

How to Grow a
Connected
Family

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Family**

With Contagious Love and Faith!

“ . . . best parenting book I’ve ever read, and I’ve read a lot. It’s simply life-changing!”
— Paul Johnson, Senior Vice President of the Baptist General Conference

James & Lynne Jackson

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Testimonials

“This is the best parenting book I’ve ever read, and I’ve read a lot. It is simply life-changing!”

—**Paul Johnson**

Senior Vice President of the Baptist General Conference

“A must read! I wish I’d had this book when I was a young parent.”

—**Roger Palms**

author of fourteen books, and twenty-two years
as editor of Billy Graham’s DECISION magazine

“I am recommending Jim & Lynne’s teaching be embraced by our denomination as core teaching for parents.”

—**Greg Braly**

Director of Evangelical Free Church of America’s Family
and Children’s Ministries

“This material is brilliant! It equips parents with a concrete, easy to learn framework for flexible, creative parenting. What a spiritually smart system! Jim and Lynne’s practicality and authenticity simply ooze of God’s grace.

—**Charlene Ann Baumbich**

Author of twelve books including *Don’t Miss Your Kids*
and *365 Ways to Connect with Your Kids*

“I truly believe that I have never read anything by anyone that so thoughtfully melds solid scriptural doctrine with sound psychological principles. This is a resource of pure parenting and teaching gold.”

—**Warren Watson**

MSW, LICSW, Clinical Psychology Director

“This book provides a biblical framework for consistently leading children towards God’s loving purposes for their lives. It is also a great resource for nurturing transformation within the hearts of parents.”

—**Dr. Jean L. Leih**

Director of Reformation Ministries

*To our Hilarious Adventure,
our Journey in Intimacy,
and our Sunshine in Skin
(a.k.a. – our children Daniel, Bethany, & Noah)
May the fruit of God's love and purposes
grow full in you for generations to come.*

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And to our families: You taught us to live and to love. Through you God planted seeds that have become many of the concrete principles in this book and in our lives.

Preface

What can I expect from this book?

IN OUR OVER twenty years of working with parents, we've seen hundreds of families grow in a profound, passionate love for God and each other. The way it looks from family to family may differ greatly, but the basic principles that these families follow are quite consistent. We've captured what we've noticed by naming four simple but profound principles that are in place in every faithful, loving family we've seen. The principles are illustrated in a simple diagram and expanded throughout the book's four sections. While it is written primarily for parents of toddlers, pre-school, and elementary school-aged children, parents of pre-teens and teens have also found the principles quite valuable.

God has used these ideas in our lives and the lives of many others to produce peaceful, purposeful parents, and strong, connected families. These families love being together and with others, and others love being with them. Their joy is deep and their love and faith are truly contagious.

Though my wife Lynne and I contributed equally to the book's contents, it is written in a singular voice to make it more personal for you, the reader. In these pages you will get to know our family through numerous stories from our experience. Our children are free-spirited, transparent kids who are OK with Mom and Dad sharing the ups and downs of our family's adventures, in order to benefit others. We sometimes share examples from their lives as teens, mostly to show the fruit of persistently living according to the principles we promote in this book. We also share stories from many others who have learned and applied the powerful principles that are this book's subject. In these anecdotes the names are changed to ensure confidentiality.

Embedded in each chapter you will find questions that ask for your thoughtful response. Working through these questions will greatly maximize the benefit you receive from the book.

At the end of each chapter is an activity or discussion question to involve your children. Many people have stated that these questions are a culminating highlight of each chapter.

Throughout the book there are woven numerous Bible verses, since we believe that a great variety of Scripture sheds light on the challenge of parenting. Unless otherwise specified, the verses used are from the New International Version of the Bible.

May you be equipped through these principles to purposefully raise children who know, love, and serve God. And may yours be a strong, connected family, filled with contagious love and faith. Enjoy!

—Jim and Lynne

Introduction

“ARE YOU GOING to help me or not?” I snapped at Daniel, our son. He’d been asking for the past hour to go play at a friend’s house. I’d dodged his request while badgering from a distance to enlist his help in a household project.

“Dad, get off my back!” he snapped back. “You keep ignoring me!” I was a bit stunned by his sharp tone. He waited briefly for a response. When none came he folded his arms and announced, “I’m leaving.”

I was at a loss for words. Although he’s definitely strong-willed, this was not typical for him. “Kids shouldn’t talk to their parents that way!” I thought. I felt defensive and angry. I was tempted to quickly, firmly, and authoritatively “put him in his place.” After all, he was being rude, selfish, and even a bit intimidating. But I was unsure. In my silence he started walking away.

My lack of peace and confidence about how to respond to this was my first clue that perhaps I needed to take a step back and think before acting. I held off my first impulse to firmly demand instant obedience. I paused instead, took a deep breath, tried to clear my head and invite some Holy Spirit wisdom. Something inside told me his was not the only misbehavior here.

Daniel’s response held some truth I wanted to pay attention to. I had to admit that in some ways I had been as inconsiderate and selfish as he. In his own unrefined way, he was calling me on it. This realization calmed my frustration with him. I still didn’t know what to do or say, but at least now I could respond calmly and more rational. Wanting the “right” words to say, I confessed to him, “I’m not sure what to say right now.” I wanted to purposefully address his behavior, but in a way that might encourage him. I also felt compelled to admit my own bad attitudes. But I didn’t yet know exactly how to deal with all that, and I wanted to get back to

my project. So I decided to let it go for the time being. “Why don’t you go now, and we’ll figure this out later,” I said. Then, with another deep breath, I smiled sincerely and proclaimed, “I love you.” He winked back and said, “Thanks. I love you more.”

This is real life. It’s not always smooth and predictable. It can even get downright messy. But it is a life into which I can invite the transforming power of Jesus. It can then become a life of authenticity in which the whole family desires to keep growing in vibrant connection to God, to God’s purposes, and to one another. This kind of life is not a destination. It’s a journey. By journeying this way, I can build a solid, connected family that is able to withstand the inevitable difficulties and cultural influences that we will face.

Living this way may seem like a lofty goal. But we’ve found over and over again that when families live according to the principles in this book, their connection bears rich fruit in their relationships at home and in the world. Parents grow in a sense of peace, purpose and confidence for parenting. Children grow in respect for others and a sense of purpose for their lives. As God’s love is welcomed into the everyday mix of life, the love in these families grows more and more contagious. The life of Christ overflows naturally to the world around them. This journey of knowing and sharing God’s wonderful love in and through our family is what this book is all about.

Section I

Foundation



Chapter One

A Life-Changing Perspective

The Connected Family Framework

“WHAT SHOULD I do?” This is the question most asked by parents struggling to figure out how to handle their children. It’s an important question. “What should I do to get my daughter to quit making messes?” “What should I do about my son’s laziness?” “What should I do when my child sasses back?” “How can I get them to do their homework?” If I figure out how to quickly and efficiently get my kids to do what I ask, life generally becomes peaceful – for them and for me. Most humans want a peaceful life. So most parents look for quick and effective methods to get their kids to behave. This is not necessarily a bad goal. Meeting it can lead to some short-term peace and quiet.

◆◆◆◆◆
The parenting journey provides one of life’s greatest opportunities for spiritual growth.
◆◆◆◆◆

If while working on the project I mentioned in the introduction, I had wondered only about how to quickly correct Daniel’s behavior, I would have given all my energy to changing his defiant attitude and getting him to help me. Those could be good things to focus on. But there was more to this situation than just his misbehavior. There was mine too. To focus only on him would be to miss half the problem. So I decided to focus first on me. When I did, I realized that I had contributed at least as much to this problem as he had. I had to ask some deeper questions of myself. How and why had I been selfish? What was I thinking and feeling? How did those thoughts and feeling influence my actions? Where do I believe God is in the

everyday challenges of parenting? It is only through asking these deeper questions that *I* can change. These kinds of questions are about my own thoughts, motives, and behaviors. They address the way I relate to my children, and why. Through trying to answer them, I can begin to change the way I think and act as a parent. It is only when *I* change that I experience true, deep peace. This is perhaps the biggest gift I can give to my child, because when I am peaceful, I can make parenting decisions that achieve not only short-term results, but long-term transformation for both my children and me.

My wife Lynne and I have been parents for nineteen years, and worked as professionals with children, youth, and families for even longer. Through these experiences we are convinced that the parenting journey provides one of life's greatest opportunities for spiritual growth. To reduce parenting to a formula of dos and don'ts is to rob parents of this rich opportunity for personal discovery.

To suggest that there is some simple repeatable method for addressing my son's misbehavior begins with the assumption that I've got my act together. And, while I'm a work in some good progress (I trust and pray), I've not yet arrived at the perfection for which I so deeply long. I bring to every parenting encounter the baggage of my own struggles. So I must remain committed to my own journey of growth as a person and as a parent. As I am transformed, I can become more peaceful and purposeful as a parent.

At the root of my response to Daniel that day were four simple, transformational principles. They are principles we have seen in action in parents who work at raising children to want to follow Jesus. They are: **Connection**, **Proaction** (proactive action), **Correction**, and **Foundation**. This book reviews those principles and shares stories to illustrate them. Learning to thoughtfully apply these principles helps parents be more peaceful and purposeful through the ups, downs, and pressures of parenting.

Viewing parenting challenges through the lens of these principles changes how I view even the most mundane of interactions with my children. Instead of seeing these interactions as problems to fix and prevent, I am learning that these challenges can teach me more deeply about myself, my children, and God's love and purposes for our lives. It is this great premise that beckons us into an amazing journey.

The four principles led to the creation of a simple framework, a way of understanding how we give effort and energy to our own spiritual lives and to our children. It has been a tremendous source of encouragement and accountability. It has facilitated a deeper look at life as a parent and has stimulated growth in us as followers of Christ. As we have shared this framework with others, we have found that many report the same growth. This is *not* a parenting method to follow. Rather, it is a set of interrelated principles designed to fit any family's combination of personalities and developmental stages. Many parents have stated this framework is actually a whole new way to look at all their relationships, including with a spouse or co-workers. One dad exclaimed, "This isn't just about my kids, it's about life! It's really helped me at work."

The framework is built on this premise: Parents ultimately cannot change their children. They can only change the way they relate to them. Embracing this premise helps me be more peaceful, regardless of my children’s behavior. I can enjoy my kids – even when they “act up.” I can relax enough to see positive opportunities in difficult situations. I can address misbehavior peacefully and confidently. I recognize God’s grace, mercy, and purposes even through difficulty. Knowing these three principles is by no means a guarantee that children will be great kids. But in most cases, parents who learn and apply the framework gradually begin to see changes in their children too.

The principles in this framework are consistent with biblical teaching. The first, **Connection**, is the starting place for relating to children. When I connect with my children I make sure they know my *unconditional love* for them. I give them my undivided attention. I have fun with them and enjoy them intensely. I tell them and show them my love in ways they will clearly understand. I convince them how significant and important they are. I learn to relate in this way in the context of all circumstances – even in conflict. Ideally, most of my parenting energy should be given to connecting with my children.

The next principle is about *proactively teaching* kids to learn character and responsibility. I affirm the unique gifts and traits of each child and create opportunities for each to use his or her gifts in a meaningful way. I put chore charts on the refrigerator alongside artwork, athletic awards, and fun photos. I work alongside my children and encourage their efforts. I help them learn to resolve conflict, not just avoid it. I energetically affirm responsibility, creativity, and kindness, and look for positive traits even in negative behaviors. I convince my children that they have important contributions to make to the world as children of God. This principle of **Proaction** is about guiding them toward their unique path and purpose in life.

Once **Connection** and **Proaction** are firmly in place, I can much more effectively use **Correction** when needed to *address misbehavior*. Children who know they are loved, valued, and are created for a purpose, are more likely to learn from corrective discipline. Effective correction involves enforcing consequences, withholding privileges, and using various strategies for addressing misbehavior with the child’s best interest in mind.

MY RESPONSE...

How is my total parenting effort divided between each of my children?

	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4
Effort per child	_____ +	_____ +	_____ +	_____ = 100%

Then, of the effort allotted to each child, how much is given to each of the framework's principles:

Effort in each principle:

Connection	_____	_____	_____	_____
Proaction	+ _____	+ _____	+ _____	+ _____
Correction	+ _____	+ _____	+ _____	+ _____
	= 100%	= 100%	= 100%	= 100%

(This is not a grading system. It is a tool for increased awareness. If the results seem imbalanced, parents can be encouraged by the opportunity for helpful improvement.)

What do the results tell me? What surprises me?

The fourth principle for parenting is more about me than about my kids. It is the basis from which I make my parenting decisions, and from which grows the energy and effort I give to parenting. It is called **Foundation**. In my **Foundation** I am strengthened for the tumultuous parenting experience. I learn about God's unconditional love. I fall more deeply in love with Him. I actively seek affirming, encouraging relationships. I discover who I am and what I'm called to do. I learn to understand the unhealthy messages and beliefs that I bring into parenting. I learn to rely on God's grace and mercy in the midst of any circumstance. I learn to face the challenges of parenting filled and defined by the truth of God's Word. As my **Foundation** is strengthened, I can effectively integrate my spiritual life and growth into my parenting.

The Connected Family Framework shows how these principles build on each other.

At the base is my **Foundation**. From it, I build to **Connection**. This area gets my biggest and best energy and effort. From a place of **Connection**, I take **Proactive Action**. This is where I develop and affirm my children's gifts and character. It is where I purposefully teach children the skills and values that they need to function within God's purposes. Finally, at the top is **Correction**. While **Proaction** is where I teach children how to stay "on track," **Correction** is where I help them to get back on track. This level is structurally dependent on all the levels below it. It



is the smallest section because ideally, the amount of effort I give to it is smaller than the levels below.

As parents learn these principles, many report a deeper sense of purpose for parenting. They also report that the principles seem to grow with them in their parenting experience. Perhaps most significant is the common discovery that when more parental effort is put into **Connection** and **Proaction**, there is generally much less need for **Correction**. Carrie and Mark's stories are a great example of this.

Carrie was quite concerned about Mark, one of her neighbors. He was a new step-dad and his highly structured, perfectionist way of life was on a collision course with the three lively sons in his new marriage. It was definitely a source of stress in the new family – particularly with his bride! Carrie grabbed a copy of the Connected Family Framework and with great conviction stuck it in Mark's face. "Here! You need this. When I looked at this I realized my relationships with my kids were upside down – my interaction with them was 90% correction. These ideas changed our whole family!" Mark was eager to do whatever would help his new family grow stronger. He began working to change his primary focus from correcting his stepchildren to connecting with them and giving proactive guidance. Over time, peace, joy and even obedience blossomed in their family as the boys responded to his affection and encouragement.

Lynne and I have been blessed as learners to apply these principles on a daily basis in our own family. We readily admit that parenting our three challenging, high-energy children does not always go very smoothly. Even though it sometimes gets downright messy in our home, both literally and figuratively, we are committed to relating to each other in a way that reflects God's no-strings-attached love.

The impact of these principles on our family to date has been profound. Currently twenty-one, eighteen, and sixteen years old, our children have a deep sense of our love and God's love for them. They enjoy one another deeply, in spite of the skirmishes that often occur. They are affectionate with each other – even in public or when friends are around. They love others with generosity and exuberance. They each have identified gifts and interests that God is already using in them to bless others. They are tremendous positive influences in their peer groups and are quite resistant to negative peer pressure. As they head off to college, they seek majors that will maximize their gifts, so they can go into the world to bless others.

We are grateful to God for helping us understand parenting through this framework. It has helped us become better spouses, parents, and Christ followers.

MY RESPONSE...

When do I feel confident as a parent? What makes me confident?

KID CONNECTION!

Ask your children, "What are our family's strengths? What helps us to be strong?"