Help them to respond to their actual environment—not just your vision of it. Are kids holding hands? Do most of their friends have a boyfriend or girlfriend?

Ask if your kids can think of ideas from the Bible that might tell us how to think about these situations. Then help them out with other verses.



4. HELP THEM INTERNALIZE THE APPEAL OF NOT DOING WHAT EVERYONE ELSE IS DOING.

We want to compel our kids with something more beautiful than the world's gaudy rhinestones. How can we gently guide them toward gratitude for God's protection from what hurts us?

Consider what truth you could encourage your child with *that doesn't make doing the right thing feel like losing out*. What's the inherent beauty in what God asks of us?

If they're particularly struggling with peer pressure, spend some time having fun together building into your child's sense of worth. Hopefully, it will help them gain perspective and identity outside of peers.

What positive friendships could you encourage, creating comfortable hang-out time and counteractive peer pressure? These friends might

Q. How can I help my child develop the fruits of the Spirit?

[Grab our free 9-day devotional with practical tips!](#)

Q. How can I kick off family devotions?

[Get ready for an engaging, totally doable, free 7-day family devotional that helps kids lean in—and maybe even laugh out loud.](#)

not not even attend your child's school. But don't underestimate the power of your child feeling accepted and "normal" in at least one social setting. (Maybe your child won't feel so embarrassed they're the only 10-year-old not watching PG-13.)



5. TALK ABOUT PEER PRESSURE WITH YOUR KIDS.

Say your 8-year-old's class is pairing up into boyfriend-girlfriend duos. How can you help them navigate?

First, thank them for telling you what's going on. Help them feel good about telling you, rather than being afraid you'll freak out. Create a safe place for kids to speak openly and get their questions out—rather than solving problems with their kid-sized toolbox. Ask questions about what they think about the situation:

- “Why do you think people want to have a boyfriend or girlfriend?” (It feels nice to have someone like you. It feels grown up.)

- “Do you think you need a boyfriend or girlfriend to feel those things? What does God say about what makes us valuable?” (God says you're valuable whether you have a girlfriend/boyfriend or not. He's the One who fills the holes inside us [see Jeremiah 2:13]).
- “Could there be any problems with having a boyfriend or girlfriend too early?” (We could start to only feel good about ourselves if we have a partner. We could miss out on friendships. We might experiment with other things, like kissing, that we should wait on. These couples probably won't get married, so kids will get their hearts broken.)

6. FOCUS ON THE VALUES MORE THAN THE ISSUE.

“We don't use those words, watch those movies, wear lipstick, or hang out with those who do,” doesn't arm our kids with the whys informing our ethics. Our kids' decisions aren't like their preschool shape-sorters: *This one right, this one wrong.*

A friend of mine, estranged from the church, passionately related to me that the church of her childhood placed everything in rote, right-and-wrong columns.

Rather than seeking to uncover what the complexity of wisdom looked like in each situation and what it would look like to love each “sinner,” the focus fell on the appearance of the issue at face value: Whether someone was pregnant. How many times someone attended church each week. The length of someone's shorts.



The way she described it, she got really good at shoving things into the right categories and really bad at compassionately seeing people.

Jesus condemned the lawyers of the Pharisees—the experts in the law!—saying, “you have taken away the key of knowledge” (Luke 11:52). Rather than encouraging people to know God, to consult the mind and heart of God, the Pharisees had a rule for everything.

He explains that they eke out the smallest matters of right and wrong but miss the big picture.

“For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

(MATTHEW 23:23, EMPHASIS ADDED)

MESSY MORALITY

As kids grow, we’re helping them begin to understand the complexity of morality and loving individuals in a messy world. Rather than that shape sorter, we’re teaching discernment is more like looking at an old black-and-white newspaper photo. We can delineate pixels of gray, black, and white.

It’s why Jesus could see past a prostitute’s label to her pain.

We could shape lovely children as morally trimmed as a paper doll, but miss the substance of hearts that love Jesus and love people, understanding why they’re tempted and the pressing questions of their hearts.

Will we raise kids who not only resist temptation but do so from a position of humility?



When should my child get a phone?

BY LISA LAKEY

I wish I had an easy answer for this. Should your toddler have a phone? No. Absolutely not. Your first grader? No way. But what if your 5th grader gets off the bus to an empty house with no home phone? Or your middle schooler with after-school practice? Things get tricky.

In our home, it was less about a specific age. My oldest had started middle school when she got a cell phone. I had taken my first full-time job outside of our home since she was born, and a couple days a week she was riding home with friends. The arrangement was restrictive for the first couple years, but she didn't complain and earned our trust in numerous ways.

Will I allow my son to get a phone at the same age? I doubt it. His personality and maturity level probably won't be ready.

There's no "right" age for a cell phone. It depends more on the individual child. But consider:

- **The needs of the child/family.** For example, your child is regularly with an ex-spouse.
- **Whether your child is able to follow your rules for usage.** Consider quality of content, screen time, healthy boundaries, etc. (For more on cell phone use, read the next Q&A!)
- **Your own level of commitment.** If you aren't prepared to stick to your guns on the rules listed, or you just don't have the time to research content filters, it may be best to wait. Especially if your child is young.



My kid just got their first phone ... now what?

BY LISA LAKEY

I'm not a super tech-savvy mom. So when my husband and I purchased a phone for our middle-school daughter, I reached out to a few friends for tips.

1. Research apps before letting your child download them. Better yet, keep the password secret so they can't download anything without your approval.

There is a lot of inappropriate content disguised and targeted at our kids. Even with every available child safety filter today, inappropriate content can still

sneak through. (We deleted an app rated appropriate for "4+" after an ad popped up featuring two women in bed and a shocked husband walking in.) What should your child's brain and heart be marinating in?

2. Set appropriate limits. Have you thought about when, where, and how long you want your kid attached to their phone? In our home, phones are not allowed during meals or family time, before a certain time in the morning and after a certain point in the evening.

We also have tech-free time where they need to do something that doesn't require a charger: like pursuing face-to-face interactions with others, or physical activity that strengthens our bodies and relationships (neighborhood kickball tournament, anyone?).

3. Use discernment on when (or if) you will allow your child to use social media. Even as an adult, I feel the unhealthy pressure social media gives to be perfect, compete, and compare.

For now, we have a strict rule against social media for our daughter. If you choose to give your kids the thumbs up, talk to them about the dangers. They need to know:

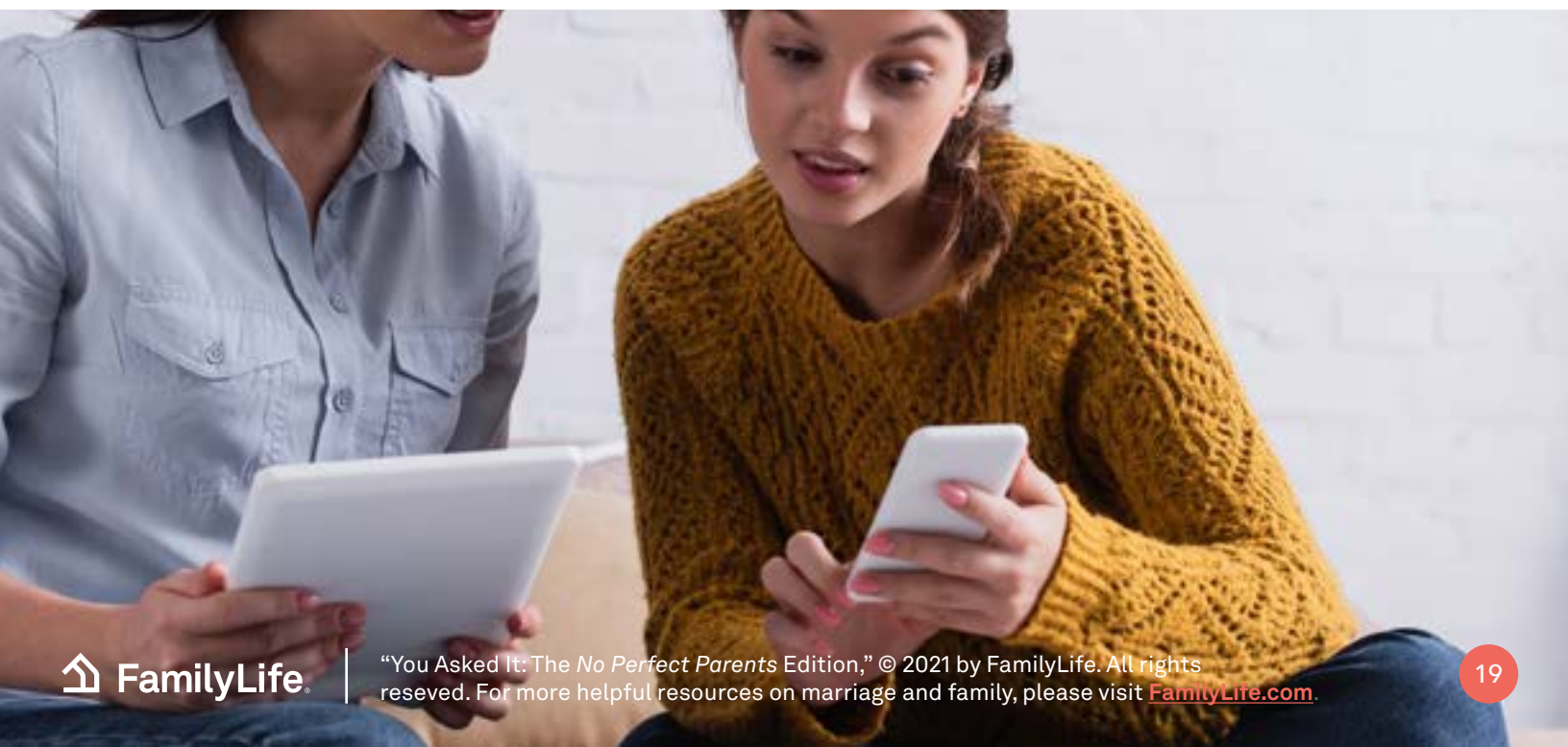
- What goes online or is sent in a text cannot be taken back.
- Never chat with someone they don't know personally.
- Never give out personal information.
- Don't say something online they would not say in person.

And most importantly, they need to know they can always come to you when things get tricky.

4. Keep a close eye, but keep conversations open. One of the first rules we set for my daughter was that her dad and I have the right to check her phone at any time—text messages, emails, internet history. But we also stress she can always come to us with any issues that pop up and we'll hear her through.

5. Set an example. From one guilty parent to another: It's confusing when we tell kids to do one thing and then we do the opposite. If you are scrolling Insta or returning texts while talking to your kids, they will, too.

There's a lot to this world our kids don't know about yet or aren't ready for. While they're young they need wise, enforceable boundaries to navigate safely in their world. This is just as true in a world of technology. Cell phones are a big responsibility, not just for our kids, but for us, too.





How can I connect with my teenager?

BY LISA LAKEY

Despite my worst fears of parenting teens being (mostly) incorrect, knowing what to do with teenagers to tighten that bond isn't always easy.

Here are a few ideas.

1. MAKE ROOM IN YOUR CALENDAR JUST FOR THEM.

I've started penciling my kids into the daily/monthly calendar. When my daughter is doing virtual school and I'm working, we take breaks together to talk or play a board game. She sends me movies she wants to see so I can plan a date for the two of us around the rest of the family's events.

Crazy schedules don't always let us live spontaneously, but the chalkboard calendar by the door helps keep my priorities straight.

2. GET TO KNOW THEM (AGAIN).

Thanks to a too-tired-to-cook night that led to the Chick-Fil-A drive-thru, dinnertime convos got a little easier. The little pack of family questions in my son's kiddie meal has led us through both silly and serious discussions. And started a bit of a tradition.

My teen, too, loves conversation starters—whether it's for the whole family or just the two of us. And her answers have led to future vacation plans, goal setting, and even some heart-to-heart talks where this mama had to humble herself a bit about ways I've frustrated her.

[Pinterest](#) is filled conversation starters for teens, but here are some to get you started:

- What is the hardest part of being a teen?

- What do you think adults misunderstand about your generation?
- What's one thing you wish our family did more of?
- What's one thing you wish our family did less of?

3. DON'T FORGET TO TREAT THEM LIKE KIDS EVERY NOW AND THEN.

It's a strange world between childhood and young adulthood. It can feel closer to pre-adulthood when teens start getting jobs and planning for college. The pressure to properly plan for the future is real ... and overwhelming.

So when you're wondering about things to do with teenagers, don't forget childhood favorites (like snow cones). Play mini golf or pull out the basketball and play a game of HORSE in the driveway. Host a family game or animated movie night. Play flashlight tag after dark. And if they want to wrestle on the floor, move



that coffee table out of the way (but ask them to be gentle—we're a little more fragile these days).

Not only does this create bonding moments, it helps set the standard for a healthy work-life balance as they get older. Sure, lattes and chit chat are always welcomed by my teen, but sometimes she needs a smack-talking game of Sorry or Phase 10.



4. GET TO KNOW THEIR FRIENDS.

When a new friend came to stay at our house one night, I thought I was polite and welcoming. After taking her home the next day, I commented to my daughter on how her friend seemed like a quiet kid. "You didn't really try to get to know her," she replied.

She was right. I interacted with her, but not on the same level as I typically do with her other friends (who I've fondly nicknamed). And she noticed.

The next time this girl was at our house, I

bought her favorite snacks, made her favorite breakfast, and asked her all sorts of questions to get to know her better. Now, she has her own nickname.

5. GIVE THEM SPACE.

My daughter and I have always been close. So the first time my teen chose to hang out in her room instead of seeing a movie with Mom, it stung.

“Don’t take it personally,” my friend told me. “It’s kind of how it’s supposed to be. She needs a little space to figure out who she is right now.”

I’m learning to be OK with my teen not wanting to be with me 24/7 anymore. (Ironically, I remember looking forward to this day when she was a toddler.)



6. PRAY WITH AND FOR YOUR TEENS.

My not-so-proud confession: As my daughter got older, I prayed with her less.

We used to do “Mommy & Me” devotions over breakfast and faithfully prayed before bed. But when she started owning her faith, my role felt less important and I slowly (unintentionally) prayed with her a little less.

But then a friend with older kids told me regularly praying with her teens kept them close, open, and honest with each other. She wouldn’t have known about friendships and boy/girl drama or the faith struggles her kids faced if she hadn’t been asking, “How can I pray for you today?”

Teenagers don’t need us *less*, just *different*.

As shepherds over the little sheep God gave us, we are called to be “examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). So let them see us on our knees often.

“The days are long but the years are short...” has never felt so true.

Q. What should I know about my teen’s struggles with anxiety?

[Listen to counselor and professor David Murray’s take on what to know.](#)

Q. How should I respond to a child who isn’t a high-achiever?

[Check out “How I Became Okay With My Child Being Just Mediocre.”](#)



Got ideas for dating guidelines for teens?

BY DENNIS AND BARBARA RAINEY

Just what role should parents play to steer a child away from the traps in the dating game?

Let's begin by defining dating in broad terms.

For us, dating is a small part of the overall process of determining God's will for discovering your life partner in marriage. In our family, the focus has not been on dating, but more on training our teens in their character and in how to develop relationships with the opposite sex.

Our teens did not go out on a date every Friday and Saturday night. We encouraged kids to focus on the friendship side of their relationships and emphasized group activities.

WHEN SHOULD I LET MY CHILD DATE?

We based this freedom on our judgment of each child's responsibility. Can we trust her to stick to her standards? Is he strong enough to withstand peer pressure?

We used age guidelines like these:

- 15+: Doing things together with an approved mixed group of teens away from our home.
- 17 or earlier: Double dates or group dates.
- Usually discouraged but allowed in certain circumstances: Single dates.

WHO SHOULD MY KIDS DATE?

As a starting point, we believe our teens should develop friendships with and eventually date only other Christians (2 Corinthians 6:14-16). Why go out with someone who doesn't have your values? Also, parents need to evaluate the vitality of that person's Christianity: Is this young man or young woman a *growing* Christian? (Most teens lack this level of discernment.)

Train your teen to look for outward qualities indicating inner character, like a good reputation at school, a self-controlled mouth, wise driving habits.

As kids spend time with the opposite sex, help them write down qualities they want to look for in the person they marry. What values really matter?

Spiritual and emotional maturity can only come with time. It's also why we want our teens to spend time with the opposite sex in groups. They can learn so much more about each other in a group instead of the perfectly-preened, best-behaved, tension-filled environment of a one-on-one date.

BOUNDARIES TO CONSIDER

Together with your teen, establish dating boundaries you agree on so teens know what's not okay, and even when to call for help. (Do you have a verbal or texted code they can use when they need you to pick them up or don't know what to do?)

- Limit hours of phone conversations that lead to unrestrained emotional attachment. Help them be wise about their emotions.
- Evaluate internet filters, screening apps, and other tools to help avoid porn, sexting, and other enemies to your child's soul.
- We try to avoid a lot of "don'ts." Instead, we constantly share what we've learned from Scripture, and we ask them challenging questions so they learn to make good choices. We want them to conclude, "I don't think I am going to do that."

As much as you can, build a bridge for open conversation about dating, sex, and related issues so you have your teen's heart—not just their behavior. Nurturing the kind of relationship that allows you to walk with them as they navigate romantic relationships? That's priceless.



No Perfect Parents: Ditch Expectations, Embrace Reality, and Discover the One Secret That Will Change Your Parenting

Raising kids with hearts for Christ may be the hardest thing you ever try to do, but it's also the most important thing. Packed with funny and honest stories, compelling illustrations, biblical insight, and practical steps you can put into practice today, this hands-on parenting manual from *FamilyLife Today*® hosts Dave & Ann Wilson will encourage and equip every parent through any stage.