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Relationships Rule

“No, you can’t have an Instagram account. We’ve told you this 1,000 times! You’re too young, you don’t need it, and we want you to value your friends face-to-face. We’ve told you! Don’t ask again. *We’ll* decide if and when you can have one and no amount of asking on your part will influence us.”

Why is this preteen demanding something from her parents when they’ve told her “no” before? What do you think they are doing or not doing?

“I told you to put away your toys and you’re still playing with them? What’s up with that? You know better! Put them away. NOW!”

How do you think this parent and child got to this point? What’s gone wrong?

“What do you mean you can’t memorize this week’s vocabulary definitions? You didn’t have any trouble memorizing them last week or the week before. Stop complaining! And don’t ask for a prize when you do learn them. You’ve shown me you don’t need one. Just get it done! Be diligent!”

What did this parent do right? What could this parent have done differently?

Are any of these scenarios familiar to you? Parenting isn’t for the faint of heart. I’m proud of every parent who is intent on parenting well and doing it on the good days and bad. This is you! I know that’s true because you’re interested in how to motivate your children. You’re not satisfied with how things are going; you’re leaning in. You want something more for them. For yourself.

The “Why” of Your Relationship with Your Kids

Capturing your child’s heart and parenting to keep it may be more important than anything else you do. Your love for your children and your desire for them to trust Christ for their salvation matters greatly. For you to have motivational power to help them make that commitment, mature in their faith, and love God more fully, you must start with their heart.

For your children to want what you want for them, for changes to occur, and for improvements to remain, your hearts must be intertwined. Your motivational power and influence over their obedience comes out of the love you have for each other. This is certainly true when thinking about motivating children. No matter your concerns that surround motivating your kids—moving them from apathy to action, disrespect to respect, self-centeredness to compassion, getting Cs to earning As—you must start with their heart.

Caring more about the quality of your relationship than the quality of children's behavior allows you to affect their behavior. In contrast, when children think their behavior matters more than anything, they will care less what you think. Your impact will decrease. Prioritizing your relationship is everything. It makes you influential in your own family.

My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

—PROVERBS 23:26

How would you describe the value of your relationship with your children? Facebook friends explained it this way:

My relationship with my daughter will impact her for the rest of her life. It will be how she sees God, other adults, and even the world. If I have a negative relationship with my daughter where I tear her down and she can never do

anything right, then that will be how she sees herself in the future. However, if I have a positive and open relationship with my daughter, she will have confidence, she will be more willing to accept God, and she will have a more positive view of the world and others. Not to mention, I want her to be able to talk to me when she grows up. I want to know if something is wrong at school, with friends, etc. I want her to ask me for advice rather than asking the world for advice because I will point her to God while the world will point her to other things. —Victoria

My relationship with my children matters because all of the other things I do with my life will pass away, but the love and guidance I pour into my children will influence them and generations to come. It is the most important legacy I can leave. —Dawn

A strong, trust-based relationship with my children matters because the world sings a different song to them daily about their identity and their place in this world. —Laura

Without relationship, there is no true respect, obedience, or honesty. There is nothing to bridge the generation gap. Just as God first draws us in with a relationship, that

then stirs a desire within us to seek Him for guidance and obey His commands, we must focus on building an authentic relationship with our children if we ever want more than performance-based obedience. If our desire is mutual love and respect and eventual friendship, we have to start building that foundation when they're children.
—Hannah

Again I ask, how would you describe the value of your relationship with your children? Why do your children matter, and why does your connection to each other matter? How might your children answer these questions?

I predict your relationship with your children matters greatly to you. Think back over the past week or so with each child in mind. What's the evidence that your relationship matters greatly? Think about how you spent your time, talent, and other resources. How did you pray? Did you explore ideas together and have fun together? Did you talk with them about their friends, struggles, successes, and plans? How did you put your belief that the relationship matters into practice?

The “How” of Your Relationship with Your Kids

You can establish and maintain a quality relationship with your children. It's the prerequisite to all the ideas I present in

the book. Without them knowing their heart is safe with you, they may not listen. They may not believe you. They may not care what you think. They may not want to achieve the goals you have for them. Your compliments and corrections may fall on deaf ears.

The word *parent* has Latin roots and means “to bring forth.” You’ll bring forth much that is positive when you have a vibrant, growing give-and-take relationship with your children. Start with their heart in mind. Parent so the Lord’s love captures their hearts. End with their heart in mind. You must.

My friend Michael spends one-on-one time with each of his three young daughters regularly. He makes them a priority, and they know it. He has a fulltime job, is studying to earn his DMin, volunteers in their church, is an entrepreneur, and serves several nonprofits with his unique skill set. He’s busy! He chooses to not let his tasks rob him of his relationships. His wife does the same thing. (There’s really no such thing as not having enough time. It’s all about what we do with the time we have.)

My friends Tina and Jeff prioritize their teen daughters and they always have. They each spend one-on-one time with them. When the girls were young, they both participated in the same activities—ballet, piano lessons, camping, and more. Now the girls are secure because they are known by their parents and allowed to prioritize the talents and relationships that matter to them. They also all serve together at church, but in different activities that suite their interests and abilities. Rachel

and Abbie are individuals in a tight family unit.

Suzanne and Lane prioritize their three teens and their teens' friends. Not only do Ward, Lilly, and Ansley know they matter to their parents, but their friends know they matter. They're welcome in their home, and they're fed in their home—often! Also, when Lane and Suzanne visit Ward and Ansley in college and go out to dinner, they make sure to invite their friends to join them. They want to know who their children are being influenced by. And Ward and Ansley want their friends to know their parents. Prioritizing their children's friends has solidified their family bond. Their children want to be home and want to be with them.

I pray you're in a good place with your kids. No matter how things are going now, your relationship can be healthier than it is. If you'd score it a B, let's make it

an A. If it's currently a C, let's find out what would make it a B and then observe to see if it can become an A, especially by implementing ideas in this book.

The ideas will work if you prioritize your children's hearts so they know you love them, know them, and understand them. Every child wants and needs to be known; being invisible is painful. Being understood is evidence of love. Note how I worded this. It's not enough for you to know them, understand them, and love them. *They* need to know.

**Being understood is
evidence of love.**

Tedd Tripp's statement is motivational, especially if you're raising teens:

Pressures of the teen years pull children away from home. This is the time when they develop comradery with those who "understand them." They are looking for relationships in which someone knows, understands and loves them. Your children should not have to leave home for that. You can provide family relationships in which your children are understood and embraced.¹

My friend Lori Wildenberg also understands the value of starting with the heart. Do you want for your children what she wants for hers? She writes, "A great and godly parenting strategy is relational. I want to interact with my kids in a way that deepens our relationship, encourages responsibility, draws grace into the family fold, and molds a humble countenance."²

Sometimes we complicate things. Yes, parenting is multifaceted, and our children and we are complex. People can be messy, and our culture is chaotic. Hopelessness is not appropriate. Hope is. Not everything is as hard as we think it is.

Securing Their Hearts

Here's my list of understandings that can secure children's hearts and increase your influence so you'll be able to motivate

them to be responsible, brave, compassionate, and so much more. Ideas in the chapters that follow support and build upon these truths.

- Parent by faith. Pray for God's insight and direction, let Him work in your child, and trust Him with the result while you parent with thoughtful intentionality.
- Parent with grace and mercy. Although consistently responding to children's behavior is important, so is surprising them with your kindness. Know when they're willfully disobedient and when they're not.
- Forgive quickly and often. Ask to be forgiven quickly and often. Remember that the past does not define your children or control the future.
- Tell your children you are confident in God. Teach them Scripture, pray for and with them, go to church together, and serve with them.
- Prioritize children, not their behavior.
- You can dislike what children *do* while you still like and love them. Remember we can all have bad days.
- Be who you want your children to be. And teach them who you want them to be. Much is caught *and* taught. Want them to be successful.

- Children are human beings, not human doings. Who they are is more important than what they do.
- Raise the children you were given, not the children you wish you had.
- Create memories and build traditions with individual children and with your family. Laugh, dream, think, feel, play, read, and explore together.
- Parent so children will want to be your friend later. Don't prioritize friendship now.
- Remember needs and wants are different. Children don't need everything they want. Parent to meet their needs.
- Seek to understand before trying to be understood. Ask better questions. Listen longer. Be fully present without devices in your hands.
- Listen when children are little if you want them to talk with you when they're older. Answer their questions when they're little if you want them to ask questions when they're older.
- When children have a problem, remember they are not the problem. Help them without making them feel like a project you're trying to finish or a problem you're trying to solve.

- Teach children to fail well. Life can be challenging. They must be able to recover from adversity.
- Unconditionally love and value your children. Ideally, there's nothing they can do that would cause you to love them more *or* less. They should not have to prove their value to you.
- Prioritize progress, not perfection. Remember, you and your children are being perfected, but Jesus is the only One who is perfect. Perfection is the destination; transformation is how our children and we will get there.

I hope this list is both encouraging and challenging. Ideas in the chapters that follow support and build upon these truths. Would you agree that relationship changes are easier to make when everyone knows about the new goals and expectations? Children sometimes tell me, “I feel like my parents have the rule book. I wish they’d share it with me.” Perhaps this list can serve as a rule book of sorts.

Is Your Child Resilient?

The more I studied and prepared to write this book, the more I became convinced that resiliency might be the most important quality for motivated children to have. Every child will

experience times of struggle, pain, and loss. Work may be hard, school can be challenging, and chores may be boring. People—even parents—may treat them unfairly. People might lie to them and they may feel left out at times. They may be bullied.

But resiliency is the ability to recover quickly from adversity, disappointment, defeat, failure, and trauma. It's an essential ability if your children are going to be motivated by you and what you do. It's essential if you want them to develop self-motivation. It offers protection against anxiety and becoming depressed.³

Resilient children will “still experience anger, grief and pain, but [are] able to keep functioning—both physically and psychologically.” Children who lack resilience “might dwell on problems, feel victimized, become overwhelmed or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse.”⁴

Resilient children aren't victims. They're survivors. They know challenges are a part of life and necessary for growth. They are not defined by them. They are motivated by them and learn from them. Their ability to stay strong, not stay down, and come through challenging experiences and adversity in one piece is what resiliency is all about. They bounce back from setbacks. Comebacks are a strength. Resiliency starts as a choice when children are acquiring this ability. With experience, it becomes a part of who they are.⁵

These children can rebound from disappointments more quickly than others because they rely on inner strengths and

they reach out to you and possibly others for comfort and instruction. Being able to reach out to others for support is a key component of being resilient.⁶

Resilient children ask for help because they value themselves and their task, and they believe they can be effective and will be effective. This is called *self-efficacy*, and it's related to resiliency. It has also been identified as a thrive skill. Self-efficacy protects children from learned helplessness and the Eeyore-like characteristics shared by passive pessimists.⁷

The toys in the classic children's book *The Little Engine That Could* are a true example of especially this characteristic of resiliency. We always think of the little engine bravely saying, "I think I can," but the toys, bound for children on Christmas, showed resiliency in searching for a train that would take them where they were going. They bounced back from failure and got on with it. One agreed to help. The toys didn't give up. Your children (and you) need to be resilient like they were.

Become more aware of how resilient you are. Your children are watching how you respond when in a valley. Talk with them about your attitudes, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings as they relate to failing. Talk about theirs. Other ideas in later chapters will give you further help in developing this important quality.

**Become more aware of
how resilient you are.**

Resiliency will develop when you start with children's hearts and prioritize your relationship. I pray you're hopeful and eager to see what the future holds. Be resilient—children who have been sitting down in their valleys lately will need to learn to stand up and walk forward. With your encouragement and teaching, they will.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do you remember the relationship you had—or didn't have—with your parents? Maybe they modeled what relationships looked like more than taught about them. Or, perhaps they taught about them, but didn't live them out. The generation of kids you're raising is different in so many ways. Yet the truths are still the same. Ask your kids how important it is for them to have a good relationship with you. Then tell them what it means to you.

THINGS TO DO

- Because knowing and understanding your children is so important for the quality of your relationship, grab a piece of paper for each of your kids. Make a list of what you know about them. Think about all their years and their likes, wants, and needs. Think about what they do and who they are. Consider their thoughts and feelings. Think about their strengths, challenges, abilities, and hobbies. Think in terms of people and tasks. Have the paper handy and keep adding to it as you observe and interact with your child. When you're ready, sit down with your child and share your lists. They'll be encouraged and probably enjoy adding things you didn't think of.
- Have your children ask several people of different ages to share about a mistake they made and what they learned from it. Share your stories, too. Ask your children what they learned from the interviews.
- As a family, choose to learn something new. You could go miniature golfing or bowling if all your children are inexperienced. You could learn to make balloon animals, juggle, or practice calligraphy. Acknowledge that learning new things can be frustrating. Keep

track of efforts, acknowledge feelings, don't give up, and celebrate when progress is made. Doing this on a somewhat regular basis can help you and your children become more resilient.⁸

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- How did you react to my recommendations for how to secure children's hearts and increase your influence? Did you mark the ones you want to think more about and work on? Which ones helped you feel good about how you've been doing? Are there any you want to talk with your spouse or children about?
- Think of a time in your life when you needed to be resilient. How did you do? Did you get stuck or were you able to bounce back? Can you share this with your children when the time is right?



*I believe that appreciation is a holy thing,
that when we look for what's best in the
person we happen to be with at the moment,
we're doing what God does. So, in loving
and appreciating our neighbor, we're
participating in something truly sacred.*

FRED ROGERS

Host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*,
in a commencement address at Marquette University, 2001⁹