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NO MORE *Perfect* KIDS

I stood outside the door of my six-month-old firstborn's room listening to her cry. She'd been changed. She'd been rocked. She'd been fed. Nothing calmed her. Finally, for my 3 a.m. sanity, I decided I just had to put her in her bed and let her fuss for a while. My best friend's son slept through the night after only two months. *Sweet little girl, why can't you sleep like my friend's little guy sleeps?* I was a new mom, and already my expectations for my first child were getting tangled up with comparisons and disappointments. I dreamed of cuddling my adored first baby, not of standing outside her bedroom door, exhausted, weeping along with her in frustration.

I found myself sitting on the sidelines of a soccer field—me, the sports-challenged momma—trying to figure out how to encourage my

soccer-loving son. I'd much rather have been sitting next to him on a piano bench than sitting along the sidelines of a soccer game. *I'm trying to understand the game and be there to support you. Be patient with me, sweet boy.* My expectations were again rising to the surface: I dreamed of a piano-playing boy, not the sweaty, tousled teammate running up the soccer field.

I found myself trying to connect with my twelve-year-old daughter. This third child of mine likes fashion design. She loved to shop, not so much with the intention of buying but rather to see how clothes are designed and put together. I, on the other hand, hate to shop and don't have a "fashion design" bone in my body. I'd pay someone to shop for me if I could. *How did this fashion-challenged mom end up with a fashion-conscious daughter?* I never dreamed a fashionista could be born from a mom with a complete disinterest in style.

Child number four, who was in junior high, asked, "Mom, will you please help me study for a test?" Taking the study guide from his hands, I walked across the room to my recliner. When I turned around, I saw my thirteen-year-old son upside down in another recliner across

We expected everything to be perfect. . . . Then we had kids.

the room. His head was in the seat and his feet were hanging over the back of the chair. I stopped myself from correcting him. He answered every study question correctly—upside down and all. *Lord, let me see my son through Your eyes. He's unique, one-of-a-kind, and much more than the ADHD label he carries.* I never dreamed I would have a child who struggled with ADD.

I found myself visiting our fifth child in his first of multiple hospitalizations for mental health issues. Ten years earlier, God had moved

heaven and earth to bring our son from an orphanage in Russia to our loving family in the middle of the cornfields of Illinois. He assimilated well in the early years after his adoption, but as he entered the late teen years, identity issues, attachment and personality disorders, depression, and more took up residence in our home. *This wasn't the life I pictured for you when we traveled across the ocean to bring you home.* I never dreamed our loving family could be touched by the heartbreak of mental illness.

Every parent does it. Before kids, we dreamed about what our family would look like. We thought about the way our family would interact with one another. We contemplated all the milestones our children would accomplish. We decided—in our mind—who our children would be. We imagined what they'd do. We anticipated what we would do together one-on-one and as a family. We expected everything to be perfect.

And then we had kids.

Parenting is harder than it looks. Even if our lives, our families, or our children are exactly like we imagined, challenges appear around every corner. Developmental stages are unfamiliar and at times, frustrating. We tell a child to “act your age,” and then we realize he really is!

For some of us, our kids aren't quite like we imagined. Their temperament is a blend of both Dad and Mom, and we're not quite sure how to manage that. As they get older, we realize they don't have the interests we thought they would have or that we wanted them to have. Their talents are different from ours. They don't like the same things we like. They struggle in ways we don't understand. They don't make the decisions we'd make. Sometimes they don't make good decisions at all!

Some of us may be dealing with even bigger disparities from our vision, like having a child with a medical condition, a mental or physical disability, or developmental delays. Those who are walking that journey are like people who thought they were going to live in Italy, but ended up in Holland instead. Still a pretty place, but very different from what they were expecting.

Most of us have expectations for each child. We expect him to grow and learn. We expect her to do her best. We expect him to behave and be responsible. We expect her to process life well. We expect him to act his age, but sometimes we forget—or just plain old don't know—what is actually normal behavior for a child his age! (And how realistic is this goal when we'd have to admit we don't always act our age?)

Let's face it: Life doesn't always look the way we imagined it would. We wanted a child, but we didn't realize it would mean sleepless nights for twelve months or more! We wanted to play catch in the backyard, but little Joey wants to play piano in the living room instead. We longed to have a child who loved to learn, only to find ourselves in parent-teacher conferences trying to figure out why Susie is barely passing her classes. We anticipated laughter and love and overlooked the fact that tears, tantrums, and tough stuff would also be a part of the package. We love our children with all of our hearts, but we don't always know what to do when our expectations don't match reality. What do we do when our expectations don't match reality?

Over time, thoughts like these may cross our minds: *I wish she were more like her brother, or, I never thought I'd have a kid who wants to stay home and read after school instead of getting involved in extracurricular activities, or, I wish my toddler would get on a regular nap schedule.*

When we are disappointed, frustrated, confused, or even disillusioned, these thoughts are natural ones. However, when we spend too much time thinking or wishing that someone should be different, we can become frustrated and discouraged at the least, and critical, nagging, and even rejecting at the worst.

At some point, every parent comes face-to-face with putting fantasy aside and embracing reality. *This is the real child. These are the real circumstances of my life. These are uncharted waters for me to navigate. How do I guide and lead a child I sometimes don't understand? How do I love the infant, child, teenager, or young adult I have right here in front of me and not wish she was any different? How can I delight in how he is created even though it's different from what I imagined? How do I inspire and encourage but not expect perfection from my child? How do I celebrate progress and stay clear of unrealistic expectations?*

These are the questions we will answer on the coming pages. Our children are unique gifts from God who deserve to be celebrated. They have been designed by their Creator to contribute to this world in unique ways. They have present value and potential just waiting to be released. The key for us is to see that potential in them on the good days and on the bad days, as well. Let's launch a journey of discovery to embrace who our children really are and to celebrate how they are uniquely designed!

WHERE DOES IT BEGIN?

Upon entering the room, you're surprised your child is standing. You realize a big milestone is about to occur.

You don't shout, "Sit down. You might hurt yourself!" Instead, you

have someone run to get the video camera while you get in position. You expect progress, and you show that to your child through your behavior and language.

*We're looking
for progress, not
perfection.*

Positioning yourself four feet away with your arms outstretched, you smile broadly and use only an encouraging tone of voice. Focused on the goal, you communicate, "Come to Momma!"

One step. Then another. A fall. A second try will appear as a false start. Over the next few days there are missteps. Attempts. Half-steps. Fall downs.

There aren't "mistakes," though. We would never tell people our child made a mistake trying to walk, even if he fell down on his tenth attempt. Rather, it is more likely we would announce his every attempt. We call our parents, siblings, and friends and perhaps even post it on Facebook: "Jared tried to walk today!" This is our attitude because we're looking for progress, not perfection — for growth, not completion.

We know error-free walking is the goal. It's possible, but only if it's the destination. Perfection can't be the journey. The journey must be built on faith in the possibilities and an expectation for good, better, and then best.

As you've probably noticed, children don't crawl for long. They pull themselves up, walk around things, walk alone, skip, gallop, and eventually run. When they fall down doing any of those things, they almost always pick themselves up and keep going unless we react as if they should be upset. Gasping, looking at them with alarm, running toward them, and asking if they're okay will likely cause the tears to flow even

if they are not hurt by the stumble. Our reactions are often mirrored by our children's.

Their goal to walk is accomplished and celebrated. Maybe you expected to reach "your goal." But walking is their goal, too. That's another reason children don't crawl. At a young age, they long for progress. When I watch my ten-month-old granddaughter pulling herself up and walking around furniture, I realize she's not that much different from my teenage sons still at home who look for progress in the form of independence.

What if, throughout their growing-up years, we had a "Come to Momma!" perspective? What difference would it make if we could see progress even in the smallest of ways from our preschooler, grade-schooler, our teenager, our young adult? What if we expected them to stumble along the way and we didn't consider that stumble a mistake? What if we stayed at four feet away, not eight? What if our arms are reached toward our children, not folded in front of us? What if we smiled instead of frowned? What if we had an encouraging, optimistic tone in our voices, issuing a request our children want to fulfill, not demands they can't live up to?

What if our children had a "Come to Momma!" belief system? *I can accomplish what my parents are asking me to do. Attempts aren't failure; they are part of life. I can pick myself up to try again. Perfection may never be reached or even necessary because I know my parents will celebrate my progress.*

If we want this to happen, it might require us to make some changes in how we think and how we respond. This kind of motivating affirmation might not be something we experienced ourselves when we were

children, so we'll have to learn something new and celebrate our own progress along the way. As parents, we hold an incredible power over how our children feel about themselves and their relationship with us.

THE POWER OF EXPECTATIONS

We know too much of a good thing is not a good thing: too much ice cream, too much laundry, too many phone calls, too many leaves to rake—and expectations that are too high.

Most of us begin parenting with high expectations for our children because we love them and want the best for them. If our children meet

*What if our arms
are reached
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front of us?*

those, we set new ones that are more challenging. After all, they've proven they're capable and we don't want them to stop growing or learning. It's all very innocent—at the beginning.

However, this can start the mountain climb. If we're always setting higher and higher expectations, our children can get the idea we're never satisfied. Just when they achieve something, and they think we'll be happy and they can relax, we announce something else we expect them to do. When we don't acknowledge they have met our expectations, they easily assume we're not satisfied.

When asking children of any age why they think their parents expect perfection, answers come easily. Responses sound something like this: "They told me I needed to improve. I agreed I could do better. I did. I got a better grade. They didn't say 'good job' or 'thank you.' They just said, 'You can do better!'"

In her research at Celebrate Kids, Dr. Kathy indicates that some

kids comment further. Some conclude simply, “I can never please my parents.” That’s a dangerous conclusion for kids to reach because they just might stop trying. They may no longer care what we want them to do. They may not believe us when we say, “We just want you to do your best.” Some tell us they purposefully don’t improve because of the pressure that follows. This is common in both academics and athletics. Other kids tell us they’re angry because they feel misled. One high school boy proclaimed to Dr. Kathy, “If my dad wanted a perfect score, I wish he would have just told me that.”

When our children do less than a great job on something, we don’t want a pattern of sloppy work or mistakes to take root so we indicate we’re concerned, unhappy, or disappointed. But, depending on how we respond to their work, children can misinterpret our concerns. They may believe we can never be satisfied and that perfection is what we want. They may not be able to separate their work from themselves, thinking they are their work. *If Daddy doesn’t like my work, he doesn’t like me.*

Setting appropriate and fair expectations is a key to successful parenting. This requires us to know our children—really know our kids. If our goals are too low, children won’t achieve as much as they might have. If they’re too high, children may get frustrated and give up. In either case, they may not achieve what they’re capable of. Setting appropriate expectations requires us to *really* know our children.

Just like Goldilocks looked for a chair, porridge, and a bed that were “just right,” parents need to look for expectations that are “just right” for each child. Like Goldilocks, we need to try them out. How does our oldest respond to this expectation? How does our youngest respond

to this one? How can I best explain this so he'll understand? Through perceptive, close observations during trial-by-error efforts, we should be able to land on expectations that are "just right." Not too easy and not too hard. Challenging without being frustrating. Achievable with effort. Personalized. Not a one-size-fits-all approach.

What's healthier than expecting perfection? It's certainly not expecting numerous errors and failure. Rather, it's expecting children to fully use their abilities and attitudes to be who they were designed to be. We want them to fully come into their own.

We risk great damage to children when we expect them to be who they weren't created to be. Expecting them to give us what they can't doesn't work. Perhaps you've read the clever story that makes this point using animals. For example, rabbits are good at hopping. If we tried to teach them to fly and even graded them on their ability, they'd flunk. And, using all their energy to try to learn to fly may cause the rabbits to dismiss and no longer value or use their hopping ability. Hopping may no longer bring them joy.

If a child is a musical genius capable of quickly memorizing and beautifully playing complex piano pieces, that's what she should do. Choosing easier music or being satisfied with less than stellar performances would not be right. She wouldn't be honoring her Creator because she'd be dismissing the way she was made.

But expecting this same girl to consistently earn perfect grades in math classes may be unfair. It's not right to assume that because she can do one thing well (memorize music), she should be able to do another thing well (memorize math facts). Rather, we must look for and use evidence when setting goals and expectations for our children. When

children see us dismiss evidence that things are easy or hard, they're discouraged.

One sixth-grader bounded out the door, happy finally to be attending middle school. However, his joy was immediately sucked out of him when he heard his dad proclaim as he was leaving, "You're going to have a great year in math." Later that day, this boy angrily questioned Dr. Kathy, "I don't know what my dad thinks happened over the summer to make me smart all of a sudden in math. But nothing happened. Can't he just accept the fact that math is hard for me?"

THE POWER OF THE GREENER-GRASS SYNDROME

Setting unrealistic expectations or constantly raising them is not the only thing we do to cause our children to infer that we want them to be perfect. If we're never satisfied with ourselves and they hear us constantly complaining and comparing, they can get the wrong idea. What have they recently heard *you* say?

"Our kitchen is way too small. I can't live like this!"

"This traffic is horrible! I should have gone a different way."

"Look at all those weeds. Our lawn is the worst on the block."

No wonder kids get the idea we're hard to please and nothing is ever good enough. With parenting, much is caught. We need to ask ourselves, "What are my kids 'catching' from me?"

Never being satisfied makes for a horrible existence. It's hard enough for adults who may have developed a thick skin and some coping mechanisms. However, it's very damaging to children. They'll

never experience the joy and peace associated with contentment. Instead, they'll find themselves

Trying, never succeeding.

Hoping, always disappointed.

Eventually stopping, no longer risking.

Always comparing.

Critique hurts too much. Perfectionists tend to see even minor imperfections. That's bad enough, but they usually take it one step further. They decide these imperfections make themselves and others totally unacceptable. This can hurt their ability to have healthy relationships. Perfectionists tend to think imperfections are totally unacceptable.

Contentment isn't easy. Maybe it's never been, but today it's made extra challenging by how easy it is to compare. We can always find someone smarter, better, prettier, or more organized. With television commercials constantly reminding us of what we do not own, magazine covers blaring the perfect look, and Pinterest and Facebook updates, pictures, and videos giving even strong adults inferiority complexes, no wonder it's hard to be content. We can quickly begin to feel bad about ourselves.

Watch out for the syndrome, though. You know it: It robs you of joy, peace, and satisfaction. It replaces contentment with questions, doubt, and confusion. You can identify it by evaluating your thought life. Do you find yourself thinking:

If I had her kitchen, I'd cook better meals and could entertain.

I wish we lived where there wasn't any traffic. Then I'd take the kids lots of fun places.

I cannot believe how bad our lawn looks compared to the corner property. I can't even do that right!

I wish we had a nicer car. Our old car looks so bad compared to our neighbor's car.

If we had more money, we could do _____.

It's the Greener-Grass Syndrome. When we believe the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, we're quickly dissatisfied. We're critical. We can become angry.

The Syndrome causes us to think:

I'd be happy if . . .

If my kids were better readers, then . . .

Our kids would be better behaved if . . .

Contentment involves confidently living life *as it is*. We parent our kids *as they are*. When we embrace our real lives and our real kids and our real spouses, we won't doubt everything. We won't blame things on others. We won't ask lots of What-if questions. We won't constantly second-guess ourselves. We won't live with the "If only . . ." wondering mindset.

When we're able to be content with what is, we won't assume "this" or "that" would make us happier. We won't waste much time thinking we should have bought a different house, married someone else, or stopped after two children. We won't waste time being angry about a lost opportunity. We won't obsess on a negative comment on our work review. We won't cry over spilt milk or miss the silver lining because we're only looking for gold.

Contentment means we won't focus on what we don't have, what we can't do, and what's wrong with everything and everyone around us.

We'll be aware of these things, because we know life can't be perfect, but we won't focus there. Rather, we'll focus on what we *do* have, what we *can do*, and what's right with the world—including our part of the world.

Contentment and perfectionism can't exist together. Contentment says we're satisfied. Perfectionism says we never are.

Our contentment is tied to having realistic expectations about ourselves. This is only possible when we know ourselves well. We must be honest and know if there are strengths we haven't yet tapped into and weaknesses we consider permanent and damaging. We can compare ourselves against our former selves rather than to an inaccurate view of who we are or who we wish we were. We resist the urge to determine if we're okay or not based on comparisons to someone else.

Contentment is not the same as stagnating at a plateau.

We must value our abilities without developing pride and accept our weaknesses without letting them defeat us. Content people are comfortable in their own skin. We have learned to ignore signs in the culture and words from “friends” who say we should have much

more than we have or could be much more than what we are. Content parents don't constantly compare themselves to others. They're more grateful for what they have than concerned about what they don't have.

Adults who are content with themselves will want their children to be content. They've learned it's not the same as stagnating at a plateau or being satisfied with mediocrity or with less than their potential capability. Too often guilt and shame can be connected to those decisions. Parents who are content in themselves have learned to value peace and want their children to experience that. They like the calm that accompanies contentment and long for their children to know that well.

They also appreciate contentment's joy and other-centeredness, and they want their kids to experience these qualities.

Contentment doesn't make parents or their children settle for less. The opposite is true! Contentment actually allows us to risk more. We strive to learn something new. We may more willingly try for a promotion because our lives don't depend on getting it. We'll have people over for dinner even if the house isn't perfect. We may even serve company a new recipe we haven't fed our family first.

Children who are content and haven't been taught the What-if? thinking pattern of the Greener-Grass Syndrome will more likely become who God intended for them to be. They'll be comfortable in their own skin and learn to be satisfied with their personal strengths, talents, and interests. They'll use them, develop them, and serve God with them. Their weaknesses won't scare them, define them, or control them.

Isn't that what you and I want for our kids? We want them to be free to be themselves in a world that screams for conformity. We long to be their cheerleaders in spite of their mistakes. We want them to be the best they can be. We want them to be themselves—not perfect, just all they can be.

How do we get there? How can we steer clear of expecting perfection? How can we see our kids through the eyes of our Creator? Keep reading! There are important questions to be asked and important lessons for us, as parents, to learn.