

CHAPTER FIVE:

MY PERSONAL PARENTING TOOLKIT



The family should be a closely knit group. The home should be a self-contained shelter of security; a kind of school where life's basic lessons are taught; and a kind of church where God is honored; a place where wholesome recreation and simple pleasures are enjoyed.

– BILLY GRAHAM

If I had a toolkit to parent my kids, I would include these ten tips in my box. These aspects have been invaluable to us as we raise our children.

1) Parenting with a Funnel View¹

Parenting can be daunting. When our children were toddlers, we quickly discovered that when we allowed certain freedoms beyond their ability to navigate, we would undoubtedly encounter problems.

As a child grows, two processes continue to dominate: growth in biological areas and learning in their mental and spiritual processes. You cannot rush these stages. According to Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam in *On Becoming Childwise*, “Allowing a child to progress into his new and expanding world in an orderly fashion greatly enhances learning and decreases the need for correction.”²

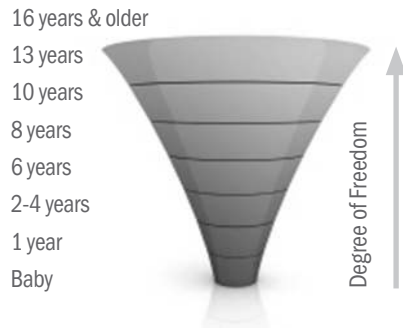
For my toddler, temper tantrums were often the result of not getting their own way and when I thought about it, I realized that I had sometimes inadvertently caused it.

My son, Matt, was almost two and loved tractors. One day, while

walking through the shopping mall, I took him into a toy shop with no intention of buying a tractor. He saw one and wanted it but couldn't understand why I wouldn't let him have it. Much to my embarrassment, I carried him out of the shop screaming. Suddenly, the penny dropped and I realized that if I hadn't taken him into the shop we would not have had the tantrum. I needed stricter self-control and consistency in my actions and I realized that this decision would affect his behavior, too. I started to apply that principle to a few areas and saw a positive change in his behavior.

As my husband and I discussed this incident and few others, we realized that we were giving our children too much freedom. The result was frustration and a form of insecurity in their lives. We decided not to grant too many decision-making, verbal and physical freedoms beyond their current ability. This decision has really helped us over the years.

It was then that we decided to adopt what we call “funnel-view parenting” as one of our tools as shown in the diagram on the right. As our children grew, so did their freedom and our trust in them. This has helped us to avoid a few minefields as we have not had to go back on our word.



Now that our children have matured into teenagers, we explained to them that trust is like a tightrope. We will give them more and more latitude as they get older, but with it comes a greater responsibility on their side. Wisdom from the Lord is key as we parent like this.

We release more and more freedom as our children grow older and as we impart our values intentionally into their lives through open and honest conversations about difficult topics. Openness, vulnerability and

trust are part of the foundation of our relationship with them. This aspect brings freedom to our relationship, and with it, joy.

2) Consistency and Consequences

Consistent action does produce consistent results. However, it takes self-discipline and effort to be consistent. As Aristotle said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit.”

Neil and I were challenged a few years back to consistently present a united front in front of our children. That was a difficult challenge. Behind closed doors, my husband and I have had numerous conversations about the way we parent our children. We discussed which issues were non-negotiable and which issues weren't as important.

From early on, we both told the children that we were one and if they tried to manipulate one parent, they would face the consequences of that action. We tried to maintain consistency in our actions and the decisions we made and where we made mistakes, we apologized to each other and to the children.

Still, my husband is far better than I at maintaining consistency in the decisions we make. I really struggle with this. Maybe that is why the following Scripture is so meaningful to me because God is always consistent and He helps me to be that way: “Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!” (Ps. 119:5, NLT).

If you are a single parent, find someone with whom you can talk about your parenting difficulties or questions. Find a person who can keep you accountable in maintaining consistency and assist you in implementing consequences in your home. (For more information on consequences, refer to chapter six on discipline.)

3) Pick Your Battles Carefully

As a parent, pick your battles carefully. If you try and fight all of them, you won't have the energy or the strength to fight the ones that really matter.

My daughter, Emily, has always loved playing with her hair. When she was 4 years old, she decided to cut her waist-length hair into a short bob with a very short fringe. The only part of her hair that was spared was the back middle piece because she couldn't reach it.

When I discovered what had happened I had to escape to the bathroom to suppress my laughter because of the way this vibrant child loved to express herself. I firmly told Emily that I didn't mind what she did to her hair because hair just grows again, but that if she wants to cut it in any way, I would happily take her to a hairdresser. It was in that moment that I understood that for us as a family, hair was not a life or death issue and that there would be greater battles to face.

I realized, too, that in years to come, Emily would face far greater challenges in terms of her identity, drugs, sex and her value as a woman. Those were battles we would fight, not ones about her hair. Each family should decide on the battles they will fight and let go of the rest. Choose wisely.

4) Try to Be a “Yes” Parent as Far as Possible

Say “yes” to as much as you can. Think about all the times your children have come to you with requests and how quickly “No” seems to roll off your tongue. It's far easier to say no than to say yes. It's often more convenient for us and takes less effort (especially if we are tired, which is often the case if you are a parent) for us to answer no without much forethought.

I have often caught myself being that kind of mother and then I hear the Holy Spirit say to me, “But why not?” More often than not, I apologize to my children and say yes.

Say yes to eating the cookie dough.

Say yes to playing out in the rain.

Say yes to sleeping outside under the stars.

Say yes to getting full of mud.

Say yes to learning to do the new somersault into the swimming pool.

Say yes to helping them reach their dreams.

Say yes to learning to play a musical instrument.

Say yes to friends coming around.

Say yes to midnight feasts, to climbing the tallest tree, to planning a family adventure and to eating a meal by starting with dessert first. Make memories with your children and do crazy things with them. They will end up becoming the people you long to spend time with.

5) Have Fun

Parenting is serious stuff. Life is full of uncertainty, but don't let it rob you of having fun with your children. Shock them by enjoying them. My son was doing a school project on our family values a few years ago and we discovered that having fun was one of ours.

Upon reflection, I realized that my husband and I can get quite intense at times. Accordingly, I think that this value was and still is a necessary one. Having fun refreshes your soul, encourages your heart and makes you smile.

Surprise your children with moments of joy and celebration. Find a reason to celebrate life and spend lots of time together as a family. Time is the currency of all relationships: We all get 24 hours in a day and I am constantly challenged to invest heavily in this currency. If we do so, I am sure that you and I will reap the rewards in years to come.

The list is endless, but to get your creative juice flowing, here are some examples from our family experiences together:

- Eat a meal back to front, starting with dessert (either do it at home or go restaurant hopping for the three courses).
- Surprise your children with a spontaneous activity.
- Celebrate birthdays. In our home, birthdays are noteworthy days to be celebrated. On your birthday you can eat anything you like for breakfast, lunch and supper (but you do need to place your order two days in advance).

- Dance spontaneously together.
- Schedule holidays away and enjoy being together.
- Play with your children—never be too old to be part of your children’s games and fun.
- Build things together.
- Tell your children that you are going to take them out on a given night for a surprise and then do something different each time.

6) Children Can Be Wise

Children have the capability of displaying wisdom beyond their years. If we pray and ask the Lord for wisdom for our children, He will be faithful in answering our prayers.³

I have heard many people say that “kids will be kids” as an excuse for their behavior. There is joy and innocence surrounding children and the way they see the world. This is not an excuse not to expect them to live without a certain degree of wisdom. We can teach our children to be wise and know that it is something given to them from God. Solomon prayed and asked for wisdom (see 2 Chronicles 1). To this day, we now know him as being one of the wisest men to have ever lived. Why would the Lord not give our children wisdom if we ask Him to? Proverbs 23:24 (NLT) says that “the father of godly children has cause for joy”. What a pleasure to have children who are wise.

Isn’t that incredible? When I first read this verse I was struck by the fact that the writer used the word “children”, not “wise adults”. I have believed this verse since my children were toddlers—that they could live as wise children. I never expected them to act like a 15-year-old when they were only 3, but I expected them to display a level of wisdom comparative to that of a 3-year-old. I haven’t stop praying for wisdom for my children and have taught them what the Scriptures say about the subject.

A child can exercise wisdom without even knowing that they are acting with wisdom. Through our prayers, training and love we can raise them up in this way. James 1:5 (NLT) instructs us, “If you need

wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.”

7) Discipline the Behavior, Not Your Child

Differentiate between who your children are and what they do. Never say things like, “You are useless”, “You are so stupid; why do you always do that?” or “You are so childish.”

Many adults are still “walking wounded” from the words spoken to them in their youth. There is a difference in disciplining the behavior of your child versus breaking them down in their value of who they are. It is critical that we learn to differentiate between what your child does and who they are. Even the Bible speaks about us acting out of who we think we are.⁴ Your words have the power to shape a child’s life and impact them for years to come.

We aimed at ensuring our children knew they were loved, even when we disciplined them. This took time and effort.

We are wired for relationship and children are no exception. They find a break or tension in a relationship very difficult. Being a parent does take courage and stamina, so let your yes be your yes and your no be no.⁵

We should discipline foolishness, not childlikeness. Your children are not mini-adults. I remember when my children were younger and one of them accidentally dropped a glass of milk on the kitchen floor. In an instant, shattered glass mingled with cold milk decorated my floor. That was when I had to choose: Do I reprimand my child or choose to love and carefully direct their attention to how to be more careful?

I sometimes reprimanded my children for silly, childlike mistakes, with the result that they cringed or started crying. Once I realized what I was doing and the long-term effects it could have, I spent some time thinking and praying about it. The next time they made a childlike mistake, I responded with more love, careful words and acceptance. In doing so, I was teaching them that it is OK to make mistakes and that

love is not conditional. I have had numerous conversations with them about this very topic. Try not to discipline childlike mistakes, but do so with willful foolishness and rebelliousness.

PARENTING IN REAL LIFE

Children who have ADHD are sensitive and need to be dealt with gently. I am trying to represent Christ to my children and discipline them accordingly. When they make a childlike mistake such as when they are clumsy and leave a wet towel on the carpet and I would say, “Use your brain”, it hurts their hearts.

I realized that I have to be careful about what I say. I used to discipline them when they made a silly mistake such as leaving the soap in the water. I used to freak out about the little things, but I’m learning to relax more. I’m learning what is important and learning to discipline the real issues.

– South African mother of two children, both having been diagnosed with ADHD

8) Love Well

I’ve heard it said that the opposite of love is not hatred but apathy. Many people grow up in a home where apathy resides and love is absent. We know that children thrive on loving and being loved. Love makes us smile, gives us courage and unites a family.

We have friends that run four orphanages and they have told us many stories of the healing power of love. These babies and children who experienced rejection, trauma and violence were restored through abundant love. One only needs to look into these orphans’ eyes after they have been in this couple’s home for a few months to see the effects of love and acceptance. It’s beautiful.

Children also feel safe and loved when they see you loving your spouse. I have caught our kids smiling when they have seen us hug or tell each other (in their presence) how much we love each other.

PARENTING IN REAL LIFE

If I could go back and do it all again, there is so much I would do differently. The first thing I would do is be really focused about maintaining and nourishing the love and connection between my husband and I. That came first and remains long after the children leave.

- American mother of four adult children

Every child is unique and no two children should be loved in the same way. We have made an effort to discover what makes our children spark. For our son, one-on-one quality time and doing something together makes him happy. For our daughter, we make an effort to give her extra physical affection and intentional time together to fill her love tank.

We have come up with a special hand squeeze so that at any time and in any public setting we can tell each other that we love them by giving this touch. To an outsider it looks like an arm squeeze or shoulder touch, but to us it means so much more.

9) Make Your Home a Haven

Family life and your home is designed to provide children with an environment in which they can grow to maturity at their natural pace of development.⁶ It should offer them a safe place, but this doesn't just happen. We need to intentionally turn our house into a home. To facilitate our children maturing at their own pace, we need to create a sanctuary in the midst of all the turmoil that accompanies childhood and young adulthood. A haven can be defined as a place of safety or refuge. Over the years I have intentionally tried to create this aspect in our home. Our home is a place where our children can come and rest, where they can bring their friends and know that it is safe.

The world can be a tough, cruel place and more than ever our children need a safe place to come to and find refuge in. As a parent, you can easily

create a haven by intentionally thinking about what it means for your family and by implementing a few well-placed boundaries and rules.

You don't need to have loads of money to create a haven, just a few well-thought-out plans. If you are a full-time working parent you can still create a haven. Have conversations about boundaries with your children and stick to your decisions.

In our home, I try and make sure there is always healthy food available for them. As a family, we love food and my kids and I often bake biscuits together. We set boundaries on internet and social media usage. For example, we (all of us) are not allowed to be on any device between 18:00 and 20:00. That is the time set aside for eating together, catching up after the day and connecting our hearts. It isn't always easy to do and we don't always get it right, but even now our children remind us when we miss the mark.

When friends come around, the same rules apply. At times, I have taken away mobile devices and told the children to go and play outside. Children and teenagers have boundless energy. They are wired for movement. In our home, we often encourage them to go outside and kick a ball around, swim, run, climb trees and just get moving. We have tried to create space and opportunity for that.

Our children know that they can talk to us about anything and we have often had constructive conversations in the kitchen while preparing a meal together. One of our roles as a parent is to guard and protect our children. We take seriously how we guard our children's lives, not just physically but also emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Take the time to pray over your home. Pray into the purpose of each room and what goes on in your home. Pray for God's blessing over your property, for His peace and Presence to be evident in your home. We have had countless people point out that they feel a peaceful Presence, an aura in our home. We know it's the Presence of the Lord and we don't take it for granted. Our home is a haven, not just for our children, but for ourselves, our family and for friends who frequent our place.

10) Accept and Love Unconditionally

Many people grow up believing that love is based on performance. This pattern of thinking shapes and affects behavior in a profound way. I, too, believed this, but one day the Lord showed me that almost my whole life was based on this false belief. He showed me how precious I am, who I am and that in Christ I am complete.

When I became a parent, I realized early on that there was nothing Matt or Emily could do to earn my love, that I had chosen to love them unconditionally. I also realized that I could choose to accept them unconditionally and that their value came from being my child—nothing more and nothing less. There were times when I never liked them that much, but my unconditional love and acceptance of who they were never wavered.

As they grew older, I played a few games with them to emphasize this value deep within their hearts. When Matt was about 11 years old, I was driving him home from school one day and I threw him a question to challenge his worldview on being loved and accepted unconditionally. Here's how our conversation went:

Me: Hey Matt, do you think that if you made the first team in rugby, I would love you more?

Matt (a little suspicious): Uhhh, I don't know, Mom. Maybe yes?

Me: Oh, and do you think if you failed your maths exam, I would love you less?

Matt (Now definitely suspicious about where this was going): I'm not sure ... maybe?

Me: What do you think, Matt? Tell me.

Matt: No?

Me: You're right. There is nothing you can do or not do that will change how much Dad and I love and accept you. We want you to thrive and be all *you*, but our love for you will never change.

I've had similar conversations with both my son and daughter over the years, throwing in shocking or weird statements like that when they least expected it. Sometimes it is before a big sports game or exam, after a day at school or before bed. By now they know deep within that they are loved and accepted. This doesn't mean that we don't discipline them when needed, but their actions will not cause us to love them less.

When our children know that they are loved and accepted unconditionally, it sets them up to succeed in life. It sets them up to fly because their hearts are safe and they are secure!

Personal & Family Reflection

1. In what areas have you allowed your children freedom beyond their age? Consider physical, verbal and decision-making freedoms as you think about this question.

2. Have you had to tighten up at home and has it produced conflict? How did you handle that and what would you do the same or differently?

3. Write down three battles (non-negotiables) that you would fight for in your family.

4. What can you say yes to more often?

5. Try the game of confirming with your children what would make you love them more, or less. Be sneaky and hit a home run in their hearts.

6. Have you ever prayed over your home? If not, take the time to go through every room and bless it.

7. What boundaries have you set in place that protect your children (what they see, hear and experience)?

8. What are two highlights for you from this chapter and what change can you make in the way you parent your children?

SCRIPTURES TO READ & DISCUSS

Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!

- Psalm 119:5 (NLT)

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

- Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV)

The father of godly children has cause for joy. What a pleasure to have children who are wise.

- Proverbs 23:24 (NLT)

Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

- Ephesians 6:4 (NIV)

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.

- 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 (NKJV)