

SETTING PARENTS FREE

*How to give your kids what they need,
and where to run when you drop the ball.*

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Introduction

We're all in this together

A couple of parents approached me during the break at one of my conferences. "We had to tell you this," they chattered. "As we were leaving the house, our teenage daughter walked through the kitchen and said, 'Oh my gosh. Like, where are you guys going?' 'To a parenting conference,' we replied. She looked at us with that classic teenage look of disgust and said, 'Good!'"

I love parents. I don't care where I'm speaking around the country-over and over again, CEOs, school teachers, mothers who daylight as corporate attorneys, artists, pastors, and cardiologists, all come up to me. They've taken a Friday night and a Saturday morning out of their lives to learn about their kids. They stand in line or raise their hands with eager eyes, hoping maybe I can bring some clarity to a problem that they have with their children. (And if the Duchess of Cambridge would like any help, I'll do my best to work her toward the front of the line.)

It's hard being a parent

If you think about this parenting task, it's actually kind of weird. In our culture, you can get training on just about any subject in the world. Click on YouTube and you can learn how to change the washer in your faucet. You can go to weekend seminars on how to better use Keynote-but we receive no real formal training in this incredibly important task of raising little humans. *Parents feel uninformed.*

Most parents just parent on the fly. We don't think about what we're doing or have any real sense of being strategic. We just go with our gut. Maybe we parent the way we were parented-or the opposite! Maybe we parent out of our *emotions*, "Oh my gosh, I can't stand to see her struggle! Let's swoop in and rescue her!"

Regardless, I see parents just frantically reacting to the situations their kids create! And most parents *know* that they are this lost! We feel impossibly outgunned by this incessant, challenging, fluid, high-stakes tennis game of parenting. *Parents feel ill-equipped.*

Furthermore, most parents feel like they are constantly "returning serve" in this tennis game. We live responding or reacting to what this child might throw at us next. I encountered some parents recently whose three-year-old had just decided he no longer liked eating! What's up with that? I read the other day about a couple of siblings. The little sister ran to her mom, tattling, "BJ is stealing my air!" The mother went back to find out what the hullabaloo was about, and she found BJ grabbing fists of air and screaming, "Mine! Mine!" I

was told about another little girl who started crying because her "drink was too wet."

This is the kind of stuff we are dealing with!

Parents tell me, "We can't ask our boys to do anything without them turning it into a competition." "Veronica, the teenager, stopped acknowledging us months ago, and now just disappears into her room." "My four-year-old has a limp-legged meltdown every time he doesn't get his way. What do we do, Doc?" I had a parent tell me just today, "I love my kids, but I get overwhelmed with the millions of decisions that parenting requires. It's just constant! And they are making up new problems faster than I can figure out the solutions to the old ones!" (Personally, I was always an expert on the developmental stage my kids just *completed!*) *Parents feel overwhelmed!*

Lastly, parents feel *guilty and afraid*. Today's parents often feel like they need to parent *perfectly*. We need to be at every ball game. We need to make sure our kids get in the right school with the right friends (beginning with pre-school). And, oh yeah, we need to protect our kids from all harm and make sure they feel loved every day while we're at it!

So let's take a look at this situation so far, shall we?

We parents aren't free. We live feeling ill-equipped, overwhelmed, full of questions, guilty and afraid! For real? That's a walkin' talkin' reason to rehabilitate if you ask me! Our culture has turned being a parent into something that can feel burdensome. It's no longer just a "family of four" living life together; it's a pressure-packed performance that you have to

do perfectly or else! Yuck! Somebody ought to write a book and throw these poor guys a bone!

You're in luck. This is not just a book about parenting. This is a book for you, the parents. Let's take care of you for a change.

Let's get free

In order to "set parents free," I want to give you two simple things. I want to tell you how to best care for your kids, and then I want to teach you how to handle it when you become "screwball parent of the year" and mess it all up. These will be our building blocks for parenting freedom.

The first thing that parents need in order to feel free and to enjoy raising their kids is to know that their children are *getting what they need to thrive*. Otherwise we're going to worry about them, right? And that's not freedom! So I want this book to help teach you what your kids need in order to grow up whole and happy-how you can give good things to their lives and hearts. I want you to finish this book feeling more competent, heads-up, and aware about how to care for your kids. The freedom to enjoy being a parent partially comes from knowing what you're doing.

Now if you are like me, we can't stop there. If all we did in this book was talk about what your kids need to grow up happy, healthy, and groovy, you still aren't free. You just have a new set of rules to follow-a newstandard to live up to!

So, secondly, we are also going to have to talk about how to handle it when you *screw it all up. Fall on your face. Fail.*

Because you will. And I don't want that to be something that frightens you.

In other words, I want to teach you how to give to your kids, and then teach you how to handle it when you goof it up. In fact, I want to talk about how we can handle our mistakes in such a way that not only will keep our screwups from damaging our kids, but might also actually *help them out!* Regular ole humans actually make pretty good parents-once we get set free.

So let's look at how to give our kids what they need, and, then how to handle it when we drop the ball!

How do we give to our kids?

If you think about it, kids come to the table without much to offer. I mean, when they are first delivered as infants, they don't bring much to the party. There's basically just something going in, or coming out of, one end of them or the other- all the time. And somewhere between then and college commencement, they (hopefully) have learned enough about love, wisdom, relationships (and how to clean their room) that they can function in the world.

So what happened? No magic voodoo. Someone just *parented* them.

When I was a graduate student, I worked for a while in the L.A. school system. One afternoon, I witnessed two boys fighting on the playground. In the midst of the fray, a little girl ran up to me, desperate-"Quick, Dr. Cox! Use your psychology on them!" I wasn't sure whether to assume the "palm-out Iron Man pose" or not. As much as you probably deserve to

be a superhero, there's no psychological superpower when it comes to dealing with kids. They just need teaching, loving, guidance, and support. They need us to teach them the heart and the skills to do life. Napoleon Dynamite understood this. "Hey Pedro, you've got skills!"

So freedom step one is, I want to teach you how to give to your kids. I want you to know what they need, and what they don't need, so you can relax. Freedom comes when we have the confidence to know that we are doing our job and that our kids' hearts are getting filled up.

I'm going to guide you through how to give to your kids by asking *seven questions* that parents often ask me. These questions will serve as the chapters on our journey.

Chapter 1 Am I screwing up my kids?

Chapter 2 How do I help my kids know that they are loved?

Chapter 3 How do I get my kids to do what I say?

Now, at this point our kids are going to respond with an issue of their own! Since they've all seen Harry Potter, and since their question fits somewhere between chapters 3 and chapter 4 we're gonna call it - Chapter 3¾.

Chapter 3¾ But what if I don't want to do what you say?

So we're going to respond to their question too! That's only fair, right? Then we parents get to keep asking questions.

Chapter 4 How do I help my kids learn to be strong?

Chapter 5 How do I help my kids deal with pain in life?

Chapter 6 How do I teach good values to my kids?

Chapter 7 How do I teach my kids about God?

I believe these seven questions (plus one objection from our snarky kids) capture the ingredients that kids need for life-what kids need in order to develop the emotional/spiritual/functional "software package" that will set them up to be rocket-hot and ready to go for life in the world! (And also, to keep bath time from becoming another dumpster fire.)

Also, you will find that different kids will need emphasis in different areas of growth. So, we are going to also use these categories and questions as a guide to help you spot your children's "blindspots." You probably have one child who came out of the womb always oriented toward love and nurture-"Cuddly Carla." However, those same kids often struggle with the difficulties of life-bullies, disappointments and conflict. She might need more help later from the "building strength" chapter. On the other hand, your next child is little Napoleon, wanting to rule your home like the Ottoman Empire. His blindspot is submission and obedience, so you'd better study up on that chapter! Different kids will need different emphases. Our chapters and categories will help you sort that out and better "make the call" on those parenting conundrums.

So, we are going to start freeing you by giving you clear, strong, and hopefully fun, answers to the questions regarding what your kids need. I want you feeling confident.

Sometimes, however, you will miss by a mile.

What do we do when we screw up?

I imagine that you want to be an amazing parent. Well, every party needs a pooper, that's why you invited me. *You Won't Be!*

That's right, you heard it here, folks. You're going to be as bad of a parent as I was. So, our second way to set you free has got to be about having room to fail-an alternative to the "what if I mess them up?" anxiety that makes us all crazy.

Here's our new hope. *What if we don't need to be amazing?*

What if our kids don't need "perfect" parents? What if all they really need is for us to be regular ole people just like them? What if all this pressure we put on ourselves to be "practically perfect in every way" is actually counterproductive? I mean, usually when humans are under a ton of pressure, they perform *worse*, right?

"But, how can we be free to fail our kids?" you exclaim. "How dare we not be amazing parents? Don't our kids deserve better than that? Doesn't letting go of the pressure mean I'm settling for being a slacker parent?" (No-but you get points for dramatic presentation.)

To be honest with you, I don't think that I was that great of a parent. And I think my children would agree. Like many of you, I looked inside and saw what an empty tank I often had. I wondered how was I supposed to teach good things to my kids when I barely possessed those things myself? Our kids turned out to be pretty cool people (which was one of our goals). They all have jobs and none of them live at home! (Each of which, I think, qualifies me to write a parenting book!) But Norma and I were not perfect parents. I'm thinking that you guys reading this book probably feel the same way. Let's start a club. *The Screwed-Up Parents Club!* And the first rule of The Screwed-Up Parents Club is that we *have* to talk about The Screwed-Up Parents Club!

Let's ask the question this way: What if you being *you* is enough?

What if parents having the freedom to just be humans with their kids-working together to help everyone grow-is what our kids really need in the first place? What if they don't need "perfect parenting" out of a "perfect parenting" manual? What if they just need *you*? What if being a goofball parent is okay? In fact, what if having imperfect parents is actually *better* for our kids? I believe it is. And we are going to talk about how.

This is not a manual

So we are going to talk about how to richly give to our kids, and then we are going to talk about how to handle it when we fail. If you think about it, that's the way God talks to us. In his word, he talks to us about the ways that lead to life, and then he tells us where to run when we mess it all up. We're just going to apply the same principle to our parenting.

This book is not going to be just a "how-to" manual on parenting. What I really want to do is to help create a "heart" for your family-a vibe for making your family a haven for loving, broken, growing people to be together, to learn together. I want to help set you free.

If this is a "manual," it's a manual for how to be *you*, as a parent. I don't want to just give you parenting advice. I want to help make parenting something that is fun and natural for you-something that reflects the heart of God, as well as your heart and your child's. I want you to feel free in your parenting. So, walk with me. Learn alongside of me. Parent along side of me. Fail along side of me. And let's talk about how to create something great with our kids!