



NOW WHAT?

*The Chapman Guide to
Marriage After Children*

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Now What? The Chapman Guide to Marriage after Children

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Introduction

*T*his is not a book on parenting, though I will share some tips for parents. This is not a treatise on marriage, though I will give some marriage pointers. Rather, this is a book that addresses the question “How do we keep our marriage alive now that the children have arrived?”

This book was born out of a conversation I recently had with a frustrated young father. He said, in a pained voice, “I’ve lost my wife.”

“What do you mean by that?” I inquired.

“I’ve lost my wife to the baby.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“We’ve been married for three years and started out with a really good relationship. We both wanted to have a baby and agreed it was time. But if I had known that the baby was going to destroy our marriage, I never would have agreed.”

“What do you mean by ‘destroy our marriage?’” I asked.

“We just don’t have a marriage anymore,” he said. “Her life is focused on the baby; my life is focused on the baby. It’s like the two of us do not exist anymore. It’s like we became parents and lost our marriage.”

“How about your sexual relationship?” I asked.

“It’s nonexistent. Maybe two or three times since the baby came.”

“How old is the baby?” I inquired.

“He turned two last week.”

“Have you talked to your wife about your feelings?” I asked.

“I’ve tried,” he said, “but it’s hard to talk with her. She says that I don’t understand how hard it is to rear a child and work. I told her she could quit work, but she says we can’t live on just my salary. I think we could . . . but there’s no need to argue with her. I know it sounds selfish, but I just wish I

could have my wife back and it could be like it was before the baby came.”

I came away from that conversation knowing I had to write this book. I knew this was not an isolated phenomenon. I’ve heard similar stories many times during the last thirty years as I have counseled couples about their marriages. I knew also that this young man’s wife was as frustrated as he, that she too struggled with the pressures of being both a parent and a spouse. I believe that thousands of couples can identify with this young couple’s pain.

In another recent encounter, a young woman approached me with her Bible open. I could tell that she was serious. “When are you going to talk about how children affect a marriage?” she asked.

I had the idea that her question was simply a bridge to something far more personal, so I responded, “Why do you ask?”

“I’m confused,” she replied. “It says in the Bible—” she pointed to Psalm 127 “—that ‘Sons are a heritage from the LORD. . . . Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.’ It may be happy

for the man,” she said, “but not for the woman. I thought having a baby would pull us together and we would both be happy. The exact opposite is true for us. Since the baby came, our marriage has fallen apart.”

I assured her that she was not alone in her frustration, that many couples acknowledge that the first eighteen months after the birth of a child is the most trying time they have ever experienced in their marriage. Mothers of small children often feel isolated and overwhelmed. They feel unwanted or unappreciated by their husbands. They often feel unattractive. “My husband doesn’t understand why I am so tired. He complains that I don’t bake cherry pies anymore. I’m up to my ears in diapers and vomit, and he’s complaining about cherry pies.”

Many fathers of young children feel taken for granted by their spouses, unappreciated, and unimportant. They feel that they are no longer number one; the baby has taken their place. They become resentful—not necessarily of the baby, but of the wife’s attention to the baby. “She never has time for me. It’s always the baby. Even when I ask her to go

out, she's afraid to leave the baby. When I want to rent a video, she says she doesn't have the energy to watch it. I don't know what else to do.”

Why is this marital pressure such a common experience? Because a whole new world of potential conflicts arise when a child enters a marriage.

A child means more work. Who does the work? Mom or Dad?

More work means more time. Whose time? Mom's or Dad's?

More work means more energy. Whose energy?

A child means more money. What money—the money that we previously set aside for restaurants and entertainment?

Research has shown that a mother feels the impact of a child upon the marriage most acutely in the first six months of a child's life, when she is trying to adjust to the expanded demands on her time and energy, whereas the father recognizes the impact of the child upon the marriage most acutely during the time the child is six to eighteen months

of age. During this time, the husband perceives his wife to be more critical, less supportive, and withdrawing from him sexually.¹

And unfortunately, the impact of children upon a marriage does not end when the baby is eighteen months old. Jim and Evelyn were in my office seeking help for their fourteen-year-old daughter. After briefly discussing the problems they were having with her at school, they admitted that the main reason they had come to see me was that their marriage was in trouble. “It seems that when it comes to Julie, we disagree on almost everything. Our disagreements on how to rear her have brought us to the point of fighting all the time. Neither of us likes it, but we don’t know what to do. It seems we disagree every day on something related to Julie.”

I sometimes ask couples, “What was your marriage like before the children came?” I will receive answers like “Well, we were struggling, but we thought a baby would draw us together.” Don’t expect a baby to create a good marriage; that is not the responsibility of a child. Children do not create a good marriage, nor do they create problems in a

marriage; they only reveal problems that were already there. A ten-year study by Carolyn and Philip Cowan revealed that “the most important piece of information to forecast how men and women will fare as parents is how they are doing before they begin their journey to parenthood.”²

The fact is, rearing children is a joint venture that requires communication, understanding, love, and a willingness to compromise. Couples who have not developed these attitudes and skills before a baby arrives will not find them automatically emerging upon the arrival of the child.

Some couples have good marriages before the children come but five years later realize they have spent so much time being “good parents” that they have let their own relationship grow stale. This kind of staleness does not happen overnight, nor is it the result of open conflict. Rather, it is a slow erosion of intimacy caused by the lack of quality time, expressions of love, and communication. In these marriages, the road to restoration is fairly short because these couples basically have a good relationship that has diminished by default. When one spouse shares

a concern with the other, the two of them will likely make a course correction, and their marriage will get back on track.

On the other hand, for couples who have developed unhealthy patterns of relating before the children came, the road to restoration will be much longer. The changes needed—effective conflict resolution, meaningful communication, tolerance of differences, looking for compromises rather than conquests, and expressions of love in a language one’s spouse will feel—require skills that take time to develop. I must add, however, it is never too late to begin. Any couple can learn these skills if they are motivated to do so.

You, too, may be seeking answers to the question, “How do we keep our marriage alive now that the children have arrived?” I believe there are answers to that question, and in this book I will seek to share them.

I have intentionally kept this book brief because I am aware that many couples believe that they don’t have time to read a book. You can probably read

this book in less than two hours. And if you do, you will discover how to make time to read books and make time for your marriage. You will also learn how to take control of your finances so that you can accomplish what is of value to you in life. Most important, you will learn how to rekindle marital intimacy and keep it alive while at the same time being good parents. You will find that you are not the only couple who have walked this road. Others have learned how to maintain a healthy marriage while successfully rearing children. You can profit from their discoveries. At the end of each of the five brief chapters, you will find practical suggestions on how to weave these ideas into the fabric of your own marriage.

I assure you that you *can* be happily married and be successful parents at the same time.

1



MAKING MARRIAGE A PRIORITY

*T*here comes a time in most marriages when two become three. Sometimes, two become four or five or six or more! This is the design initiated by God in the Garden of Eden when he said to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”¹ Both Scripture and modern sociological research indicate that the best environment for children is the environment created by a loving father and mother who are committed to each other for a lifetime. The Scriptures also indicate that in marriage the husband and wife are to become “one flesh.”² The term *one flesh* speaks of deep intimacy. Modern research also affirms this concept: Most

couples who get married do so because they want to have an intimate, exclusive relationship with each other. If an intimate marriage and parenting are both a part of God's design, then surely there is a way to do both successfully.

Let's freely admit that when children arrive, they greatly affect the marital relationship. There is a new person in the house, and he or she will be there for a long time. That first child may be joined by siblings over the next few years. Each child creates a new dynamic in the household. Someone has said, "The decision to have a child—it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body."³ Parents can identify with that statement. The child is a part of them, and their hearts are linked to the child's well-being. However, in their love for the child, they must never forget that the child is the offspring of their love for each other. Therefore, they must continue to cultivate that love relationship, not only for their own well-being but for the well-being of the child as well.

When a couple neglect their own love relationship, either intentionally or unintentionally, they

do so to the detriment of their children. Research clearly shows that the effect of divorce upon a child is devastating. Divorces typically do not occur on the spur of the moment. They are preceded by months and sometimes years of neglecting the marital relationship. Therefore, for the conscientious parent, there is nothing more important than rekindling or keeping alive an intimate relationship with his or her spouse. The antidote to divorce is to stop the process of drifting apart. Choose to paddle your canoes toward each other rather than away from each other. In the last chapter of this book, I will tell you how to do that. But first you must commit yourselves to the process by *making marriage a priority*.

What does it mean to make marriage a priority? It means, first, that we pause long enough to assess the quality of our marriage. Then we must make a conscious choice that, for the benefit of our children, for ourselves, and (if we are Christians) for the glory of God, we will commit ourselves to each other and acknowledge that our marriage is important to us. Finally, we must agree that with

God's help we will find a way to strengthen our intimacy. Making marriage a priority is a conscious choice to make things better.

There is a song that says, "Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage."⁴ I would like to change part of that analogy and say that *marriage and parenting* go together like a horse and carriage. The horse and the carriage exist as separate entities; they can be separated from each other. When the horse is separated from the carriage, it is free to roam and frolic as it likes. In a similar manner, marriage and parenting are separate endeavors, but parenting is at its best only when it is linked with marriage.

When the horse is harnessed to the carriage, its freedom is limited, but its energy can be used for positive purposes. The carriage cannot fulfill its created function without the horse. Before children, a husband and wife are able to roam and frolic as they choose. Once children come, parents' freedom is limited. But their choice to be connected with their children is for the good of both parents and the children.

However, limited freedom does not equal no freedom. The horse is often uncoupled from the carriage and returns to the pasture—a horse that stayed harnessed to the carriage day and night would soon become a frustrated horse. Nor would this be good for the carriage and its passengers. Similarly, a couple who are so attached to their child or children that they have no time for themselves will become a frustrated couple. This is not good for the children or the parents.

Like the horse apart from its carriage, parents have an existence apart from their children. This existence is called marriage, which at its best provides parents time to frolic and enjoy each other so that they are renewed for their task of parenting.

Please note that the title of this chapter is “Making Marriage a Priority.” Notice I say *a* priority. I often encounter couples who argue over whether the child should be their priority or marriage should be their priority. That’s like arguing over whether water or food should be *the* priority for the human body. The truth is they are both priorities. Parents who do not seek to be good parents are delinquent

in their responsibilities. On the other hand, couples who do not give priority to their marriage are also delinquent.

A couple who neglect their children in pursuit of their own happiness will live to regret their decision. On the other hand, a couple who neglect their marriage while focusing all their energy on their children will also live to regret their choice.

Keeping your marriage vibrant and alive is one of the best things you can do for the health of your children, who will also likely one day be married. They desperately need a model of what a healthy marriage looks like. If you neglect your marital relationship, you may meet the children's physical needs but realize in time that you have failed to teach them relational skills. Marriage is a priority; parenting is a priority—the choice is not either/or. To neglect either is detrimental to the other.

In my book *The Four Seasons of Marriage*,⁵ I used the seasons to describe the various stages of a marriage:

- ☛ **Springtime** in marriage is a time of new beginnings, new patterns of life, new ways of listening, and new ways of loving. Feelings we experience during this season include excitement, love, trust, hope, and joy.
- ☛ **Summer** couples share deep commitment, satisfaction, and security in each other's love. They are connected and supportive of each other.
- ☛ **Fall** brings a sense of unwanted change, and nagging emptiness appears. We might feel apprehensive, concerned, sad, discouraged, and uncertain.
- ☛ **Winter** means difficulty. Marriage is harder in this season of cold silence and bitter winds. Couples experiencing a winter season in their marriage will act and feel harsh, angry, disappointed, and detached.

You may want to ask, “What season was our marriage in before the children came? What season is our

marriage in now?” If you are not happy with your present season, *Now What?* is definitely for you. In the next four chapters, I will share practical ways of restoring and maintaining a healthy marriage while at the same time being successful parents.

PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

1. Using the idea of the four seasons, assess the quality of your marriage by underlining the words in each description that best describe your current feelings about your marriage. Then ask your spouse to read this chapter and make an assessment as well.
2. If you discover that your marriage is in the unsettledness of fall or the coldness of winter, you need not remain there. You and your spouse can return to the spring or summer seasons of marriage by confessing your failures to each other and asking forgiveness.
3. Can you both agree to make your marriage a priority? Your motivation may be for the

children, for yourselves, or for God. But whatever your motivation, when you make marriage a priority, you are moving in the right direction.

INTRODUCTION

1. Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Partners Become Parents* (HarperCollins, 1992), 109.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.

CHAPTER 1

1. Genesis 1:28.
2. Genesis 2:24.
3. Alice Gray, comp., *Stories for a Mom's Heart* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2002), 29.
4. Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn, "Love and Marriage," copyright 1955 by Barton Music Corp./Warner Chappell Music, Inc.
5. For more information on the four seasons concept, you may wish to read *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, by Gary Chapman (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2005).

CHAPTER 3

1. *MSN Money* staff, "Raising Your Quarter-Million-Dollar Baby," located at <http://moneycentral.msn.com/content/collegeandfamily/raisekids/p37245.asp>.

CHAPTER 4

1. For more information on the love-languages concept, you may wish to read *The Five Love Languages of Children*, written by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1997).

— *About the Author*

Dr. Gary Chapman is the author of the perennial best seller *The Five Love Languages* (more than 3.5 million copies sold) and numerous other marriage and family books. He is currently working with best-selling author Catherine Palmer on a new fiction series based on *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, the first book of which was released in the spring of 2007. Dr. Chapman is the director of Marriage and Family Life Consultants, Inc.; an internationally known speaker; and the host of *A Growing Marriage*, a syndicated radio program heard on more than one hundred stations across North America. He and his wife, Karolyn, live in North Carolina.