

## **GRACE-FILLED PARENTING**

In beginning or renewing your parenting journey, how do you want that to go? Will it be trial and error? Just repeat how you were parented? Leave it up to somebody else? My preference is for you to fill every moment of your parenting, every interaction with your child, with grace.

Grace is a quality of calm understanding, a safe haven for your children in their storms of life. It involves gentle guidance and meaningful direction. It involves strategic firmness and clear understanding of choices, providing reward for good choices and consequence for bad choices.

The following are nine components of grace-filled parenting. They are the buoys marking the channel for safe passage through childhood for your children.

- 1. COMMUNICATION IS RELATIONSHIP.** It doesn't matter who is right or who is wrong. It doesn't matter if you have power and control over your child. Christ-filled parenting involves keeping the lines of communication open between you and your child at all times. Your communication with him defines the quality of relationship you will have with each other. As the parent, your communication with your child begins with listening, understanding your child's basic needs, and providing a meaningful context within which he can thrive in life. Active listening is the royal road to relationship.
- 2. CLEARLY DEFINE WHO'S IN CHARGE.** When the child is wreaking havoc in my office and the parents are making excuses, I know who's in charge. Parents are in charge when they convey authority, set firm boundaries, and work with their children on meeting their needs within those boundaries. Their children will be relieved because...
- 3. CHILDREN WILL ALWAYS TEST THE LIMITS.** Testing the limits is how children explore their environment. They test limits to be sure that they are there. Being in charge makes children anxious and afraid. They have neither the emotional nor intellectual maturity to handle being in charge. Children will act out continually until parents reassert their authority and set limits. Yet, children will never ask for limits nor beg you to be in charge because...
- 4. CHILDREN NEVER MEAN WHAT THEY SAY.** For children, actions always speak louder than words. Unexpected lower grades in school frequently say, "I'm stressed, disorganized, overwhelmed." Angry outbursts often say, "I'm afraid or depressed." Extreme measures like running away or cutting often say, "Listen to me. I'm hurting." Children's words need to be decoded. Their behavior conveys what they mean much more than do their words. When children begin to want a say in conducting their lives, they need to know that...

5. **A FAMILY IS NOT A DEMOCRACY.** While democracy may be the greatest gift to political structure, it does not bode well in a family. Democratic families yield factions, lobbyists, “seed money” and strategizing. Parents need to be benevolent despots. They share the power, confer with each other out of earshot of the children, and convey decisions with the support of one another. The children may have opinions, fight respectfully for causes, but never have a vote on matters that impact the entire family. As utopian as this system may be, forces are afoot that challenge its very fiber. Notably, as children enter latency age and move toward puberty...
6. **HORMONES WILL WRECK HAVOC.** While Laurence Kohlberg hails adolescence as the age of developing a capacity for abstract reasoning, Eric Erickson sees the teen’s challenge to form a personal identity. As adolescent hormones carom off all points inside the youth’s body, the ricochets are dodged by all family members. Irritating habits of untidiness, extreme mood swings, saying no just because they can, and finding every last parent nerve to pluck are only a few of the outcomes of hormonal imbalance with which families must contend. As if this is not enough, its twin force challenging family harmony is simply stated...
7. **TEENAGERS WILL REBEL.** In childhood, kids want to be just like their mom or dad. In adolescence, they want to be exactly opposite of mom and dad. Ironically, this is a good thing, for it is out of this exploration that youth begin to form their personal identity. Rebellion generates the psychic energy needed to shape and mold their personal identity. I heard once that eighty percent of teens rebel, to the exasperation of their parents. And yet, eighty percent of the rebels return to the values, conditions, and lifestyles of their parents by age twenty-five or when their first-born child turns two years old, whichever comes first. I believe that even the twenty percent that do not rebel in adolescence do rebel. They just have a delayed reaction developmentally. Their rebellion comes about later in the form of extramarital affairs, failed marriages, job hopping, drug and alcohol addictions, or other limit-testing adult behavior. Thankfully, when issues and concerns do arise, through God’s grace and our hard work...
8. **PROBLEMS CAN BE SOLVED.** Even under the best of circumstances, through no fault of our own, the stress of living may generate problems for our children. After noticing a consistent pattern of unhelpful behavior, if that pattern lasts less than six to eight weeks, it’s likely just one of life’s moods. If the pattern lasts longer, it may be a symptom. The “big three” problems families encounter are depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. While seeking professional counsel is always an option, behavioral tools are often sufficient to help children and youth get through stressful situations. The

stabilizing counterforce to developmental challenges and stressful situations is stated in the following concluding component of grace-filled parenting...

- 9. YOUNG ADULTS LAUNCH WHEN THEY DEMONSTRATE RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM.** All children explore as they grow. Our brains crave stimulation and experience. Parents need to nurture this process of exploration, but within healthy limits. Thus, parents give children and youth as much freedom as they demonstrate responsibility for. Parents define the child's responsibility at any age. Parents set the limits and boundaries for the child's exploration and freedom. When a child exhibits irresponsibility, parents pull back on the freedom. When the lesson is learned and trust restored, parents can again allow the child freedom to further explore and experience.