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1 CHOICE

Choose to Be the Parent

Honey, hop into your car seat, and I'll buckle you up."

"No! I don't want to sit in my seat! I don't want to wear a seat belt! I don't want to go for a ride!"

Now what? What's a parent to do when a request is denied? What's next when an order is turned down by a four-year-old as though it was an option? What should you do if the command to "hop into your car seat" turns into World War III with your preschooler protesting loudly, kicking furiously, and swinging like a boxer? *Now what?*

Scenarios like this happen every day. Sometimes the disobedience or threatened disobedience is subtle: "I don't want to get in my seat," the youngster says calmly. "I'm tired. Do we have to go to the store today? Could we go tomorrow?"

Sometimes it is radical: “I hate my car seat,” shrieks the toddler. “I hate this car! I hate *you!*”

No one wants to have her parental authority questioned. When your child’s challenge is a mild one, it is upsetting. When the response is extreme, it can be devastating. You think you are failing. Your household has been turned upside down, and you feel like you are the worst parent in the entire world! Those thoughts are very real, but they are not accurate. The question is not, Who is the worst parent in the entire world? (I’d hate to judge *that* contest.) The question is, Now what?

“I am the parent. He is the child.” I said those two sentences more than once as we were raising our kids. Who was I trying to convince? Probably both of us, myself and my child. Actually, it was more of a reminder—a reminder I needed when there had been a mysterious role reversal.

Saying, “I am the parent. He is the child,” helped me restore each one of us to our proper place.

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE:
OVER 1/3 OF CHRISTIAN
PARENTS EXPERIENCE FREQUENT
CONFLICT WITH THEIR CHILD
OVER THE FOLLOWING:
INTERACTIONS WITH SIBLINGS,
CHORES, DISOBEYING PARENTS,
AND BEDTIME/NAPTIME.**

“I am the parent.” Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Of course I’m the parent. Obviously I’m the parent. I’m older. I’m wiser. I pay the bills.

I make the decisions. I’m the one who is in charge.

Well, um, maybe not *all* the time. In fact, my recollection is that the two sentences quoted above were uttered because I had momentarily abdicated the throne and was no longer in charge (or at least things were moving in that direction).

Somehow, one of my little sweeties, albeit the cunning toddler or the charming grade school boy, was taking control. Granted, he was neither qualified nor chosen to be in command, but evidently he had forgotten that he was the child and that I was the parent. And I guess I had forgotten it too! I was in the same position as the parent with the car seat protestor. An order was given and was being debated. That parent's authority was in question.

Who's in Charge?

"We have a problem in our home," the young father began as he was handed the microphone. We had just finished a strong-willed child seminar and had opened it up for questions. "We have a problem in our home," the father said. "Our four-year-old daughter is running the house. What can we do?" That was it. This dear man was obviously at the end of his rope, and the knot he was clinging to was fraying. His authority had been usurped by a very strong-willed child.

The honesty of that father must be appreciated and applauded. In the auditorium, heads nodded in affirmation, agreement, and commiseration. Confusion of the roles of parent and child is not unusual. After having addressed thousands of parents and answered numerous questions in seminars, workshops, and via email, I can attest to the fact that role reversal is a common problem.

So what is the answer?

The first step is precisely what we heard from that father: Admit it when there is a problem in need of a solution.

STEP 1 *Admit it when a problem exists.*

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

—John 8:32

By holding this book in your hands, it would seem that you are willing to admit, or at least consider the idea, that there is room for help in some areas of parenting. Admitting that a problem exists may appear very simple. Simple, yes. Easy, not necessarily. For many, this first step is extremely difficult. It seems to be easier to ignore difficult situations, hoping that “with time things will change.” Yes, things will change with time, but if you have compromised your role as the parent, the change will not be very pleasant.

God wants you to know and admit the truth. If you are to be “free,” you must deal in the facts. The father we heard from at the seminar was willing to acknowledge that somehow, somewhere, for whatever reason, he was no longer functioning as the parent, as the one in charge. Perhaps that is the case in your home. Maybe you are tired or under stress in another area of your life. Sleep deprivation is one very common stressor for parents. Maybe you are a little defensive or overprotective when it comes to parenting. Maybe, for whatever reason, you feel inadequate. “The truth will set you free.” What is the truth about your situation?

The car seat protestor we met at the beginning of this chapter felt self-assured enough to oppose his parent’s order. Evidently there was confusion in their family about who was the parent, who was in charge. What is Step 1 for that parent? Admit it when a problem exists. Now is not the time to make excuses. Instead it is time to get help.

Help!

Until you realize your parent-child relationship can improve, it is unlikely things *will* improve. There can be no problem resolution until a problem is identified. That is precisely what I was doing when I announced that, “I am the parent. You are the child.” Step 1 must be taken if any further advance is to occur. Admit it when a problem exists, and go on to Step 2.

STEP 2 *Build your confidence.*

“The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.”

—Isaiah 32:17

If Step 2 is to build your confidence, it might be appropriate to determine how it eroded in the first place. Many times losing a simple skirmish will trigger the wearing away of a parent’s confidence. When you pick a battle, you must win.

Dad is in the local pizza parlor with a group of friends. His child has finished eating, but the group as a whole is not done. Little Hannah starts to squirm in her chair, and Dad tells her to stay seated. Almost before the words leave his mouth, she jumps down and walks around the table to visit with one of the other adults. “Is this really so bad?” Dad asks himself. “She isn’t running around or causing a commotion.” So he lets it go and doesn’t reinforce the instruction that was given.

Is it a big deal for this youngster to leave her seat and walk around the table? No. Is it a big deal to willfully

disobey an instruction from her parent? Yes! Dad just lost a battle he chose to fight. His confidence is potentially disintegrating and so is his child's respect for him. It's important to think about your commands before you give them. Pick your battles wisely.

When you choose a particular battle to fight, when you draw a line in the sand, it is essential that you win. The dad in the pizza parlor told his daughter to stay seated. The mother told her son to get into the car seat. These were not points of discussion or items to debate. The children were not asked if they would *like* to obey.

When an order is given, there is never a debate. And because there is no question, it is important that you give your orders wisely. The little girl must stay seated. The little boy must get into his car seat. If once or twice your child has been allowed to "win the battle," then he has learned that the orders given are debatable. Your authority and confidence are in jeopardy.



**IT'S A TOUGH JOB:
70% OF CHRISTIAN
PARENTS ADMIT THAT
THEY SOMETIMES LACK
CONFIDENCE IN THEIR
PARENTING DECISIONS.**

If losing daily skirmishes can tear down the confidence of a parent, what will build it up? The obvious: winning the daily skirmishes. Also a parent's confidence may be bolstered by something as simple as doing a reality check.

Too often, parents have given up their rights and responsibilities because they have lost track of what is truly reality. That four-year-old darling who had taken over the house had managed, consciously or unconsciously, to convince the adults that they were not capable of being the parents. She had persuaded

them that she was better equipped to be in charge, and obviously, she was more than willing. The preschooler who was not interested in following the instruction to get into his car seat and buckle up was also questioning his parent's authority. The pizza parlor prowler completely ignored the words of her father.

These kids had taken charge or were threatening to do so. So what reality does a parent need to examine to build his confidence? It is the reality that your child is not prepared cognitively, experientially, or emotionally to be the one in control. No child has the skills needed to Be The Parent.

Perhaps the best illustration of this is one that borders on the ridiculous. Imagine riding in the car with your preschooler and taking turns at the wheel. You drive for a while and then hop out of the driver's seat and he takes over. Good idea? *Of course not!* He's only three! He doesn't have the skills to drive a car. He can't even reach the pedals. No parents would give control of their automobile to their child. Then why give your child control of parenting, a role that the child is not capable of handling? This decision could be equally destructive.

Snap back to reality! It is NEVER best to allow your child to control your household. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, you are better equipped for the job of being in charge. Your confidence level should be raised just by doing a reality check.

Back to reality

Please repeat after me . . .

I am the parent . . . THAT is reality.

He (or she) is the child . . . THAT is reality.

I am older and wiser . . . THAT is reality.

God has given me the parenting
 responsibility . . . THAT is reality.
 He will equip me to do the job . . .
 THAT is realty.
 I can have God-given confidence in
 my role . . . THAT is reality.
 I am the parent!

If it is your goal to Be The Parent, you must choose to, Step 1: Admit it when a problem exists; Step 2: Build your confidence (with a heavy dose of reality); and . . .

STEP 3 *See the vision.*

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
 —Proverbs 29:18 KJV

God gave Adam and Eve, the first earthly parents, a twofold task as they started their life together in the garden. He told them to, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Complying with the first part of that instruction was not difficult then, and it is not difficult today. Becoming a parent, conceiving a child, being fruitful and increasing in number—that is usually the easy part. The difficulty comes with subduing that fruit! Therefore, it is important to have a vision. A vision will help you keep your focus. It will help you from being shortsighted.

A Vision?

What is your vision for your child? I am NOT talking about deciding that little Jimmy, only five years old, will

one day be the pianist of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. I am not suggesting you declare that particular intent and then go after it with abandon even if little Jimmy hates the piano and has absolutely no musical ability. That is not what I mean when I challenge you to have a vision. A vision, as I am referring to it in this case, is more general and overarching. It is not a future career goal or a benchmark of society. It is not you desiring for your child to become what you have become or achieve what you have achieved. Nor is it expecting that your child become or achieve what you have not.

Let me share the vision my husband and I had for each one of our sons. We wanted to help our children “sing the song God put inside of them.” This is the type of overarching goal or vision any parent can adopt. That was the vision we saw for our boys.

Seeing the vision for your child is akin to the concept presented in *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby and Claude King. The reader is encouraged to find where God is *already* at work and come alongside Him.

God is a sovereign ruler of the universe. He is the One who is at work, and He alone has the right to take the initiative to begin a work. He does not ask us to dream our dreams for Him and then ask Him to bless our plans. He is already at work when He comes to us. His desire is to get us from where we are to where He is working. When God reveals to you where He is working, that becomes His invitation to join Him.¹

Where is God working in your child’s life? What skills and interests and abilities has He given your son or daughter?

Identify these and get in step to enhance them and to help your child “sing his song.”

Their Song

The vision we had for each of our sons was to help them “sing the song God put inside of them.” That was the way we worded it. We did not set out to help them sing “our song,” or the song *we* determined they must sing. “Train a child in the way *he should go*” (Proverbs 22:6, emphasis mine). Each one of our three sons was and is very different. How can three boys with the same parents, the same grandparents, living in the same community, attending the same church, all be so different? Because that is what God intended. If our Creator can make each snowflake an original, I’m certain that creating every human being to be unique is in the realm of His ability.

Unique

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

—Psalm 139:13–14

That verse is the beautiful, poetic explanation of each person’s individuality. My sons used a more humorous approach. “Mom always reminds people that they are unique—just like everyone else!” Yes, we are all different, all unique, and each one of your children and mine is an individual. So how did we go about accomplishing this vision? We had to carefully observe our boys and get to know them

as individuals. We had to listen to their dreams, their fears, and their ideas—starting when they were very young.

Listening takes time—time alone with each child and time together as a family. We took the time to work together and to play together. But it isn't just time; it's listening too. You must listen as your child expresses himself. Too many times, parent-child dialogue is actually parent-driven monologue. And usually that monologue sounds like a list of dos and don'ts, like an instruction manual. "Don't do that. Do this." We already live in a noisy world. You will have to make a conscious choice to listen to your child.

The Five-Day Challenge

So how can you be intentional when it comes to communication with your child? Take the five-day challenge. Announce that for the next five days, the car is not only going to be a transportation vehicle but is going to become the place for conversation. All distractions: cell phones, DVD players, CDs, the radio are forbidden, outlawed for five whole days! The only sounds allowed within the confines of the automobile will be those of the driver and passengers engaged in conversation! This will be a chore for most families who have found these distractions very convenient. They may be convenient, but they definitely stifle communication. The challenge is to turn off the distractions for five days and connect with your family. You will need to ask open-ended questions to begin the conversation. For example:

1. Tell me about your favorite piece of playground equipment. Why do you like it? Do you think I would like it?

2. What is one color you really like? Can you guess what my favorite color is? Why do you think I like that one?
3. Do you have a favorite song?
4. Can you remember the Bible story from last week's Sunday school lesson? Did you learn a Bible verse this week?

The questions do not need to highlight monumental things. The point is to converse. Be a listener and be willing to share. Obviously the questions will change as the age of your child changes. There were times when we made the conversation into a guessing game.

“Who was in Sunday school today?” I would ask.

“Try to guess,” was the answer.

And then I would guess various names (some legitimate, some silly) and our conversation was fun and lively.

Take the five-day challenge anytime you feel that communication has been stymied. Pay attention and you will actually hear what your child is thinking and dreaming. The better listener you become, the better opportunity you have to help your child determine the song that God placed within him—and the more likely you are to see the vision come to life!

Being able to see the vision for each one of your children is an important part of proactive parenting. Just as it is important for the mother of our original car seat protester to admit that she needs help, and to build her confidence through a reality check, she must see the vision for her child. As this mother strives to help her son sing his song, she will have increased determination to calmly and confidently win the battles she has chosen. This mother can be certain of the value of restoring and maintaining peace. By being the parent, she will ensure that the time she and

her son have together will not be wasted in useless, disrespectful chaos but will instead be positive and productive.

And there is more. We have just begun to develop the choices to be made for proactive parenting. Step 1: Admit it when a problem exists; Step 2: Build your confidence; Step 3: See the vision. And now you must have a plan.

STEP 4 *Develop a plan.*

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”

—Proverbs 16:9

Naively, some new parents assume that they automatically possess all the skills and knowledge needed to be parents simply because they now have a little one in their home. After all, the new parents had parents of their own. Surely they learned something from their folks. And if their parents made mistakes, as they undoubtedly did, these have been identified and can now be avoided. It’s easy . . . isn’t it?

Well, what if you didn’t have two parents in your home? What if you had a parent who was present but who was emotionally absent or incapable of good parenting for whatever reason? A man told me that when he came to a parenting emergency, he would step back and ask, “What did my father do in a situation like this?” Unfortunately the answer was, “Get drunk.” Not an option.

This is an extreme example. But maybe one or both of your parents were inaccessible because of their work schedule or their interest, maybe even obsession, with the television, the newspaper, their own friends, or simply the

desire to nap. Just remembering how your parents did it is not enough.

In a perfect world, your parents gave you a good supply of parenting tools to use with your own children. Maybe your spouse's parents did the same. It is possible that you both feel well equipped. (After all, look at how delightful you two turned out!) However, even if both of you had positive, confident, proactive parents, you bring different biases and routines into your new family. I'm guessing that your two families of origin, the families where you and your spouse were raised, did some things differently.

Are you aware of the definition of *normal*? It is whatever YOUR family did (regardless of how bizarre it might have been). You and your spouse bring two different "normals" that will contribute to the creation of the new "normal" for your family unit. (Which, by the way, someday your child's spouse will question, "You think *that* is normal?")

Furthermore, your parents did not raise this child of yours . . . this unique individual who God has given you. All that is to say that whether or not the parenting you and your spouse received was superlative, you still need to be proactive and have a plan to help your child develop into a responsible adult with well-placed priorities. Here's how to help your child "sing his song":

1. Give your child the opportunity to know Jesus.

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

—Mark 10:14

What do proactive parents do to see that their children know and love the Lord? There are opportunities you can give your child to become a member of the family of God. You can be intentional in seeing that the child in your home develops a relationship with Christ—and the sooner the better. No parent can make a child accept Christ as his or her Savior. There are, however, certain things a parent can do that can encourage that personal decision.

First of all, your commitment to Christ is of utmost importance (see the appendix: “The Plan of Salvation”). Your child is watching you and listening too. Even when your child is young, he will be deciding if you are the “real deal.” This shouldn’t panic you, and this is not a call to perfection. It is a reflection of the attitude of your heart. If having your child know Christ is truly important to you, this will be reflected in your behavior.

Be sure to find a church where the gospel is preached, children are loved, and Christian growth is encouraged. Then joyfully engage in opportunities to serve as individuals and as a family.

2. Teach your child to obey.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”

—Ephesians 6:1

Teaching your child to obey you and helping him realize there are consequences for disobedience are two things that are essential. These will encourage your child’s ability and willingness to obey God. This is the essence of choosing to Be The Parent.

A parent understands that boundaries are important. God gives us boundaries—not to fence us in—to protect

us from the perils outside of the parameters. Your responsibility as the parent is to determine —and reinforce— those boundaries.

Routine

Children thrive on routine. In one sense, routine provides boundaries. Your child needs a consistent schedule. What time does his day begin? When is bedtime? Mealtime is another activity that needs to be predictable. Putting your child on a schedule, creating those boundaries, has many benefits. Routine provides assurance of parental care. “I know we will be having lunch at noon . . . I know Mommy and Daddy put me to bed at 8:00 p.m. each evening . . . We do this every day.” There is a feeling of safety with boundaries.

And there is also freedom. A child who realizes where the boundaries are located, and heeds them, is able to run free within those boundaries. A child without reinforced boundaries does not have the freedom or safety he needs. Boundaries are not limited to routines. As the parent, you need to communicate to your child the acceptable behavior for various settings—church, the grocery store, the automobile, to name a few. There are boundaries in regard to certain people groups. What is the appropriate response to a teacher, a babysitter, a grandparent? When your child knows the boundaries and you have reinforced the appropriate behavior of staying within those boundaries, he can be confident in those settings. He knows what is expected and what to expect from you.

Many times kids act up to get attention. Even if the attention is negative, they have decided it is better than being ignored. Be sure you are giving your child the attention

and positive reinforcement that he needs. Our mom with the anti-car-seat son will want to be sure her son:

1. complies with the order she has given, and then . . .
2. is rewarded with as much positive attention as Mom can safely give as they head down the highway.

Active parenting is important as your child relates to you within the boundaries. Let me give you another example. Since we started with the grocery store, let's continue there. When you are shopping with your child, do not ignore him. Include him in the process. It is not all about efficiency. It is about having positive interaction with your child. The grocery store can be an adventure in learning and in enjoying one another. For example, you can ask a child for help in finding a particular product. I said "finding a product" not pulling it off of the shelf. Your child should not take anything from a shelf or a display unless you have asked him to do so. When he follows your instruction, he is your helper not a hindrance.

In an age-appropriate fashion, you can talk about the various food products and nutrition and agriculture and more. The possibilities for learning are limitless! Your child is getting attention within prescribed boundaries, and you are enjoying your child *and* getting the grocery shopping finished with a smile on your face.

Being the parent means teaching your child to obey. That is not being cruel. It is being biblical, knowing that with obedience comes freedom. Let me say it one more time. Being the parent means teaching your child to obey.

If you make a commitment to these two objectives, to giving your child the opportunity to know Jesus and to

teaching him to obey, you will be well on your way to success as a parent. Those are a part of the plan.

Now you have seen four of the action steps. You understand how important it is to: Step 1: Admit it when a problem exists; Step 2: Build your confidence; Step 3: See the vision; Step 4: Develop a plan. There is only one more step.

STEP 5 *Know you will make mistakes, and keep on learning.*

“Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.”

—Proverbs 1:5

There is no perfect parent. In fact, if you ask any seasoned parent, “Did you always make the right choices?” the honest ones will have to admit that many of their good choices were the result of experience gained from making poor ones. We made mistakes in parenting. You have made mistakes in parenting. That is OK. Do not let those mistakes paralyze you.

Being the parent will allow you the opportunity to make mistakes and to ask for forgiveness. The idea is NOT to repeat the same mistakes over and over. To *learn* as a parent means a change of behavior. The goal is to keep learning and becoming a better parent. And to accomplish that you must Choose to Be The Parent!

ACTION STEPS:

- STEP ①** Admit the problem exists.
- STEP ②** Build your confidence.
- STEP ③** See the vision.
- STEP ④** Develop a plan.
- STEP ⑤** Know you will make mistakes, and keep on learning.

Kendra is 100 percent correct when she says that the first step in proactive parenting is to admit that a problem exists. If that is sometimes difficult for a mom to do, it is incredibly difficult for a dad. We dads like to believe we are in charge and that our children could not possibly be usurping our position. Furthermore, we absolutely do not want to think that others might have noticed that we are losing control.

I have seen situations where it is obvious that the child and the parent have reversed roles. The dad appears to be clueless and makes excuses if and when any attention is drawn to the apparent problem. This is sad for both parent and child.

There is a quick test you can do to see if you might have a problem being the parent. Choose the correct answer that is the closest match.

When I give my child a direction, he:

- a) *ignores my instruction.*
- b) *argues with me.*
- c) *throws a fit.*
- d) *does what I have asked.*

If your answer is a, b, or c, take note. The possibility exists that there has been a role reversal. Don't be afraid to admit the problem exists. That is the loving, parental thing to do.

One more note from Kendra: Be The Parent, Not the Friend

There is one more problematic role sometimes assumed by parents that I want to address before we move on to the next choice. Many parents try to be a friend to their child instead of being the parent. Being a friend to your adult child is both appropriate and necessary if you are to have a relationship, for very few adults are in need of a “mommy” or “daddy.” If, however, you are currently in the throes of parenting and your child has not yet reached adulthood, do not, I repeat, do not try to be a friend to your child. Your child probably has many friends in his or her age group. Which, by the way, is NOT your age group. Look in the mirror. You are old! I don't care if you are only twenty-five years old, you are old in comparison to your child! While your child may have an abundance of friends, it is highly unlikely that many are clamoring for the job of parent. That is your role. Be The Parent.

62% OF CHRISTIAN PARENTS SAY THEIR CHILDREN CONSIDER THEM THEIR BUDDIES. IF THAT'S HOW THEY PRIMARILY SEE YOU, THERE IS A PROBLEM.

Note:

1. Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 35.