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. . . ABOUT LIFE LINES . . .

The Life Lines series is designed for *real* people in *real* life situations. Written by published authors who are experts in their field, each book covers a different topic and includes:

- information you need, in a quick and easy-to-read format
- practical advice and encouragement from someone who's been there
- "life support"—hands-on tips to give you immediate help for the problems you're facing
- "healthy habits"—long-term strategies that will enrich your life
- inspiring Bible verses
- lists of additional resources—books, Web sites, videos, and seminars to keep you headed on the right path

Life Lines is a joint effort from Marriage Alive International and Smalley Relationship Center. Marriage Alive founders and directors David and Claudia Arp serve as general editors.

Whether you need assistance for an everyday situation, a life transition, or a crisis period, or you're just looking for a friend to come alongside you, Life Lines offers wise, compassionate counsel from someone who can help. This series will connect with you, inspire you, and give you tools that will change your life—for the better!

Titles in the series:

Life Lines: Connecting with Your Husband—Gary Smalley

Life Lines: Connecting with Your Wife—Barbara Rosberg

Life Lines: New Baby Stress—David and Claudia Arp

Life Lines: Survival Tips for Parents of Preschoolers—Becky
Freeman

Life Lines: Communicating with Your Teen—Greg and Michael
Smalley

Life Lines: Making Wise Life Choices—John Trent

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. . . INTRODUCTION . . .

Do you ever wonder . . .

- how “sleeping in” came to mean actually making it until the late hour of 7:00 A.M. before being awakened by the *pitter-patter* of noisy preschooler feet?
- what happened to the days when you could sit down and read a whole magazine article or a one-page devotional without being interrupted six times?
- if you’ll ever again be able to take a ten-minute shower without a small visitor entering the bathroom?
- when you’ll get dressed for church in an ensemble that doesn’t include jelly smears and Barney Band-Aids?
- when you’ll be able to walk through your house barefoot in the dark without stepping on Legos or those tiny Barbies?

Your life has never been the same since you brought that new baby into your house, and the challenges just keep coming. If your little bundle of adventure is now a fast-moving, curious, talkative two-, three-, or

four-year-old, you're at the peak period of parent frustration. These are the days when you can't blink without opening your eyes to find your little one climbing the garden trellis or experimenting with permanent markers. These are the days when you can't finish a cup of coffee—or an entire thought—without your little one requiring your attention to approve his latest daring feat or to kiss her most recent boo-boo. These are the days when Mommy and Daddy's fund of ideas for worthwhile pastimes runs far shorter than their preschooler's energy and desire for more!

But even when you run out of steam—and ideas—by 11:30 A.M., you want what's best for your preschool-aged child—and it costs you. It costs your time, attention, creativity, and energy—when sometimes there are other priorities battling for that same time, attention, creativity, and energy. If ever there was a stage that felt like an unstoppable merry-go-round, these preschool years are that stage.

So what's a parent to do? Get all the help you can—help for making that carousel ride enjoyable while it lasts, and help for stopping it once in a while so both you and your little one can rest.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

If you find yourself at the end of your rope, questioning how to handle the latest tantrum or wondering if

there are any steps you can take to retain your sanity, this book is for you! Whether you stay at home with your children, work at home, or juggle parenting with a job outside the home, you face similar frustrations and challenges. I want to help! So I'm mustering all the strength of my experience and education in order to bring you encouragement and advice.

After all, I am a fellow survivor! Together with my husband, I have managed to live to tell about the ten years we spent raising four preschoolers. Believe it or not, I managed to take careful notes during those years so that I would never forget the love, laughter,

and exhaustion of being a mommy to small children (a full-time job whether or not you also work outside the home). I remember those years like the back of a chubby little peanut-butter-and-jelly-covered hand.

After a ten-year mommy break, I went back to college and completed my degree in elementary and early childhood education. I then taught little ones in public school for a short time—okay, a *very* short time. After a mere nine months of faithful service, I was able to make writing from home a paying proposition and felt glad to get back with my own children during the day.

For this book, I've gathered knowledge about what

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really works from my own experience, and I've also researched and combed through the best parenting books. I've explored child psychology and visited with two kinds of experts. Some were professionals with Ph.D.'s in early childhood; some were fellow parents who could pass on creative suggestions.

So here it is in a nutshell: the best help for parents of preschoolers. Because let's face it, right now you probably do not have time to go to the bathroom alone, much less read through an extensive *Encyclopedia of Proper Parenting*. You could call this a bit of life support for you, the parent.

In these pages, we'll look at two main areas. First, how can you take care of yourself so you'll be a better, less irritable, and more rested parent? We'll look at some "life support" ideas—things you can do immediately to lighten your load—as well as some healthy habits you can develop that will enrich your life in the long run.

Second, we'll look at some of the main dilemmas facing parents of preschoolers and offer some problem-solving ideas. We'll talk about how preschoolers operate, and then we'll touch on potty training, finicky eaters, temper tantrums, and bedtime. I'll give you some tips on how to fill your day with worthwhile pastimes—for both you and your child. Hang on—help is on the way.

• • •

I'm happy to report that every last one of our preschoolers is now a happy, functioning teenager or adult—not that there weren't, as there continue to be, some amazing ups and downs on their way to young adulthood. But we made it—both parents and children! And so will you.

. . . 1 . . .

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Here's a typical day in the life of a stay-at-home parent of a preschooler:

6:43 A.M. She's awakened with the gentle tap-tap-tapping of a small sticky hand on her sleep-laden eyelids. Gingerly, she opens one eye. Though the scene is a little fuzzy (jelly in the eyelashes doesn't help), she can make out one preschooler in sleeper pajamas holding a jar of grape jelly to his chest with his left hand, patting her tenderly with the other dimpled, jelly-coated right hand.

She smiles weakly as this child asks her to help him find the peanut butter.

7:56 A.M. Having inhaled a cup of coffee, she is now standing at the mirror, bearing only a vague resemblance to her former before-kids self, removing grape jelly pats from various and sundry parts of her body.

The challenges of parenting are intense—and unrelenting.

Preschooler is wailing in the time-out chair, where he's been banished for throwing a rabidlike fit when his peanut butter and jelly toast was cut diagonally instead of up and down. She estimates the remainder of his three-minute time-out, wondering if it's safe to risk taking the world's fastest speed-bath—alone. She sighs wistfully for those halcyon days when drawing a hot bubble bath signaled anticipated time alone, not an invitation to a hot-tub party for little people.

11:07 A.M. She opens cupboards and drawers and dumps out the toy box while looking, in vain, for a pound of hamburger she was sure was thawing on the kitchen counter. When she checks on the preschooler playing in the sandbox outside, she's just in time to see him holding the pound of hamburger by one end, giggling as the kitty happily gorges herself on the unexpected treat.

1:14 P.M. She reads *Pat the Bunny* six times, until finally, blessedly, the little fellow falls asleep. Tiptoe-

ing out of the room, she glances back at the child's long lashes, his little round tummy rising and falling with each breath, and dashes back to kiss his soft cheek. Then she tosses the mental coin: Does she take a nap or clean the house that looks as if it's falling down around her ears? She yawns and sinks down beside the resting child, curling her body around his, sucked into the undertow of sleep.

3:22 P.M. On a walk to the park she answers seventy-six questions, all beginning with "Why," "What," or "How." She is a walking encyclopedia of preschooler knowledge: why some worms wear sweaters, why fingers have two elbows, what baby robins eat. Forget *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? If they only had a game show called *Who Wants to Be a Mommy*? she'd win—and big. Keeping a preschooler informed—with age-appropriate answers—takes more stamina and more scientific knowledge than any existing game show, and it requires gargantuan nerves of steel.

5:00 P.M. She makes a stab at a slapdash job of house-keeping and opens a can of SpaghettiOs for dinner (since little Prince Charming made sure Kitty enjoyed tonight's originally planned entree). She hears an ear-shattering clatter—an all-too-familiar noise she's come to dread. The offspring has managed to pull the

toy box into the kitchen and dump the contents on the tile floor—again. She wonders how he gets the strength to haul a huge toy box from room to room, but goes weak-kneed and limp when required to pick up one plastic Duplo block.

6:53 P.M. Dad comes through the door and surveys the daily damage that a three-foot child can wreak upon a two-thousand-square-foot house. He looks hopefully toward the kitchen stove, frowns, and asks, “So tell me, what did you do all day?”

9:47 P.M. The little one is finally asleep after a thirty-minute wild romp in the bathtub (splashing enough water on the floor to float a battleship), ten more readings of *Pat the Bunny*, six choruses of “I want a drink of water,” and four of “I need to go potty.” She stumbles to her own room, notices a hopeful look on her husband’s face and silently turns the small decorative pillow face up, so that the “Definitely Not Tonight” embroidered message can say it all. He pouts. She reminds him that the “What did you do all day?” question didn’t exactly get her love motor in gear.

10:14 P.M. She falls asleep while trying to remember the calm, collected, organized woman she was before stretch marks, spit-up, and tantrums rocked her

world. Her husband lies in the dark, fondly remembering when “teddies” meant sexy lingerie instead of stuffed fuzzy bears.

That’s a basic agenda for a parent who’s home all day. The parent who works part-time or full-time has to come up with pants with no orange-juice stains, a briefcase without oatmeal dumped inside, and time to do three loads of laundry between the preschooler’s bedtime and her own. The working parent puts in long hours of dealing with work pressures and people and comes home longing for a haven of rest and refreshment—only to find that Junior still has plenty of energy and wants to use it all playing with Mom or Dad. The challenges of parenting are intense—and unrelenting.

Even though you and your spouse both love your child more than life itself, do you ever wonder if you actually have the strength to raise him without losing your mind (or your marriage)?

If this mom’s scenario seemed awfully familiar, no doubt it’s because your own days are riddled with the unexpected from the moment you wake up until you drop into bed at night. Whatever plans you make are subject to change completely, depending on the

Any mom or dad still standing and smiling at the end of a typical week home alone with small children deserves a medal of honor.

moods and mishaps your preschooler brings to the mix. That combination of reasoned, intentional planning and rolling-with-whatever-comes is hard to achieve with grace—and with your temper under control.

I have a sincere empathy for men and women in this stage of parenting. These preschool years—before a child moves on to more independent pastimes and an ability to go fifteen minutes without Mom’s or Dad’s attention—are especially tough. When I’m asked in interviews which stage of parenting I consider the most difficult, I don’t hesitate to name the preschool years. Though teenagers bring their own set of challenges, the most physically and mentally demanding and exhausting stage of parenting is the time when your children are preschoolers. There are so few “breathers” for the parent of a preschooler, whose neediness is non-stop. For a few years, you can’t let your guard down (“It’s too quiet. What are they up to now?”), can’t go take a nap anytime you want (and you want one all the time), can’t take your eyes off them (“Where did they go?”), can’t go to the bathroom alone (*Knock, knock, knock*. “Mommy, can I come in? What are you doing, Mommy?” *Knock, knock, knock*).

In researching the most prevalent problems parents of preschoolers face, I found that exhaustion and burnout top the list. Feelings of isolation (for

both stay-at-home parents and working parents who are too busy for their friends) and aching spiritual needs run a close second.

Parents of preschoolers are looking for information, asking almost as many questions as their little ones:

- How can I get some rest and stay healthy?
- How early is too early to potty train?
- How can I get her to eat?
- What do I do when he throws a tantrum?
- I get so much advice, but which child-rearing technique really is best?
- How do I keep my child occupied without resorting to too much TV?
- If I'm home all day with the kids, how can I keep my brain from atrophying?
- What will make bedtime easier for the whole family?
- How can I teach my child about God?

In these pages, we'll touch on all of these areas and more.

If we put a childless, well-dressed CEO of a major corporation into a home with two or three preschoolers (ah, toss in a baby, too, just for fun) and evaluated the CEO at the end of the week, I guarantee that he

would no longer be the same person—physically or mentally. In fact, my guess is that the CEO would be on his knees, begging to be allowed to go back to work.

Parents don't have an easy out, and deep down they don't really want one. This God-given child is theirs to love and discipline—to shape for a healthy, productive grown-up life. After all, Proverbs 22:6 tells us, "Teach your children to choose the right path, and when they are older, they will remain upon it." Because they love their children, parents hang in there. I personally feel that any mom or dad who is still standing and smiling at the end of a typical week home alone with small children deserves a medal of honor.

Want to earn that medal of honor? This book holds some of the keys of help and humor to get you to the end of each day.