



The Relationally-Intelligent Child teaches parents the crucial insights of a must grasp concept: relational intelligence. This tool for growth and connection will not only change a child's life, but also a parent's own relationships. You'll discover five key elements that can engage and equip your child with skills for being relationally intelligent with family, friends, and others.

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Contents

Chapter 1: <i>The Incredible Gift You Can Give a Child</i>	9
Chapter 2: <i>What Is Relational Intelligence?</i>	17
Chapter 3: <i>The First Element of Relational Intelligence: Secure Attachment</i>	29
Chapter 4: <i>The Second Element of Relational Intelligence: Fearless Exploration</i>	51
Chapter 5: <i>The Third Element of Relational Intelligence: Unwavering Resilience</i>	69
Chapter 6: <i>The Fourth Element of Relational Intelligence: Wise Decision-Making</i>	85
Chapter 7: <i>The Fifth Element of Relational Intelligence: Future-Focused Service</i>	105
Chapter 8: <i>Your Starting Point Plan for Applying Relational Intelligence</i>	119
Chapter 9: <i>Three Currents That Can Stop You from Becoming Relationally Intelligent</i>	141
Chapter 10: <i>Three Gifts to Succeed in Modeling and Coaching Relational Intelligence</i>	159
Acknowledgments	165
Notes	167



Chapter 1

The Incredible Gift You Can Give a Child

As cultures across the globe continue to migrate further and further away from face-to-face friendships, love, and connection, we believe *you* can give your child an incredible gift. Current research shows no one else on the planet is better equipped to give this gift to your child than you. This gift can teach and coach your children to live out the skills needed to have positive, healthy, others-centered, world-changing, face-to-face relationships with others.

It's not a life free from challenges, stress, or trials. But it provides your children with the strength and wisdom to get up on their own after falling down and gives them a foundation for love, connection, resilience, and care. In addition, your home can be a place that is a light to your children's friends, who long to know what healthy relationships look like. Even after your children are grown and no longer living under your roof, they'll look for ways to stay attached and spend time with you. Simply stated:

We believe you can teach your children to become relationally intelligent in a way that changes not only their life—but others' lives as well!

It's long been thought that you can't *define* love with any type of certainty. For example, a 2016 article listed "36 Definitions of Love" found in the Urban Dictionary, from its being an emotion, to a decision, to simply being "undefinable"!¹ But an avalanche of new clinical studies and even timeless biblical truths say otherwise. We believe it's possible for you to show your children how deeply they are loved through your everyday actions. And, as they see you demonstrate this amazing love *relationally*, you're giving them a model of how to highly value themselves and love others compassionately.

You might be wondering why we seem to be so confident. Like the noted futurists John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene wrote, we also believe, "The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century will not occur because of technology, but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human."²

And wave after wave of studies today are showing just how to be fully, wonderfully, healthily human is to be *relational*! It is how we are created.

We'll introduce a more expanded definition of what we mean by being "relational" and "relationally intelligent" in the next chapter. But for now, we want you to know it's about being able to identify and value your own strengths and helping your children understand their strengths as well. It's about understanding ways to genuinely value and connect with others. It's being able to model and coach your children how to take positive risks that go with exploring their world, while also exploring what others could be thinking and feeling. Then, it's working together with your children, helping them to become more creative and resilient. It's also helping them to be linked to something greater than themselves, motivating and empowering them to go change their world for the better.

Basically, there really are applicational, relational blocks we can lay down in our child's life that are essential for building a genuine love.

In fact, this book centers around five specific elements. Each of these five are core elements in unleashing what we call *relational intelligence*. Like cracking open an atom, they generate powerful positive

relational changes and benefits for your child. We'll share why these five elements make such a positive difference and surround them with hands-on examples. After you've seen them up close, we'll help you create a "starting point plan" for bringing these skills and traits into your home.

Why Is Being "Relational" That Important?

It's been thirty years now since the first personal computers and cell-phones began infiltrating almost all aspects of our everyday life. We've been dealing with technology long enough now to begin understanding the risk factors that we didn't recognize early on.

No doubt, parents from the 1950s eventually learned that smoking in a car with the windows up was damaging (or smoking in general, much less around children). Parents today, in their heart of hearts, are beginning to understand the need to put down the screen and start relating more with their children in a way that builds personal, loving relationships.

But the real challenge is how do you actually build stronger relationships with your child once you put down your phone!

The great news is that you can help your children experience and create positive relationships by learning and modeling what they need to learn in your home. In the process, you'll discover how they learn and how prepared they are for real-world experiences like relating well with others in the workplace, social settings, and even their loving relationships in the future. Becoming relationally intelligent will have a positive impact on their health and future.

Consider an eye-opening study out of UNC–Chapel Hill showing your children's *life expectancy* is linked with their ability to be relational.³ Drawing on the research of four major studies concerning health and longevity, the lack of close-knit, face-to-face relationships is now actively linked with high blood pressure, abdominal obesity, heart disease, stroke, and even cancer risk! Conversely, these negative physical measures all go down as you help your child experience and

learn to build close relationships and friendships. Talk about a gift that keeps on giving! *You are giving them life when you teach them to be relationally intelligent.*

Yes, there are significant benefits to having screen-based relationships. We're not asking you to ceremonially smash your smartphone here at the start of this book. But what we *are* asking you to do is take time to learn how to build healthy relationships by being willing to first put down that digital screen. When you do, you're not only benefiting your health and that of your children, but you are also influencing the imprint of their perspective on whether they had a "happy" or "unhappy" childhood.

A new study on childhood memories found the memories most linked with a happy childhood didn't involve how many major vacations or "cool experiences" parents provided for their children, nor the number of "things" they were given.⁴ Being happy in childhood wasn't even linked to the absence of negative or difficult experiences. Instead, emotional happiness was linked to the very same thing that impacts their physical health: *the degree of connected, caring relationships in their home!*

The quality of your children's relationship with *you* at home is more important than any cruise or theme park trip. The memories of individuals who knew they were deeply loved and cared for as children, even in a less-than-perfect home with failures and challenges (like most of ours), are the happiest and most remembered in adulthood.

One final benefit for now (and we'll share many more throughout the book) is how applying relational intelligence in your home effectively battles the #1 health risk for children and adults today. It isn't the terrible, dreaded disease of cancer. Instead, more people are suffering from *a cancerous lack of relationships*, which leads to loneliness!

In a University of Chicago study,⁵ loneliness was shown to cause dramatic increases in the stress hormone cortisol, which is linked with hardening of the arteries and inflammation. Loneliness was also shown to diminish executive functioning, memory, and learning. The bottom line is, better than any statin pill, these researchers' prescription for

helping your children learn more effectively and have better health as well is you spending time helping them build their relational networks—and not just with TikTok, Facebook friends, Instagram followers, or online gamer friends from down the street or across the country. According to these studies, those online “friends” and “relationships” didn’t erase loneliness, as much as we might wish they did. It is *face-to-face relationships* with friends and family like you that move a child away from loneliness!

Does it sound like we’re giving loneliness too much credit for damaging lives? If so, check this out.

In England, the degree of damage to public health linked to loneliness has become so pronounced, British prime minister Theresa May appointed the first “Minister of Loneliness” to help with all the health and mental challenges. Japan is facing an exploding epidemic of *kodokushi*. Roughly translated, it means “lonely deaths.” And it’s not just older people but young people as well!

People in Germany, Scandinavia, and France have more money, are better educated, and have better health care than at any time in their history. But in every one of those countries—as well as America—young people are *unhappier* than at any time since the process of collecting data began.

Here in the United States, studies show that the majority of people today say they have either one or zero close friends—down from three or four just a few decades ago.

So, why are we so lonely?

We know that in our crazy-busy world, full of “stranger danger” warnings and scary real-life challenges, for us and our children to take the risk to get out and make friends isn’t always easy. And what about busyness? You and everyone you know are incredibly busy. It seems like if we don’t take the time to match schedules with people in our lives, we tend to find ourselves spending more time online, texting, emailing, or having video chats with these same people than intentionally taking time to build face-to-face, personal relationships.

It is easier—and it can seem “safer”—to just click our fingers on

a keyboard to do relationships. A click of a finger can register a “like,” or two thumbs can share 280 characters in a flash. We can even join an online group. But frankly, if we never meet up with that group through face-to-face interaction, then it doesn’t matter what we call our Facebook group.

Becoming relationally intelligent through face-to-face, in-person relationships is harder than posting a perfect social media picture or selfie. However, it is also immeasurably more beneficial to your children when you teach them how to engage, explore, love, serve, and relate well with real people!

We Are “Wired” for Relationships

There are undisputable realities of *why* you and your child need personal, face-to-face relationships, and why skipping out on being the coach and guide to your children is not an option. Most of us already know that we need help putting down the technology and guidance for knowing how to gain new skills in building stronger personal relationships. Most of us parents know we need to be the ones modeling relational connection for our children.

Let’s go back to the great news we have to share with you, not only in this book but also online at therelationallyintelligentchild.com—the news that doing relationships well is something you are already wired by your Creator to do!

As you learn more about these five applicational building blocks of relational intelligence and begin applying them in your home, you’ll be amazed at the confidence you gain in face-to-face relationships. And as you strengthen your family’s attachment bonds in the process, you’ll discover yourself gaining an amazing internal balance.

Pick a sport. If you’re going to be a great athlete, balance is a key to success in any one of them. Relationally, we can learn to have inner balance that helps us wisely move toward others as parents, spouses, and friends. Balance that motivates us to add adventure and creativity to our life. To help us stand up after we get knocked down. To embrace

love from others and know how to love and value others. *Even if they're different than us.* And yes, even in a world that is incredibly polarized. We want to help you and your children embrace a more positive future—amidst all of life's challenges.

So, think about that long list of benefits you've just read.

You and your child becoming better at relationships. Each of you experiencing better health. Happier memories. More friendships. Less loneliness. Less exposure to the “second-hand smoke” of excessive screen time. Gaining that inner balance to reach out and be resilient and carry with you a positive view toward the future—even when we're living in times of great trials.

Who doesn't want that for their children or for themselves!

Let's get started, then, by gaining a picture and a definition of what it means to live out those five key relationally intelligent elements.



Chapter 2

What Is Relational Intelligence?

To begin our understanding of relational intelligence, let's walk into a “brick and mortar” store that virtually everyone is familiar with, an Apple Store. Yes, even if you're a PC fan, it's worth walking inside, even for just a moment.

When you do, from our experiences, you'll be walking into a place filled with people from opening to close. Displays everywhere pulse with light and energy and the atmosphere is often crazy with noise. Typically, you'll find classes being held somewhere in the store, full of people of all ages learning how to use the latest technology from slides being projected on a wall. And of course, lots of sales for Apple.

You'd think the key to all this excitement would be that the salespeople spend countless hours learning how to master every detail and every update on the iPhone, every model of Mac computer, and every generation of iPad throughout the store. If so, you'd be wrong. Although these “frontline” Apple employees are very well trained, what you've just walked into is a living, breathing example of applied relational intelligence.¹

Even the Apple “geniuses,” those experts in the back who master technical challenges, repairs, and troubleshooting every problem, are generally good at relationships. Their ability to speak tech-talk to the

average person leaves most of us feeling a little more intelligent when we walk out the door.

From our perspective, what you are really being sold when you walk in is an experience and a relationship.² That's because the first and largest group of people you meet in the front of the store, with the colored T-shirts and almost certain smiles, are the Apple *specialists*. They are people like my (John's) friend Mark, who has worked at an Apple Store now for several years.

Mark was in his sixties and knew virtually nothing about smart-phones and personal computers when he walked into his first Apple Store. He had, however, had a very successful career in running a local "mom and pop" bookstore for decades. (Think the "Shop Around the Corner" in the classic movie with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks.) But as book sales went to big chains and then to online sales, small bookstores everywhere closed up. That caused him to lose his store, retire earlier than he wanted, and quickly become very bored.

Then he got a new Apple computer and he ran into a problem understanding something about it. So he walked into an Apple Store near his home for advice. He was quickly met by someone in a colored shirt who listened to and solved his problem in a blink. But as a former store owner, what amazed him was the warmth and life and energy that seemed to spring from the person he talked to, as well as the people with the same color T-shirt throughout the store. So he said to the person helping him, "Do you ever hire old people like me?"

"Absolutely!" said the Apple specialist who had helped him and who turned out to be one of the store managers.

"But I know almost nothing about phones and computers," Mark said.

"That's OK," the manager told him. "What we're looking for are people with great relationship skills. If that's you, we can teach you the details." Which they did, and he puts his outstanding relational skills into action still today. He used to charm people, talk about the book they needed, or point them toward a resource for that problem

they were trying to solve. He once used relationships to point people toward a book. Now he does the same thing with technology.

Relational Rating Is Everywhere

Today, pick almost any area in the business sector and you'll see how it's being driven to be more "relational." For example, let's say you're not feeling great. It's been several days, and now it's time to go to a clinic. With healthcare moving closer to where people live, urgent care centers are popping up in many drugstores, supermarkets, and corner shopping centers.

You would think that technology and clinical expertise would be the thing people value most about their experience. And indeed, most urgent care centers have a topnotch NP (nurse practitioner) or PA (physician's assistant), an x-ray tech, a med tech, and a receptionist out front. They offer a multitude of tests that give you "right now" results, everything from strep tests to heart tests. But while people *expect* the latest clinical tests and medical expertise, what they *value most* is something they can understand. *Relationships!*

Ask the NPs or PAs who staff these centers what really matters. You'll learn it's not just their wise diagnosis and treatment. What's crucial to the rating that the clinic and the provider gets is the *experience* a person had relationally.

From meeting the med tech out front to the nurse practitioner in the back, the number of stars they give on the survey tends to reflect the way they believe they were treated relationally. And those stars (or their equivalent) can impact a provider's bonus or career. Meaning, *on top of* all their medical skills, they must have relational skills as well—which are not always taught in NP and PA schools!

Pick almost any job today and you'll see the same thing. Almost every business now is being driven by customer service and relationships. We demand relational intelligence from baristas and bank tellers. It's a key component for how we choose roofers and whether we return a second time to the place our car was repaired. However, most

people who work in these places will go through an entire educational or vocational career without a single class on how to do relationships well. We just assume people already know how to relate with each other. Yet there's no training on doing relationships well from grade school through trade or graduate school. Sadly, those life-skills classes were removed from many schools along with home economics and art classes.

What's the result? People are clamoring for skills at relating.

For example, at UC Berkeley, more than seventy students couldn't get into a new, every-seat-full "adulting" class. The following semester, more than two hundred students signed up for the same class and more than half of them were turned away. This was a course not just on life skills such as how to create a budget, but primarily filled with coaching on how to do relationships in the real world. The same thing is true at the Adulting School in Portland, Maine, where classes are bursting at the seams.³

All across this country, young men and women in colleges and graduate schools are actively seeking help in filling up something they've missed in home and school. It's those core skills on doing life and relationships well that we'll be coaching you on in this book.

One More "American Picking Good" Example of Relational Intelligence

Let's look at one more example of where you can see applied relational intelligence being demonstrated. Pickers are people who spend their time searching for antiques and unique items they can purchase and resell to others. Arguably, the most famous "pickers" on the planet are Mike Wolfe, Frank Fritz, and Danielle Colby. They are the stars of the hit show *American Pickers*, which has run for over twenty consecutive seasons.

Watching episodes of *American Pickers*, we see how Mike and Frank *value* and build attachment with the people they're talking to. We watch them step right into people's lives and be interested in and

value them as *people*, linking what they've done with something bigger, like preserving history or treasuring or continuing a loved one's interests or legacy.

With these examples, we hope you're beginning to get a picture of how, even in our day of amazing technological advances, it's *relationships* that hook us, encourage us, motivate us, and inspire us. And it is relationships driven by relational intelligence that will build great things into the life of your child!

How “Relational” Ability Is Different from “Capacity” Learning

As we unpack more closely what relational intelligence is, it's important to know up front that this kind of relational skill isn't reserved for certain personalities. We're not saying you have to be born with the relational skills of a top Apple Store associate. Or be skilled at getting total strangers to open their doors and storage sheds like Mike and Frank. We can all learn a great deal about relating well with others—no matter our natural personality. And as we learn how to better relate to others, we'll also be able to teach and model relational wisdom to our own children.

Why are we so confident about you being able to do that? In large part, it's because we believe you have the innate intelligence to impact your child's life relationally.

Let's start by digging into that word, *intelligence*.

We're sure you've heard the term “artificial intelligence” (even though it's often linked incorrectly to movies based on mad robots taking over from humans). Or perhaps you're familiar with “business intelligence,” where we're told we can transform how business information is collected, integrated, analyzed, and presented.⁴ And who hasn't heard about the concept of “emotional intelligence”? Appropriately understanding our emotions is an incredibly powerful tool for doing life well with others.

Experts are doing great work on the clinical and research-based

aspects of connecting emotional skills with relationship skills. For example, we're very grateful for Dr. Gary Oliver and his outstanding work on linking EI (emotional intelligence) and RI (relational intelligence) at John Brown University's Relationship Center.

But in almost every case, when you hear the word *intelligence*, it's being looked at as a "capacity" measurement. Here's what we mean. I (Dewey) was in elementary and junior high school with identical twin brothers. Each of them was an exact replica of the other, making it virtually impossible to distinguish them. Their own mother had trouble sorting them out, so playing pranks on our teachers was easy for them.

The thing I remember most, however, was how incredibly intelligent they both were. I'm pretty sure when we were in kindergarten, they were conjugating verbs while the rest of us struggled with learning to spell one syllable words. I know for a fact they graduated first and second among their class in college with degrees in nuclear engineering. Eventually they became bosses to a lot of the same guys who called them "nerds" in school. Talk about poetic justice!

When you think of the word *intelligent* or *intelligence*, it's most likely linked to people like these identical twin brothers, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, or Katherine Johnson (the NASA math expert pictured in the movie *Hidden Figures*). All of them became outstanding in business, technology, or science and were able to hold in their minds a huge capacity for detailed thoughts, facts, and figures. That is where most clinical measures of intelligence are based.

If you have ever taken an IQ test, or an ACT or SAT to get into college, then you've been exposed to broad capacity-based measurements of intelligence. In these types of measurements, capacity refers to volume, meaning there is a maximum amount that something can hold or contain, making it possible for whatever is in the container to be measured.

Regarding intelligence, it is a concept that was popular among many early psychologists and neuroscientists, mainly because they believed the *amount* of intelligence an individual possessed was *fixed* for that person. However, the amount also varied with each person.

Intelligence then, if looked at as a “capacity” measure, could be quantified. We could even assign people some level of intelligence quotient, a higher quotient reflecting a greater level of “smartness” possessed by the individual.

But our focus and definition in using the word *intelligence* is not about *capacity*! Our goal isn't to help you or your child gain or even measure your broad base of general knowledge. Nor is it based on the idea that there's a cap on your ability to acquire knowledge or to develop characteristic traits helpful for creating new relationships. In fact, you'll soon read an entire section on amazing new findings in neuroscience showing that our brains actually can learn and apply something new, regardless of our age or background, therefore blowing up the “cap” theory of our ability to acquire knowledge!

What we're laying out with our definition of relational intelligence is an *ability-based, applicational* understanding of this phrase. How you can gain tools, examples, and insights to apply when relating and connecting closely with others. How you can model relational intelligence with your children as they watch you *apply* these relational skills as a parent and person!

Intelligence's Applicational Link to Wisdom

Depending on the translation, the word *wisdom* is found in the Bible some 216 times. Almost forty times it's found in the book of Proverbs alone. “How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!” (Prov. 16:16), and “For wisdom is better than jewels; and all desirable things cannot compare with her” (8:11).

Dr. Bruce Waltke, noted Dallas Theological Seminary Semitic scholar, once shared a classic definition of wisdom as being “skill of living.” That is the real-world skill of doing relationships well that we'll be focusing on in this book. In other words, we're challenging and guiding people to be relationally intelligent as they apply and live out a certain set of core skills for doing life well.

Even the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines intelligence as “the

ability to learn or understand . . . the *ability* to *apply* knowledge to manipulate one's environment."⁴

Likewise, the *Collins English Dictionary* defines intelligence as "the ability to think, reason, and understand instead of doing things automatically or by instinct." And the Apple Dictionary states intelligence is "the ability to acquire and apply knowledge."

With that in mind, here's our definition of relational intelligence: *relational intelligence is exercising our natural ability to learn, understand, and apply healthy relationship skills needed for successfully connecting and interacting with others.*

***Relational intelligence
is exercising our
natural ability to learn,
understand, and apply
healthy relationship
skills needed for
successfully connecting
and interacting
with others.***

We'll dive deeper into each aspect of this definition as we go through the book. But just know that we believe you already have the God-given, "uncapped" *ability* (not capacity) to understand and *apply* wise, relational living. You can learn to do relationships well, even in a world where so many people and situations seek to put a "cap" on who you are today or can become tomorrow.

We also want you to know the goal for acquiring relational intelligence is never to exert control, nor to gain any advantage over anyone or any situation that could harm or defraud another individual. If your primary focus for getting better at relationships is so you can control or use other people, it will eventually ruin every relationship you have. Our goal for teaching you these skills is for you and your children to experience a new level of love, lived out well by applying five key elements of relational intelligence.

Where did these five elements come from? We have had the privilege of working with couples and families for more than sixty years

combined. Dr. Wilson's PhD is in cognitive learning with his dissertation focused on relational commitment among millennials. Dr. Trent's doctorate is in marriage and family therapy, and his dissertation was on what builds attachment in caring, bonded relationships with children.

We both teach in graduate programs and have done decades of study and research on family interactions. In doing so, we have quantified these five elements as being core measures of what is constantly seen in high-functioning, strongly attached, healthy children and parents—what we refer to as relational intelligence.

Now that's not to say there aren't other aspects of doing relationships wisely and well that could have been factored in. After studying and researching healthy family functioning, other traits can certainly move under the heading of one of these five core elements that we've isolated and focused on.

For example, you won't see "compassion" as one of the key measures. But it's closely linked with the fifth element of relational intelligence for children, which is Future-Focused Service. Another is "courage." You'll discover it is a part of the second, third, and fourth elements. Simply put, the five elements we've chosen are broad enough to be core reflections, yet not so wide as to not be significant.

Throughout the book, you will often see us refer to the URL www.therelationallyintelligentchild.com. This website is where you will be able to find a plethora of information, insights, and additional research about parenting and other meaningful relationships you have. We'll give you more information about this later, but for now, let's lay out a map of the rest of the book.

The Five Elements of Relational Intelligence for Parents

So much of what we do in life occurs progressively, or in succession. For example, God designed us physically to crawl before we walk, and to walk before we run. Likewise, children also learn language progressively by starting with one syllable words before learning multiple syllable

words and their meaning. These small humans now have a vocabulary—a filing cabinet, if you will, full of the words they'll use to express their views over the course of a lifetime. Simply stated, God means for our children to develop progressively through a natural order.

The five elements of relational intelligence listed below are also progressive in that each element is foundational for the one that follows. In the same way it is virtually impossible for your child to run a race without first learning to walk, we'll demonstrate how developing a secure attachment with your child is foundational to every other element. A secure attachment encourages and enables them to fearlessly explore their world! Because they're going to fall when they explore, through getting up and going again, they develop an unwavering resilience as a child. All of which leads to them making wise decisions and having a future-focused perspective for serving others as teenagers and adults.

- *1st Element—The foundational need for SECURE ATTACHMENT*
- *2nd Element—Which paves a way for fostering FEARLESS EXPLORATION*
- *3rd Element—Resulting in an UNWAVERING RESILIENCE that's needed to overcome real-world relational challenges*
- *4th Element—Which becomes the platform for WISE DECISION-MAKING that's essential and crucial for developing self-regulation*
- *5th Element—With the end goal of seeing life so hopeful, it empowers FUTURE-FOCUSED SERVING of others.*

In the next chapter, we'll begin walking you through each of the five core elements and how each applies to relational intelligence. Then, once you've gone through these five core relational elements, our

goal isn't to just say, "Well, good luck with that!" Instead, we're going to help you apply these principles in the following ways:

- In chapter 8, we'll help you create a starting point plan for bringing relational intelligence into your unique home and family.
- We'll look at three things that can block us from becoming relationally intelligent.
- We'll also look at three things that empower our learning and application of each element.
- Finally, we'll end the book with a challenge to pick one other family and share with them what you've learned, helping them become relationally intelligent.