

The Straight Talk on Parenting

A No-Nonsense Approach on
How to Grow a Grown-Up

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PART ONE

The Method

It is not unusual for parents to describe my knack for getting to the heart of a family problem as a “gift” or a mysterious talent. Whether the difficulty is sleeping issues, nonstop sibling battles, or power struggles that escalate into tantrums, I offer a course of action that is simple, manageable, and relevant to the family I am working with. Parents are shocked when they realize that the immediate relief they feel also produces a long-term positive change in the overall family dynamic. The truth is, it’s not a gift, it’s a cultivated talent, an intentional training, and a method I have been using for more than twenty years. It’s a plan any parent can follow (including you!).

Parents find it hard to believe that as a “parent educator” I could find myself distracted or depleted, stressed out, tapped out, spent, confused, perplexed, or bewildered in my own parenting journey, but I did and I still do from time to time. I am no different from any other parent. The difference is, however, that I had a long-term plan, a strategy to follow that kept me from steering too far off my intended track.

The method I have been using with my own children and in my work with families for the past twenty-five years can be taught and mastered by parents who are looking to create a more peaceful, enjoyable, stable, and sustainable home life for themselves and their kids. All you need are the basic elements of the method, time to practice, a commitment to the process, and a willingness to go through the trial-and-error phase and make small adjustments so that the method feels authentic and natural to you and your family.

As each season ushers in a new lineup of classes and workshops, more moms and dads are filling the rooms or working with me privately. Why, with so many parenting books on the shelves and so many online resources offering child-rearing advice, are more parents making the time to work with a parenting expert? When I ask them, they tell me that they want more confidence and clarity when it comes to making their parenting decisions. They are tired of flip-flopping through strategies that don't deliver on the promise of bringing more peace and happiness into their lives with kids. And many parents are now talking to friends who have older children and are reporting that they would have done things very differently if they'd realized early on that the goal was not to produce a polite seven-year-old but to raise a high-functioning, emotionally healthy adult. Parents work with me because they are frustrated by not having a plan for dealing with the daily challenges that arise when raising kids in a fast-paced, ever-changing, pressure-cooker culture and because they are afraid that their adult children won't make it on their own.

That's why I needed a simple method that both addressed the daily challenges of living with children and ensured I would raise healthy adults. Having such a plan brought a sense of calm, confident resolve into my life as a parent. And it can do the same for you.

Fundamentals

It would be impossible for me to talk about the method I use to identify family challenges and possible solutions without first taking a moment to talk about the fundamental themes that run through all of my work.

I truly believe that almost every challenge we face with a child can be traced back to:

- A fracture in the relationship we have with our child, which manifests itself in the form of increased power struggles, a sense of disconnection between parents and their children, and an overall atmosphere of frustration and stress in our day-to-day lives

- A child whose efforts to become independent have been thwarted, and thus she is too dependent on a parent and is improperly trained to take on the tasks of life
- Or both

These central themes influence every decision I make when I am in the presence of children, whether they are my own or someone else's. The question I ask myself every time I am interacting with a child is this: "Is what I am about to do going to enhance a healthy relationship with this child and boost his ability to become independent and self-reliant?" Only when I can answer yes to this question, am I willing to speak or act. Those who practice the concepts that make up my work will testify that these are hallmarks of my philosophy.

In this book, I dive deeper into the importance of relationships and offer parents a chance to help their children develop a relationship blueprint that will guide them toward healthy relationships and away from unhealthy ones. Along with the relationship blueprint, I include a number of strategies parents can utilize to foster independence in their children no matter what their age. Beyond that, I use the method to:

- Identify the challenge quickly so parents can put their energy into finding solutions instead of getting weighed down by details of the drama
- Identify strategies to get through a "red zone" moment that will move the action forward without making things worse
- Identify adult character traits that will help ensure that parents raise children who are ready to take on the challenges and wonders of adult life
- Design routines, structures, boundaries, and limits in combination with a child's unique nature to achieve the perfect blend of freedom and order

Once parents understand the method and are given a chance to practice it, they are able to enjoy a more relaxed and confident attitude about their parenting and focus their efforts on the journey as well as the destination.

The Elements

There are four elements that make up the method I use to identify family challenges and brainstorm solutions to bring about long-term, sustainable change. Each of the four elements can be used separately, but when they are used in combination with each other, families transform in remarkable ways.

Relationship blueprint: In *Duct Tape Parenting*, I shared with readers the two decisions that I made as a young mother. First, that I was not willing to fight with my kids for eighteen years; this meant that, second, I would have to spend time cultivating a respectful, honest, and loving relationship with them in order to minimize potential power struggles and a long-term fracture in our relationship. As the result of those two decisions, I developed an entire parenting approach that focused more on maintaining, growing, and cultivating healthy relationships than on having kids who were neat, tidy, polite, and compliant. It made life with my own five kids fun, satisfying, and, believe it or not, mostly peaceful and harmonious.

I knew firsthand that investing in the relationship with my kids would significantly decrease the power struggles, help us all get out of the house on time (after all it takes real cooperation to move a family of seven out the door each morning without tears or tantrums), and reduce the daily stress of living in a fast-paced world. Beyond that I began to understand that everything my children learned about relationships would come from the one they were establishing with me, their mother. With that realization came a commitment to helping my kids design a relationship blueprint that would ensure they knew the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship and would be drawn to individuals who modeled healthy relationship qualities.

I accepted that my job was to model for my kids what a healthy relationship looked like, sounded like, and felt like, as a way to ensure that they had a better chance of entering into a healthy relationship with someone outside of their family. This is why the first element of my method focuses first on the relationship we have with our children—because whether we want to accept it or not, in every moment we are

either interfering with or enhancing the relationship we have with our kids. This is a theme in parenting that cannot go overlooked. A healthy relationship with our kids increases our chances that those other problem areas either aren't problems or they are so small that we can deal with them easily, swiftly, and effectively.

Fostering independence: The second element is the idea that we are responsible for helping our kids develop the independence and self-reliance they need to manage life on their own. It's part of our job to help them feel confident in their ability to handle anything life throws their way. On a small scale, this means allowing our children to master self, home, social, and life skills.

Beyond that, fostering our children's independence makes it more likely that they will have the skills necessary to navigate a world that is overly connected in some ways and disconnected in others. As children's exposure to a larger world beyond their neighborhoods and communities expands and their access to technology increases, parents' concern about their children's safety rises. The natural tendency is to overprotect, and that leads to an attitude of "keeping the kids young and innocent for as long as possible." Unfortunately, this puts our children at greater risk. The more empowered our children feel, the more capable they believe they are; the more experience they have in making inconsequential choices when they are young, the more confident we will be in their ability to make thoughtful, wise, and safe choices when they are exposed to the larger and sometimes more dangerous world.

Living with a toddler, raising an adult: The third element is reconciling the idea that we can implement a strategy to deal with a frustrated three-year-old and at the same moment foster character traits that will assist our twenty-three-year old in his life as an adult. Although these two ideas, living with a toddler and raising an adult, seem to be at odds with each other, the truth is, they can live together harmoniously. With a bit of practice and commitment you will experience the same awe-inspiring results that I, as a mother raising five children, and the tens of thousands of parents I've worked with have experienced.

When you spend as much time helping your kids develop character traits as you do learning a technique to deal with bedtimes, back talk,

and fighting, the daily challenges of life start to, dare I say it, disappear. When a child begins to develop self-control, a trait we want our adult children to embody, he can manage his impulse to pummel his younger brother for knocking down his blocks. You no longer need a strategy for the moment because the strategy is his newfound self-control. I, for one, found great satisfaction in knowing that fostering a character trait in my child would make a discipline strategy unnecessary.

Intention meets intuition: And finally, the fourth element combines following your gut feeling, or even the patterns you recognize in your kids, with incorporating routines, structures, boundaries, and limits that ensure the entire family can function in a fast-paced world. It's a balancing act, to be sure, but when intuition and structure are integrated successfully, you suddenly have a morning routine that has everyone up, dressed, fed, and smiling as you start your day. And, this isn't just momentary magic. This is the magic that comes from designing an intentional plan with the unique nature of your kids in mind.

Often, when I am teaching a class and introducing the idea of routines, parents find it difficult to accept because they assume I mean a generic, one-size-fits-all option. Before they even process the idea that each system is tailored to each family or family member, they say, "It won't work." I encourage you to keep an open mind, and if I use an example that won't work for your family, consider reworking the routine into something that looks appropriate for you and your kids. Your values drive everything you do. My values are different. That's why I've included so many stories from real families. The trick is to take the nugget of structure or stability and tweak it into a solution for your child.

This is where the magic (and fun!) is. You start to recognize ways to create the perfect blend of structure and personal preference. Take some time to consider the benefits and then give it a try. Use this rock-solid, time-tested method, and make it work for your family. When you do this, you've found your true north. As a result, you will feel that confidence and clarity you are looking for to guide your family today and into the future.

CHAPTER ONE

From Footprints to Blueprints

A child is an active and dynamic entity... Children develop their relationships to others through the use of their own creative powers and their ingenuity in trying to find their place. A child will try something: if it works and if it fits in with his goal, he retains it as a method of finding his personal identity. Sometimes the child may discover that the same technique fails to work with all people. Now he has two courses open to him. He can either retreat or refuse to cooperate with such a person, or he can use a new technique and develop an entirely different relationship.

—Rudolf Dreikurs, *Children: The Challenge*

Have you ever considered that the relationship you establish with your child, which begins at birth, becomes the blueprint for every other relationship she enters into during the course of her life?

If you are like many of the parents I have worked with over the past twenty-five years, you haven't. It's more likely that you thought about what kind of mother or father you would be and the responsibilities that go along with raising a child from infancy to adulthood. You might have imagined the relationship you would have with your child and vowed that for you there would be no yelling in the market, plenty of patience with him as he struggled to tie his shoes, and calm and respectful talk about homework and teachers. You might have recalled your

own childhood with fond memories and wanted to base your parenting on the way you were raised. On the other hand, you might have found your own childhood somewhat distasteful and made the decision to do things very differently when you got to be a parent. In either case, it's rare to find parents who truly understand the correlation between the relationship they establish with their very young child and the impact this relationship has on all of their child's future relationships with family members and others.

Our children are part of a social world that is built around and depends upon relationships. In an attempt to find their place in their first and primary social structure, they watch, assess, learn, and then experiment with different ways of interacting and engaging with their caregivers. Now consider that young children cannot differentiate between healthy or unhealthy relationships. If they aren't taught how to distinguish between the two and what qualities are present in healthy relationships, it's reasonable to think they might very well find themselves in dysfunctional ones through no fault of their own. Although children may not understand the meaning of the word *relationship*, they are still experiencing, discovering, testing, and learning, and it isn't long before they begin to mimic their parents' language, tones, attitudes, and behaviors, giving us a first glimpse into how our children anchor their experiences and apply them in developing their very own personal relationship blueprint.

Once created, a child's relationship blueprint is used to help navigate most, if not all, future relationships, including those with grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and family friends. She will look to her relationship blueprint as she learns to navigate her first playgroup or day care, or her preschool or kindergarten classroom, and it will become even more important as your child's world expands and she is required to navigate relationships with her classmates, teachers, and coaches through elementary, middle, and high school, and beyond.

What Is a Blueprint?

Imagine the blueprints to a house. What does an ideal home look like to you? Imagine the sketches on paper. This blueprint of your home contains the structure for your vision, along with all the specific design

elements that reflect your style, taste, and preferences. The blueprint acts as an anchor and allows you to build the house of your dreams. It has been carefully mapped and measured. Are we going to use birch or maple, granite or stone? Deviations can mean unexpected costs, delayed timelines, or safety issues, so it's crucial to follow the blueprint or you'll end up with something other than what you envisioned. Shortcuts and on-the-spot upgrades can be tempting when you're in the middle of a build, but knowing that the final outcome may be affected makes sticking to the plan worthwhile.

Now consider a relationship blueprint. What does an ideal relationship look like to you, and what goes into the relationship of your dreams? Like a structural blueprint, a relationship blueprint serves as a map to the end goal: a solid, sound relationship. Am I going to use encouraging words or criticism? Indulge in my tendency to yell or use a respectful speaking voice? Will I pull out the sarcasm or remain sincere in my attitude? When we interact with our kids, we are either following the plans to ensure we reach our goal or we are making on-the-spot changes because it's faster, we're tired, and we're wondering, "What difference will it make if I cut a few corners?"

Here's the kicker: the interactions—each and every one of them—between parent and child are the basis for the child's relationship blueprint, which she will use to evaluate all future relationships. What we choose to put on that "map" affects how our children move on and interact with others. I believe that if more parents understood this, they would take the time to make complete and intentional blueprints; often they don't, simply because life gets in the way and they build as they go. In the world of construction, this is a recipe for disaster. The same goes for parenting.

Reflecting on Your Relationship Blueprint

Think back to your own childhood. You likely have strong memories of your parents and the way they spoke to you and to each other, how they made you feel in their company, how they handled your mischievous behavior, and how they supported your interests. You may recall specific facial expressions they used to communicate their disappointment or approval, a certain tone of voice they used to get your attention, a

particular mood they displayed when they were tired or stressed, or the way they used their sense of humor to cut through tension.

Likewise, their parenting style—which might have included hovering or trusting, criticizing or encouraging, and physical gestures of affection or aggression as well as expressions of friendliness or frustration—influenced your ideas about relationships and perhaps, without knowing it, swayed your decision to enter into a deeper relationship with your parents or distance yourself from them when possible.

When you got older, you widened your observations to relatives and eventually to friends and lovers, and you took note of how these people interacted with you and with others. Perhaps they included you or ignored you, spoke down to you or asked curious questions about your life, displayed a good disposition or appeared distant, aloof, and uninterested. All of these experiences influenced your relationship blueprint. Whatever your reaction was—trust, resilience, resentment, or retreat, or any other—you internalized it and made your own map accordingly. Along the way, you undoubtedly encountered people who were accepting or critical, flexible or rigid, demanding or cooperative, honest or deceitful. All of these further influenced your ideas about relationships and cemented the kinds of people you wanted to surround yourself with and those you wanted to steer clear of.

Our children will be building relationships for the rest of their lives, and so it seems reasonable that we'd take the time to design a solid relationship for them to learn from. This means that, instead of spending our time investing in superficial and temporary parenting decisions (like nursery colors, the perfect preschool, or the outfits our kids wear), we can best spend our time building a solid blueprint for all future relationships. This means paying attention to our word choices, discipline decisions, tone of voice, comments and criticisms, and so on. It means that we take the time to be intentional, aware, and respectful in a way that stays true to a plan and its solid outcomes.

Recognizing Healthy Relationships

Think of all the positive relationships you've had or witnessed in your lifetime. Consider the trust, love, empathy, cooperation, respect, and

honest communication present in those relationships. Imagine the relationship you would like to have with your child. In a perfect world, what would this ideal relationship look like? How would you treat each other?

Select words that fit your concept of an ideal relationship from the list below and write them down in your notes. Add other words that you associate with a loving, engaging, satisfying relationship. Refer to your unique list to keep you on track in your relationship with your children.

Mutual respect	Support	Compassion
Trust	Kindness	Consistency
Flexibility	Boundaries	Integrity
Loyalty	Listening	Radical faith
Appreciation	Empathy	Cooperation
Acceptance	Love	Honesty
Understanding	Affection	

Recognizing Unhealthy Relationships

Now, do the same exercise for unhealthy relationships that you did for healthy ones: think of the worst relationships you've experienced or witnessed. Envision the cycles of hurt and betrayal, anger and disrespect, manipulation and judgment, and the unhealthy communication usually present in these relationships. Then, in a worst-case scenario, think about what a fractured relationship with your would child entail. Circle the biggies below and add more words to this list. Get every negative relationship indicator down on paper. Then you'll know where to steer clear as you work on building a healthy relationship with your child.

Authoritarian behavior	Belittling	Dishonesty
Nagging	Shaming/ humiliation	Grudge holding
Disappointment	Taking advantage	Worthlessness
Judgment	Trust breaking	Inconvenience
Passive-aggressiveness	Unethical actions	Insignificance
Guilt tripping	Rigid standards	Arrogance
	Double standards	Control

Whether we are modeling healthy relationship attributes or unhealthy ones, our kids are watching and learning. In all likelihood they will seek out partners who make them feel like we do, so it's in our children's best interest for us to give serious consideration to our daily interactions with them.

Healthy from the Inside Out

As a start, it's helpful to recognize that the activities we do and the time we spend with our children don't equate to a child's ability to create a healthy relationship blueprint. Loving our children, reading to them, spending time with them, or bonding with them over a movie or special vacation is not the same as building a healthy relationship with them. In fact, it could be argued that it is during the times of stress, unrest, disagreements, and power struggles that children are truly learning what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy relationship. Building a good relationship blueprint is not about having a happy, positive experience all the time. Testing the relationship and working through the tough stuff is what teaches a child how to handle the ups and downs that life will surely send her way! In these very real moments, children begin fitting together the pieces that will ultimately make up their personal blueprint for most if not all of their future relationships.

No parent I know wants to end his day with a feeling of regret, remorse, or resentment, but unfortunately many parents do. They question their parenting decisions, question their children's behavior, and question whether life with kids will be the satisfying experience they dreamed it would be before their children arrived. Taking the time to understand the power of the relationship blueprint will help bring a sense of confidence, courage, and, ultimately, calm as you make the changes necessary to positively influence your child's ability to enter healthy relationships later in life.

Three Mistaken Messages

Even if you are a parent who can articulate the idea of a relationship blueprint, it's still a challenge to identify all the ways in which

we unintentionally and inadvertently muck things up. Over the past twenty-five years, I have identified three specific ways that well-intentioned parents accidentally influence the relationship blueprint design in less than positive ways:

1. Labels that belittle: Labeling our kids with negative attributes, which influences their self-image
2. If you loved me, you would change for me: Using parenting strategies to “get” children to behave teaches children that it is acceptable to use whatever means are necessary to get people to change for them
3. Words that wound: Proclaiming specific values as important to us and then demonstrating them in ways that do not align with the true definition of the word

Message One – Labels That Belittle

What is the impact on our children when they are bombarded with comments like, “You noodle,” “You are disorganized,” “You never follow through,” “You have to be more responsible,” “You should be more respectful,” “You are so impatient,” and “Will you always need me to help you?” These words, these attitudes, and our propensity to constantly “work” on our kids as if they are projects that need improvement guarantees that the image they first construct of themselves will be based on the words, attitudes, and areas of correction we bombard them with on any given day.

The following stories illustrate how “feeding the weed” (focusing on pesky behavior) and labeling our children with negative character traits interferes with their ability to enter into and maintain a healthy relationship with anyone outside their family. Although these may seem like extreme examples, they are typical of the many parents I work with who are struggling to break old patterns in their behavior.

Overwhelmed and Sensitive – Judy H.

I was the kid who was easily overwhelmed. My parents referred to me as being overly sensitive, and they made sure that they paved the way for me by removing obstacles so that I wouldn't get overwhelmed. Now, as an adult, I still experience myself as easily overwhelmed, and if I am not careful, I expect the people closest to me to make my life as easy as they can. Truthfully, if I feel like I am not going to handle a situation well, I will use my "label" to manipulate people into letting me off the hook or making excuses for me. If that doesn't work I will avoid difficult situations and people altogether. Eventually, people tire of my neediness and inability to deal with the challenges of life. Quite often I am initially attracted to people who will make my life easier, but I soon tire of being treated like a child and break off the relationship. Either way, the relationship ends.

You Can't Make Me – Jarrod L.

I was the kid who refused to take orders from anyone. Any direct command from my parents was met with defiance and the guarantee that I would do the opposite. Because they didn't know what to do with me, they gave in, and to this day I still refuse to "do what I am told." In school I earned the title of "chronically disruptive student" in the classroom and bully on the playground. As you can imagine, this idea I have of myself is a real challenge in both my professional and personal life. My unwillingness to cooperate with people has resulted in numerous failed personal relationships and jobs where I am repeatedly passed over when it's time for promotions. At twenty-six I am finally learning how to cooperate, but it is slow going.

Criticism and Blame –Tyrus A.

I was the kid who always seemed to disappoint his parents. They were never satisfied with anything I did. They thought that criticizing me would help me do better, but it did the opposite. Now, as a grown man, I don't do things that I think leave me open to criticism or will let people down. I apologize for things that are not my responsibility, blame myself when things don't go well, and am hesitant to try new things. Relationships? I am a disaster at relationships. I wait for criticism and when I meet someone who notices the best in me, I don't believe them. It's not long before the game of "lift Gabe up" loses its appeal and the person moves on. I have been called "Eeyore" more times than I care to admit.

As I said, these may sound like extreme examples, but more and more adults are beginning to trace the challenges they face in their adult relationships back to their early childhood experiences, and more specifically to the relationship blueprint they created as kids.

By shifting our focus and recognizing that our kids are in the process of developing the kinds of behaviors, values, and character traits that will assist them during every phase of life, we can more thoughtfully and intentionally help them develop the kind of self-image that will make it possible for them to become people who respect themselves in the deepest and most honest way. I'll tell you how to turn this around later in the chapter.

Message Two – If You Loved Me, You'd Change

The second message that contributes to the development of our child's relationship blueprint is based on in-the-moment, not-sure-what-else-to-do strategies, which include the nagging, reminding, lecturing,

saving, bribing, coaxing, controlling, punishing, and shaming many parents use to try to manipulate their children into behaving.

As parents, when we focus on fixing or changing our children's pesky behaviors, we teach them that this is an acceptable relationship model. Our children interact with others thinking, "I don't like some of your behaviors, so I am going to try to change you to suit my liking." Our children grow up to believe that if the people they are in relationship with really cared about them, they would indeed be willing to change for them. Now, that is not to say that we don't want to assist our children in developing behaviors that will support them as individuals and in their relationships with others, but how we go about doing that either contributes to an unhealthy view of relationships or a healthy one.

Criticize and Demand – Tina H.

My relatives told me that I was a very precocious and confident young child who gave my parents a run for their money. My parents had very strong views on the way children should behave, how they should do in school, and how a house should run. They used constant criticism and comparisons to get me to toe the line. I think I made the decision when I was still very young that when I was an adult, if people didn't do what I wanted, I would do the same thing to them that my parents were doing to me. I would criticize them until they gave in to my demands.

One of my first adult experiences was renting an old house with several girls from school. After a few months, one of my new roommates started to get on my nerves because I didn't like the way she cleaned the kitchen. After all, there is really only one way to clean a kitchen. Instead of talking to her about it and working out a system that would support both our personalities and habits, I started to criticize the way she loaded the dishwasher and took jabs at her for leaving the pots and pans out to "air dry." When none of that worked to get her to clean the kitchen the way I wanted

her to, I extended the criticism to other areas of her life and I started to compare her to our other roommates. Two months later she told me she was moving out. This is a pattern in my life. I am doing to other people what my parents did to me. I know how irritating it is, because I experienced it firsthand, but that doesn't change the fact that I don't have skills or the experience to communicate honestly with people who have a different style than I do.

Nag, Nag, Nag – Linda R.

My parents weren't all that heavy-handed, but they nagged and reminded and directed us until we got old enough to get in the car and drive away. I didn't realize I had adopted those same tactics until a friend pointed out how I spoke to my girlfriend. She said I sounded like her mother, not her girlfriend. Although I was mortified, I also knew she was bang on. The problem was, I had no idea how to change my behavior because my role models were my parents. I was doing what they did. Vicki has a saying, "Children don't grow out of, they grow into whatever it is they are doing at the moment or what they are most often exposed to," and in this case she hit the bull's-eye.

These stories illustrate how children conclude that, when they are in a relationship with someone who behaves in a way they deem unacceptable, they have every right to nag, remind, threaten, exclude, ignore, hurt, or punish the person in order to get him to change. These are the skills the child has witnessed, experienced, and practiced during his young life. The children are doing what they know. Yes, it is that cut-and-dry. Just watch a group of five-year-olds playing and you will hear quite clearly the words they have been hearing at home and how they have interpreted them and applied them in designing their relationship blueprint.

- “That’s not how you are supposed to build a sand castle. You do it like this.”
- “If you want to play with us you will have to ask us nicely or we won’t play with you.”
- “Are you going to use red to color your flower? I think it would look better in yellow.”
- “Are you sure you want to put the house there? Wouldn’t it look better over there? I’ve never seen a window like that. They usually look like this.”
- “Stop acting like a baby. It didn’t hurt that much.”
- “Ya know, people aren’t going to be friends with you if you don’t...”

Message Three – Words That Wound

Just using words to define a healthy relationship isn’t enough to ensure that our kids actually understand the true definition of the words we are using. As parents, it is our responsibility to model and live in harmony with our values, so our kids can experience firsthand what those values look and feel like in relationship with other people.

Most adults will admit that how and what we communicate, whether verbal or nonverbal, is the foundation for all our relationships, healthy or unhealthy. Communication begins with the words we use, words like respect, cooperation, responsibility, compassion, love, acceptance, and integrity. These words are the foundation for all communication, but as I said earlier, the words alone have no meaning for our children. The words take on meaning through action. When a parent uses the word “respect” at the same time she is yelling at a child, has her hands on her hips, or is shooting nasty looks across the room, the child mistakenly interprets the word respect based on those actions.

If parents are not careful to consistently demonstrate the true meaning behind their words, it’s unlikely our kids will have much luck in accurately ascribing meaning to those words.

Respect: Maybe you recognize yourself in some of these all too common phrases:

- “You aren’t really going to wear that to school are you?”
- “Why do you put so much butter on your toast?”
- “Go tell your brother you are sorry and wipe that look off of your face!”
- “No, I am not giving you a choice, just go get in the car, now!”
- “Who do you think you are talking to, young man?”
- “I know I said you could have James over to play, but I changed my mind and that’s that.”
- “I wouldn’t be yelling at you if you hadn’t been so clumsy and dropped the eggs all over the floor.”
- “No, you can’t help me in the shop. I don’t have time to watch you every minute and you are likely to hurt yourself if I don’t.”
- “Can’t you just go find something to do for five minutes without badgering me for something?”
- “I would never have spoken to my mother in that tone of voice. If I had, I would have been on restriction for two weeks.”

Message: Respect is a one-way street (my street).

If you are thinking that these comments sound harsh, you are right. And yet this is just a sampling of the ways in which we communicate with our children that in no way reflects a respectful attitude or communication style. Take some time to listen to the way you speak to your children and ask yourself if you would pass the “true meaning of the word respect” test.

Cooperation: Do the following statements sound like people cooperating with each other?

- “Put your coat on, keep your hands to yourself, and don’t ask me for anything when we get to the checkout counter.”
- “Just sit still so I can get these boots on you.”
- “I know you wanted the other backpack, but it was cheap. This one will last all year.”
- “Why don’t you sit there and sing me a song while I bake the cake? Then there won’t be a big mess to clean up.”

- “It’s faster if I do this myself.”
- “No, you may not, and there is nothing to discuss.”

Message: Cooperation means do what I say, when I say it.

Responsibility: Maybe you have never made these statements to your children, but you’ve probably heard another parent on the playground speak to his child this way:

- “It’s your responsibility to remember your homework, so this is the last time I am going to bring it to you.”
- “I just don’t understand you. I will carry your backpack from the car, but you are old enough to be responsible for your things.”
- “I put your mittens in your backpack, how can you keep losing track of them?”
- “I’m going to call the coach and ask him why he is being so hard on you at practice.”
- “I think the teacher should understand what a tough time you are having right now and excuse some of your late assignments.”
- “You shouldn’t be expected to remember all of your belongings with your busy schedule.”

Message: You are not capable of being responsible for your things or yourself.

Three Intentional Messages

If we know what *not* to do, then it’s time to find out what we *can* do to ensure that our children have the best chance at creating a healthy relationship blueprint. If it’s true that the labels we use to describe our child’s less-than-exemplary behavior (noodling, whining, defiance, laziness, moodiness) and the techniques we use to try to change their behavior (threatening, nagging, punishing, doing for, saving, excusing) influence their relationship blueprint in unhealthy ways, then the solution is to shift our focus, model healthy relationship dynamics, and watch healthy relationship attributes take shape. Likewise, the way we demonstrate the

words we use to describe a healthy relationship influences our children's relationship blueprint in significant ways, so it's imperative that we pay close attention to our responses and reactions and challenge ourselves to stay true to the real definition of the words we use with our kids.

If our goal is to ensure that our children have the best chance at designing a healthy relationship blueprint, it's as simple as this:

1. Labels That Lift: Drop the negative labels and focus on strengths. It's just as easy to say, "You are tenacious" as it is to say, "You are stubborn"; or to say, "You have leadership skills" rather than "You are bossy," or, "You are thoughtful about your morning routine" rather than "You are such a dawdler." Highlighting and spotlighting strengths in our kids helps them develop a strong and healthy self-ideal, and this will influence every aspect of their relationship blueprint.

2. Tools of the Trade: Send the message that you love your children as they are and you will not use shady tactics (clandestine parenting strategies) to manipulate them into changing. Instead, you will model ways in which two very different people can be who they are and accept others for who they are. It is our responsibility to communicate to our children that change is initiated from inside, from a desire to change for yourself and not for someone else, and that requiring someone to change as a way of demonstrating love for you qualifies as manipulative and abusive behavior.

3. The Truth in Our Words: If you want your children to show respect, they must understand the true meaning of the word and they learn this by watching you. We are charged with adequately representing the true meaning of the words we use with our kids in order to ensure that our children can live them honestly and recognize them in relationship with others.

Message One – Labels That Lift

Let's dive deeper into the idea of labels and how our children build their self-ideal around the words their parents use to describe them. In the following stories, adults share their memories of childhood and how

their parents supported their growth and influenced their relationship blueprint.

Tenacity and Grit – Amy J.

I am one of three girls. My sisters and I know that our parents made a concerted effort to raise strong women. They repeatedly used words like tenacious, gracious, and levelheaded. When you are a kid, you don't necessarily pay attention to the words themselves, as much as you start to notice what behavior your parents ascribe to the word. It shaped the way we saw ourselves and influenced the kinds of people we were drawn toward. I don't remember my parents dwelling on our less-than-desirable behavior, and as a result I don't tend to dwell on personality traits I don't necessarily admire in others. My parents accepted us for who we were and we girls try to do the same. We all have a tenacious spirit, although our levels of tenacity vary. We can stick with things, even when it's hard, and that applies to academics, sports, or any other area of life. In our relationships, that means that we are willing to work through the rough areas. I think graciousness was the counterbalance to our tenacity. My mom was an approachable and inviting person, and I think a gracious person embodies those qualities. It's important to all of us that people are comfortable in our presence. My parents were great role models for levelheaded behavior and they acknowledged when the three of us were drawing on that strength in situations that might warrant a more dramatic response, like an unexpected pimple right before prom.

Growing into Respect – Paul K.

I don't remember my parents ever asking for or demanding that I show them respect. What I do recall is that they made it

a point to acknowledge when I was being respectful. I heard things like “Thanks for respecting the fact that I like the pantry organized a certain way” and “It takes a lot of self-respect to ...” and “It’s easy to say yes to your request to use my tools, because you are so respectful with them.” Now, I am going to guess that I probably wasn’t as respectful as they led me to believe, but because they pointed out all the times that I was showing even a modicum of respect, I grew into an adult who values respect. More importantly, they modeled respect for themselves by creating clear boundaries about what they would and would not do in terms of their parenting and modeled respect toward me by being consistent and including me in family decision making. As an adult, I can tell by the end of an evening who I will choose to spend more time with based almost solely on their level of respect for self and others.

Square Peg in a Square Hole – Caroline C.

I was born into a very gregarious and athletic family. Unfortunately, I am cautious by nature, and saying I am a bookworm is an understatement. Instead of my parents pushing me to conform or comparing me to my siblings or making me feel guilty because I didn’t value the same “seize the day” attitude they embodied, they encouraged and supported who I was innately. They identified traits in me that could easily have been overlooked or undervalued. Words like “thoughtful” and “calm” replaced words like “introverted” and “scared,” which carried negative connotations in our clan. I had a wicked sense of humor, even as a young kid, and a huge vocabulary, and they pointed out how these traits added value to our lives as a family. I never felt that they were putting me down; instead, they showed me how important these traits are in a well-rounded relationship. As an adult,

I am much more adventurous as a result of not being pushed by my parents and I have a keen sense of who I am, and I am a bulldog about staying true to my natural rhythms and preferences. I have been known to end a first date well before dessert if I get the sense that the other person doesn't accept me for who I am.

Straight Talk

This is what it sounds like when a parent focuses on strengths and spotlights healthy relationship qualities:

- "You showed a lot of **patience** with your brother tonight. I know you wanted to work on the Legos alone, but you were **kind** enough to let him join you."
- "I know how much **courage** it took to tell Nancy you didn't want to go out with her anymore. You showed her a lot of **respect** by talking to her in person and not calling her on the phone, which would have been easier."
- "Sometimes it's hard to **forgive** people when they break your trust, but it's clear this **friendship** is important to you and you were willing to stick with it and work things out."
- "Your **tenacity** paid off on the field today. All those extra hours of practice made the difference in the final score."
- "You are really **determined** to pour just the right amount of milk on that cereal."
- "You **rebound** so quickly when things don't go your way."

When you speak this way, it is reasonable to think that you will raise a child who feels adequate and sees the best not only in himself but also in others.

Message: You are valuable (even though we do things differently).

Message Two – Tools of the Trade

Beyond the labels we use with our children are the strategies we use to communicate the “how” of relationships. A healthy set of tools, demonstrated by thoughtful parents, will be the difference between children who believe they have a right to ask others to change for them and children who look for ways to work cooperatively with others.

Trained in Collaboration – Julia P.

My parents were both mediators, and, as a result, they brought their skills in collaboration to our lives. When I was just a toddler, my parents spent time talking with me about where I wanted to keep my clothes and where to put the bed and whether I wanted a light on when I went to sleep. It wasn't that I could even answer any of their questions or participate in these discussions, but I felt included and I felt valued from the time I was very small. Over time, I learned how to hold my own and fight for what I wanted, and I learned to hear my parents out and at times accept their wisdom. When I got older I was invited and encouraged to help create family policies and explore the ramifications of those policies. I learned how to argue respectfully, listen attentively, and consider different points of view. Now, it has been said that as an adult I can be too subdued and matter-of-fact in my daily interactions, but I assure you that my passion is there. The difference is, it is focused on things that matter to me. I do not look to overpower people or to manipulate them into doing what I want.

Think Before You Speak – Max D.

As an adult, I get along really well with people. I am not interested in trying to get people to change for me and I am not

easily manipulated into changing for others, and there is no mystery as to why. My mom and dad parented with a simple motto: “Say what you mean, mean what you say, and then do it.”

- **Say what you mean:** This meant they had to think before they spoke. They couldn’t just throw out random consequences or answer our questions without first thinking about them. I am clear with people about what I want and what I don’t want, what I will and will not do, what bothers me and what delights me. I take responsibility for being clear with others so there are very few misunderstandings in my relationships.
- **Mean what you say:** This meant that you should be ready to fight for what you believe. They told us that this demonstrated to their kids that not only was there thought behind what they said, but that they were willing to fight for their position, so if we wanted to challenge it, we better bring our A game. I stand behind what I say and if I make a mistake I am the first to admit it and to make amends. I don’t threaten people or use tears to get what I want. This keeps the drama out of my relationships and I tend to attract people who are very emotionally healthy.
- **Do it:** This is all about follow-through. And I have the courage and the confidence to follow through with what I say. It can be tough, but in the long run, it’s worth it.

Straight Talk

Take some time, perhaps just a few days, and observe yourself in relationship to your kids. Make a mental note of all the ways in which you model healthy relationship dynamics. Ask yourself the tough questions: How often do I accept my child for who she is today and how often do I use a strategy designed to make her

change to my liking? Remember, our children are watching and learning, and if they come to believe that healthy relationships include accepting yourself and others, and finding healthy ways to work together to solve problems and overcome challenges, you will be giving them a gift that will last a lifetime.

Message Three – The Truth in Our Words

And finally, let's wrap up this relationship blueprint with examples that illustrate the power of adequately representing the true meaning of the words we use with our kids and the lasting influence they have on our children, now and in their lives as adults.

Respect: If your son is raised connecting the word respect with the following statements:

- “I respect the choice you are making to wear your sandals; I will be wearing my rain boots.”
- “I can see how upset you are, and I love you and respect you too much to fight with you, so I am going to go outside until I cool down and then we can talk about what happened.”
- “I know you like having the same lunch every day, so I bought you everything you need to make the lunch that you like.”
- “I can see that the way you organize your clothes really works for you.”
- “I can feel myself getting angry, so I am going to go cool down and think about how I feel about the situation and then maybe we can find a solution that works for all of us.”
- “I respect your choice not to work on your science project and I hope you can respect my choice not to get involved in the decision your teacher makes.”
- “I know your uncle can be very judgmental and in spite of that, you showed respect for his point of view and for the rest of the family by not arguing with him over dinner.”

...it is reasonable that you will raise a son who has a healthy concept of what respect looks like, sounds like, and feels like in a relationship with others.

Message: Respect is a two-way street and we both participate.

Cooperation: If your daughter is raised hearing:

- “How about you carry the jacket to the car just in case the weather changes? If you decide not to wear it, that’s fine, but at least you will have it with you.”
- “Would you be willing to help me out at the store and be in charge of crossing things off my list and then paying the cashier while I bag the groceries?”
- “I am not going to have time tonight to help you with your project, but if you are willing to get up an hour early tomorrow morning I could help you then.”
- “I promised your brother I would make him a cake and I am wondering if you would like me to teach you so we can make our cakes together from now on.”
- “I am willing to watch thirty minutes of your show, even though you know it’s not my favorite, before I go to the other room to read.”
- “We have a lot of camping gear to set up, how do we want to divide up the jobs?”

...it is reasonable that you will raise a daughter who has a healthy concept of what cooperation looks like, sounds like, and feels like in a relationship with others.

Message: Cooperation is a willingness to work together.

Responsibility: If your children are raised hearing:

- “I trust you can find another pair of mittens to wear today at school.”
- “Only you can decide how much lunch you will eat.”

- “I don’t know where you put your soccer shoes. I put mine in the hall closet.”
- “I’m sorry, but I won’t bring the homework that you left on the counter.”
- “You told the coach that you would put in the extra time outside of practice; you’ll have to explain to him why that didn’t happen.”
- “Do you have a plan for replacing the broken window?”
- “I understand that you are frustrated. I am following through with our agreement.”

...it is reasonable that you will raise children who have a healthy concept of what responsibility looks like, sounds like, and feels like in a relationship with others.

Message: Responsibility is being able to respond effectively to the situation at hand.

Relationship Recovery

At first this may seem like a lot to digest, but the truth is, every parent I work with starts the conversation by saying, “I don’t know what happened to our relationship, but if we don’t turn things around, I’m afraid we won’t have a relationship at all in a few years,” so I know that at the epicenter of the problem is the struggle to engage in healthy relationships with those we love most. As you work your way through the next three chapters, you will begin to see how every step connects and integrates to create a streamlined method for growing a grown-up and enjoying the process along the way.