

GREAT PARENTS



Discover how to enjoy life with
your spouse while raising your kids

**DR. GARY SMALLEY
& TED CUNNINGHAM**



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*We dedicate this book to the fantastic staff and elders at
Woodland Hills Family Church in Branson, Missouri.*

*Ted Burden, Denise Bevins, Stephanie Watson,
Brenda Pannell, Angela Jennings, Amy Cunningham,
Pam Strayer, John Meyer, Jim Sedlacek, Bill Rogers,
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serve marriages and families in our church and community
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CHAPTER 1

GENERATION OBSERVATION

You might be a Great Parent, Lousy Lover if you grew up in the '80s, rolled up your pants, poufed your bangs, drove a Camaro, or have more than two Bryan Adams songs memorized.

GARY... I love observation. Norma and I are that couple at the restaurant watching other families. Part of our regular entertainment is making up stories about what we observe. We often catch ourselves laughing, shaking our heads, or even tearing up as we think about the countless stories unfolding in families around us. We see the excitement of families as they eat out in Branson, Missouri, enjoying the first day of their vacation. We can even identify the families that are eating a quick bite after exhausting themselves at one of our theme parks on the last day of their vacation. I can spot a loving and caring dad from a mile away. I can also tell when he's distant and angry. I can see the spirit of a woman when

it is crushed. My wife, Norma, is an expert at sniffing out the child who has Mom and Dad wrapped around his or her little finger. We're not judgmental; we're just old, and we eat out a lot. It gives us plenty of time to observe.

I am my own scientific study of one. Over the years, I have studied research comparing the biological brain patterns in preschoolers and how they translate into the gender differences. Through our work with thousands of couples at the Smalley Relationship Center, we have learned the best practices for working with crisis couples. I have personally interviewed over sixty thousand women to discover what leads to deep and lasting intimacy. Now at it for more than forty years, I am convinced that my own personal scientific study has impacted me the most. My entire ministry has been built on making mistakes in my marriage and family, repairing the relationships, and passing on what I have learned. I have even been accused of messing up on purpose so I would have something to write about. Ha! I wish I were nearing perfection to the point I had to fake mistakes. Wouldn't that be something?

Alive for seventy years, I have observed a lot. Moses says we get seventy years, eighty if we're strong, but I'm pushing for ninety. Married for forty-five of those years, I have now observed four generations within my own family. First I observed my parents and how they raised me. My second observation included everything Norma and I did with our children, most of which was opposite of my parents. My third observation could possibly be my favorite: my kids' correcting

everything Norma and I did wrong with them. It hurts sometimes, but it is hilarious more often than not. They have also picked up and passed along our good habits. And my last observation (which is in its very early stages) is of my grandkids and how they are experiencing life reacting to their moms and dads. Lord knows, I love being the patriarch.

Every generation has unique characteristics. I have been particularly interested in the differences of each generation when it comes to marriage and parenting. The parents of today view the world and their role in it entirely differently than Norma and I. It hasn't been that long, but I don't remember ever having guilt as part of our parenting style. Sure there were times when I returned home from a speaking trip and felt guilty for being away. Or the times when I corrected or disciplined the kids only to learn that I was the one who was wrong. Guilt was rare. We did the best we could with the skills we had. Looking back, there are many, many things I would do differently. That's the beauty of hindsight. But for the most part, I have few regrets.

Not so with today's parents. They live for each and every moment as though they are going to miss something. Birthday parties seem more extravagant than ever. Disney is an annual goal, rather than a lifetime achievement. Kids get their own rooms; heaven forbid they share one. They have their first car at three, albeit a Barbie Jeep or John Deere Gator. Every day is a special day at school. Wear something green day. Funky hair day. Silly socks day. Awards assembly day. Pajama party day. You get the gist. When I was a kid, we

were lucky to get an annual field trip to the library. Oh no! Did I just give the “When I was a kid” line? Am I coming across like a grumpy old man? I promise I’m not grumpy. But this is fun. Let’s keep going.

Parents today are rushing their kids from karate to dance while doing homework in the car and grabbing a bite at a drive-through. We sign our kids up for everything special. Forget about making costumes for Halloween; Target and Walmart have the latest and greatest in Hannah Montana and superhero attire. “Seize the day” has turned into “soak up everything out there, and squeeze every last drop of life out of the day.” We give all of our time and energy to the kids and very little to the marriage. Every hour a parent is not working or sleeping is given with a big bow on top to the kids. To not do so makes you a bad parent.

My young friend Jon Jenkins in Branson put it best when he said, “Gary, my dad loved me very much. I have never questioned that. He worked hard, and I don’t ever remember him coming home and spending hours playing with me and my brother. At best we would get a quick game of catch or a pickup basketball game, but then he was on to mow the lawn, change the oil in the car, grill dinner for Mom, or fix little things around the house. When he moved on to household chores, I don’t ever remember feeling like he didn’t love me. Why do I feel so guilty if I need to get something done around the house? Heather believes that we need to spend way more time with our kids than our parents could or would spend with us.”

Observation #1—My Parents

My parents' generation, the Builders, was born between 1922 and 1943. They lived through the Great Depression and World War II. They were taught to value hard work, law and order, and respect for authority. Their generation was built on surviving. They faced many hardships and were grateful if there was food on the table every night.

The Builder generation is also called the "Greatest Generation." This is the generation of sacrifice. This generation not only saved the world for us; they also built our country for us through sacrifice and hard work. They were willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. They are people of duty, loyalty, and honor. Your grandparents probably had the same job or profession for their entire working career. Once these people took a job, they didn't quit it, and they outlasted many bosses.

My dad worked, and my mom stayed home. Mom worked outside of the home only if it was absolutely necessary to provide for the family. Because they survived the Great Depression, survival was their first priority around the home, not comfort or fun. Because commitment was such a high value, they would settle for a mediocre marriage so long as they never divorced. They stayed married because divorce would bring undue hardship upon the family, and family was their highest priority. However, children and family were not synonymous. There was a strong family structure, and Dad was very much in charge. The Builders coined the phrase

“Wait until your father gets home.” In other words, “Daddy’s gonna give it to ya if you don’t shape up.” Kid-centered homes were rare in my parents’ generation.

I had a very angry father who lived with the “Kids should be seen and not heard” motto. My dad and I did not spend a lot of time together. I can remember his occasional outbursts around the dinner table followed by an immediate departure. His exit was a relief to the entire family. We could get on with the meal in peace.

Dad was the provider. Mom was the caregiver. That would change with me. I was going to be a provider and a caregiver. I would do everything with my kids that Dad never did with me.

Observation #2—My Generation

The Boomers were born between 1943 and 1960. I was actually born in 1940, but everything in my being screams Boomer. Defining events for the Boomers include television, the civil rights movement, and prosperity. We value health and wellness, personal growth, and civic involvement.

While my parents’ generation considered themselves lucky because they survived the Depression and a world war, the Boomer generation feels more stress than luck. Many Builders lost their jobs and were pushed out with early retirement because there were so many Boomers who drove them out and took the management positions. Boomers are the CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and managers right now.

Boomers live with the buy-now-pay-later mentality, and they live to work. They view themselves as important when they are successful. This success-driven mind-set set the pace for their parenting as well.

My generation was the first set of parents to create the “My child is an honor roll student” bumper stickers. Your grandparents did not use such stickers. We enrolled our kids in gifted reading programs and honors classes. We made our children study hard for those ACT and SAT tests so they could get into good schools and eventually find good jobs. Health plans, 401(k)s, and job security are high values.

I grew up in a very poor home with a very angry father. Most of my parenting skills were birthed from an attitude that said, “I’m going to do everything the opposite way my dad did it.” I heard all the time growing up, “I didn’t have it; you don’t need it.” I in turn told my children, “I didn’t get it, so I’m going to make sure you do.” Since God blessed me with resources to do so, I gave my kids everything. I wanted to make sure my kids had everything I didn’t. I raised three Buster children.

Observation #3—My Kids

My kids’ generation, the Busters, was born between 1960 and 1980. Watergate, Michael Jackson, and the fall of the Berlin Wall were defining moments for this generation. They value diversity, global thinking, and pragmatism.

My kids rolled up their pant legs, spiked their bangs,

played Trivial Pursuit, and watched Harrison Ford play Indiana Jones in all the sequels.

My parents were emotionally disconnected from me, and I never heard my dad say, “I love you.” The real question for me was “How many times a day will my kids hear ‘I love you’ from me?” Your parents decided to fix the emotional disconnection but made the mistake of connecting with you financially rather than emotionally. Your parents thought, *We are going to pay for your college. Don't even worry about getting a job to buy books; we're going to pay for your books, too. You don't need to work in the off-season of college; I want you to relax the three months of summer and the month at Christmas and the week at Easter and the week at Thanksgiving.* That's why, when a Buster comes in to interview with a Boomer, one of the first three questions they ask is “How much time off do I get?” Boomers view Busters as lazy. Busters just consider themselves more relaxed; a little more laid back. They have decided not to be as stressed out as the Boomer generation.

Compared to previous generations, this pampered upbringing has led to entitlement. As a whole, Busters tend to want in three years what their parents have spent thirty years accumulating. I saw this in my own family. My children wanted in their twenties the success I had in my forties and fifties. When they didn't achieve it, they felt let down. Boomers call hard-earned accomplishment paying your dues and earning your stripes. Those with an entitled mind-set not only want a quick payoff, but believe for some reason that they deserve it. Later in the book we will look at how

this sense of entitlement creeps into parenting and can put unrealistic expectations on grandparents.

The Busters see life as full of options. If this job doesn't work out in a couple of months, they'll find another one. They'll have more jobs by the time they turn thirty than my generation ever dreamed of having in a lifetime.

So far we have looked at the differences in my generation and my kids' generation. Now let's look at the one glaring similarity. Know what it is? We have in common the kid-centered home. We both treat our kids like gold. We are going to connect with them in every way possible. In addition to money, Busters connect with more time. They'll even disconnect from, or divorce, their spouses if they think it will be better for the kids. Every waking minute is geared around the kids. To invest in a hobby or another group of friends is to be selfish, and it leads to poor parenting. In many ways this is smothering their Bridger children.

Observation #4—My Grandchildren

Unlike any other generation in history, the Bridgers get massive amounts of attention from the preceding two generations. Grandma and Grandpa pick up the slack where Mom and Dad leave off or when they are unavailable. Think about how far we have come. The other day my grandson texted me from school, asking me to grab him some Sonic and then pick him up from school. When I was a kid . . . Nope, I'm not even going there.

Bridgers were born after 1980. Defining events include school violence, multiculturalism, reality TV, and terrorism. They value civic duty, achievement, and diversity.

The Bridgers are also referred to as millennials or mosaics. They are also called the iPod generation. This generation is still defining themselves, and they want to be approached on their own terms. Really? Does that surprise you? They've been raised to set the rules. They want to set the playing field. They are still coming to understand who they are and what they are going to be. To be honest with you, generational studies and researchers are saying the Builders and Boomers have more hope for the Bridgers than for the Busters.

Now you may have read through my four observations about the generations and thought, *That's not me or my parents at all*. There are always exceptions, but the characteristics bleed over into our culture. While your parents may have raised you very differently from your friends, our parenting styles are influenced by the culture we live in. We see what other parents are doing, and we all can feel the pressure to conform.

Our church regularly hosts playgroups for moms with young children. As the kids play, the moms spend their time discussing best practices. They exchange information on formula, deals on clothes, and whether or not their kids will make the cutoff for kindergarten. Swapping stories is what we do as young parents, and it is not a bad thing at all. It takes a village. So while you may not have been raised in the

stereotypical Boomer home, you may have friends who were, and they are influencing your parenting today.

Will you journey with me as we make some observations and discoveries together? Throughout this book I hope you have many “That is totally us” moments. We are all on this parenting journey together. I’ve asked my pastor and great friend, Ted Cunningham, to join me on this quest. This is my fourth book with Ted. He is a fantastic guy to work with, and I love how his brain works. We spend a lot of time together in life, and he constantly challenges me to stay fresh and on my “A” game. I’d feel a lot older than I actually am if I ever stopped hanging around guys like Ted. He is a great teacher and writer, and I know you will enjoy his observations as well.

Before we go on our discovery, I want you to get to know Ted a little better. He is a Buster who struggles to keep from becoming a Great Parent, Lousy Lover.

Add your voice to the GPLL message . . .

Connect with us at www.greatparentslousylovers.com and watch the video podcast for chapter 1.

Post your thoughts, comments, and stories on our Web site. Here are some questions from chapter 1 to get you started on your journey to a couple-centered home:

- What kind of home did you grow up in? Kid centered or couple centered?
- Which generation do you best relate to?

- What are some of the attributes of your generation's parenting styles?
- What about your parenting style is different from the cultural norms of your generation?
- Even though we are early in the journey together, can you identify some changes that you need to make in your home?

OBSERVATION DATE:

Sit down with your spouse—at home or away—for an “observation conversation.” What do you each observe about the state of your individual hearts, your kids’ hearts, and the heart of your family? What are signs of health in each? What are some areas of concern? Include a favorite snack, and share at least one memory that makes you smile.

Notes

CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MARGIN

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CHAPTER 8: FOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

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CHAPTER 15: LAUGH MORE

1. Chuck Swindoll, *Laugh Again* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 13.

CHAPTER 18: SEX AFTER KIDS

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