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# **HOPE** FOR **PARENTS OF** **TROUBLED** TEENS

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO  
GETTING THEM BACK ON TRACK

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**CONNIE RAE**

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## Where Did This Kid Come From, Anyway?

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# 1

**W**e were driving to church—just my husband and I. Silently. Finally, I said, “Have we been too hard? Too strict? Too unbending? Maybe we should have given in more, let him do some things even if we weren’t comfortable with them.”

More silence. Then my husband replied, “He did everything he wanted to do—whether we OK’d it or not. Look where it got him. What else could we have done? What could we have done differently and still been true to our convictions?”

More silence. We were both thinking. Wondering. Steve was safe for the moment—in the county jail. It was amazing how the worries lifted when we knew where he was and that he couldn’t get into more trouble—for the time being. He was remorseful. Again.

This was the third, or was it the fourth time he was incarcerated? The first times had been to juvenile detention. We celebrated his eighteenth birthday in a tiny room in juvenile hall—and then they moved him across the street to the county jail.

We were the ones responsible for his first arrest. After several incidents, promises made and broken, we went to the juvenile authorities and asked them to help us. They did. They arrested

him and confined him. He was angry. The minute he got out, on probation with all kinds of restrictions, he was off to be with his friends—the same ones he was getting into trouble with. Then it was only a matter of time before he was picked up again—for possession of marijuana.

Steve had written checks on our family's meager bank account. He'd pawned family items. He'd "borrowed" his father's truck to run around in when he was supposed to be in school. He didn't have a license. His father taught in the junior high school across the street from the high school. Many times he left at the end of the day thinking he had parked his truck in one place and found it in another. Shaking his head, he blew it off to poor memory.

Then there was the day when he pulled into a neighborhood gas station to fill up the tank. "Man, your truck must really burn up the gas. Your son was just in here and filled it."

We had prayed that he would not get away with anything—and God honored our prayer. At one point we sat in the office of the probation officer (PO) with our son, hoping to find a way to stop this rush to destruction. He was in big trouble now. The PO was giving him the opportunity to confess to everything he had ever done, for immunity. Our son looked at us and with a solemn shake of his head, said, "They know *everything* I have ever done"; and then to us, "Have I missed anything?" We didn't think so. God was faithful, and we made sure our son and the probation officer knew it.

Out of jail once again, we helped him get a job. We let him be home again, as he earnestly attempted to get his life on track. But the temptations were too great, the will too weak, and he was back in trouble again.

Thanksgiving Eve, middle of the night, we received a phone call from the sheriff's office. He had been arrested, once again, for possession of marijuana. We were expecting a houseful of family and friends for Thanksgiving dinner. We were heartbroken, embarrassed, frightened, and we still had to "entertain."

It was hard to tell the family again. Everyone had hoped and prayed he was finally on the way to getting it together. We feared differently, but still we hoped. Still we prayed, "Whatever it takes."

So here we were.

The last time we had been in court with our son, the judge had said he didn't ever want to see him again before his desk. He made it clear that if there *was* a next time, he would go away for a long time.

Our son had had a three-year history of forging checks, auto theft, running away—all crimes within the family. We could have overlooked them. We could have excused them. We could have threatened and required restitution. In fact, we did all of those things. Nothing made a difference. We went to the authorities for backup, to force him into compliance—and now he was facing real prison time. We were fearful. We were remorseful. We wondered if our “righteousness” had condemned our son to imprisonment with felons, murderers, and rapists. What had we done?

## Hope Becomes Reality

Today, Steve has been married more than twenty-five years and is the father of two grown children. He has been a successful businessman, an entrepreneur, a planner, and a developer. He is a good man. He honors his father and his mother and appreciates his siblings and extended family. Life has not always been easy. He learned his first trade while in a nine-month drug treatment program—the alternative to prison time. We hired a lawyer who very directly put it to Steve: prison or treatment program. You choose. He chose the treatment program with no hope that it would make a difference for him.

We were so fearful he would bolt again that we picked him up at the county jailhouse door, locked him in the backseat of the car (child locks!), held onto him from both sides while we stopped at the local music store to buy him a guitar (Christmas present), and three hours later, delivered him into the hands of the intake person at the treatment center. He knew he was free to leave at any time, but the moment he would do so, an all-points bulletin would be issued for his arrest, and his next stop would be prison. He stayed.

Two weeks after entering the program, they allowed him to call home—*our* Christmas present. “Mom, Dad, I want you to know I’ve turned my life over to Christ. I’m going to make it. I’ll stay here as long as it takes.” It took nine months.

## Our Children Are Unique

Sometimes life seems so unfair. Just about the time we feel we are “getting it all together,” along comes a precious little bundle of joy and energy who doesn’t necessarily live up to our expectations. If we already have a child who is totally delightful (yes, they do exist!), the shock may be doubly staggering. And then we compare ourselves to that “perfect” family who has only happy, manageable children—or at least appears to. And we wonder.

It would be wonderful if all newborns were indeed a *tabula rasa*, as John Locke suggested back in the 1600s—a blank sheet of paper, upon which experience writes. We could be perfect parents, imprinting only the best things on our children’s absorbent little minds, and they would all turn out wonderfully well. Or would they? What a burden to put upon the parents of the world!

No, God had a different plan. Each of our children is born with a unique and many-faceted personality. Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family said it this way: “Just as surely as some children are naturally compliant, there are others who seem to be defiant upon exit from the womb. They come into the world smoking a cigar and yelling about the temperature in the delivery room and the incompetence of the nursing staff. They expect meals to be served the instant they are ordered, and they demand every moment of mother’s time.”<sup>1</sup>

Most parents of more than one child are well aware of their children’s temperament differences—especially the differences that are annoying or that cause family disturbances. But sometimes, in the dailiness of living, we lose sight of the individuality of the

1. James Dobson, *The New Strong-Willed Child* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972).

child. We find ourselves fighting with behaviors that might represent some special character trait that needs to be recognized and developed into a strength. In the immature expression of that trait, we find ourselves irritated and frustrated, so instead of analyzing the temperament of the child, we begin to kill something that might be quite important in years to come.

Dr. Roger Williams commented in his book *You Are Extraordinary* on a study that was done by the Menninger Foundation.<sup>2</sup> One hundred twenty-eight babies were observed from one month of age until almost eight months of age. Everything about them was watched carefully, from diaper habits to feeding, sleeping, playing, crying, bathing. Marked personality differences showed up as soon as they could be observed. Some babies were bold. Others were shy. Some reacted quickly to stimuli. Others didn't even seem to notice. Some could tolerate tension and frustration. Others fell apart. These were all babies considered "normal" in every sense of the word.

This distinctiveness, this uniqueness of the individual stays with each of our children as they mature. In spite of the fact that we make bold attempts to mold them into a particular pattern of our choice and convenience, they remain "who they are." Maybe if we could recognize "who they are" when they are small, we might avoid certain problems when they are bigger.

### ***Training Our Children, for Better or Worse***

Many parents quote Proverbs 22:6 to assure themselves that if they teach their children Christian ways, they will eventually come back to their early training. But this Scripture can also be taken as a warning: "Train up a child in the way he should go [and in keeping with his individual gift or bent], and when he is old he will not depart from it." This implies that if we are careful to discover the uniqueness that lies within our child and use that individuality

2. Roger Williams, *You Are Extraordinary* (New York: Pyramid Publications, 1976).

as a tool in our parenting, we will make a considerable positive impact on our child's life.

On the other hand, we can train our children *negatively* as well. If we neglect to train carefully, considering the individual needs of a particular youngster, we will unintentionally train them to go the wrong way. The impact of this kind of training may reach us when our children reach adolescence.

Psalm 139:13–18 describes the beauty of our individuality before God. The psalmist praises God for the fearful and awesome wonder of his birth. He speaks of being “intricately and curiously wrought [as if embroidered with various colors]” (v. 15). He marvels at the revelation that God’s eyes saw his “unformed substance, and in Your book all the days [of my life] were written before ever they took shape, when as yet there was none of them” (v. 16). He wonders at the innumerable thoughts of God toward him, and revels in the knowledge that God loves him.

In the wisdom of God, each of our children has been born with a special capacity to love and serve God, and has been given the uniqueness of temperament to do the job well.

As parents, we often despair at the willfulness, the cockiness, the deceitfulness, the rebellious-type spirit we have seen in certain of our children. But maybe we have misinterpreted and mishandled an independent, creative, potential leader by our lack of understanding.

Another question parents often ask is how these kids can be so different when we’ve raised them basically the same way. Given the extraordinary differences we find in children, it is no wonder they do not, cannot, respond to similar circumstances in similar ways. Each brings his own distinctive interpretation to life situations and to his own unique needs. How each child perceives his wants being met will have a major effect on his understanding of his life.

### ***Individualized Spaces***

In addition to inborn personality traits, each child has certain specific adjustments to make as a direct result of his particular

situation. Birth order in the family, genders of siblings, the number of children in the family, the multiple complexities of relationships between parents and children—all give each child a very individualized space within the family unit.

Also, parents change. Family structures change. Environments change. Sometimes families change drastically in cases of separation, divorce, or death. All of these have a direct influence on each of the children in our home—but the message of that influence may be different for each child.

### ***Stages of Child Growth and Development***

Just as each of our children is different from the others, so he is, paradoxically, very much the same in his stages of growing up. A quick course in Child Growth and Development might look something like this:<sup>3</sup>

BABIES	... Beautiful	... Bawling
ONES	... Winsome	... Warring
TWOS	... Tender	... Terrible
THREES	... Trusting	... Trying
FOURS	... Fun	... Fearful
FIVES	... Fabulous	... Fighting
SIX	... Sensitive	... Slugging
SEVEN	... Serious	... Sour
EIGHT	... Active	... Aching
NINE	... Nice	... Naughty
TEN	... Terrific	... Tempestuous
ELEVEN	... Evolving	... Escaping
TWELVE	... Tantalizing	... Troubled
TEENS	... Terrific	... TERRIFYING!

Some children seem to always be on the “good” side of the diagram, with maybe an occasional slip over to the “not-so-good.”

3. Chart adapted from Frances L. Ilg and Louise Bates Ames, *The Gesell Institute's Child Behavior: From Birth to Ten* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955).

Others never seem to leave the “far right,” and their parents are always coping with behavior that leaves them exhausted both mentally and physically, but especially emotionally. Still other children move back and forth between “easy-to-live-with” and “hard-to-live-with” relatively smoothly.

Each of these one-word descriptions is an overgeneralization, but it represents realistic and normal behavior for these general age categories. Within these categories, children respond to life and to circumstances depending upon their individual temperament, their own particular pattern of growth and general development—and even the time of day!

## Parenting Styles

An equally important factor that influences our children’s decisions and attitudes is the philosophy of child-rearing that each parent, individually, brings to the family. Most parents train their children in a way that seems comfortable to them. In the midst of much confusing and even contradicting “advice” from the experts (and not-so-expert), most mothers and fathers still develop their own way of dealing with their children. They may completely accept the way they were raised and follow through with their own children. Or they may completely reject their parents’ practices, or fall somewhere in between. Whatever they end up doing, the style of parenting that emerges will have a strong influence on the development of each of their children.

Four general styles of parenting have been observed, with each style influencing children in specific ways.

The “*Authoritarian*” parent is one who demands complete control over his child. While they may justify this approach in various ways, the underlying motivation is often a desire to control, or fear that something will happen to the child, or the belief that the child is incapable of taking care of himself. The child often responds with what appears to be an ideal nature. He is obedient, well-behaved, and easy to get along with. But often there is an unnoticed volcano

growing beneath the surface because the child may not be allowed to express himself or grow naturally into an independent person. His good behavior may be caused by fear. This child may begin to make his own decisions as soon as he realizes his parents can't control him anymore. And his dependency on others to make decisions for him could put him in situations where he will "go along with the crowd" rather than use good judgment.

The "*Autocratic*" parent is similar to the authoritarian parent, but is characterized by a more impatient and demanding attitude. It's the "Do it yesterday" approach paired with inconsiderate and inconsistent parental control. Motives are often selfish and self-centered, expecting much but giving little to help the child grow to independence. The child may respond with submissive behavior, but not without a fight. He often looks sullen or morose—not a very pleasant personality to be around. He may even develop nervous tics or neurotic behavior and may be dependent on someone else to run his life. When he gets old enough, he may find very specific ways to assert his immature independence and intentionally hurt or embarrass his parents.

The "*Indifferent*" parent is not given this label because of a lack of love for his child. This parent may indeed care and be concerned for his child's welfare, but is so preoccupied with his own life pursuits that he has little time or energy to give to his growing offspring. He allows the child much freedom and little restraint. He gives little affection or signs of caring. Or, he periodically shows a lot of attention and then withdraws again to his own interests. The child almost appears to be raising himself. Depending on the quality of the environment he is living in at school, church, and home, and the character of other significant persons in his life, he may get along quite well. But often there is an underlying feeling of resentment and anger toward any proposed authority over his life—school, the law, anyone in supervision over him. He may be argumentative, a "fighter," a poor student, rebellious. If he doesn't have someone in his life he can relate to in a positive way, he may become delinquent.

The "*Democratic*" parent looks good on paper. Mom and Dad are willing to listen and discuss problems. They encourage the child

to express his feelings about family relationships. They accept the child's right to make decisions about matters that involve him and trust him to make good judgments about his personal behavior. The child is usually friendly, basically cooperative, expressive, filled with good ideas, and motivated to *do* and to *be*. He is willing to face new challenges and even looks for them. However, the democratic parents who do not combine democracy with a clear understanding of a child's immaturity and the need for a certain degree of parental authority, could have trouble maintaining their own preferences regarding their child's activities through the teen years.

It is important that there is a good balance between control and autonomy, between warmth and a lack of concern, for the child to be balanced in his approach to life.

Obviously, the most effective style of parenting is one that helps free each individual child to become his own best person. At first it may seem simple to analyze and adjust a parenting style to our children's advantage. However, there's a catch! Parents are also caught in the bind of their *own* personhood, their relationship to one another in the marriage, and to possible contradictions in philosophies of discipline and child-rearing. In addition, the individual temperaments of our children cause us to react in different ways. We may use different patterns of parenting with each of our children.

Perhaps the greatest reason to be aware of parenting styles is to help us analyze our responses to each of our children, individually, and to discover how we may have been using a mode of interaction with one or several of our children that has not only been ineffective, but may have contributed to some of our problems. *It is never too late* to make changes. Especially if we can communicate our lack of understanding to that particular child, ask his forgiveness, and make a new start.

## **Scriptural Advice for Raising Our Children**

The Scriptures give many suggestions for child-rearing. Unfortunately, some parents have misunderstood what they have read or

been told, and have done damage to their children's psyche in the process. Some portions of biblical truth, taken out of context or without regard to *other* truths, can be misleading.

For example, one difficult passage of Scripture is Proverbs 23:13–14: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod and save them from death” (NIV). Some well-meaning but ill-informed parents have actually made a parental practice of whipping their children regularly for the most minor of infractions because they earnestly believe it is God's will. These same parents are dismayed when their children finally grow old enough to fight back—in whatever way they can.

We can find the real meaning of that particular scriptural admonition when we read the context. The reluctant, or “detached,” parent is admonished not to withhold discipline from the child. The parent has not been doing his job, and while discipline implies training and a correction of steps, it also implies that punishment may sometimes be necessary. The “rod” the passage refers to is the reed-like grass found so abundantly in the marshy places of Palestine. Like grandmother's “green stick,” it could give a stinging reminder without bruising the body. Parents need to know that sometimes loving our children means giving them temporary pain. They also need to know and understand the difference between a loving step of correction and the harsh, emotional, judgmental bruising of the body *and* the spirit.

### ***The Gift of the Parents' Faith***

The most precious gift we can give our children is that of ourselves and our time. In Deuteronomy 6:5–9, God gives parents the formula for raising children who will be most likely to accept their parents' faith. “You (*mom and dad*) shall love the Lord your God with all your [mind and] heart. . . . And these words . . . shall be [first] in your [own] minds and hearts; [then] you shall whet and sharpen them so as to make them penetrate, and teach and impress them diligently upon the [minds and] hearts of your children” (vv. 5–7, italics added).

How do we “whet and sharpen” the words of faith and belief in God so as to make them penetrate into the depths of our children’s hearts? The words *whet* and *sharpen* have some very appropriate meanings. *Whet*, among other things, means “to stimulate the appetite.” It means to make our children want what we have. It also means “to kindle” or “to quicken”—to stir up action of some sort. Faith causes us to act in response to the truths we believe. The word *sharpen* challenges us to be clear and distinct in the example we set before our children—to be keen, eager, wide-awake, watchful, and vigilant in the ways we relate to our family.

It appears that our faith in God, as parents, must be more than a “hand-me-down.” It must be active. But our actions must have words to go with them, because the next words in Deuteronomy tell us that we must “talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up” (v. 7). Furthermore, our faith and belief must be obvious to all: “Bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets (forehead bands) between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (vv. 8–9).

### ***Answering to God***

But even then there are no guarantees. Deuteronomy goes on to give the warning: “Then beware lest you forget the Lord” (6:12). There are many Scriptures that give warning to willful and rebellious children. God, in His infinite love and sense of fair play, has given each of us the power of choice—the choice to love and serve Him, or *not*. We must recognize and accept the fact that our children have a choice as well. They will, each one individually, leave the comfortable place of parental authority and stand before God, alone, to make that decision. Our job as parents is not only to help them progress *toward* Him but also to avoid *hindering* them from establishing a one-on-one relationship with Christ as their Lord and Savior.

“Fathers, do not irritate and provoke your children to anger [do not exasperate them to resentment], but rear them [tenderly] in the training and discipline and the counsel and admonition of the

Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). (That goes for mothers, too.) Oh that we could all manage to daily live that Scripture in our relationships with our children! But we are also human. We have our bad days and good days. And some of those days are hard on our children.

### ***Going Beyond the “Parenting” Verses***

As parents, we must realize that *all* of Scripture is our source of life and counsel. Too often, we fail to understand that what God’s Word says to us about relationships in general *also* applies to our children. For example, we could paraphrase Matthew 5:23–24: “When you come to church and remember that your child has any grievance against you, *leave the church* and go make peace with your child! Then come back to church and present yourself to God.”

Matthew 18:15, paraphrased, might read: “If your child wrongs you, show him his fault, *between you and him alone.*”

Wise parenting is many things. But perhaps most important, it is a spirit of humility. We must be ready to admit our own shortcomings to our children. We need to ask their forgiveness when it is called for. We must be real people in all things. We must be ready to forgive our child, even if that child is not asking our forgiveness.

Our children need many things from us. They need our love, our acceptance, our careful discipline, and our forgiveness. Each of our children is a special gift from God. The gift needs a lot of tender care—sometimes more than we are prepared to give because of our own unmet needs and deficiencies in character.

### **Parent Pain**

Sometimes we wonder: Why *this* child? Why *me*, Lord? We truly tried, but we just couldn’t make it work. Maybe God made a mistake. Maybe *we* made a mistake. This child should never have been born.

Years ago, I sat in a group of people and cried inside when I heard a mother say, “We went through hell for eight years. The only relief we got was when he died.”

Parents of wayward children often vacillate between wishing their child out of their lives and fearing he will leave them. There is no relief, only moments less painful than others.

We *do* ask the question “Why?” many times over. Sometimes we think we know why, which usually becomes guilt over some small, or large, thing we remember we did to that child in the process of his growing up. There are no easy human answers to the *why*. But there is an answer from God.

### ***God Has a Plan***

The Scriptures remind us over and over that God is in charge. Many parents can quote Romans 8:28 (KJV)—“And we know that all things work together for good . . .”—and do it frequently in the midst of their troubles. But in isolating that particular verse of Scripture, we miss the intended message. Yes, all things *do* work together for our good in the overall providential plan of God; and all things that happen in our lives *are* fitting into a plan that God ordained before the foundation of the earth. But what we miss is that in the working out of that plan, the “good” is for us to be molded into the very image and character of Jesus Christ—to share *inwardly* His likeness. That confirmation comes for us in verse 29: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (KJV). The development of our *inward* character, the mind of Christ—the loving, accepting, forgiving spirit—seems to be best forged through painful experiences in which we are forced to face realities, to love, to accept, and to forgive.

### ***God Shows Himself Strong in Our Weakness***

There’s another aspect that needs to be considered. When my own children were small, I had a lot of opinions about parents whose teenagers were “in trouble” all the time, or were just plain trouble. I have few opinions anymore. I have empathy, understanding, and a desire to ease their hurts and fears. I want to help them

come victoriously through these experiences with a deepened trust in God and a more mature Christian character. The apostle Paul alludes to this idea in 2 Corinthians 12:6–7: “Should I desire to boast, I shall not be a witless braggart, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I abstain [from it] so that no one may form a higher estimate of me than [is justified by] what he sees in me or hears from me. And to keep me from being puffed up and too much elated by the exceeding greatness (preeminence) of these revelations, there was given me a thorn (a splinter) in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to rack and buffet and harass me, to keep me from being excessively exalted.” The circumstances are different, but the main issue is similar. Paul had a problem he couldn’t deal with. There has been much speculation as to what his difficulty was, but that’s not important. The important thing is God’s answer to Paul’s *why*.

Paul begged for release. Sound familiar? God replied, “My grace (My favor and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you [sufficient against any danger and enables you to bear the trouble manfully]; for My strength and power are made perfect (fulfilled and completed) and show themselves most effective in [your] weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). That was enough for Paul. But, I imagine, not without some struggle. He settled into the attitude of “when I am weak [in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in divine strength)” (v. 10).

Does this mean God planned these dreadful things for me and my child? No. But God allowed these things to happen that we might experience the truth of freedom and what it costs outside the will of God. And, He promises to be for us what we cannot be in our humanness. Through these experiences, we can come to know, unlike in any other way, what it means to rest in the peace of God.

### ***Using Our Sorrows to Help Others***

There’s another reason for our agonizing experiences. Isaiah 61:1–3 speaks of Jesus and the ministry He was to bring—healing the brokenhearted, opening the prisons to proclaim liberty and freedom to physical and spiritual captives—a ministry of comfort,

reconciliation, and restoration. Jesus ministers to us in our sorrow so that we might know how to minister to others in their sorrow. Second Corinthians 1:3–4 explains to us that God is the source of all comfort and encouragement. He consoles and comforts and encourages us in every trouble so that we may also be able to comfort others with the same kind of loving care we received from God.

Jesus in us, as parents, can reach out to those who are hurting. He assures us in John 14:12 that we will carry on His ministry and do even greater things because of the mystery of God's Holy Spirit within us. Jesus was, in a sense, limited in His earthly ministry. He touched lives where He was and on several occasions even where He *wasn't*. But the power of God's Spirit living and loving through His children, is multiplied, magnified, and limited only by our inability to see beyond our own personal tragedies.

### ***God Knows What We Need to Grow***

God knows what we need to become like Him. He knows what our *children* need to become like Him. He puts our individualities and uniqueness together in order to help us all become more like Him. The end purpose? "That they may be called oaks of righteousness . . . the planting of the Lord, *that He may be glorified*" (Isaiah 61:3, emphasis added).

Our failures become the tools for His miracles. Why *this* child in *this* family? Perhaps this is the only place this particular child can find roots that will eventually bring him back into God's family. There may be pain for a time. But there will also be a time of joy. Take courage, Mom and Dad. Resolve to take positive steps that will give your lives beauty and solidity that will draw that child back to you, and to God. Start now.

### **Something to Do**

1. Start with a blank sheet of paper, one for each of your children. Write each child's name at the top of the page. Take at least fifteen minutes to center your thinking on each

individual child. Write words and phrases that come to your mind describing that child—personality characteristics, interests, character strengths, weaknesses, things that “bug” you, things that make you proud, things that scare you—be as thorough as you can be.

2. Turn the paper over, and again put the individual child’s name at the top of the page. Take another fifteen minutes and zero in on how you deal with this child when he doesn’t live up to your expectations. Think of a specific example when you were angry or upset and were not pleased with the results of your discipline. Think of another example when you were able to control your own emotions enough to feel you had accomplished something with this child. Can you own one of the parenting styles (outlined in this chapter), maybe reluctantly, because of some of the phrases you used to describe this child?
3. Pray. Ask God to give you wisdom to know how to deal with each child as an individual. If you recognize areas where you have been neglectful or overly rigid, or anything in between, ask God to make you aware of how you may have hurt this particular child and how you can regain his trust and respect.
4. Write a letter to each of your children. Tell them of your hopes and dreams for them. Tell them of your prayers for them. Explain what you have been doing in these exercises and ask them for forgiveness, if necessary. Remind them that you are not perfect and you know it. Remind them that you love them. Encourage them to be the best of who they were created to be—even if it may be very different from your own dreams for their future. Give them the awareness that you will accept them for who they are and who they choose to become. Hold on to that letter.
5. Invite each of your children out with you, alone. Share the contents of the letter. Be prepared for rejection, disinterest, even accusation. But also be prepared for tears of relief,

expressions of love and warmth, and promises. Remember, this is only a beginning. You may not get the response you hoped for. But you will clear the stage for God to work in that child's life with a freedom that may not have been there before. Be honest with your child. You may "backslide." You may *forget* in a moment of frustration and anger all of the good things you said you'd do or *not* do. Ask your child to be patient with you. Let him know that you want the best for him, and you want the best for your family. Maybe you can't all agree on what is best right now, and those areas of disagreement cause conflict. Be real. Be honest. Seek your child's respect. Most important, decide now that you will never quit. You will sacrificially love and be a parent to this child as long as it takes to get his life on track—and then forevermore.

## Prayer

*God, my Father, the perfect Father, the perfect Mother. Teach me to be more like you. Teach my child through me. And may this child come to know you and love you and serve you. Use his uniqueness to bring honor and praise to you. And use my uniqueness to bring honor and praise to you. Amen.*