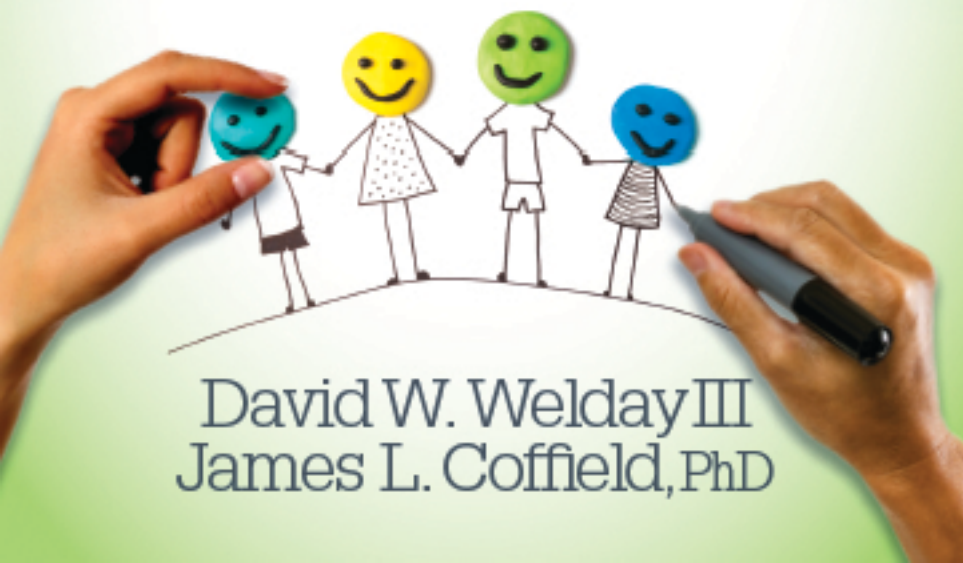


Shaping YOUR Family Story

*How Imperfect Parents Create
Hope and Promise for Their Children*



David W. Welday III
James L. Coffield, PhD

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by David W. Welday III and James L. Coffield

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Dedication

DAVID—I find it ironic—perhaps even comical—that I would write a parenting book. I am not a perfect parent, nor was I perfectly parented. But I will be forever grateful to my mom and dad, David and Sally Welday, for the way they loved me and raised me. In addition, I cannot imagine a more beautiful, wise and supportive wife and mother to our children than my bride, Amy. My three sons, David, Darren, and Jason each bring me such joy, hope, and blessing. I am so proud of you for the men you have become! Thank you for helping me become the man I am called to be.

JAMES—If all good stories are peppered with irony, I too find it ironic that I am co-authoring a parenting book. At times I have made the goal of being the perfect parent an idol, something too important. I have placed too much pressure on myself and on my kids. Being a father has been one of the greatest privileges in my life. I thank my wife Mona who has been so supportive and deserves credit not only for writing my PhD dissertation but helping me write this document as well. Though we sometimes changed the names in this book, I am profoundly grateful to Skylar, Pearce and Kim who are individually amazing people. You have each taught me more than I will ever teach you. If you ever wonder, know that you have my blessing.

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Note from the Authors

WHILE BOTH OF us have contributed to the content you are about to read, we recognize that it can be confusing for you to keep track of which one of us is speaking. While we have much in common, certainly our passion for parenting, we are very different people. One of us drives a sports car, the other a truck. One of us comes from a staunch reformed religious background, the other from the “wild and crazy” side of the spiritual tracks. We have different interests, abilities, and experiences. And yet we came together for this parenting project. So in the interest of making it easy for you to embrace the principles and information we hope to share with you, we have intentionally written in one voice. We want you to be able to relax and read without having to think, *Okay, is this David or Jim talking to me?* So, don’t try to figure it out. May you find great peace and comfort in knowing that *you* are writing an incredible family story, one that can change the world.

Also, please understand that we have both spent years reading, hearing and learning from others, teaching about child development and attempting to practice what we learned. It is not our intent to claim that the thoughts shared in this book are original with us. Nor are we trying to avoid giving credit where credit is due. If confession is good for the soul, we readily

confess that none of the ideas shared in this book are our own. We are humbly standing on the shoulders of others who have gone before us.

—DAVID AND JIM

P.S.—We've started each chapter with a common statement that most every parent says at one time or another. We did this by design to remind you that you are not alone. You're not the only imperfect parent who sometimes feels overwhelmed, unprepared, and not up to the task.

Preface



NOBODY'S PERFECT

DAVID WELDAY HAD a goal and purpose. It had long been a passion of his to create a starting point for groups of parents to meet for the specific purpose of discussing parenting. Jim Coffield was rapidly approaching three decades of counseling with teens and adults when David first approached him about writing a book. David had been diligently working on this project for some time, but knew that Jim would be able to offer additional insights. We had no idea that two years and numerous rewrites later, this project would have evolved into this final form. Our collaboration has been filled with research, compromise, and persistence, not unlike parenting. We've had to choose our battles, agree upon the story premise, decide which themes are most important, and make difficult choices.

As in real life, and specifically the role of parenting, we have both remained true to the principles shared in this book while

being flexible enough to allow our different personalities to be expressed. It is our goal to invite you to view your parenting experience through the grid of a story. We will discuss how to choose your themes, develop your characters, deal with the conflicts and direct the compelling story of your family.

Being a great parent is a high and noble calling. It changes lives. How you parent matters not only to your children and your family, but to your community—to the culture in which you live, and to generations yet to come. While we can all humbly acknowledge that there are no perfect parents, authors, or books, we invite you to come with us on this journey as we each attempt to write a better story for ourselves and those we love.

Remember, parenting is a process. Nobody gets it right all the time. We all make mistakes in our parenting. Just when you think you've got one child figured out, along comes another one with a totally different personality and set of strengths and weaknesses. But ironically, what can seem like failings and inconsistencies with parents or kids are not always a bad thing. In fact, sometimes our mistakes and failures can become some of the most important aspects of our child's development.

Great learning and discovery come through adversity. My former pastor Carl Buffington once said, "If it were up to us, we'd kill our kids." He went on to explain that as parents we have this idea that our love is best expressed by taking away all the roadblocks, obstacles, and challenges that our children face. If left to us, we'd spare them every heartache and trial that we've faced. Unfortunately, in doing so we'd very likely mess them up for life.

After all, who among us wouldn't want to spare our kids from pain and difficulty? Look at the amount of time we spend

just trying to keep them out of trouble. But the truth is, wrestling with difficulty builds character. It makes us stronger. It makes us better. Much like a refinery's intense heat converts raw materials into something of value, life's difficult experiences refine us. So don't wallow in your mistakes—**let your refining moments become your defining moments.**

That's not to say you shouldn't endeavor to protect your children or that you should be complacent about being the best parent you can be. What I am saying is, don't beat yourself up over your shortcomings and failures. They just might be the stuff that helps turn your son or daughter into the next president, CEO, inventor, or great theologian.

While I hope this book helps you become a better parent, I think it's important to start our journey together by agreeing that there simply are no perfect parents, and you're not going to be the first. We all make mistakes, and those blunders can even be helpful. So relax. This is not a competition to see who turns out better kids—there is no contest (there shouldn't

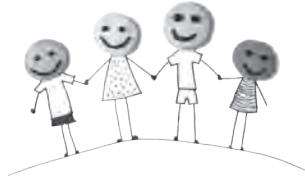
*Let your refining
moments become
your defining
moments.*

be, anyway) to see who wins the Best Dad of the Year award or the Mom of the Millennium trophy. We all win when we become better parents.

Hats off to you for picking up this book and getting this far. We hope you find the investment of time we spend together worthwhile. When you've worked through *Shaping Your Family Story*, feel free to contact us to let us know what you think about it.

—DAVID WELDAY AND JIM COFFIELD

Introduction



WHAT MAKES A GREAT FAMILY STORY?

AS SHE SAT in my office crying, she said she felt like her life was a character in a sitcom. Why would someone say that? Perhaps it's because we relate to stories. Stories captivate us. We identify with them and relate to them. Maybe you long to be William Wallace fighting for freedom or feel like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz who only wants a heart, or desire the tenacity of Katniss Everdeen who survives the Hunger Games. People often try to make sense of their lives by connecting to a character in story. We think in stories. We remember stories.

As a parent, what does it mean to write your family story? What story is your family telling to the world? In your story are you the hero, the villain, or just an unforgettable side character? Surely there are times when you will feel like all three. But you are cast in a key role. In many ways you are the director, producer, and writer all rolled into one. And while your story isn't

complete and the outcome is uncertain, you can make a difference—a huge difference on how it is written, and you can help your children become characters in your story who live life with purpose, passion, significance, and joy. That is a noble—even heroic—task, one that invites you to move from ordinary to extraordinary.

For generations ordinary men and women have inherited this profound responsibility. Some planned for it and some didn't. But it doesn't really matter how you got into this story. What matters is that you're here. And once you are in, you do your best to make your family story a great one.

Throughout this book, we will share some of our struggles with parenting. We hope that you can laugh at our clumsiness, share our successes, and grieve with our sorrows and losses as you embrace and catch the perspectives offered in the pages to come.

There will be days when you won't feel quite so noble about this holy calling called parenting. There are probably days when you will feel more exasperation than exhilaration over the prospect of being a parent. We all feel that way, but parenting is not about your feelings.

When it comes to parenting, people have all sorts of ideas about what "successful kids" look like: Is it how they behave? The kind of career path they follow? If they like us or not? If they make a lot of money? If they are happy? If they stay connected to us or become alienated?

It doesn't take much living to realize that simply being popular or having a lot of money isn't what life is all about. Being successful in life has a lot more to do with how you live than what you have or who you know. Being a successful parent has much more to do with helping our kids discover meaning,

purpose, and joy in life—with helping them live significantly, confidently, and with a desire to make a difference in the world.

So how do you raise kids to live out such a grand story? Though there is no formula to follow or magic pill to swallow, there are core principles and practices that parents can follow to give them a better shot at raising successful kids.

To illustrate those practices, this book is divided into five main parts with each giving you a central principle to consider and hopefully put into practice. These five segments are:

- Reflecting
- Directing
- Protecting
- Correcting
- Connecting

Interestingly, these five segments correlate with the five crucial elements of a great story; **character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme**. As you read through each section, we hope you begin to see your role as a parent in a nobler light and we hope you will be both inspired and motivated to approach your role as a parent with a renewed sense of purpose and joy.

Section One

Ready, Set, Action...

Chapter 1

The Foundation of Your Family Story



**"THIS IS NOT WHAT I SIGNED UP FOR—
NOT THE DREAM I HAD FOR MY CHILD."**

EVERYONE LOVES A redemptive story, one in which the unlikely hero wins the battle, the Hobbit carries the ring, the couple reunites after the war. We have also watched movies that do not seem to have focus or lack a clear plot. At the closing credits, we look at one another and wonder why we paid money to watch it. In much the same way, good or bad, the way we live life tells our story and the story of our family.

A family story may begin with dating and attraction and progress through courtship, newborn sleep deprivation, conversations in the principal's office, all the way to grandchildren,

even great-grandchildren with all the hopes and tragedies that are sprinkled throughout. We will all eventually see our stories clearly as we look back. We will be able to see the different chapters, seasons, and themes, but once the story is written, it is very difficult to edit and change. **The time to make the edits to your family story is now.**

I wish I had considered this concept of my family being and living a story years ago. But even if your children are grown, it's never too late to start making your family story better. It is just easier to edit our stories early on when our children's minds and hearts are most malleable.

The Orlando Civic Center was packed. Thirty-six thousand people from around the country had descended upon Orlando dressed as Wookies, Star War Commanders, Han Solo, etc. From my perspective as a psychologist, it looked like a sea of

*The time to make
the edits to your
family story is now.*

mental illness. As my son and I walked around in awe of the spectacle that was the Star Wars Convention, we overheard a passionate argument. It was about whether an X-Wing Fighter would be able to with-

stand the pressure of achieving hyperspace. The arguing men (each in full costume) had become so angry that it seemed as if they were on the precipice of an intergalactic battle. Sadly, this passionate argument was about two things that do not exist, X-Wing Fighters and hyperspace. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Star Wars; it is a good story that has been well told. But it amazes me that so many people remain compelled by this story and its characters. As I looked over the sea of Princess Leias and Jabba the Huts, I was struck by the truth that people will be faithful to a compelling story.

Good stories are evocative. They cause us to cry, to laugh, to hurt, to feel deeply about matters. As we consider our family and parenting, we want to purposely think about how we live out and direct a compelling story; a purposeful story that evokes life. As is true in each of our lives, good stories involve a character who wants something and goes through great conflict to obtain it. People are faithful to a compelling story. May your family story be as compelling to your children as the Star Wars saga has been to so many millions.

*A plane spends
most of its flight
time off course.*

As a parent, you are the principle director in the development of your family story. It's important to remember that what makes your story compelling and memorable is its imperfections and how you respond to them. For example, a plane spends most of its flight time off course. However, the GPS navigation system makes constant subtle corrections and so your flight arrives at its destination on time (well, some of the time). The analogy is applicable to our parenting. We mess up—a lot. Yet, if we make the needed course corrections all along the way, our kids have a much greater chance at becoming healthy, successful adults, despite our failures and short-comings.

You and I have our own individual stories. We are also part of a larger story made up of complex, interconnected parts. Like a solar system comprised of individual planets, families too, are made up of individuals living out unique personalities, temperaments, and values. These individual stories stand alone, yet are part of a larger story called family.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD FAMILY STORY

A simple understanding of the arc of a story is given to us by Donald Miller when he tells us that a story consists simply of a character who wants something and must go through a conflict to fully realize it.

This book identifies five core principles that each relate to a crucial component of a great story. Here is a brief overview:

#1—Character (Reflecting)

The characters in a story are either static or dynamic. Static characters remain the same throughout the story while dynamic characters change. As a parent, you play a crucial role in helping your children grow and change in positive ways. A reflecting parent is more likely to produce characters that are dynamic—characters that mature, progress, grow, and change.

#2—Plot (Directing)

The plot of your family story is the order and timing of how the events of your storyline unfold. Most parents assume they have little say in these events and often find themselves merely reacting to circumstances as they occur. Directing or shaping your family story speaks more to the intentionality you use in helping your child find his or her way in life and proactively guiding them in the way they were designed to go. A movie that has good characters without a strong plot leaves the viewer unsatisfied. Much like a bad movie, a family that has no direction or purpose will often become shaped by whatever stories are being told around them, yet have no distinctive flavor of their own.

#3—Setting (Protecting)

The setting is the backdrop where the story takes place and includes the social, environmental, and religious components of the character's life. Compelling family stories create a safe, supportive, and sometimes challenging landscape in which to develop. In this text, we will call this protecting, because the world in which you are raising your children is not safe. It's glorious and wonderful, but certainly not safe. Our job as parents is to provide appropriate protection as we raise our kids in this world, which can be toxic.

#4—Conflict (Correcting)

Conflict is inevitable. How characters deal with conflict determines the outcome of the role that they play in their own story. How families deal with conflict and discipline determines much of the outcome of their family story. No parenting book would be complete without taking space to address matters of discipline and how to correct the wrong things we see happening in our family story.

#5—Theme (Connecting)

The theme of a story is the overriding message. A story's theme can also be described as the mission or vision that it carries. Every author writes with a purpose in mind—a message or feeling that they want to convey to the reader so that they walk away from the story with something of worth. Your family has a theme too, and it all has to do with how your family connects—with each other, with others, with their own history, and with God. What is the mission of your family? How does this mission play out in your daily decisions to connect?

NO CHILD (OR PARENT) IS AN ACCIDENT

The best stories usually have an element of surprise. While some children are carefully planned, many come along at inconvenient times and in less than ideal circumstances. Many of us simply don't feel prepared to be parents. You might feel you

Much like a bad movie, a family that has no direction or purpose will often become shaped by whatever stories are being told around them, yet have no distinctive flavor of their own.

weren't parented well yourself, and didn't have a positive role model or memorable personal experiences from which to look back on. The story of your family is not random. I used to tell bedtime stories to my children. Along the way, they would add to the story often taking it in new directions from what I planned. But because they were part of the story, it held their attention. You may feel at times like your family story is unplanned, out of control or that you are just not cut out for

shaping your family story. Please know that you were hand-picked by God, chosen for your role in your family's story. In fact, this is a role you were meant to play. This wonderful and complex adventure is not a chaotic or random journey, but a purposeful commitment that will include the greatest joys and sorrows of your life.

If you believe that your existence is not an accident and that you are not a parent by accident, you will parent with more intention, faith, hope, and confidence. It matters how you raise your children and how you were raised. And though there may be some accidents along the way, there is purpose in our design.

Every parent questions whether or not they are qualified, capable, and equipped for parenting. You will be a better parent if you face this demon of uncertainty head on, wrestle him to the ground, and declare victory. Being your child's parent is the role of a lifetime and you were meant to play it. As long as you contend that you are a parent by accident, you leave room to give yourself a "pass," and can choose to check out. But making that choice won't be good for you or your child. So even if you're not ready to settle the matter of being "chosen" or "called" to be a parent (much less prepared), you will be far more likely to actually become a positive parent if you move forward at least with the hope and belief that maybe, just maybe you were born for this.

*Know that you
were hand-picked
by God, chosen for
your role in your
family's story.*

No matter how ill-prepared you may feel, know that you are not an accidental parent, and your child is not an accident either. Anyone can become a great parent. Like any behavior, it is learned, and therefore it can be re-learned, modified, and improved. Would you expect yourself to dance perfectly the first time you tried it? Neither can you expect to parent without the mishaps and blunders that go along with learning how to navigate something new and different.

In general, you will parent the way you were parented, unless you make a personal, lasting decision to do better. Your children are given to you for a number of years so that you can help guide and point them in the direction that they should go. It's a noble responsibility—but you're up for it.

YOUR CHILD IS HERE BY DESIGN

Jim Collin's 2001 bestseller, *Good to Great*, analyzes companies that research has indicated are the most successful. Without exception, these companies did not come to that success by accident, but rather by design. Corporate success stories are inevitably populated by heroes that had a clear purpose and mission. Furthermore, their top management excelled at communicating that purpose, vision, and mission to the employees. Everyone was on the same page and took pride in knowing they were not just working, they were working for something.

Parents who say "I'm just not cut out for this" cannot hope for success. When things are going wrong, it's easy to question whether you have the chops for parenting at all, let alone parenting well. Maybe your doubts stem from a teenage daughter who is going through serious rebellion issues—she's running with the wrong crowd, getting involved in drugs, or threatening to move out of the house and in with her boyfriend who lives in a van down by the river. You can almost hear the insidious whisper in your ear: "It must be your fault; you're just not cut out to be the parent of a teenager."

I remember sitting with an adopted teenager who was coming to grips with his unique family makeup. His eyes lit up as he said that he realized that he was supposed to be in his adoptive family, it is where he belonged and he was placed there and was chosen. His perspective that life was purposeful and not random gave him a great sense of confidence. Approaching your roles as a parent with the assurance that this is part of your purpose, your "mission" in life will help you as a parent.

Believing in a purpose and design foster greater conviction to stay engaged no matter how difficult, depressing, or heart-breaking the circumstances may be at the moment.

In most good stories there is a point where the hero cannot turn back: Frodo from the Lord of the Rings realizes that the burden of the ring is his to carry; Marvel Comics' Iron Man decides that the only way to save the country is by sacrificing himself. This is also true in life. When early settlers came to America, they would often burn their ships once they reached their destination so there could be no way to back out of their commitment. Realize that you are the parent and that there is no one else that can complete your specific task, and get to work.

As you look at your own family story, don't feel discouraged if the past or current story is not what you envision for your family. This might be why you are reading this book right now, to make some course corrections and influence the future storyline to become a gripping tale for future generations to come. It doesn't have to be a far-off fairytale; it can become your reality.

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Chapter 2

Shaping a Great Family Story



**"I WISH MY KIDS CAME WITH
AN OWNER'S MANUAL!"**

I ATTENDED A 2-DAY workshop on how to write a great story. The auditorium was filled with eager young writers and Hollywood types all wanting to know how to craft the next big blockbuster. The speaker, who had been advertised as the guy people hire to fix lackluster screenplays responded to the question by saying there is no formula for a great story, only principles. So how do you write a better story for your family? Here are six principles that can be used in shaping a great family story.

#1—Create High Emotional Warmth

We have all seen movies or read books with epic action: crashing cars, searing lasers, and flying fists keep our attention for the duration of the scene. A story that is full of action must also have warmth—a plot or sub-plot with some emotional connect-edness. We often read reviews of the latest action film where there is high intensity and conflict but the characters are basically static; they are not moving in any particular direction. There seems to be no warmth or emotional direction. Despite the hype, those movies usually fail to reach blockbuster status.

A good family story must also possess a degree of warmth. If there is very little warmth among the characters, the movie will lack compelling movement. By warmth, I am not implying that everyone should constantly enjoy and invite the presence of other family members or that families should cross over the balance from healthy to enmeshed, but there must be some overt positive emotion displayed on a frequent basis among all members. Events as simple as snuggling on the couch with popcorn for family movie night, playing ball together, or kind conversations shared over a meal evoke warmth and fondness in a family. Do your spouse and children know that you love them, not only by words, but by your presence, conversations, and demeanor? Does your daughter know that when she has a broken heart that you will actually listen, or would she assume you will tell her to “suck it up” and get over it? Does your family know the difference between laughing together at a funny event rather than laughing at one another? Screen writers have a name for adding warmth to a movie. They call it “saving the cat.” If the hero does not “save the cat” early in

the story, the audience is not compelled to pull for him. There is usually a vulnerable moment with the hero within the first 15 minutes of a movie.

#2—Have Low and Productive Conflict

Is your family story one of conflict? We all deal with conflict, and conflict is not always bad. Benjamin Franklin said, “Those things that hurt, instruct.” Our children need to see conflicts resolved, problems remedied, and bad circumstances mitigated. The research of Drs. John and Julie Gottman at the Gottman Institute has revealed that longevity in marriage can be predicted by the couple’s ability to resolve conflict. The same is true in creating a wholesome, healthy family unit. Is your family currently bogged down in conflict? If so, this unresolved conflict can damage the relationships in the family. Addressing these issues can not only restore relationships, but also teach important life skills. The solution may be found in something as simple as a family meeting and consensus, or it may require going to a counselor.

#3 – Have High Fun

Having fun with the family is often much easier said than done, or planned than accomplished. The best fun is spontaneous, but life doesn’t always create situations that are fun for the entire family in a singular moment. If your family is succeeding in having low conflict and high warmth, the fun will come more naturally. That said, there are proactive steps that you can take to create windows of opportunity. For example, if you tell your kids that there can be no internet, video or phone

for one hour each evening (or one or two evenings per week) that might allow time for a board game or a walk around the neighborhood. What about pretending that you are visitors to your town and discovering what the “tourists” do when visiting your city? In a good story, conflict is often momentarily put aside for some comedic relief. It can allow the viewer to relax, enjoy the story line, and give a more complete perspective of the situation. Laughter creates emotional bonds, loosens tensions and the investments in time will greatly enhance the relationships in your home.

#4—Have High Purpose or Theme

All the best stories have an underlining purpose or theme running through them. The details of the plot are held together by this cosmic cause or purpose that pulls the characters through the story. What’s your family about? If a friend or neighbor was asked to describe your family, what would they say? Would they describe your family as athletic, compassionate, scholarly, dysfunctional, laden with addictions, or wild? How would you like to be described as a family? To know how to write the rest of the story, take a look how your family operates now. What is the theme of your family story so far? To find the answer analyze your story to date. One of the basic premises of behavior theory is that one will eventually become only what they are becoming today. Decide what you want the theme or purpose of your family life to be. Depending upon the ages of your children, you might want to involve them in the discussion. Create a family motto, a goal. Creating a sense of family identity is important and meaningful.

The movie *The Blind Side* told the story of the Tuohy family who adopted a young man of a different race and helped him to succeed in life. The movie described the family's wealth, love for their alma mater, and the personalities of the different family members. But it was a great story because it had a compelling theme. Several times in the movie, Mrs. Tuohy would answer questions about why they were helping Michael Oher by simply responding, "You do what is the right thing to do." The Tuohy's are a family who, when presented with a situation that pushed them out of their comfort zone, chose to do what they considered the right thing to do because that is how they define their family narrative.

Take time to identify the theme or purpose for your family. Not only will it help your kids to feel like there is meaning and reason for being connected beyond just living and surviving, it will likely generate deeper ties to each other, creating more emotional warmth into your family storyline. What will be the theme of your family?

#5—Answer the Right Question

Children are continually asking two basic questions: "Am I loved?" and "Can I do this without suffering negative consequences?" The first question concerns love, the second concerns boundaries and structure. It seems as if most parents are good at answering only one of these questions. For example, if a daughter asks her mom, "Do you think I can become the president?", to which the mom answers, "Well, Honey, you would need to study hard and get good grades in school if you want to become the president," she, the mom is answering the wrong question. The daughter is asking, "Am I loved? Do you believe

in me?” The mom did answer the second question of “Can I do this?” by describing what it takes and what the requirements would consist of to pursue her dream of becoming the president.

I would like to invite you into the tension of boldly answering both of these questions. Just be clear about which question is really being asked.

#6—Parent Consistently

I love to watch small children as they learn the precarious movements of locomotion. Their walking often looks more like an unsuccessful fall than a successful walk, yet somehow they learn. We have small grandchildren now and it’s a blast watching them wiggle and struggle with first learning how to roll over, then scooch across the floor, to finally pulling themselves up to end tables and couch fronts. Then the magical day arrives when they venture out, first one hand off, then the second. They teeter a bit and take that first step. A toddler learns to walk due to the consistency of gravity. If she leans over too far in either direction, a fall is inevitable. That consistent feedback teaches the child to walk and run, and eventually they can navigate the world. As parents, we need to strive towards providing our children with a level of consistency that will not only help them feel safe but help them learn and grow.

In telling a great story, what makes a character believable is consistency in their behavior. People are wired in certain ways and act accordingly. So when someone does something distinctly out of character, people notice. If they deviate out of character too often, it becomes unbelievable. An important principle of positive parenting is consistency. Consistency builds trust and trust is an essential building block of a healthy family.

As a kid growing up in the Midwest, whenever my dad came home from work, he would check my room. If my bed wasn't made correctly, he would immediately call me in from play and marshal me upstairs to remake my bed properly. It irritated me, but it was just the rule of the house. The bed had to be made, and made correctly, each day. (This meant hospital corners, lines on the bedspread straight, and the bottom edge hanging about one inch from the floor.) I never realized how much effort it took for my parents to enforce this rule... not until I became a parent. As an adult, when I come home from work, the last thing I want to be is the bad guy, making my kids pause their video games or whatever they are doing to come in and make a bed.

When you come home tired or you have been working with your child at home throughout the day, there comes a point when you desire some peace and rest. You do not want to hold your child accountable for tasks either undone or incorrectly completed. No one wants to listen to the whining and complaining, and then wait for them to redo or properly complete the task the second time around. But it is important to consistently enforce your household rules. Parenting is work—it's a job, a career, and it demands dedicated and consistent effort.

The principle here is clearly not about making beds. I personally don't care whether your kids make their beds every day or not. (Truthfully, no one in our home has to make his or her bed.) But once you make a rule, any rule of the house, you must be prepared to consistently enforce and reinforce it. Kids are desperate for consistency in their lives, and as the parent, you have a major responsibility for creating consistency and stability in your home. You can't consistently enforce the rules of

your home without some sort of discipline measures to back up those rules. Discipline is really just training or teaching tactics and should not be viewed as punishment—but we'll talk more about discipline later on.

Consistency Makes the Difference

Children spend less time watching television and playing video games if their parents are consistent about the limits they set on screen time and insist that they get exercise, a new study found. . . . Based on such findings, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents limit total screen media time for children older than two to no more than two hours of quality programming a day. "However, it is not just the presence or absence of rules that is important but also the consistency of the rules and whether children and adolescents are aware of the rules."¹

Choose your rules carefully, and agree with your partner about what is most important. Whether the rule is about doing your homework before you watch TV or taking your shoes off before you enter the house, it's critical that the enforcement of your rule is applied consistently every time.

In modern life, rules seemingly change quickly, and sometimes just for the sake of convenience. This can actually be profoundly disturbing to kids. Kids long for consistency in their lives, and despite the hassle or inconvenience of it, having reasonable rules, knowing the rules and having them enforced consistently is essential to creating a safe and positive home environment.

¹ Susan A. Carlson, MPH and colleagues of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS

However, consistency is not just about enforcing rules. It's also about how we react to the unplanned moments of life. Perhaps Mom will get all flustered and bent out of shape over that spilled sippy cup of juice on one occasion, but then the next time it happens she acts as if it's no big deal. What is a kid to think of the Dad who one time shrugs his shoulders over a broken curfew, but the next time goes ballistic? Kids will become insecure when they don't know what to expect from us. This is why when we parent, we mustn't operate out of our emotions—our emotions are generally not consistent. We must operate out of principal and not convenience.

On the other hand, parents should not be emotionless robots either. Children can interpret a parent's controlling his or her emotions as not caring. We must show our emotions, particularly through love. Balance is the key, not stoicism. We can express positive emotions through regular hugs, smiles, and encouragement, as well as reasonable displeasure by way of a quick but fair rebuke. The key is, we must never lose control of our emotions, especially when disciplining a child for misconduct. In fact, when parents become truly angry, they should take their own "time out" to collect their wits before administering discipline, be it corporal punishment, grounding, or loss of privileges. Taking time to collect those wits can help parents avoid extremes that they may find themselves regretting later.

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I'm speaking from experience. Occasionally one of my children will do something to irritate me. For the sake of discussion,

let's say my son either ignores my request or manages to muster an almost inaudible grunt as a response to a question. Even though my normal response nine out of ten times is measured, if I lose control and blow up at him on that particular day when I'm already frustrated about something, I'm not being consistent. I am teaching him by example that I can't be trusted. He never knows for sure which Dad is going to react to him: Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. When this happens (and if human blood runs through your veins, trust me, you will blow it from time to time), be quick to recognize your inconsistency or overreaction. Pull back. If necessary, apologize.

Consistency also brings security into children's lives by way of boundaries. Parents can easily fall into the trap of setting inconsistent boundaries, which is an accident waiting to happen. There are two sides to any good boundary: expectations and consequences. Both sides need our best efforts. Inconsistent boundaries place children in a "no-win" situation. If on the one hand we verbalize consequences, but fail to follow through with action, children will become confused and insecure, often developing poor behavior habits. They'll figure out all too quickly that "no" doesn't really mean no—at least not until the fourth time you say it. But clear expectations and consequences enhance children's chances of success.

Children really do want to please their parents, believe it or not. They feel more secure in being loved when we set consistent boundaries and give them the chance to honor us through obedience. This is not mere rules-for-rules'-sake legalism. What I am suggesting is you need to consistently give your child clear enough information so he or she has the opportunity to honor you. In order to help ensure your child's success, you need to

help him or her obey. Along with consistent rules, let your love for your kids stay consistent as well. They want to know you will be there for them no matter what and that your love for them is not conditional on their behavior. This is a hard balancing act that nobody can master easily, but is important to the health and well-being of your family relationship.

Consistency counts!

CONSISTENT CONSEQUENCES

The other side of the consistent-boundaries equation is consequence. Parents may do very well with setting expectations, but they can still fail to set or deliver consequences. By this I mean both what we consider negative as well as positive consequences.

Consistency in consequences is one of the most important lessons your children can learn. If there are little or ineffectual consequences in the home, children

struggle. They learn nothing about discipline and don't understand the "real world" of consequences they will face as adults. It's always someone else's fault or responsibility. Poor parenting in this

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area has terrible consequences, not only for your child but for our communities, our culture, and our world. Consequences are designed to foster discipline by rewarding good behavior, giving additional instruction, and providing motivation to correct bad choices.

Be consistent in giving positive consequences as well. Few things are worse than loving someone who you feel you can never please. It seems like no matter what you do, it's never

enough. That's not a healthy way for children or adults to feel. If your child did what you asked, tell them thanks and let them know how much you appreciate their help. Even if they didn't give it their best effort, find something positive in what they did. If the forks ended up on the wrong side of the plate when you asked them to set the table, so what? Praise your child for helping to set the table. If they need additional instruction, give it in a loving way. Perhaps next time, you can explain that while there's really not a right or wrong way to set the table, our culture generally places the forks on the left side of the plate. Practice what I call the "Yes, and" principle. Instead of saying, "No, you didn't set the table correctly," try saying, "Yes, thank you for setting the table; and next time, let's put the fork over on the left side of the plate. That way you are doing it just like all the fanciest restaurants do it."

Expect your children to contribute to the family work and take on increasing levels of responsibility. That's also a form of consistency. It may seem a whole lot easier to just do things yourself, but you are doing what's best for your children when you involve them in family responsibilities. So look past the complaining. And consistently find reasons to give them verbal rewards that are appropriate, frequent, and sincere.

FAILURE TO FOLLOW THROUGH

What if you asked your child to set the table and they fail to do so? Do you set the table for them and ignore their disobedience? Do you rant and rave about how no one ever listens to you? Do you make sure they heard you and gently remind them that you need their help? Do you apologize for interrupting their video game or TV show? Just how far can they go before they push

your button? Is the child controlling the parent or is the parent parenting the child?

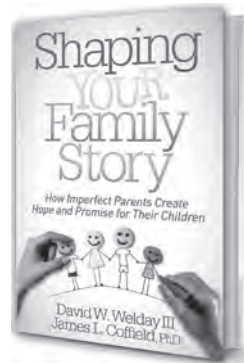
When it comes to power struggles and discipline, consistency counts. Your child needs to know you will consistently stay in control of yourself and the situation while gently yet firmly guiding him or her toward obedience and the desired behavior. Otherwise, children figure out how to play us against ourselves and get what they want, even when it's not what's best for them. If you give children a path of least resistance, they will take it almost every time. Consistency counts. Much like that regular oil change your car needs, it's "pay me now or pay me later." It is much easier to deliver consistent consequences when children are young than to begin being consistent during the teen years. If you weren't consistent with them from an early age, it becomes increasingly difficult (though not impossible) to set the boundaries.

We said earlier that what makes a great character in a story is consistency. Likewise, being consistent in the way we handle our children and their actions will help build *their* character and tell a better story.

Continue the Conversation

If you believe in the message of this book and would like to share in the ministry of getting this important message out, please consider taking part by:

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Jim Coffield (L) / David Welday (R)

DAVID WELDAY loves being a dad even more than playing guitar, snow skiing, golf and drooling over exotic cars. By day, he is a marketing strategist and coach, working with a wide range of non-profit and corporate clients. He still adores his wife Amy, and is the proud father of three sons and a growing group of grandchildren.

JIM COFFIELD is not only passionate about helping parents, he is uniquely trained as a psychologist to do so. For years, Jim has taught graduate level courses, led seminars and retreats on all aspects of parenting, marriage and family. He is a professor of counseling and clinical director of the MAC program at Reformed

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