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The Parent You Want to Be

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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Getting the Most from This Book

If we were to sit down at your kitchen table together and ask you what kind of parent you want to be, what would you say? You don't have to answer immediately. Just think about it.

You're probably reading this book in between work, errands, chores, and a myriad of other activities. Or maybe you've taken it with you on a trip where you hope to have some extended time. Wherever you are, we want to thank you for making a connection with us. As the parents of two little boys, we know the challenge of trying to find a few minutes to read a book like this. And we are going to do everything we can to make it worth your effort.

That's why we've posed this question right at the beginning. It's one of the most important questions you will ever explore. Why? Because how you answer it will shape your child's life forever (we'd add an ominous echo effect on that last word if we could).

Too strong? Are we overstating it? We don't think so. After all, if your own parents—no matter how blessed you already may have been to have them raise you—had been more patient, or more affirming, or more visionary, or more (fill in the blank), wouldn't you be a different person than you are today?

Of course. You get the point. So we'll ask again: Knowing that it is impossible to embody every good quality that you might aspire to have as a parent, what are the top traits you'd most like to have?

THE PARENT YOU WANT TO BE

How you answer this question at the moment, by the way, may change significantly by the time you're done reading this book. So beware. We plan to open your eyes to some qualities to which you may never have given serious attention.

Before you jump into the heart of this book, we want you to know that we've written it with busy parents in mind. You'll soon see that the chapters are brief and that each one is divided by headings that will allow you to set the book aside to change a diaper or take your child to a soccer practice and then easily find your place again to pick up where you left off.

We've also included a few exercises and brief self-tests to help you internalize the material. And we've included discussion questions at the end of each chapter that can be especially helpful in generating positive discussions not only with your spouse but with a small group or even a class of other parents who are invested in being the parents they want to be. After all, a book is never really understood or applied until it is talked about with other people.

Again, thanks for joining us on this journey. We wish you every success in becoming the parent you want to be.

*Les and Leslie Parrott
Seattle, Washington*

How Does Your Child Perceive You?

*Before I got married,
I had six theories about bringing up children.
Now I have six children and no theories.*

John Wilmot

“Dad,” my first grader asked me recently, “what are you going to do when you come to my class for Parents’ Day?” He was standing on the opposite side of my desk in my home study.

“What have the other parents done?” I asked, looking up from my computer screen, where I’d been replying to email messages.

“Anthony’s dad let each of us try on his fireman’s helmet and heavy jacket,” he said excitedly. “It was heavy, and it smelled like smoke! And you know what, Dad?”

“What, John?”

“Anthony’s dad rescues people from burning buildings with a big ax! Have you ever done that, Dad?”

“Well, no. I haven’t done that,” I replied, clearing my throat. “What have other parents done when they’ve come to your class?”

“Audrey’s dad works at the Museum of Flight, and he set off a really big rocket for us on the playground—it was so cool! You should have seen the smoke!”

“Mm-hmm.”

“It went so high, Dad. It had sparks and everything!”

“That sounds really cool,” I slowly murmured.

“Nick’s mom is a doctor,” John continued, “and she put a cast on Nick’s arm right there in the class, and then she cut off the cast and passed it around the room so we could touch it—but Tayden didn’t want to because he said it was gross.”

It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.

St. Francis of Assisi

“Wow!” I said, trying to join in on his excitement.

“So what are you going to do, Dad?” John asked earnestly.

“Well, Son, let’s see. Um, what do you think I should do?”

“Mommy says you work at your computer and talk on the phone a lot.”

“Is that what Mommy says? I guess she’s right about that—but I don’t think I want to do that for your class.”

“Nooo!” John giggled.

“Let me talk to your mom about Parents’ Day.”

With that, John scampered out to the backyard as I tracked down Leslie in the kitchen. “What am I supposed to do in John’s class for Parents’ Day? John’s going to think I’m the most boring dad in the world, and he’ll remember this forever,” I said frantically.

Leslie started laughing.

“I’m serious.”

“I know. I just got a mental image of you showing the class how you talk on your cell phone and write at your computer.”

“Very funny!” I snapped. “John already told me that joke—and I didn’t laugh then either.”

Just then John came in from the backyard and said, “Hey, Dad, why don’t you bring your brain to class?”

He wasn’t joking. John had once sat in on one of my lectures at the university where I talked about the human brain. I’d used an actual human brain from a formaldehyde container I borrowed from

the biology department. Needless to say, he was fascinated—as were my college students.

And that’s exactly what I did for Parents’ Day. I explained to his first grade class that I’m a “doctor” who works on feelings and that feelings begin in the brain. I showed them a colorful wooden model of the brain and then asked if they’d like to see an actual brain that I had in a jar contained in a cardboard box.

“Yes—show us the brain!” some students shouted.

“Children, let’s be respectful now,” John’s teacher said with authority while keeping an eye on the cardboard box.

The kids were now literally sitting on the edge of their seats, and John was grinning from ear to ear. The anticipation in that first grade classroom was palpable. I put on my protective goggles and latex gloves before reaching into the box. The children were wide-eyed—except for Tayden. He was peeking through his fingers.

I spent the next few minutes answering one question after another. The questions ranged from the practical (“What are all those lines on it?”) to the curious (“Whose brain is it?”) to the theological (“Doesn’t he need his brain in heaven?”).

Needless to say, I was a hit. The kids still talk about that day when they see me picking up John after school. And so does John. “Remember when you brought the brain to my school, Dad?” he’ll say. “That was awesome!”

Whew! I did it. I made my son proud. And isn’t that what every parent wants? Don’t you want your child’s perception of you to be as positive as possible?

Your Child Aspires to Be Like You — Is That a Good Thing?

That afternoon after buckling John into his car seat and traveling back home from school, Leslie and I were talking about what we

might do for dinner. Then, during a brief lull, John said something that would melt any parent's heart: "Dad, I want to be like you."

The truth is, whether our kids say it or not, they feel it. Children aspire to become what their parents are. And that's precisely why it's critical to be the kind of parents we want to be.

John's comment got me to thinking. If he wanted to be like me, how did he perceive me? What qualities did he see in me that he wanted to emulate? Suddenly I was more self-conscious than I'd been

I talk and talk and talk, and I haven't taught people in fifty years what my father taught me by example in one week.

Mario Cuomo

in years. I felt like I was sixteen again, looking into the mirror and wondering what other people thought of me. Metaphorically, I began to "check myself out." Was I a patient man? Could my son look at me and say, "I want to be patient like Dad is"? Was I optimistic? I sure wanted my son to be. Was I forgiving, empathic, comforting, kind?

Have you ever had these same thoughts? What traits does your child see in you? Perhaps more important, what traits doesn't your child see in you that you wish he or she did?

From the day John was born, I was so focused on what I would *do* as a parent — reading all kinds of books on techniques and strategies — that I hadn't given much thought to the kind of parent I wanted to *be*.

Leslie felt the same way. And the more we talked about it, the more serious we became about what we've come to call "intentional traits." Each of us made a list of the top five traits we wanted to be sure our children saw in us. And our lists were very different. What's more, some of the traits came naturally and easily to one or the other of us, while other traits would require more work.

Who You Are Matters More Than What You Do

Now don't misunderstand—we're all for using good parenting techniques to discipline and motivate our children. In fact, you'll find many practical parenting tips in this book. But the primary message we want to get across is this: Your child's character hinges on the traits you exhibit as a parent. And who you are as a parent isn't left to fate, luck, or chance. You can *choose* to be the kind of parent you want to be. While plenty of things about your child's life are unpredictable and beyond your control, you can make certain your child has a parent with particular qualities. This book will show you how.

You may be wondering why the traits you embody even matter. Let's make this plain: Your traits matter because your child is watching you more closely than you know. A haunting reminder of just how powerful we are as parental role models is found in the Harry Chapin classic "Cat's in the Cradle." Written in 1974, this song starts out with a natural harmony and depicts the tale of a father with his newborn son. The first time we hear the chorus, the dad is saying:

*And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew,
He'd say, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad.
You know I'm gonna be like you."*

But by the end of the tune, which has followed their relationship through the boy's tenth birthday, his college years, and finally the father's retirement, the chorus is bittersweet. It seems the son, who has moved away and started his own family, picked up on the one quality his father hoped he wouldn't pass along—the quality of being too busy for relationships. The father has called his son to see if the two of them can get together. "I'd love to, Dad, if I could find the time," answers his son. In the final chorus, the father's words ring true:

YOUR KIDS WILL REMEMBER YOUR TRAITS

*And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,
He'd grown up just like me.
My boy was just like me.*

Chapin's song will stop almost every parent dead in their tracks. And if it doesn't, it should. It's a poignant reminder to take stock of the traits, both good and bad, that our children observe in us.

Being a parent — not just *doing* parental things — is the most important calling you will ever have. But it's also the most rewarding enterprise of your life — especially when you are the parent you want to be.

For Discussion

1. How would your child describe you to another person?
What specific traits would your child mention?
2. If your child grows up to be just like you in one way,
what way do you hope that is and why?
3. Do you agree that when it comes to parenting, who you
are matters more than what you do? Why or why not?