

FOCUS[®]
ON THE FAMILY

PARENTING

THE
LOW-PRESSURE
GUIDE
TO Parenting
..... YOUR
PRESCHOOLER



TIM SANFORD, M.A.

PRAISE FOR *THE LOW-PRESSURE GUIDE TO PARENTING YOUR PRESCHOOLER*

Twenty years ago, when I first became a mom of preschoolers, I was so overwhelmed with doing everything right. This left me rigid, tense, and overwhelmed. I wasn't having fun—and neither were my kids. Tim Sanford's message of low-pressure parenting is one I'm thankful for, especially since I still have preschoolers in my house through adoption! I highly recommend this book for parents who want to enjoy their kids and feel the weight of "rules" and "restrictions" slip from their shoulders. It's a book to read more than once and share!

TRICIA GOYER

Coauthor of *Lead Your Family like Jesus* and mother of ten children

Tim's book on simplifying the parenting process for preschoolers will change lives and help you to enjoy parenting! He compiles years of experience, knowledge, and wisdom from God's Word into solid advice urging parents to quit stressing about the mountains of input others provide them daily in order to raise the "perfect" child. He helps us transform our ideas of what we think we should be doing and instead form a plan for raising our children following God's inspired Word. I trust that God will use Tim's book to encourage many parents in the early years of their children's lives.

JOE WHITE

Award-winning author and President of Kanakuk Kamps

The Low-Pressure Guide to Parenting Your Preschooler by Tim Sanford provides a wealth of practical insight for the stressed-out preschool parent. I especially appreciated the “Big Four” low-pressure principles. Tim simplifies critical parenting tasks into an easy-to-understand strategy that left me repeatedly saying, “Yes! I can do that!” My two preschool grandsons and their parents lived with us for eight months this year, and I wish I’d had a copy of this book then. It would have helped me a lot in assisting their parents. Actually, it would have been easy to give them a copy of the book and say, “Don’t stress—practice this stuff!” Tim’s principles and insights could help a parent build a preschooler up and prepare the child for decision-making for the rest of his or her life. Thanks for this!

BRENT LINDQUIST, PHD

President, Link Care Center

Tim Sanford is a warm, encouraging, and practical voice for parents surrounded by conflicting advice and opinions for the “best” way to raise their children. You’ll take a deep breath and smile with relief on so many pages—and you can replace worry with joy as you learn to celebrate and delight in the earliest years of your child’s life!

CYNTHIA ULRICH TOBIAS

Author of *The Way They Learn* and *You Can’t Make Me! (But I Can Be Persuaded)*

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People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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INTRODUCTION

“What’s normal for my child to do at this age?”—*Amy*

“I have our son in soccer, piano, and a preschool reading assistance program. Is he getting enough socialization?”—*Maggie*

“How much (fill in the blank) is enough?

Encouragement, downtime, sleeping, alone time:

You name it, how much is enough?”—*Robert*

“Is age six too late to start our daughter in gymnastics?”—*Carmen*

“No matter what I try, I can’t get my son to take a nap during the day. What do I do?”—*Heather*

These are comments from parents I know. Do they sound familiar? All these parents have something in common and probably something in common with you: They feel the pressure of parenting correctly. As a parent, you’re expected to wear yourself out playing medic, professor, and chauffeur to your kids—and make sure your kids turn out exactly right.

There are books telling you what is exactly right, and

books detailing what to do at each stage of development to ensure your child *will* turn out to be healthy, happy, successful, popular, a good citizen—and a good Christian. Add to that the endless Internet articles to read and videos you “must” see to make sure you’re doing just the right thing at the right time and just enough of it (but not too much of it), all to make sure your child develops properly.

I recently did a Google search on the phrase “how to parent,” and about 590,000,000 sites showed up! Then I googled “how to raise children,” and 385,000,000 sites appeared. I hope you’re a speed-reader!

There’s more, of course. Be sure to read all the magazines in your pediatrician’s waiting area with articles such as “How to Be the Best Parent in Your Child’s Preschool Class.” And read every post on the *Mrs. Cleaver’s Way to Be Perfect and Calm All the Time* blog.

While you’re at it, remember the bazillion sermons, workshops, and small-group studies you should attend because the other “good Christian parents” are. With titles like “Raising Wonderful Kids in a Messed-Up World,” “How Godly Parents Never Lose Their Temper,” and “Christian Parenting the Right Way,” you just have to attend and get all the information you can.

Once you’ve done all that, be sure to consider the whirlwind of contradictory advice from other parents and siblings, Bible study members, and the lady who scowls at you when your child has a fit in the supermarket candy aisle.

Finally, don’t forget to compare your offspring against the other kids in the neighborhood, your church, and your

Mom's Morning Out group. Your child and your parenting are bound to come up short in at least half a dozen categories.

Taken all together, it's enough to make parenting confusing, if not crushing, with too much pressure, pressure, and more pressure. While having information is good when it comes to raising children, too much is still too much. It can confuse and discourage even the most dedicated parent, especially when there isn't enough time in the day to do it all correctly.

If you're like many parents I know, you're being stressed by many of these emotions and thoughts:

- self-doubt
- feelings of incompetence
- thinking you're a failure
- feeling out of control to the point where you either become paralyzed or run around the house doing a Chicken Little imitation ("The sky is falling!")
- wondering if your child is going to survive your parenting and turn out "normal"—whatever *that* is
- feeling you don't know the right things to do in the first place

You're feeling the pressure, aren't you?

Here's a dictionary-style definition of the word *pressure*:

pressure \ 'pres sure \ noun:

A series of urgent claims or demands exerting a strong force on someone, causing a burdensome condition under which it is hard to hold up.

Demands. Strong force. Burdensome. Hard to hold up under.

Are we having fun yet?

It doesn't have to be that way. That's why I wrote this book.

I'm the dad of two daughters who are grown and married. I'm a licensed professional counselor with over twenty-five years' experience as a therapist working with children, teenagers, and parents. Before that, I was in youth work conducting church day camps, teaching Sunday school, helping out at vacation Bible school, and serving countless times as a camp counselor.

I'm married to Becky, who's been teaching elementary and middle school students for more than twenty years. So we've both been around kids awhile.

I don't claim to know everything, but I've learned a lot about what works—and what doesn't—when it comes to raising children. Through all that, I've discovered the key to understanding parent-child relationships—and making them more stress-free.

The key is coming to grips with *your true job description: what it is* and *what it isn't*. Seriously, that's the key.

The Big Four

Working toward that goal, I've boiled parenting down into four overarching, low-pressure principles to keep things organized in my mind and yours.

That's right, just four:

1. Shrink your job description.
2. Make friends with free will.
3. Step away from the power struggle.
4. Reduce the rules.

Apply these four principles and the rest is “gravy,” as they say—good gravy, mind you, but gravy all the same.

Parenting is hard work, yet it doesn't have to be burdensome, leaving you feeling pressured all the time. You *can* relax. You *can* shrug off the pressure and know you're still parenting well. I want to help you understand your actual job description and accept what you can control as well as what you can't. Then we'll discuss how it applies to raising preschoolers.

“But what about the stress I'm under?” you ask. “What about all the pressure I feel every day?”

Chances are there's more *demand*ed of you than there *is* of you. Where are you supposed to get enough energy or know-how to do it all?

Relax. Did God somehow make a mistake and create men and women with insufficient parenting abilities? How many generations of parents raised their offspring before the printing press was invented around 1440? How in the world did they manage without any of the materials we have today?

The problem isn't God's oversight, and it's not your lack of ability to carry the load of parenting. The burden, pressure, and accumulating weariness come from misunderstanding your job description. That's where the problem is.

What you're holding in your hands is not another “Do it this way and your child is guaranteed to turn out right”

book. I'm here to explain to you your real job description as a parent—and how it's much simpler and less demanding than you probably think. My goal is to *shorten* your to-do list and relieve as much of the pressure as possible. I want to take the burden off your shoulders, not hand you another one. And give you permission to relax in the adventure called parenting.

“If I had it to do over again I would not spend so much time agonizing over every tiny detail of life I thought might impact my children in the long term, and just ENJOY their early childhood.”

—*Shari (mother of two children, both teenagers now)*

Shari's a great friend of ours, and a great mom. Take her advice. Let's make this parenting privilege clear, simple, doable—and low-pressure. And by the time we're done, you'll be able to breathe a well-deserved sigh of relief—and ENJOY these early childhood years.

Low-Pressure Principle 1



**SHRINK YOUR JOB
DESCRIPTION**



ONE

DO YOU HAVE TO MAKE THEM TURN OUT RIGHT?

CRAIG IS PART of the millennial generation, married and well educated. He wants to make a difference for Jesus Christ in the business world. Several years ago, he joined a small computer applications design firm comprised of five very talented individuals. But none of them—including the firm’s founder—had any business management expertise.

Craig’s frustration usually would come out in a loud, long sigh while we were cleaning our mountain bikes after a good ride. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do and what belongs to the other guys,” he told me one day. “There are no job descriptions for any of us. We spend too much time checking things out with each other to make sure nobody is stepping on someone else’s toes. We lose hours of work time that could be spent designing more applications! Our boss seems content

to ‘shoot from the hip.’ I mean, that’s okay if you want to stay small, but we have the potential to go really big.”

Month after month Craig would hold out hope, asking for a job description. Month after month he was told, “Oh, we’ll get to that. But for now, we have this really great job opportunity. As soon as I get them to sign the contract, we’ll look into getting some job descriptions written up.”

After about a year and a half of directionless frustration, Craig left the company. He and a coworker launched their own business. He told me, “The first thing I’m going to do is sit down and write out job descriptions!”

Ever have a job like Craig’s, with no clear job description? It doesn’t work, does it?

What’s Your Job?

The business world uses job descriptions. So does the military. Even athletes have detailed job descriptions of what they’re to do as part of the team.

Maybe you’ve composed a job description or two without realizing it. Perhaps you’ve given your babysitter one before going out to dinner with your spouse. It might look something like what Stacey, a mother of three, provides to her sitters:

“We have everything written out very clearly about our expectations:

- *Follow established bedtimes, plus or minus thirty minutes.*
- *Please have our children clean up any messes that they make.*

Do You Have to Make Them Turn Out Right?

- *If the kids aren't getting along well, have them each do 'alone playtime' in their bedrooms for a specific amount of time.*
- *Please have them change into pajamas, brush teeth, read a story, and pray with them. A small light and music may be on.*
- *They are never allowed to watch TV—not an option.*

“Emergency information and phone numbers are listed as well. We always try to give a designated time we plan to be home by and then try to determine if the sitter is okay with that and whether he or she can be flexible. Seeing those specific instructions creates order and predictability in our home, and that’s why I think sitters like watching our kids.”

If business people, military, athletes, and even babysitters benefit from having job descriptions, doesn't it make sense for parents, too?

Yes, it does.

So where does the confusion and pressure of our endless to-do lists come from? You'll begin to see the answer if you ask ten people to describe the job of a dad or mom. You'll get fourteen different opinions. That's because the titles “Dad” and “Mom” have become vague, contradictory, and controversial. Often they're based solely on personal opinions or reactions to negative experiences. None of these things makes parenting more understandable or doable.

Since we tend to learn so much through contrasts, let me begin by addressing things that *don't* belong on your job

description. Understanding what your job is *not* is as crucial as understanding what it *is*. It also helps relieve the pressure you may feel because of unrealistic or muddled expectations. We'll get to the *do* list in chapter 2.

Your First Impossible Mission

Naomi is the mom of a toddler who'd be classified as "all boy"—very kinesthetic, with the need to move and do.

"My son, Nathan, won't use words," she told me over the phone. "He prefers to communicate using sounds—machine sounds, animal sounds—you name it, any kind of sound. (Note: Communicating with sounds in place of words is a common trait for people whose primary learning style is kinesthetic, where learning takes place by carrying out physical activities.) We tested him, and he doesn't have any speech problems. How do I make him talk? I'm worried if he doesn't learn to stop using noises, he'll never get a girlfriend."

Did I mention that Nathan is only a toddler?

Behind Naomi's anxiety over a girlfriend is her desire to raise her only child "just right," so he'll grow up "just right" and find "just the right" girlfriend, who will become "just the right" wife for Nathan—all so Naomi will be happy having grandchildren to focus her time on, and all will be "just right."

Naomi doesn't have a dysfunctional child. She's a Christian mom who wants grandkids someday. She also wants to make sure her only child turns out right in order to be a good witness to her unbelieving family. Naomi was putting tons of pressure on herself and on Nathan as well—unnecessary and extremely burdensome demands.

Naomi's not alone. In fact, the single most common responsibility written into parental job descriptions is this:

“IT’S YOUR JOB TO MAKE SURE YOUR
CHILD TURNS OUT RIGHT!”

Can you feel it? Pressure, pressure, *pressure!*

No, no, no. Even if that responsibility were accurate, everyone has his or her own interpretation of what “turning out right” looks like.

Do a reality check with me here. The first human home was the Garden of Eden. It was perfect. This perfect home was run by a perfect parent figure—God. In this perfect home with a perfect Parent were two perfectly created children—Adam and Eve. So far, so good.

In this perfect environment there was a rule: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). That’s as clear a rule as any parent can state.

You know the rest of the story. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God; they foolishly defied Him and ate the forbidden fruit. You and I live with the effects of that wrong choice to this day. We get old and die. Bad things happen all around us and to us. All of these things are sober reminders of that first wrong choice—made by a perfectly created person in a perfect world with a perfect Father.

So what did God do wrong? If He had brought Adam and Eve up “in the way [they] should go” (Proverbs 22:6), why didn’t His children choose the right path? If it’s the parent’s job to make sure children “turn out right” (whatever that is)

and God is the parent figure in this home, wasn't it His fault that His children did *not* "turn out right"?

If Proverbs 22:6 is a guarantee for all parents, why wasn't it a guarantee for the Author of the Book?

You aren't willing to say it was God's fault, are you?

You're exactly right, because it *wasn't* God's fault. And since it wasn't His fault as the parental figure, it's not *your* fault when your child makes an unwise choice, either. Let this settle in for a moment.

"But I *want* my child to turn out right," you say.

Of course. But that doesn't mean ensuring your child "turns out right" belongs on your job description.

"But—"

I hear you. That's your prayer, hope, desire as a parent. Yes, and you would do anything for your child. It's still *not* your *job*. Attempting to ensure that your child turns out right, or attaching your sense of competence as a parent to that goal, is where things go awry. It's *not* listed on an accurate job description for a mom or a dad.

So trash the notion that it's your job to make your preschooler turn out right. Doing so is the beginning of low-pressure parenting.

Your Second Impossible Mission

The second big responsibility that often sneaks into our job descriptions as parents is this:

"IT'S YOUR JOB TO MAKE SURE YOU DO
EVERYTHING RIGHT (PERFECTLY)."

Ooh. Even more pressure. Feel the stress?

You don't need to. God is perfect; you and I aren't. The good news is perfection is *not* on our job description. It's *not* required that you do everything correctly, know exactly what to do in every circumstance, or never make a mistake. That task is *not* on the *do* list.

“But I *want* to parent correctly!” you insist.

Great. But that's *not* part of your job description. God is not looking down from heaven with a clipboard in hand, evaluating your every move to see if you're perfect. Why? Because He already knows we're not perfect (and fully accepts us anyway).

Even if you are perfect in your parenting (as God was in the Garden of Eden), your child may still choose foolish things (as Adam and Eve did). On the other hand, you may struggle in your parenting through every stage of your child's development and he may still end up making wise, godly choices.

Que sera, sera.

In the Latin culture, where I spent my early years growing up as a missionary's kid, there was a philosophy regarding life and circumstances that was summed up in the phrase “*Que sera, sera*”—“What will be, will be.” The deep influences of that culture help me see the truth in the following example.

As a concerned and competent parent with a young child's birthday party on the calendar:

1. You can be the best party planner on the block (doing it right).
2. You can put together the best birthday party a

three-year-old has ever been to (doing the right thing again).

3. You can purchase the highest-quality party favors and gifts, and the healthiest snacks money can buy (doing it right and having everything under control).
4. But if a snowstorm hits town, the power goes out, and everyone invited is homebound with two feet of snow piled in front of their garage doors, then your daughter's "best birthday party in the world" is canceled. Or the day before the big party, the birthday girl's older brother tests positive for strep throat and you have to disinvite everybody.

Que sera, sera.

You were wise and responsible. You did everything correctly. You controlled all the things that were yours to control. You are absolutely the best party planner on the block, no questions asked. Yet you still can't *make sure* the weather cooperates or your child stays free from strep throat—or that circumstances or children "turn out right." There is no guarantee, even though you did everything perfectly. It's *not* in your job description.

So scrap the notion that it's your job to do everything "right." Remember, we're talking about low-pressure parenting. Jesus was right in John 8:32 when He told us, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." He was talking about His identity as God's Son, yet His statement is no less true for the rest of life. Knowing and understanding the truth—grasping reality—is what sets you free from the inaccurate expectations on your parental job description.

Our culture overemphasizes success—even in parenting. In an attempt to ensure your child will turn out right, you can be lured into grabbing control over the wrong things.

Most of us don't want to be control freaks, just "in control" enough to ensure our kids turn out to be responsible citizens and follow God with all their hearts. We think that if we control, we can make things turn out the way we want. We can be happy and avoid pain or displeasure.

Sounds good to me! you might think.

If only that were true.

You may not recognize it at first, because it seems like you can control your preschooler. Yes, it truly seems like you can—sometimes.

Remember When

Think about all the things you used to control when your child was an infant. You could schedule and regulate bedtime and bath time. You decided the type of food offered—though your baby ultimately decided what stayed in his mouth!

It's easy to think (a) you *can* control your child, and (b) controlling him actually *is* your job. With infants this works—mostly because they're too small to exert much active outright rebellion. Control-driven conflicts in parent-child relationships seem nonexistent—until your infant begins toddling. Then conflicts can become endless, and—if you follow a faulty job description—the pressure of parenting will really escalate.

But who has the final say about most of these life choices? Here's where things get confusing. As a parent you think,

Well, it's me, of course. I'm the parent and I'm the boss. The kicker, though, is that while you *are* the boss, ultimately it's your toddler who has the final say-so. Not so much with words, mind you, but with her behavior.

As she grows, so does her ability to exert her independence. Independence she uses to obey or disobey. Conflicts over the child's choice versus the parents' choice build and often become fully evident when age two arrives, if not before.

If you're like me, you're a concerned, loving parent desperate for your kids to turn out right, and you're willing to do whatever you can to make that happen.

Good for you. But you may be tricked into thinking the way to do that is by controlling your child. It's not. There's a huge difference between controlling your child's *environment* and attempting to control *her*. That's where this book comes in.

Your own expectations, the advice of others (expert or otherwise), and comparison with other families—all these factors put pressure on you and allow control issues to surface. The result—the kinds of struggles we'll be addressing realistically in the following pages.

A woman I'll call Jennifer would have benefited from understanding the concept of control. She had two daughters and one son, all about the same age as our two girls. As we got to know Jennifer, it became obvious that she was driven, talented, and success minded. It was also clear that she was determined to make sure her girls achieved great things. An elite swimmer in her youth, Jennifer never realized her dream of competing in the Olympics. She also got pregnant before

her wedding and longed to redeem herself in the Christian community's eyes for her "one failure."

From the time her girls were preschoolers Jennifer pushed them, vowing that one was going to be the family Olympic swimmer (at any cost). The other was to be a sports physician for a professional sports team. That was just the way it was going to be. It didn't matter what either girl wanted.

"Besides," Jennifer told us, "they're too young and immature to know what's good for them."

The "future doctor" told my daughter, "I don't like it! Mommy doesn't even listen to what I want." This came from a *preschooler*. It's amazing how much kids pick up at a very young age.

As for her sister, the "future Olympian" turned all the pressure inward and had countless medical complications all through her childhood years. Doctors blamed stress, which Jennifer vehemently denied. Because of her *My girls have to turn out right* and *I have to do everything right* thinking, she wounded her daughters deeply their entire childhood.

Her girls are adults now. There is no Olympic swimmer in the family. There is no medical doctor, either. Mom didn't get either of the "successes" she pushed so relentlessly for. Last I heard, Jennifer's relationship with her now-adult daughters is strained at best.

Sad.

How You Think About Parenting

What do you assume a parent's job should be? Do you feel pressure to be the perfect parent or make sure your child

“turns out right”? Do you feel the pressure not to parent the way you were parented?

To understand your assumptions, it helps to understand what you’ve been telling yourself. Your present thinking patterns grew out of your life experiences. And those experiences affected your thinking and decision making long before you ever thought of becoming a parent.

Your brain is complex. So to keep things simple, let’s compare your brain to a jukebox. (I know, jukeboxes have been replaced by smart phones and streaming music, but today they’re vintage and coming back into vogue.) An old-fashioned jukebox holds a wide variety of vinyl records, so imagine that each “record” in your brain’s “jukebox” contains a brief phrase known as a *belief*.

belief \ bee 'leaf \ noun:

A statement of what you think is fact; a conclusion you hold about an object or circumstance you face—your perception.

You have beliefs about every subject under the sun. You use them every day to make sense of life. They’re your “world-view”—all on a collection of records in your brain.

Most of your beliefs were recorded, cataloged, and stored in your jukebox during the first seven to ten years of your life. Here are a few examples of what I mean:

- “Boys are more important than girls.”
- “Yellow is a stupid color for a truck, or anything for that matter.”

Do You Have to Make Them Turn Out Right?

- “All dogs bite.”
- “No matter what I do, it won’t be good enough.”
- “Dogs make better pets than cats.”
- “Anything below fifty degrees is too cold to be outside.”
- “Crunchy peanut butter is better than smooth.”
- “Do it right the first time or you’re a failure.”

Illusions in Our Thinking

Looking at your thinking is essential to your parenting. Errors, wrong thinking, skewed beliefs, and misconceptions lie at the root of many, if not most, conflicts. That’s certainly true about parenting.

The formula for sanity is:

Truth, accuracy, reality = freedom, sanity, stress-free living (healthy thinking).

The formula for insanity is just the opposite:

Lies, inaccuracy, vagueness, errors = bondage, insanity, excessive stress (unhealthy thinking).

Here’s where the pressures begin building long before you even know it. So this is a good place to start—thinking more accurately about this whole topic in order to undo common misconceptions about your role as a parent.

Regardless of how different your record collection may be from mine, we all have one that sounds pretty much the same. It says, *All my records, all my beliefs, are true. I can even verify them with real-life experiences if I have to.*

We're quite defensive about our collection too. Let's say I have the belief that "all dogs bite" in my mental jukebox. Is that record accurate?

"No, it's not."

But my defenses shout, *Do you think I'm stupid? I wouldn't believe a lie! I'm intelligent! I know what's right and true, and I can back it up with bite marks right here on my arm. See?* While I'm defensive with scars and all, my belief about dogs is still wrong and you're still correct.

When there are two parents in the picture (whether married, divorced, blended family, or whatever) there are *two* jukeboxes. This situation doubles the likelihood of error, wrong thinking, skewed beliefs, and misconceptions. It can also create a scenario where two different records are playing at the same time, both vying to be listened to—making for a not-so-harmonious-sounding environment. It also means there are *two* "But I'm right" records playing.

Be courageous and look at your thinking honestly. You may find some of your records are a bit warped and/or badly scratched. Some of your conclusions about what a parent is supposed to be or do may be based on incomplete information. Some of your records may need to be cleaned up, updated, or replaced altogether (like "All dogs bite"). This book will help you do that with records involving the subject of parenting.

When that happens, unnecessary pressures will come off your shoulders. Parenting may not become stress-free, but it will be clearer, doable, and more enjoyable. That's why the truth is so important, even in parenting—*especially* when it comes to parenting. The sooner you know the truth, the sooner you *and* your child will be free.

Do You Have to Make Them Turn Out Right?

So shrink your job description. Toss these two moldy oldies from your jukebox:

It's your job to make sure your child turns out right.

It's your job to make sure you do everything perfectly.

Let's start over, creating your *real* job description as a parent. Helping you do that is *my* job description, as you'll see next.