

Parental Insomnia

Overcoming the Fears That Keep Parents Awake at Night

Jonathan and Jennifer Howes

Preface

There are a few big disclaimers Jennifer wanted me to share from the very beginning. For the record, these are listed on the first page of this book. So, here you go:

Disclaimer #1: Jennifer and I are not perfect parents. Shocker, I know, but we had to get it out there. We've made our fair share of parenting mistakes over the years.

Disclaimer #2: Our three kids, Joelan (20), Julia (18) and Jesslyn (9), are not perfect kids. Shocker again. Don't get me wrong. They are great kids, and "we love them to the moon and back." But they are not perfect. Of course, their grandmothers think they're perfect. Jennifer's mom once said, "You could line up all the kids in the world, and my grandkids would be the best ones." It's hilarious, but I think it's completely acceptable for a grandparent to feel that way about her grandkids.

Disclaimer #3: Jennifer and I are not experts in the field of raising children. We are not professional parents. We do not earn a living raising kids. Jennifer does have a Masters Degree in School Counseling, so she has more formal education in the area of child development than me. But we are not parenting experts. We are pastors and fellow parents on this journey with you.

We do have 20 years of parenting experience, and we have gained a little insight and wisdom over the years. Our two older kids have graduated from high school and are currently attending college. But our youngest child is just in the fourth grade, so we don't even see a light at the end of the parenting tunnel yet. (Although from our conversations with "older" parents, the job as a parent never ends. Our roles simply change over time.)

Those are our big disclaimers. Even though we are not perfect parents or child raising experts, we believe this book will bring much value to your life. Our hope and prayer is that it challenges and encourages you to be the parent that God has called you to be.

Introduction

Being a parent is one of the greatest joys in life, and at the same time, it is one of the greatest responsibilities. I will never forget the day that we brought our first-born home from the hospital. He was three days old. We were so excited that God had blessed us with a son. He was the answer to our prayers.

So, as a young couple, married just two short years, we brought a son into our little starter home in Cahaba Heights, Alabama. This house had 1400 square feet, 3 bedrooms, 1 bath, and the single car garage had been converted into a room I was using for my home office. We had read books on parenting, attended 7 weeks of child birthing classes, and had decorated Joelan's nursery with a Winnie the Pooh theme. We had plenty of baby clothes, diapers, and the "latest and greatest" baby equipment, received from generous family and friends at various baby showers.

We had done all we could think of to prepare ourselves to parent this child. When we arrived home from the hospital on day 3 of our son's life, he was sound asleep in his car carrier. I remember gently setting him down in his room and quietly closing the door. Jennifer and I walked into the kitchen, looked at each other, and one of us said, "Now what are we supposed to do?"

All of a sudden, the joy of bringing home our first child turned into panic and fear. The weight of taking care of this child and raising him overwhelmed us. We were completely responsible for his wellbeing. *What if something happens to him? What if he dies in his sleep? Is he supposed to sleep on his stomach or on his back? Or is he supposed to sleep on his side? How can he sleep on his side if we wrap him up in his baby blanket like a burrito? Maybe we are wrapping the blanket too tight?*

It was only his third day of life and the fears of parenting this child had already taken root in our hearts.

It's normal and natural for parents to worry about their kids. This is how God created and made us. All parents have a built-in instinct to love, care, and protect their kids. Raising a child is a HUGE responsibility, and I would argue that it's one of the highest callings in life.

So, let's dive in and talk about Parental Insomnia. All parents have fears that keep us awake at night. If you say that you do not worry about your kids, then you are lying, or you are completely psycho. And most of the fears that we have about our kids are real. They are legit. Our parental fears range from small to catastrophic.

The biggest fear parents have is that something bad will happen to our children. We fear they will die. I cannot begin to comprehend how difficult it would be to lose a child. I have walked through this dark valley with church members, and I know they are experiencing pain and suffering beyond measure. Parents who have lost children have a very special place in my heart and think about and pray for them often.

But the fear something bad will happen to our child is not limited to the fear they will die. We fear they will get cancer. We fear they will suffer a serious injury riding their bike or playing sports. We fear they will get in a car wreck. We fear they will be kidnapped or taken. We fear they will be abused. We fear they will be bullied. We fear they will go down the wrong path. We fear they will get in the wrong crowd. We fear they will get pregnant out of wedlock. We fear they will marry the wrong person. We fear they will not be successful in life. We fear they will not be able to provide for themselves and will be living in our basement when then are 40 years old.

The list of parental fears could go on and on. Some of our fears are serious. And some of our fears are petty and silly. Bottom line, when it comes to parenting, the struggle is real. We all have parental fears. We love our kids so much, and we all want God's best for them.

So, what gives you Parental Insomnia? What keeps you awake at night? What do you worry about the most when it comes to your kids? What are your parental fears?

Over the next 5 chapters in this short book, we are going to share with you 5 essentials to overcoming your parental fears. They are 5 steps, or building blocks, to give you a "blueprint for parenting". So, I hope you are ready to face your fears and become the parent that God has called you to be.

Jennifer's Thoughts

I agree with Jonathan, becoming a parent was the greatest and surprisingly hardest thing that has ever happened to me. I just knew that I would be a great mom and did not know what I did not know.... so I was in for a rude awakening when I realized I did not feel equipped to do the whole mom thing. All along the way, I have needed a lot of help: from friends, from parents, and most of all, from the Lord. I am thankful for the people who poured into me and loved me through the hard times. I definitely want each of you to know that I am just an ordinary and imperfect wife and mom who has developed a passion for helping families get connected to God and each other. It is one reason why I love Graystone. We were able to start a church that is super committed to children, teens, and helping families thrive. Over the years, we have seen God do an incredible work in the lives of families. We have also seen families torn apart for

various reasons. It breaks my heart every time I hear of a family destroyed by addiction, infidelity, misdirected priorities, or financial problems. My prayer is that God will use us to help parents grow closer to Him and be effective for His kingdom so we can continue to Know God and Make God known in our family, in our community, and in the world.

Chapter 1

Give it To God

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” – Proverbs 3:5-6

The first step, or building block, in overcoming our parental fears is to give them to God. We need to trust God with our kids. I know that sounds simple. I know it seems like the classic Sunday School answer.

When my kids were little, every Sunday on the way home from church, I would ask them what they learned in children’s church, hoping this would lead to a spiritual discussion on the way home. As a parent, we want to maximize our kids’ learning opportunities. I remember one Sunday when my son was around kindergarten age, I asked him what they talked about in kids’ church.

“You know, Dad,” he replied.

I said, “Son, I really don’t know. I was in big church.”

“We talked about *that* guy.”

“What guy?” I said.

“You know, Dad. That guy. The one we *always* talk about.”

Again, I said, “What guy?”

“Jesus!” he said. “Every Sunday, we talk about Jesus!”

I fully realize it sounds too simple that the first essential in overcoming our parental fears is to trust God. It is simple and obvious. But it is not easy. In fact, it is easier said than done.

Now, before we can trust God, we have to have a clear understanding of who God is. God is good! In fact, God is great! He is incredible. We are not perfect parents, but God is a perfect God.

As a parent, we need to know that God loves and cares for our kids more than we do. I know that this is a difficult concept for us to wrap our finite, little

brains around. In our minds, there is no way that anyone in the world could possibly love our kids more than us. Well, God does. And this is the first step in overcoming our fears.

God loves our kids. He designed them. He created them. He knit them together in their mother's womb. He formed their bodies. He shaped their faces. He gave them their unique personalities. He equipped them with gifts and abilities. And he breathed life into them.

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' Acts 17:26-27

God created our kids and breathed life into them. And he placed them in our family. He chose you to be the parent of your children. God determined before the creation of time that it was best for you to raise your child. What an overwhelming thought.

So, let's talk a little more about the greatness of God. God is Sovereign. He is in control. Nothing happens outside of his will. Now, this opens up a huge opportunity for debate and discussion. Why would God allow something bad to happen to my child? Well, that is a deep question that only God can answer. I am not going to attempt to answer why God allows certain things to happen or not to happen. But what I do know is that God is good. He is great. He is perfect. He is loving, gracious and merciful. He loves and deeply cares for us. And he loves and cares for our kids.

We live in a sinful, broken, fallen world. Bad things happen. Evil is all around us. This is the result of The Fall (*Genesis 3*) and man's free will. Our world is not perfect. It is full of sinful, broken people. As a result, there are sicknesses and diseases. There are dangers. There are evil people who will do unthinkable things because of the depravity of their minds and souls. So, that's one reason we have these parental fears. Evil people and a broken world are what trouble us and keep us awake at night.

But here's the deal. God is great. He is in control. And we have to trust Him. We have to turn our lives over to him. We have to depend on Him. We have to believe that the best place to be is right in the center of God's will. It may not be the safest place. It may not keep our kids out of harm's way. But the center of God's will is the best place to be, and we have to trust Him. We need to cast all our anxieties on him because he cares for us (*1 Peter 5:7*).

Do Not Fear

In the Bible, God tells us over and over again, “DO NOT FEAR”. From the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation God instructs us not to be afraid. And the reason we should not fear is because He is with us. We should not be afraid, because God is with us. We have the promise of his presence. He says that he will never leave us or forsake us (*Matthew 28:20*). And if God is for us, who can be against us (*Romans 8:31*)? God is for us. God is for our children. God wants what’s best for them. He is with them. He cares for them. He has a unique purpose and plan for their lives (*Jeremiah 29:11*). He wants them to prosper and be successful.

So our faith is in the person and character of God. We are not to walk around in fear. But we are to walk by faith. We are to choose faith over fear. And our faith is not a blind faith. It is not a dumb faith. It is a faith based on the character of God and the truth of his word. So, we are trusting in the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. God not only created the universe, but he sustains it. He is involved in every detail of our lives. He is not an absentee God. He knows us by name. He knows the number of hairs we have on our heads. A sparrow does not fall to the ground apart from the will of God (*Luke 12:7*).

So, trust God. It is far better than the alternative. What is the alternative? The opposite of trusting God is trusting in ourselves. Wow, that is a scary thought. And that brings us right back to our fears. Certainly we have an important role to play, and we will discuss this in chapter 2. But if my child’s wellbeing was placed solely on me, I would collapse under the pressure. If my child’s life depended entirely on my wisdom, talents, and hard work, then the responsibility would be overwhelming. Yes, we have an important job to do but even in our role, we are completely dependent on God. We are to do our part and trust God to do His.

So, the first step in overcoming our fear is to trust God. We aren’t depending on ourselves. We aren’t depending on our family. We aren’t depending on our schools. We aren’t depending on our community. We aren’t depending on our government. We are depending on the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. We are depending on a great God.

Jennifer’s Thoughts

From the time I found out I was expecting our first child, I began to worry. I wouldn’t call myself a pessimist, but I do consider the “worst case scenario” a lot of the time. I worried his heart would stop beating, or he would be stillborn. Once he was born, I worried when I couldn’t get him to sleep, or eat, or poop! Then, I obsessed over every little cough or sneeze and agonized whether or not to take him to the doctor. When he started kindergarten I thought about the school bullies and whether or not he had any friends and how he would handle his

emotions without me there to protect him. You get the picture, right? The crazy thing is that I knew to take my fears to the Lord, yet it was hard for me to remember to do it. So I developed a routine that I still put in practice today. The second I realize that I am worrying, I turn the worry into a prayer.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Phil 4:6-7

There are some days when the situation before me is so overwhelming, I have to repeat these verses multiple times, all day long. But by giving my worries over to God, I’m trusting Him to take care of my concerns. I suspect that I will continue to worry about my kids, even as they become adults and parents themselves. My prayer is that I remember to turn to God, who is *“our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Psalm 46:1*

Chapter 2

More Is Caught Than Taught

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 11:1

The first step in overcoming our parental fears is to give it to God. The second building block is to be the parent that God has called us to be. In chapter 1, we talked about focusing on God. In chapter 2, I want us to focus on ourselves. I do not mean we need to focus on ourselves in a selfish way, like we need to pamper ourselves with manis, pedis, and full body massages. I mean we need to focus on our own personal growth and development.

I truly believe that being a parent is the greatest and highest calling in life. God has blessed us with these children, and it is our responsibility to raise them and set them on the path that God has for their lives. In order for us to be the parents God has called us to be, we have to reach a certain level of spiritual growth and maturity.

I played college tennis at Jacksonville State University under Head Coach Steve Bailey. Bailey, as we affectionately called him, was the perfect coach for me. He had an easygoing, laid-back personality, and we had a close relationship on and off the court. Some of my favorite memories of Coach Bailey were our van rides to and home from our away tennis matches. He would drive the van and more times than not, I would ride shotgun. He loved to tell stories and share with me his philosophies in life. (He was a great storyteller.) One of his

philosophical sayings was, "It's all in the upbringing." If an opponent was throwing a temper tantrum on the tennis court or if a fellow player got suspended for "conduct detrimental to the team", Bailey would always say, "It's all in the upbringing." Basically what Bailey was teaching is that a person is who he is based on how his parents raised him. Bailey's philosophy was to recruit good kids from good families. And it worked out pretty well for him because he has more wins than any other tennis coach in JSU history.

The "it's all in the upbringing" philosophy puts a major burden and responsibility on the parent. How a child turns out in life is directly related to how he or she was raised. Now, we know this is not 100% accurate, because there are always outliers and rebels. But Bailey's philosophy (I know he's not the originator of the saying) does make a ton of sense. A person's values and lifestyle can be directly tied back to his or her parents.

And here's the deal: more is caught than taught. Even though we "preach to" and teach our kids every day, they are more than likely to do what we do and not what we say. They are going to follow our example. So, we need to strive to model for them in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity (1 Timothy 4:12).

So, if our kids are following our example, we want to make sure that we are living a life worth emulating. "If the apple doesn't fall far from the tree", we need to make sure we are producing the right kind of apples. I know this is a huge responsibility. But before we can begin focusing on our kids' growth and development, we have to focus on our own.

Let me suggest narrowing our attention to three areas of personal growth and development.

First, we need to be strong in our faith. We need to have a firm foundation and know what we believe. As James says, "*we must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by wind (James 1:6)*". A strong faith begins with a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Living out the Christian life is not following a list of do's and don'ts, but it is following Jesus. It is living in fellowship with Jesus and growing closer to him each day. We grow closer to God just like we grow in any relationship, by spending time with God. God speaks to us through his word, the Bible, and we speak to God, through prayer. Prayer is simply talking with God just like we would talk with a close friend. The way that I have grown most in my faith over the years is through setting time aside each day to be alone with God. And there is nothing more powerful in a child's life than seeing his father or mother reading the Bible and on his or her knees in prayer.

The second area we need to develop is a secure identity in Christ. We need to have a positive view of ourselves and see ourselves as God sees us. I

hear so many parents say that they are not equipped to raise their kids. And quite honestly, none of us are. But our confidence comes from the Lord. He is the one who has blessed us with these kids and He will equip us to be the parent He has called us to be. Our security or insecurity directly relates to our effectiveness as parents. If we have a low self-esteem, we will be insecure parents. And if we are insecure parents, we will raise insecure kids. If we think too highly of ourselves, we will tend to trust in our own abilities instead of God. So there is a fine line between Biblical confidence and personal pride. Our confidence needs to come from our identity in Christ. When our security is in Christ, resulting in a healthy view of ourselves, it will help us lead our kids in every area of their lives.

Lastly, we need to have solid Christ-like character. Our character, good or bad, will be passed down to our children. More is caught than taught. They are watching our every move. So, we need to be men and women of integrity. We need to strive to exemplify the Fruits of the Spirit...*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)*.

It takes a long time to develop strong, Christ-like character. And this is not an area of our lives we can fake or put on a show. Our kids see us everyday, and we cannot fool them. They know if we are walking the talk or simply giving lip service. They know who we are behind closed doors and in the privacy of our own homes. So, we need to strive to live our lives above reproach (*1 Timothy 3:2*).

I think we all like the idea that our strengths will be passed on to our kids. But not only will they receive some of our strengths, they will pick up some of our weaknesses as well. I know these are overwhelming thoughts. So as your pastor, this is where I remind you that none of us is perfect (*Romans 3:23*). And God's grace is sufficient for us (*2 Corinthians 12:9*). I do not write this chapter to discourage you, but to challenge you. I want to encourage and motivate you to grow as close to God as you can, develop a strong self-worth based on your identity in Christ, and exemplify the character qualities of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's all strive to be the parents God has called us to be.

Jennifer's Thoughts

Over the years, I have found that the best way for me to continue to grow in my relationship with God is by being in a women's bible study. Honestly, I need the accountability. I get so busy with household chores, the kids' activities, my job, and hobbies that my quiet time can get overlooked. I also love hearing what other women are going through and what God is teaching them.

Recently, a common theme during our bible study discussion is how social media is distorting our view of ourselves and hindering our self-esteem. We look on Instagram and see our friends as put-together women with perfectly dressed children and dreamy husbands and all of the sudden our life looks disastrous. I'm

lucky if my daughter's hair gets brushed, much less if she has on a matching outfit and bow. I'll never measure up to that perfect image portrayed in my friends' posts. The struggle is real and it's so helpful to connect with other women who can point me back to God and remind me I am created in His image. I am a better mom, wife, and child of God when I am in close fellowship with other believers. Some of my best friendships have been made in bible study and I am so thankful to have had so many wonderful women guide me to a closer relationship with God.

Chapter 3

A Hope and A Future

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." **Jeremiah 29:11***

It's hard to believe, but Jennifer and I are in a season of life where our two older kids have graduated high school and are attending college. We are not empty nesters though, because our youngest child, Jessie, who we jokingly refer to as our grandchild, is only nine years old. Jessie was a surprise to us, but she was not a surprise to God. In fact, every child is a miracle and a gift from Heaven (*Psalm 127:3*).

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."
Psalm 139:13-16

The Psalmist points out that God is the one who knits our kids together in their mother's womb. God is the one who shaped and made each of our kids. Psalm 139 is one of my daughter Julia's favorite Bible verses. In fact, she wants to get "fearfully and wonderfully" tattooed on her wrist. (*This is a side note, but it does apply to parenting. Jennifer and I have decided not to allow our kids to get a tattoo until they are fully independent from us financially. At this point we feel like they will be old enough and mature enough to decide if, what and where to put a permanent tattoo their bodies.*)

The Psalmist declares that God is the one who made our kids. He is the one who formed their bodies and shaped their faces. He is the one who designed their personalities and equipped them with unique gifts and abilities. And God has ordained each day of their lives.

God has a special purpose and plan for each of our kids' lives (*Jeremiah 29:11*). I believe it's our job as parents to help our kids find God's calling and mission for their lives. As my two older kids are transitioning into adulthood, *Jeremiah 29:11* has been the Bible promise that I have been claiming for their lives. Of course, I want what is best for my kids. But God has an even better plan for them than I do. I want to help them find God's will for their lives, because there is no better place to be than in the center of God's will.

The third step in overcoming our parental fears is to recognize that God has a unique calling for each of our kids. God created them for a special mission and purpose in life. And one of the best things we can do as a parent is to think, pray, and plan with the big picture in mind. One of the exercises that has helped me make parenting decisions over the years is asking the question, "What do I want my son or daughter to be like when he or she is 40 years old?" I picture in my mind my child's life when he or she is 40 years old, and I write down important characteristics.

I want her to have a strong faith of her own and a close, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. I want her to have a positive view of herself based on her identity in Christ and the truth of God's word. I want her to have solid Christ-like character and exemplify the Fruits of the Spirit (*Galatians 5:22-23*). Hmmm, do these qualities sound familiar? Hopefully, mom and dad have modeled these. Remember, more is caught than taught.

When my daughter is 40 years old, I would love for her to be married to a godly husband. (By the way, I have been praying for this man for 18 years and counting.) I would love for her to have kids and enjoy being a mom. (I am also looking forward to being a granddad but hopefully not in the immediate future.) I would love for her family to be actively involved in a local church where they are regularly worshipping and serving God. I would really love for that church to be Graystone Church, although Julia says she wants to live in the mountains, possibly North Carolina.

I think you get the point on my little exercise. What do you want your kids to be like when they are 40 years old? This will put life into perspective and help you make decisions along with way. If we have a clear, God-given vision for their lives that has been bathed in prayer, it will help us keep our priorities in order as a family.

Over the years, I have seen so many families lose focus and get caught up in activities that have very little eternal significance. One of those activities is youth sports. Now, I love sports more than anyone. I've played sports my entire life. I am pushing 50 years old, and I still play on the best church basketball team on the planet. We are the reigning 2017 Champions of the Loganville First Baptist Church League. I know that doesn't sound very impressive, which is kind of my

point. It's church basketball. In the grand scheme of life, it's not a very big deal.

The same can be said for kids' sports. It's rec league tee ball. It's not that big of a deal. I've seen some families get so consumed by youth softball or baseball that you would think their kids are getting paid millions of dollars and competing in the MLB World Series. Now, I love kids' sports. It's great for the kids to learn to compete and play on a team. It develops a child's character when he disciplines himself to practice and work hard. Kids' sports provide great exercise, which in turn helps them be healthy both physically and emotionally. Winning and losing teaches our kids about life. Kids' sports are a great opportunity for families to spend time with each other and do life with other families.

But, I've seen families take kids' sports to an unhealthy extreme. I've seen dad living vicariously through his kids hoping to achieve his own unfulfilled dreams. I've seen families invest thousands and thousands of dollars with the expectation their son or daughter will receive a college scholarship, or even play in the pros. Let's be honest, only one in a million kids will grow up to become professional athlete. Most kids have a better chance of winning the lottery than becoming a pro athlete. And I wouldn't recommend wasting your money on the lottery either. It would be best to start saving money for your child's college education than paying for hitting and pitching lessons. There is no amount of coaching and training that will make a child a professional athlete unless he has been blessed with natural God-given abilities. And these are often pretty evident to everyone at the ballpark, except for his mom or dad.

I've seen families get so consumed with kids' sports that it becomes the most important area of their lives. I've seen families make their kid's sport more important than God and their church. Now, these "good Christian families" would never say that sports are more important than God, but they are communicating it with their actions. It's really sad when a travel ball tournament becomes a higher priority than a family worshipping together at church on Sundays. Or a football practice takes precedent over a middle school kid being actively involved in the church student ministry. After all, to quote the great "theologian" Allen Iverson, "We're talking about practice?"

Sorry to jump on my soapbox about kids' sports (This is my book, and I write whatever I want!) I'm not against kids' sports. But sports simply do not need to be a higher priority in our family life than God and his bride, the church. And I think this goes back to my original question. What do you want your kid to be like when he or she is 40 years old? There are very few 40 year olds who are making a living playing professional sports. And there are millions of us old guys enjoying church softball and basketball.

So, let's recap and close this chapter. God has created and made your child. He has blessed her with unique gifts and abilities. God wants her to use those talents and skills to fulfill His purpose and plan for her life. Ultimately, her life's

calling and work will bring God much honor and glory. The third building block in parenting is to have a God-given vision for your child's life. What does God want your son or daughter to be like when he or she is 40 years old?

Jennifer's Thoughts

You know how you are before having kids...you see a toddler behaving badly in a restaurant and say things like "I would never let my kid do that!" Then a couple of years later you are sitting in that same restaurant and it's your toddler that is causing the scene? We have probably all been there before.

Before Jonathan and I had children, I had all of these plans and ideas of what our family would be like. We would be the perfect family with our priorities in order. I would be able to be a stay at home mom and instill all of the right values in our children, who would behave perfectly because we would discipline them appropriately. You get the picture, right? But when reality set in and I realized the whole parenting thing was much harder than I thought, I second-guessed myself.

Jonathan and I had to grow in the area of parenting and learn more about parenting our children the way God wanted us to. One of the most challenging aspects of this was trying to understand how God wired each of our children. They are all three unique and beautiful children with different temperaments, personalities, gifts, and abilities. For example, I am an extrovert and parenting introverted children was confusing for me. I couldn't understand why my three-year-old wouldn't just run to the playground and make new friends. It frustrated me! I had to read books, seek advice from other parents, and ultimately seek the Lord for how to best understand my children. I remember a pivotal moment that changed the course for me. I was reading the Kay Arthur book, *The God You Can Know*, and she challenged the readers to accept themselves the way God created them. I clearly knew God was telling me to accept my children the way God had made them.

My encouragement to you would be to know and understand that God has a plan for your kids and you have the privilege to help them realize it. Take a step back from the busyness of life and make decisions that will continue to lead your children down a path where they can know God and discover His plan for them. The church exists to help you in this endeavor!

Chapter 4

Training Days

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not turn from it." **Proverbs 22:6**

I will never forget the first time that Jennifer left me home alone with our first-born child, Joelan. He was only two weeks old. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Jennifer wanted to attend a friend's wedding. I remember her saying that she would only be gone an hour, and Joelan would probably sleep the entire time. I said, "No big deal. I've got this!" Two thoughts were going through my head. First, I was getting out of having to go to this wedding. Newborn babies are a great excuse. Secondly, all my two-week old son knew how to do was eat, sleep and poop. "How hard could it be?"

When Jennifer left the house, I was kicked back in my recliner with Joelan asleep on my chest. It was a precious moment. It would be the first of many father son moments we would spend together. As I was daydreaming about us playing catch in the backyard, fishing on Pa's lake, and taking in a LSU Football Game at Death Valley in Baton Rouge, the foulest smell made its way up to my nostrils. Joelan had dropped a bomb of epic proportion. At first I was impressed, but then I realized that his little masterpiece had escaped his diaper and made its through his clothes on onto my shirt. We were both going to need a wardrobe change.

After putting on a clean shirt, I took Joelan back to his nursery, laid him on the changing table, and proceeded to change my first dirty diaper. Part one of this process went great as I successfully took off his brown-stained onesie and got him wiped clean as a whistle. Then, before I could strap on his new diaper, he had another explosion. The runny poop erupted out of his bottom like an active volcano, and it went everywhere. "It" literally hit the fan.

By the time Jennifer returned home from her friend's wedding, Joelan and I had been through several outfits. We were now both naked and taking a bath together. For the record, this was probably the only bath we ever took together. I remember thinking, "We've got to get this little guy potty trained."

The fourth essential or building block in overcoming our fears is teaching and training our kids. Parenting is one training exercise after another. This is the hard work of parenting. We are to train them to talk, to walk, to read, and to write. We are to train them to tie their shoes, brush their teeth, and eat with utensils. It is our job as parents to teach and train them in how to live in every area of their lives. If you think about it, this can be quite overwhelming.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should GO!" The goal is that we train them to a point where they can live life on their own, independent from their parents. Our goal as parents is to raise them up and send them out. This typically should take around 21-22 years, but in some special cases it could take up to 30 years. I know some adult children who have suffered from the

“failure to launch” syndrome and are still living in their parents’ basement. We will discuss this in more detail in chapter 5.

So, raising kids is a long-term commitment, and by the way, it will cost you a boatload of money. We currently have two kids in college, and we are paying for our third round of braces. Hopefully, I am not overwhelming you or adding to your fears. We simply have to parent one day at a time, and it begins with baby steps.

Let’s discuss four areas in which we want to teach and train our kids. Luke 2:52 says, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” We really do not have much information about Jesus’ childhood, but we do know that he grew in these four areas of his life. He grew mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. It is our job as parents to help our kids develop their minds, bodies, hearts, and souls.

When it comes to developing a child’s mind, I don’t think I have to convince you of the importance of education. There is much debate in “Christian circles” over the best type of education for our kids. Should our kids go to private school, public school, home school, or some type of hybrid? Over the years, I’ve heard strong arguments from all camps. Our philosophy for our children’s education has been pretty simple. Let’s take it one year at a time, and one child at a time. Each year we would decide the best school for each child. The school you choose for your child depends on the needs of your child, the schools in your community, and what you value most as a family. Some families will value a strong academic curriculum over a Christian environment. And some families will settle for an average high school education in favor of a competitive sports culture. Choosing a school for your child truly depends on your personal family values.

We are also responsible for our children’s physical development. This is not rocket science. We are to teach them the important of a healthy diet, good sleeping habits, and the proper amount of exercise. As I mentioned in chapter 3, I really am a big fan of kid sports as long as it is not taken to the extreme. Sports makes exercise fun, and it gives kids an opportunity to play with other kids which leads to our third area of training, social development.

Of the four major areas of a child’s development, helping our kids grow relationally is probably the one we think about the least. But a child’s social development is of vital importance, and it will not happen by default. It will only happen by design. We have to train them from a very early age in how to relate and get along with others. When our kids were little, Jennifer would schedule “play dates” at a park, McDonalds, or at our house. These were very beneficial for two reasons. First, Jennifer could get some relief from the kids and some much needed adult conversation. And secondly, it was great for the kids to learn to play and interact with other kids. I’m sure every parent has had to teach and

instruct their kids to share their toys with other kids. “Jessie, you have been playing with the baby doll for a long time. Now, it’s Kate’s turn to play with her.” Teaching our kids to share and put others’ needs above their own is not easy work, but it is one of life’s most important lessons. If our kids have good people skills and the ability to work well with others, it will help them be successful in all areas of their lives.

And I would argue (*I am a pastor*) that the most important area of a child’s development is his or her spiritual life. “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from him (Proverbs 22:6).” It is our responsibility as parents to teach our kids to follow Jesus and to lead them down the narrow path to eternal life (Matthew 7:14). There are many things we can do to help our kids grow spiritually, and I believe we need to be proactive and intentional.

Over the years, I have tried anything and everything to help my kids grow spiritually. I prayed over them as babies. I read Bible stories to them at night when they were little. On the way to sports practices, we would memorize Bible verses together. We would read family devotions before dinner and try to have spiritual conversations. Honestly, we were never consistent with this one, but we tried.

We have tried just about anything to teach our kids God’s word and help them grow in their relationship with God. But probably the best thing we have done for their spiritual growth and development is to make church a high priority. From the day each of our kids was born, they have been very active in church. We haven’t been legalistic about their church involvement. It has simply been a natural part of their lives. One of our ulterior motives for starting Graystone Church was that we wanted to have a great church environment for our kids to grow up in. We wanted our kids to love God and love His church. We wanted church to be fun and place our kids associated with great memories. Our kids have grown up in the church, and their best friends are kids from church.

Our two older kids who are now in college went to church every Sunday morning, every Sunday night, and every Wednesday night. They were in a high school small group on Sunday nights with their adult leader, and they each led a middle school small group on Wednesday nights. They attended every Fall Retreat, every Discipleship Now Weekend and every Summer Church Camp. And they loved every minute of it. We didn’t force them to go. (Although, they knew they didn’t have a choice not to go.) They wanted to go.

Being a Christian and following Jesus is not a part of their lives. It is their lives. It is who they are. If you want your kids to grow spiritually, put them in an environment for spiritual growth. I cannot overstate the importance of having your kids “in church”. If you want a plant to grow healthy and strong, you will place it on a greenhouse. The church’s children’s ministry and student ministry are

spiritual greenhouses for a child's growth. I want to encourage you to make church your child's third place. Their first place is home. Their second place is school. Let church, Graystone Church, be your child's third place and a greenhouse for his or her spiritual growth.

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" Psalm 122:1

Jennifer's Thoughts

When I first found out that we were expecting Joelan, I picked up several books about pregnancy and birth. Once he was born, I read several books on how to take care of a newborn. Then as he grew, I picked up a book on the next phase of his life. I always wanted to be one step ahead so I could be prepared for the next stage in parenting. My friends and I often talked about how we did things as moms, and sometimes those conversations were really helpful but other times I would leave those conversations feeling very insecure. I wanted to be a great parent and I wanted to be a godly mother and what I came to realize is that there is not one perfect way to parent a child. There are so many variables.

What I had to come to terms with is that at the end of the day, I am responsible to God for how I parent my children. Other people will have their opinions and ideas but really it is between Jonathan, the Lord, and me how we do things. I have to admit that I was pretty fanatical about some things like television shows, video games, PG-13 movies and Internet usage when my children were younger. I remember one time in particular, Joelan, 10 years old at the time, was hanging out with kids in the neighborhood and wanted to go to one of their houses to play video games. He told us they were playing Halo and I asked him what it was rated. He answered, "M. But it's just ghosts and stuff." He didn't understand why we told him no so Jonathan and I looked up the information about the game online and we read together why the game received the M rating. All the other parents were ok with their kids playing this game. We weren't. We had a strong conviction to help guard our son's heart from violence and bad language.

How do you have strong convictions and guidelines without your kids being weirdos? Honestly, I don't know and I don't care. I love Joshua 24:15. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Sometimes I want to shout it from the rooftops. "The rest of you can do it however you want but as for us, The Howes, we serve the Lord."

I can also get on a soapbox about teens and student ministry involvement. I would attribute about 90% of our older kids moral and spiritual maturity to their involvement in the Student Ministry at church. All kids want to have a social life. They want to have fun and get out of the house. They want to experience cool things away from their parents and the smartest, and safest, and most beneficial

way to do that is to make sure they are connected to a church youth group. Some of you are saying that you want your kids to go to church but they don't want to go. Who cares? Make them go. You are the parent. I would almost guarantee that after 6 weeks of faithful attendance, they would WANT to be there. Not only that, they will experience spiritual moments that lead them to a genuine faith in God. You are the parent. BE THE PARENT! It is your job to expose your children to godly people and environments that will help them chose to follow Christ.

Honestly, I could go on and on about the topic of training children. On one hand, it is one of the most challenging and complicated processes. I have shed many tears over the years about my kids and mistakes we have all made along the way. On the other it is really quite simple. Make it your family's mission in life to LOVE GOD AND LOVE PEOPLE. If loving God is your highest priority, you will be exactly who God wants you to be as a parent. Don't settle for a mediocre family. Sell out completely to the Lord and see what He does. He has a purpose and plan for our kids that are so much bigger than we can imagine. Commit to living for Christ, and trust Him with the results.

Chapter 5

Release Them

"Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth." Psalm 127:3-4

The fifth essential or building block in overcoming our parental fears is to release our kids into the world. This is arguably the scariest step in being the parent God has called us to be. As I write this chapter, I just spent the last two Saturdays moving my two older kids into college. Joelan, our son, is a sophomore at Georgia College and State University living in a four-bedroom apartment in Milledgeville, Georgia with three of his buddies. Julia, our oldest daughter, is a freshman at the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega, Georgia, and she is living in a dorm on campus with one of her best friends from high school. It's only been a few days since we left Julia at UNG, but I have tears in my eyes as I write about it. It is such a difficult season of life for a parent. You are happy for your kids because you know it's the next best step for their growth and development, but it is just hard. It's hard because you know that your family will never been the same again. We will always be a family, but it will look and feel different from this day forward.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, our goal as parents is to train our kids to GO (Proverbs 22:6). Our goal is to raise them and release them into the world. At this point, our kids are still dependent on us. We are paying for their college and living expenses. We are paying for their textbooks, which are very

expensive even to rent. They are still on our car and health insurance, and we still send them a weekly allowance. So, we have a long way to go before we can fully release them into the world. But sending a kid to college is a good next step in them growing toward adulthood and independence. I don't even want to think about them getting married and having kids of their own. We will save that for another book when Jennifer and I are MUCH older.

A good illustration or visual of releasing a child into the world is that of a rope. Picture having an imaginary rope tied around your child's waist. When our kids are young, we keep them close. There is very little slack in the rope. They are completely dependent on their parents. But as they grow, they gain more and more independence, and we let out more and more of the rope.

Within the first year, a child begins to crawl and even walk. As parents we set up baby gates around the house to keep the kids in confined areas. We let out a little rope, but they are still in the safety of our house. Then a child grows to the point where she can run and play outside. We let out a little more rope, but we set the yard as the boundaries. We tell our kids that they can play anywhere in our driveway and yard but do not go into the street. At this point in a child's life, she is around mom or dad almost 100% of the time with the exception of an occasional babysitter. So, the imaginary rope has not been released very far.

When a child is three or four years old, it's a good idea to send him to a once a week Mother's Morning Out or a two or three day a week preschool. I have to tell a funny story here about Joelan. Most of our parenting stories revolve around Joelan, because he is our first-born. And as you know, parents tend to be much more protective with their first child than their second, third and so on. By God's grace, Joelan has turned out to be a phenomenally well-adjusted young man, even though Jennifer is a self-proclaimed "helicopter parent".

Anyway, back to my funny story about Joelan, or really about Jennifer. When Joelan was 3 years old, we decided to send him to a 2 day a week preschool at a great church less than 5 minutes from our house. Jennifer was so nervous. Joelan was super shy. We made a bigger deal about his first day of preschool than we should have which created even more fear and insecurity for poor Joelan. In fact, the entire family, mom, dad, and baby Julia all took Joelan to his first day of preschool. We took pictures, and we all walked him into his classroom. Jennifer was a nervous wreck leaving him in the classroom, but the teacher assured us that he would be fine. About two hours after we left Joelan at the church preschool, the school called our house (This is back when everyone had a home phone), and Jennifer picked it up on the second ring. Joelan's teacher was on the line, and she asked Jennifer a personal question. She said, "This might be a strange question, but does Joelan normally wear underwear?" Apparently, she was helping Joelan go to the bathroom (A child had to be potty trained to attend the preschool, which was also a major concern for Jennifer) and saw that he was going "commando". It's funny that Jennifer was so concerned about Joelan's first day of

preschool, she forgot to put underwear on him. Jennifer was a little embarrassed dropping Joelan's underoos off at the school office.

As a child grows, parents need to release more and more of that imaginary rope. Obviously, some milestones in a child's life require more faith and the releasing of more rope. When a child gets on the school bus and heads off to the first day of kindergarten is a monumental day. Allowing your child to sleep over at a friend's house (and I'm not referring to spending the night at the grandparents or the cousins' house) requires a step of faith. When your child gets her driver's license and drives on her own out of the driveway for the first time, it is a super scary experience. My prayer life increased 500% when my kids started driving. At this point, the rope is getting pretty far away from home and for the first time, they could really hurt themselves. Or somebody driving another vehicle could cause some serious damage. Like I said, my prayer life has been really strong since the kids started driving. Every time Julia leaves the house to drive somewhere, I tell her the same two things, "I love you! Be safe!"

Now, there is so much to discuss in this area of releasing our kids and slowing letting out a little rope at a time. I want to mention that there are times when we need to reel in a little rope. There are times when we need to tighten or shorten the rope. Sometimes we have to tighten the rope because we need to discipline our kids. We are to discipline our kids as God disciplines us.

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:5-6,9-11

God disciplines us because he loves and cares for us. He wants what's best for our lives. As parents, we discipline our kids because we love them and want what is best for them. There are many times that we need to tighten the rope to protect our kids and teach them a lesson. For example, if our child is 5 years old, and we tell her to stay in the yard, but she disobeys and rides her bike down the street, we need to discipline her. We may take her bike away. Or we may not let her play outside alone. It's important to tighten the rope, so she will learn from her mistake. We are not disciplining her to make her life miserable. We are disciplining her to keep her out of the street and keep her from getting run over by a car. Our discipline is ultimately in her best interests to help her grow and develop.

As the kids get older, the discipline will be different. It may be losing cell phone privileges, which it is a privilege and not a right to have a cell phone. A parent might tighten the rope by making curfew earlier on a weekend night or by not allowing sleepovers for a season. One of the secrets of parenting is to know when and how much to tighten or loosen the imaginary rope. Parenting requires a lot of push and pull, give and take. This also requires a ton of communication between mom and dad. Remember parents, and especially if you are divorced and raising your kids in a blended family situation, we have to keep a united front. The parents must be on the same team. And we are in this together. We have to agree on when to tighten and when to loosen the rope. We may disagree behind closed doors, but once a decision is made, we need to walk in that decision together.

This final step of releasing our kids is challenging and complex. Knowing how much rope to release at a time will be different for each family and for each child. I joked earlier about my prayer life increasing when the kids began to drive. Well, so much of releasing our kids comes down to our prayer lives and seeking God's perfect will for our children. Jennifer and I have allowed our kids to do some things where other parents, my parents included, thought we were crazy. When Julia was fourteen years old, we let her go on a mission trip to Brazil with the church without Jennifer or I going. We prayed about it. We trusted the adults who were leading the trip. And God gave us a peace that it was the right decision. Letting Julia go on that mission trip by herself at the age of fourteen is one of the reasons that she has grown to be the young woman of God that she is today.

Hey, being the parent that God called you to be is not for the weak. It takes countless hours in prayer, hard work, tough decisions and a tremendous amount of faith. We have to truly believe that God loves our kids more than we do. There is no better place for our child to be than in the center of God's will.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3:5-6

Jennifer's Thoughts

There are so many parenting strategies and techniques that we could discuss but there is something else on my heart. I want to take a minute and speak to the issue of teen rebellion.

I used to think that if a child rebelled, it is because the parents did a poor job parenting the child. But life has taught me that a person can do everything "right" but at the end of the day, the child makes their own choices.

They can choose to follow the path that their parents set before them, or go their own way.

The prayer for our kids has always been for them to follow the Lord every day of their lives. We pray that they come to know Jesus at an early age and never know a day apart from Him. I have prayed this prayer a thousand times. I am trusting God that He will guard their hearts and minds. I am believing that when they come to a fork in the road, they would seek the Lord and follow Him.

I remember when our older kids started driving and had more freedom, I worried whether or not they were being truthful to me about where they were and what they were doing. I thought about all of the terrible trouble that they could get into and how it would ruin their lives. I wanted to prevent it all but I could not control every step that they made. As I was praying about this I remember thinking that if my child rebelled, I would not live in regret because that would be their choice, not mine. I am definitely not a perfect parent but I did the very best I could to ensure that they had a strong faith in the Lord. I have several dear friends, who are godly parents, that are grieving over their child's choice to rebel against them and the Lord. Not only are they grieving, but they are struggling to know how to discipline and love a teen/ young adult, who continually makes poor choices. I do not have the solution for this heartbreaking problem, but I do know that God is with them.

If you are anguished today over a rebellious child, my encouragement to you is to give it to God, and let go of any guilt or regret you are dealing with. You cannot change the past. You also cannot make a person choose to follow and obey Christ. You need to release control over to the Lord and trust that He "works all things for good for those that love Him and are called to His purpose." Romans 8:28

I would also encourage you to reach out to your small group or a pastor for support and guidance. We need each other. We were not meant to live out this life alone. Find a safe place and a safe person to help you as you navigate this difficult season of life.

Conclusion

Finish the Race

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."
2 Timothy 4:7

Last summer my parents were visiting from Mississippi, and my dad brought his

mountain bike. We have several mountain bikes trails in our area, and I came up with the idea of my dad, my son, and I going on a “little” mountain bike ride. I had never ridden on the trails at Harbins Park, but I had heard they were great. Life is full of moments and memories, and I thought this was a great opportunity to build a memory with three generations of Howes men.

The three of us loaded up the bikes, drove to Harbins Park and hit the trails. As we traveled further and further into the woods, I began to realize that the mountain bike trails were a little more challenging and treacherous than I thought. There were steep hills, sharp turns, narrow passageways, rocks, sand, mud and fallen trees on the trails. I also made a rookie mistake and didn't bring my cell phone, so we had no GPS or any way of making an emergency phone call. The trails were marked with signs, but we ended up getting lost. In fact, it seemed like we kept arriving at the same directional sign again and again. It was a humid summer day, and we quickly ran out of water. After a while, it dawned on me that my dad is 77 years old, and I began to worry about his health. He's in great shape for his age, and I do not think of him as a granddad pushing 80 years old. But if he were to crash his bike or have a heart attack in the middle of the woods, we would be in big trouble. I began to pray.

After several failed attempts, we finally got on the right trail that led us back to the parking lot. When it was all said and done, we had ridden 7 challenging miles through some pretty difficult terrain. When we arrived back at the car, I asked my dad if he was OK. He said that the entire time riding the final stretch that he was quoting the Bible verse, “fight the good fight, keep the faith, FINISH THE RACE.”

I believe that parenting is very similar to my mountain biking adventure with my dad and son. Parenting is full of moments and memories, and I would encourage you to cherish every one. Take plenty of pictures and post them on social media. And like our mountain biking adventure, parenting is a much more challenging and treacherous journey than we could ever imagine. As families, we all have our up and downs, and we have experienced a few crashes along the way. We've all made some wrong turns and lost our way in various seasons of life.

I would like to end this book with a challenge to the parents to never give up, to keep the faith, and to finish the race. Parenting is a long journey, and I do not think it will end until we cross the finish line of heaven. Let's keep fighting for our kids, believing in God, and “peddling” until we finish the race. I have counseled dozens of parents who have struggled with rebellious kids, prodigal sons and daughters. My encouragement has always been and always will be to never give up on your kids. Keep praying. Keep loving them unconditionally. Claim Galatians 6:9 which says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” God promises that we will reap a harvest if we don't give up.

The reward of our parenting is to see our kids grow to become the men and women God has called them to be. It is for them to bring God honor and glory by fulfilling God's purpose and plan for their lives. My prayer for each of you reading this book is that you will do your part and trust God to do his part. May you be the parent that God has called you to be. May you fight the good fight, keep the faith and finish the race. Godspeed!

Jennifer's Final Thoughts

My last word of encouragement to you is that YOU ARE NOT ALONE! Life is hard and God's desire is for us to do life together! Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 tells us

*“Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
¹⁰If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
¹²Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”*

Your church family is there to walk the journey with you. It is such a blessing to have friends to go through life with, in the good times and the bad. If you have not found those friendships yet, reach out to your church family and ask for guidance!

And a final note: Jonathan and I hopefully have many days and years ahead here on earth to love and parent our children. As our kids get older, we get really excited about the “grandparent” stage and getting to spoil our kids' kids! We have been blessed with godly parents who have poured into us and our children. It is their legacy that we get to pass on to our children and grandchildren. So much of who we are is because of our parent's love and commitment to each other to stay married, make sacrifices, and invest in their families. So a huge thank you, Chuck and Debbie, and Joe and Mary Jo. We love you!

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