



**DELIGHT**

**IN  
YOUR**

**CHILD'S**

**DESIGN**

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## DELIGHTED OR DISILLUSIONED?

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### *Delight*

1. A high degree of gratification;
  2. A sense of great satisfaction;
  3. Keen enjoyment;
  4. Lively pleasure;
  5. Joy<sup>1</sup>
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**M**om, can't we *please* go to the park?" seven-year-old Elisa asked as she pulled on my arm.

*Arghh.* I'd just settled—finally—into the recliner for a little coffee break after working all afternoon at my in-home office. *I'll get so cold standing on that playground watching her! Do I have to?* I thought.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather cuddle and read a story?" I asked.

"Aww, c'mon, Mom. I want to swing on the monkey bars."

*Sigh.* "Okay," I said, struggling to hide my exasperation. I knew she simply had to get outside to do something active or

she'd beg me all evening to take her out. It was simply the way she was wired. *Chalk up one more to the sacrifices of motherhood.* I got our coats.

At the park, I impatiently shifted my feet back and forth. I blew out my white breath. I clapped my gloves together to keep warm. "Just ten more minutes!" I called out, as Elisa shimmied up a pole to some very high bars.

She swung powerfully, back and forth, back and forth. Startled out of my discomfort and impatience, I marveled at her coordination, and not for the first time.

"Wow, that's great!" I cried out. *I never could have done that as a kid—nor would I have even wanted to! What makes her that way? She obviously didn't inherit the klutz gene from me.*

While Elisa played, I thought about how she'd always used her whole body to express her personality. She never walked downstairs, she leapt—four steps at a time. She was compelled to get in her quota of at least 1,642 cartwheels per day. I wondered, *When was it that she first earned the nickname Monkey?*

Perhaps it was when, at age two and a half, she declared she'd climb the rock wall at the outdoor store REI (and did so a few short years later). Or perhaps it was the day when she was only sixteen months old when, horrified, I spotted her crawling across the top of the monkey bars on our backyard swing set. As I ran to save her, she nonchalantly climbed back down! Hmm. Or was she already our Monkey at a mere three months, incessantly standing on our laps as we held her? I wondered, *If she could have grabbed my rib cage before she was born, would she have swung from that? What makes her so nimble and so adventurous?*

Suddenly I realized we had to scoot to make it to Costco before the store closed. Elisa and I left the park, picked up her big sister, Aimee, and I fought traffic as the kids bickered in the backseat.

"Stop that!" I said.

"It's *her* fault!" they chorused.

"It takes *two* to make a fight!" I replied *very* loudly and impatiently. (And that made three.)

As we entered the warehouse, Elisa's face lit up at the sight of those wonderfully wide, long aisles. She impulsively cartwheeled through the office-supply section. I cried, "Look out!" as her foot nearly connected with a customer's chin. I apologized, embarrassed. Frustration mounted as I approached the long checkout lines.

Later that evening, I guiltily looked forward to a quiet house with kids nestled in their beds. But my first request to "Get on your pj's and brush your teeth now" fell on deaf ears, as Elisa attempted some last-minute acrobatics.

"Okay, okay," I grumbled, "just three more somersaults down the hall and *that's it*—uh-oh! Watch the lamp!" *So much for the trip to the park to help release her energy.*

Eventually, Elisa's sweet, high voice called from down the hall, "Mommy, Daddy, tuck-in!" We went into her room and bent over for the obligatory chain of butterfly kisses, fishy kisses, and Eskimo kisses. But as I nuzzled her soft face, I was drawn in. I lingered. My little pixie grinned charmingly—minus a few teeth the tooth fairy had taken—and sighed, "You're the *best* mom in the whole wide world!"

*Hardly*, I thought. Yet my heart lifted. A grin tugged at the

corners of my mouth as I recalled Costco cartwheels, somersaults down the hall . . . and her enthusiasm for life and tenderness toward me. My weariness from caring for an energetic child was replaced by delight in her and the privilege of being her mother. *I'm so glad I'm her mom*, I thought as I switched off the light. I couldn't wait to tuck in Aimee next!

### **TOO BUSY, TOO TIRED, TOO IMPATIENT, TOO DISTRACTED?**

In the course of a single day, parenting offers up an emotional smorgasbord: Exhaustion. Pride. Impatience. Delight for dessert—yet we can be too full of other emotions to make room for joy. That's because while we love our children, so much can interfere with our *truly* enjoying them.

In a single moment you may experience a double whammy: exhaustion from work (whether that means back-to-back business meetings or eight loads of laundry) while dealing with a chronically arguing child whose extremely high energy level and distractibility also frustrate you. Instead of marveling at the wonder of your child's being, you may wonder if you'll keep your sanity!

**WHILE WE LOVE  
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ENJOYING THEM.**

On good days, if you're dealing with a child who has energy to burn and an art for endless negotiation, you may be future-thinking enough to realize that he may *someday* become a dynamic salesman or lawyer. You may even joke about your desire to bottle and sell his energy. But often you simply and frankly admit, "He's a handful!" You may think, *I do love this child, but I don't like him very*

*much today! Or I do love him. But caring for him is wearing me down, physically and emotionally.*

I think every parent feels like that on some days. But if those feelings are chronic, it's definitely time for a more joyful, optimistic attitude.

## WHY DELIGHT?

Why—with all the other things we must focus on as parents—is it so important to learn to delight more in our kids? Do our feelings really matter as long as we get the job done?

Yes! As your delight in your child increases (I'll soon explain *how*), you both will experience many benefits:

- **Your child will be assured of one place he can count on being accepted and loved.** Your home can be a place of refuge, where your child's self-confidence and optimism are continually recharged. Remember the children's book character Alexander and his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day? From discovering gum in his hair when he wakes up, to being deserted by his best friend, to learning that he has a cavity during his dentist appointment, the seven-year-old laments a day that goes from bad to worse. In fact, he repeatedly wishes he could move to Australia. Maybe a horrible day here would be a wonderful one there!<sup>2</sup>

In truth, bad days aren't so easy for our kids to escape. They regularly need reassurance that they are valued and can overcome difficulties that come their way: put-downs from a bully, sour looks from a teacher . . . perhaps even

more difficult crises that we hope our children will never have to endure. Consider your delight in your child an inoculation against despair. While not providing full immunity—life will always have its challenges—a child who feels unconditional love will be more resilient, self-confident, and hopeful.

**CONSIDER YOUR  
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DESPAIR.**

For years, my son's friend Cameron too often slept on other people's couches or had the extra plate at someone else's dinner table. When he was staying at our house, he quietly observed my husband, Gordy, and I show playful affection to each other and our kids. Sometimes he laughed. Sometimes we saw pain in his eyes and realized it was hard for him to watch. We knew his single-parent dad did not seem able to meet his physical or emotional needs.

When it became apparent that Cameron desperately needed an accepting, loving home of his own, his mother, Donna—with her five-year-old daughter—bravely boarded the train in Georgia to move to Washington state and regain custody of her son. At first, living out of suitcases in my home office with her confused little daughter, Imani, proved overwhelming for Donna. She didn't have a job that could adequately support a single mom of two. And Cameron, for whom she'd moved out West in the first place, was hesitant to open his heart to her because he'd been hurt so many times.

Then in God's perfect timing, Donna found confirmation she'd made the right decision in a poem her son had writ-



ten before he knew she was coming to Washington. We wept at his poignant words:

*No one to tuck me in at night*

*No one to say, "Don't let the bugs bite"*

*No one to say "I'm proud of you"*

*No one to say "I love you."*

Never underestimate the power of family, silly bedtime rituals, or your child's having his own place at the dinner table. But remember too the power in those words: "I'm proud of you"; "I love you."

- **The more you enjoy and appreciate your child, the more pleasurable life will be for you.** I have a beautiful set of twelve nesting gift boxes that have been not only used and reused for gift giving, but also repeatedly stacked, tumbled, and re-nested by my kids. There's a fascination in removing one box at a time, from the largest to the smallest. After all, the center box, the tiniest one of all—about an inch square—could hold the greatest treasure, even a glittering diamond.

The fresh surprise and delight felt as each smaller box is revealed, in anticipation of what will be found next, can be experienced when you take time to "unpack" your child. Can you see beyond his superficial wrappings: his physical appearance and behavior?

Peel away the stereotypical thinking, and you'll discover his personal learning style and motivations. And eventu-

ally, with enough loving, deliberate intent, you're likely to uncover what's at the center of your child, what makes her a real treasure: her soul, spirit, and unique thoughts and feelings. It's *then* that you'll see your child more fully as a gift, not just a responsibility.

Not only can you enjoy and appreciate what makes your child unique, you can find much humor in parenting. Kids can be so very *funny*—often not intentionally so, yet funny nonetheless. The way a toddler waddles like a duck makes us giggle, while at the same time we're bursting with pride at his new accomplishment. A preschooler mutilates a sentence or new word because he doesn't quite hear it right, and we laugh—not in derision, but because his interpretation is not so far off. In a sense we laugh at our own language.

Once my son, then a preschooler, excitedly returned from the county fair to tell me he'd gotten an ink stamp on his "knifehead."

"Your what?" I asked.

He lifted his bangs and gestured, and I said, "You mean, your *forehead*?"

"Oh yeah!" he brightly answered, "my *forkhead*!"

Enjoying your child's attributes and funny comments is good for you. Proverbs 17:22 tells us that a cheerful heart is "good medicine" but "a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Have you ever thought of joy in your children as a healing influence? as an energy producer instead of an energy reducer?

- **A child who knows how it feels to be appreciated is more likely to encourage others.** I saw Elisa, a first grader,

put this into action recently. As she sat quietly in the church pew next to me, she spontaneously scribbled a note to our pastor, telling him she *loved* his speeches (especially the stories Pastor Jim weaves into his sermons). After the worship service, she insisted on taking her note to him.

Later I wondered, *Did any of the other thousand people attending that service—or any of the five thousand there that weekend—think to encourage him that day?* I also wondered, *How many of the people who clamored around Jesus, as He told His clever parables, thought to tell Him, “We love Your speeches!”?*

If any did, they might well have been children. To this day children respond to Jesus’ stories, and even a very small child grasps the importance of the shepherd who rejoiced at finding his lost sheep.<sup>3</sup>

I also wonder if Jesus found it rejuvenating to hold precious, smiling, loose-toothed children, bursting with eager questions, open hearts, and funny mispronunciations? On one occasion, His disciples attempted to shoo some children away, seeming to think they should be seen but not heard in the Master’s presence.<sup>4</sup> Jesus, instead, welcomed them into His open arms. He taught the grown-ups that they needed to become more like those children.

As Christ revealed His love for children, those little boys and girls must have responded with eager affection, which I imagine in turn warmed Jesus’ heart.

My daughter Elisa’s encouraging words to our pastor came from deep within her, without prompting. Her sister, Aimee, often writes words of affirmation to others. (I save

many of her little notes to me to reread when I need a boost!) Yet those words were much like those my children have heard from each other, Mom and Dad, and others.

Appreciation is like a boomerang. Delight in your children, and it will eventually circle around back to you.

- **A child who feels valued responds more positively to discipline and guidance.** Your child senses it when you

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delight in him. The attitude of your heart is reflected in your words and actions, from a simple, brief adoring look to a warmly spoken "I love you!"

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But, oddly enough, delighting in your child does not mean you will always make him happy. Other words and actions that *stem* from delight in your child may actually infuriate him, when that means saying NO to something he wants to do.

Yet to stand firm—with energy and commitment—requires unwavering belief in your child's value and potential. In other words, it communicates true delight in him. Cameron had additional lines in his poem, which we as parents can all learn from. He wrote of enjoying freedom to come and go as he pleased, yet he included these words of longing: "No one to say, 'Be home by midnight.'"

Valuing your child also means understanding your child well enough to know what is likely to trigger inappropriate behavior. That can help you be more patient in the midst of conflicts and think more creatively about how to motivate

positive behavior. For example, three kids will react differently to the common disciplinary measure of time-out.

One child sees a time-out as a positive break from tension. He doesn't like being sent to his room, but after a short bout of crying he'll begin quietly playing with his toys. Whether he knows it or not, he needs time alone to calm down.

Another child can't stand to be away from people for more than five minutes. Time-out means torture. She quickly begs for mercy, forgiveness—whatever it takes to get out of solitary confinement.

For a third child, a time-out is just an enormous battle of wills. Though he doesn't like being confined to his room, he may smugly refuse to come out . . . that is, until Mom does the begging. Or, like my son, he may try to find a way around his confinement. I recall sending toddler Tyler to a time-out in a kid-sized chair, telling him in a serious voice, "I don't want to see your bottom out of that chair for five minutes." A minute or so later he walked into the room with a wide grin, holding the seat of his chair firmly to his bottom!

Kids react differently to disciplinary measures because *what is important to them varies*. One craves solitude; another, people; yet another desires control and leadership. The good news is that what drives children can motivate them to change difficult behavior. Delighting in your child will come more naturally as you understand her priorities and feelings, despite argumentative moments. And sensing your delight, she'll eventually be more open to correction.

- **Your appreciation of your child is likely to impact him for life!** The inventor Thomas Alva Edison was labeled “addled” by his teachers and was kicked out of public school at a young age. Thankfully, his family saw his potential and nurtured it. His mother homeschooled him for a while, which gave him tinkering time, access to advanced textbooks, and a basement laboratory. By age twelve he was a successful entrepreneur. Addled? Not quite!

Edison eventually wrote this unforgettable tribute to his mother:

If it had not been for her *appreciation and faith in me* at a critical time in my experience, I should never likely have become an inventor. I was always a careless boy, and with a mother of different mental caliber, I should have turned out badly. But her firmness, her sweetness, her goodness were potent powers to keep me in the right path. My mother was the making of me. She was so true, so sure of me . . .<sup>5</sup> (italics mine).

Is it actually possible that without the encouragement of Edison's mother, we might not have had the phonograph or the incandescent lightbulb, or his many other inventions? Or would Edison's innate personality and gifts have led him, no matter what, to be an inventor?

Certainly his parents and sister had an impact as they recognized and nurtured his interests and talents, stood up for him, and believed in his abilities and potential.

At age two, Edison (then called “Little Al”) was found

sitting in the barn on a goose egg, trying to hatch it. His big sister's husband, Homer, laughed and called him a little goose for trying it. But Al's sister, Marion, soothed his hurt feelings by saying, "It's all right, Al, you did a very smart thing even if it didn't work. If no one ever tried anything, even what some folks say is impossible, no one would learn anything. *So you just keep on trying and maybe some day you'll try something that will work.*"<sup>6</sup>

Marion no doubt had heard encouraging words from their mother as well. She knew just the right thing to say to her little brother—even though she probably never imagined that he'd someday be a famous inventor. (Incidentally, more than one thousand patents were issued to Edison.)

We must balance our sense of appreciation of the inborn abilities of a child with recognition that we, as parents, do make a difference. Your supportive parenting may affect your daughter's choice of a spouse who will also love and honor her. It may affect your son's confidence in his choice of a career. And it will ultimately affect the way your children parent their own kids.

## WHY NOT DELIGHT?

Part of learning to delight is getting to know your child better. In this book, you'll explore the attributes and characteristics that make your child unique, fascinating, and sometimes difficult to live with.

First, we'll consider the recipe for your child's genetic makeup, which began shaping him long before birth. My nephew Jared was smaller than a grain of rice when it was al-

ready determined that he'd have red hair like his uncle Frank.

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made," said the psalmist (139:14). I think you'll get a fresh appreciation of your child as you consider that God has given him his unique identity. We can learn much from science about the complexity of humans and how early your child was destined to have his distinct physical traits. Next, you'll be invited to consider the personality style of your child. A simple assessment of your kid's personality traits and abilities can go a long way in helping identify not only his or her weak areas, but strengths you can rejoice in and express appreciation for. Then I'll speak honestly about the personality clashes between parents and children and offer practical ways to avoid unnecessary conflict.

*But wait, you may be thinking, my child is so complicated, so hard to understand.*

How well I know it! I remember frantically running into Aimee's bedroom when she was only three after hearing a shriek and hysterical crying. Expecting to find her pinned under a fallen dresser, I instead found her trying to align a seam in her sock, crying, "Oweee! It *hurts*." Socks—hurt? Sounded far-fetched to me at the time, but child-temperament experts explain that we are each born with a certain sensitivity to our environment. Some of us are more sensitive than others to sounds, tastes, smells, and the feel of clothes or human touch. Just being aware of that made me much more patient with Aimee.

Some differences, of course, *are* more complicated. Strong personality traits that are accompanied by motor or speech struggles may indicate a disability. In a later chapter, I'll dis-



cuss what parents can do if they suspect their child may have a hidden disability, using the stories of two families whose children do face special challenges.

The book ends with ideas for new attitudes and actions. We can easily go for days without outwardly showing appreciation for our kids. We're either busy dealing with child-related struggles or caught up in our own activities.

You may recall the joke about the wife who says, "You never tell me you love me anymore!" to her hubby. He responds, "I told you so the day we married; when that changes, I'll let you know." We get the joke, because we all know a husband's love should regularly be expressed in his words and actions—just as our love toward our kids should be conveyed.

Sometimes we do express appreciation, but not in ways that reach our child's heart. One thirteen-year-old told me she wished her parents praised her more. I asked how they showed their love to her. She said, "Clothes." This interested me, because kids with expensive clothes are sometimes assumed to be spoiled by their parents.

So I asked, "Would you rather have the clothes or praise?"  
"Praise," she replied.

It's important not just to drum up fresh feelings of appreciation, but to express that affirmation in ways most meaningful to your child.

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## **FIRST THINGS FIRST**

Before considering what makes your child both incredibly interesting and sometimes hard to live with, you need to look in-

ward. If you struggle with emotional detachment, isolation, or feelings of hopelessness, delighting in your child may seem impossible right now. You are right to be concerned, no matter how “normal” your family appears to outsiders.

Consider what happened one Sunday morning in Ohio in early 2004, when the rear wing of a 114-year-old private school undergoing an expansion project suddenly collapsed, destroying several classrooms and displacing a large number of students.

The accident was unexpected. Outwardly everything had appeared fine. The school had obtained all necessary work permits, and a city inspector had reported no problems following periodic visits. A preliminary assessment concluded that excavation was probably too deep and too close to the existing foundation.<sup>7</sup>

Just as students and staff members noticed nothing unusual the Friday before the building's collapse, a casual friend might assume that all is humming along pretty well in your family. But if you struggle with personal issues that lie close to your foundation—your values, your self-worth, your very soul—you may be surprised one day by an unsettling incident that threatens the stability of your family.

Because delighting in your child is difficult (if not impossible) when you do not understand or value your role as a parent, chapter 2 looks at some common personal struggles that affect parents and offers some ideas on how to address them. Once you identify and attend to them, you'll be free to get to know—and delight in—your one-of-a-kind child.