

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

STANDING UP FOR YOUR CHILD

without stepping on toes

Vicki Caruana



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Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes

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INTRODUCTION

What do you want for your children? You want the best for them. You want quality experiences with quality people. You want them to be happy and healthy. You want them to be successful and lead productive, satisfying lives. At the same time, you want to protect them, prepare them, and prevent them from making mistakes.

All this is natural and normal. But just wanting something may not get you what you're looking for.

Sometimes you have to take action. Sometimes you find yourself in a battle zone for the sake of your child. Sometimes people get hurt in the process.

It's been suggested to me that it's not possible to stand up for your child without stepping on toes. I disagree. If we're careful about how we communicate and conduct ourselves, we can help our children get what we think they need in a way that doesn't burn bridges, alienate, or betray our claims to be followers of Christ.

There will be obstacles in your way. There will be people and circumstances you can control and those you can't. There will be disappointments and discouragements. Yet this is a road that faith-filled parents should be prepared to walk with their children.

There are internal obstacles, too. Our personalities, experiences, and abilities can get in the way of our desire to provide our children with what they want or need.

My mother used to say I was my own worst enemy—that I got in my own way. She was right. Now, as a parent, I want to

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do better than I did for myself. I don't want to discover that I'm the one who got in my children's way.

That happens to many of us, and more often than you might think. We spend so much time doing damage control, negotiating, going to bat for, and otherwise standing up for our kids that we don't focus on what's really important.

Eventually our children need to learn to stand up for themselves, and the sooner the better. Throughout this book you'll discover not only what it takes to stand up for your kids without stepping on toes, but to train them in being their own champions.

There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of scenarios that require parental intervention; there's no way I could cover every situation. Instead, I offer you guiding principles, along with examples from the lives of those who contributed to this book, in a way that helps you apply what you learn to your life with your children.

Speaking of anecdotes, the ones you're about to read are a mix of real-life, based-on-real-life, and composite stories. Names have been changed to protect the identities of parents and their children. Gleaned from an online parent survey, from fellow members of various groups and organizations, and from my circle of friends, these stories offer examples of what it takes to stand up for your child in today's world.

How to Use This Book

First, take a deep breath. You're about to be submerged in a world you thought you knew.

Standing up for your child is not a mystery. It's something you do instinctively. But the mother- or father-bear behavior that sur-

faces when your child is threatened must be tamed if you're going to accomplish anything. This book is a guide to doing that.

It's not a bible, though. It's full of proverbial wisdom, not a to-do checklist. I suggest reading it all the way through, deferring judgment until you reach the end. There is an actual method behind the madness amidst these pages.

After your first read-through, focus on one principle that you believe speaks to your current situation. Ask God to show you any hard-heartedness you harbor, and to soften you toward His will for you and your child. Consider your accountability to Him and the reputation you present to a watching world.

Finally, give yourself and your child a break. Guess what? Your son or daughter isn't perfect, and neither are you. You'll make mistakes when you stand up; your child will make mistakes when standing up for himself or herself. You're both in the process of becoming.

The fields of communication, psychology, business, and even evangelism all have something to teach us about advocacy. The topic easily can become controversial, too; emotions run high when we talk about our children's rights, needs, and desires.

That's why I've created a place where you can meet with other parents just like you who need support as they stand up for their children. Please visit us at www.standingupforyourchild.blogspot.com.

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IN THE BEGINNING

Sometimes standing up for your child starts when he or she is still in the womb.

For us, it began after losing our first child, Emily, to an unusual genetic disorder.

During the sixteenth week of both of my subsequent pregnancies, in 1989 and 1991 respectively, I had to decide whether to undergo amniocentesis to find out whether these babies, like the first, had Turner's syndrome. The procedure included penetrating my abdomen with a terrifyingly long needle, in search of amniotic fluid that would be analyzed. Since I was classified as "high risk," the doctor insisted the test was necessary.

Not that it mattered. My husband, Chip, and I agreed long before the procedure that even if the results revealed that this child too had Turner's Syndrome, we would see the pregnancy through to term, God willing.

After the first time I underwent this probing—almost alien—procedure, we were referred to a genetic counselor.

It was just six months since our daughter had died before her first breath. We hadn't possessed the experience, wisdom, or the opportunity to stand up for Emily's chance at life. That chance had been statistically nonexistent; we knew she was dying in utero and couldn't do anything to stop it.

Now the counselor, Pam, sat facing us. She extended her right hand to me and her left to my husband. "I'm your bridge," she said. "We have a lot to talk about, but first things first."

Who would stand in the gap for our baby? We would.

Sitting on the edge of the hard plastic chair, I breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, I thought, we'd found someone who could understand the agony Chip and I had been through. We wouldn't have to explain and explain again the depth of our pain and confusion at the loss of Emily.

In Pam, we had someone who'd stand up for our choice—even against doctors who proposed something else. We'd never had that before. We'd been alone, feeling pressure from well-meaning experts. Pam had seen it all and worked with countless other parents who struggled with genetic uncertainties. She could speak the language of the medical community and translate when necessary.

Squeezing my hand, Chip smiled at me with his own sense of relief. We were going to be okay.

Or so we thought.

"Before I can advocate for you as parents, I need to make sure I understand your wishes," Pam began. "This time, if the fetus presents with the same chromosomal defect, would you prefer to terminate instead of waiting for the inevitable death in utero? There's no reason to put yourself through that pain again."

Any relief I'd felt dissipated like cheap air freshener. Pam was really one of *them*.

She'd said she was there to advocate for our wishes, but she'd made assumptions about what those wishes were. Termination was not a choice in our minds. It seemed that, once again, we were alone in standing up for our child.

Once again I was bargaining with someone who didn't share my beliefs or convictions. Pam was kind, professional, and knowledgeable, but she didn't get it. Even as she tried to soothe our raw emotions, I realized she couldn't possibly be the advocate we needed.

Chip released Pam's hand and squeezed mine tighter.

"We're ready this time, no matter what the test shows," he said.

Who would stand in the gap for our baby? We would. It was what we'd been called to do from the moment of his conception.

This was the day we started to learn what it meant to advocate for our children. This was the beginning of the goofy, gratifying, challenge-riddled time of our lives called parenthood.

We would learn that, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, in school and on the playground, at grandma's house and on the soccer field, in the dentist's chair and beyond, parents question and quarrel and sometimes quiver or quit when faced with something that threatens their children's quality of life.

Sometimes they're blessed with someone to stand beside them when they stand up for their children. More often they stand alone—or so it seems.

As for our firstborn son, Christopher—he did not have Turner's Syndrome. Nor did his brother, Charles.

So with two boys to raise, it was time for the long-term work of advocacy to begin.

Standing Up and Standing Down

Think back to when you were growing up. Most likely you experienced at least one situation in which you had to stand up for someone else.

Maybe you stood up for your brother against a bully. Maybe you stood up for your best friend against a hurtful rumor. Maybe you stood up for yourself against your parents' demand for an unreasonable curfew. Whatever the reason, you felt compelled to open your mouth in response to some injustice, misunderstanding, or mistreatment.

Chances are that you were and continue to be one of the good guys. As a parent you probably stand up, stand firm, and at times stand against injustice—whether it's directed at your child or someone else's.

Some of us, though, do more than stand up for the rights of the weak. We may be guilty of shoving our way down the throats of others, even if our cause has merit. We're the parents who make the news, caught on the school security camera as we climb over the front counter in the office and throttle the assistant principal. We're the parents who scream at coaches through the metal fences near the bleachers in order to "encourage" them to give our children more game time.

As severe as this sounds, it happens too often. Parents behaving badly give nightmares to teachers, coaches, doctors, nurses, and other service providers. Those of us who pose for this not-so-pretty picture are *bully parents*.

On the other hand, perhaps you've been faced with injustice and did nothing. You may have stood by while a bully picked on a less-than-popular kid at school. You may have let a friend repeat a lie about a classmate when you knew it wasn't true. You may have sat quietly in the bleachers when a coach screamed your child into the ground about an error he made.

Has inaction defined you? Do you struggle to stand tall against the giants who tower over you and your child's life? Those of us who whimper and wilt at the thought of confrontation are *victim parents*.

I've described the extremes here. But we all have a tendency toward one or the other.

Which way do you naturally bend? Trees grow toward the sun, twisting and turning around obstacles as they do. You can tell the trees that usually face a fierce wind; their trunks and branches curl away from it. We either grow in response to something that satisfies us or against something that threatens us. And so do our children.

We're the parents who scream at coaches through the metal fences near the bleachers in order to "encourage" them to give our children more game time.

Worse Than Ever?

Some say parents need to pay more attention than ever to the issue of advocacy. Consider the following, adapted from a column I wrote in response to an Associated Press article about a parent who stormed into her daughter's classroom unannounced.

School Violence Hits an All-time Low

What happens when two mother bears fight over the same cub? Well, one gets jailed and the other ends up in the emergency room. On October 22, 2004 in Macon, Georgia, a teacher was charged with battery and cruelty to children for allegedly beating a parent who tried to retrieve her daughter's backpack.

Talk about violence in schools!

Both parents and teachers are territorial when it comes to children in school.

"This is my room. These are my kids," a teacher declares.

"This is my family. These are my kids," a parent defends.

Both play the role of protector and defender of their own territories—and children get caught in the middle.

There's a good chance the parent didn't follow proper procedures and walked into the teacher's classroom both uninvited and unexpected. There's an even better chance that there was a history of negative encounters between this parent and teacher. Most likely, both parties had personal issues outside of school that affected their aberrant behavior that day.

The tug-of-war over the student's backpack was inappropriate at worst and childish at best. When the teacher threw the backpack in the trash, it was perceived as a declaration of war. A struggle ensued, hair was pulled, punches were thrown—and finally the teacher picked up a chair and hit the mom on the back.

All while the children watched.

Parents worry quite a bit about violence in schools. I doubt any of us thought that it was the teachers we had to be afraid of.

"Cruelty to children" was one of the charges against

that teacher. I commend the court that made that charge. It keeps the focus where it should be—on the children.

Not only should grown-ups know better, but the bottom line is that it is not about us! We've already had our turn. This is our children's one shot at a quality education. Without real parent-teacher partnerships, our kids will get the raw end of the deal. But without mutual respect there will be no partnerships.

We can't just assume that everyone involved in a child's life is there for the same purpose. We need to take the time to get to know those adults who sometimes spend more time with our kids than we do. Partnerships don't just happen. They require time, attention, and the dismantling of fences.

We must do all this and more. Parents need to respect an authority figure's position and boundaries. Authorities must re-spect a parent's position and values. Both can talk together kindly, plan together wisely, and support one another regularly.

All while the children watch.

Whether or not the advocacy battle is more intense than ever, it feels that way sometimes.

I've certainly felt like a mother bear protecting her cub on more than one occasion—though sometimes I'm not nearly as ferocious as I think I should be. I have this habit of expecting other people to be on their best behavior, but usually I'm disappointed to discover that they're not.

One day, for instance, I sat on a bench at the playground and watched as a seven-year-old girl pushed my four-year-old son off the steps to what we called "the big climbing toy." She dismissed him as if swatting a fly.

Standing, I took one step forward—hoping my grown-up presence would fill the girl's view and dissuade her from pushing my son again. He clambered up the sturdy steps one more time; again she pushed back.

This time I stood where the little darling's mother could see me, spotting my son with both hands as he climbed up the steps. When the girl reached out to push him down, I blocked her maneuver. "No. Keep your hands in your own space," my teacher voice said. "It's his turn to climb."

She screamed.

Guess what? Her mother tore herself away from her phone conversation and yelled at me to leave her daughter alone.

Me! She yelled at *me*!

Toe to toe we stood, my sneakers firmly planted and her three-inch heels sinking into the newly spread mulch. Then, nose to nose with her, I felt my resolve begin to dissipate.

My insides shuddered as they do when my blood sugar plummets. I stood and said, "I would appreciate it if we could play on the big climbing toy, too. Everyone deserves a turn."

For a moment she said nothing, eyeing me like a cat ready to pounce on an unsuspecting bird. Suddenly she turned, yanked her daughter off the big climbing toy, and dragged her, screaming, to their SUV.

I felt weak in the knees for a moment. Then I turned to see my son atop the big climbing toy, a smile stretching from ear to ear.

Everybody Needs One

We all need an advocate—someone to stand up for us, at least until we can stand on our own.

Most of us have had such a champion. Maybe your parents were your first advocates, and as you grew you encountered others who stood in the gap for you.

Many people apparently long to be heroes, looking for ways to save someone or something else. Teachers, coaches, friends, family, and even strangers speak for those who don't have a voice of their own. There are whole organizations devoted to advocacy—for children, endangered species, the environment, the needy, the persecuted, the homeless, the misunderstood, and the wrongly accused.

We parents are charged with being advocates for our children. From the moment they're conceived, we make decisions about their quality of life. Our choices don't always mirror those encouraged by our doctors, families, and friends—which is why standing up for our kids risks stepping on toes.

Take, for example, the choice of how to deliver your baby. Did you go all-natural or medicated? Did you enroll in Lamaze, Bradley, or no childbirth class? What did you say when your doctor asked if you were going to breast-feed or bottle-feed your newborn? If you had a son, how did you decide whether or not to circumcise him? These were all opportunities to stand up for the needs of your child and the rest of your family. It was the beginning of a lifelong commitment—and perhaps some lifelong disagreements.

There are times when parents need advocates, too—someone to help when we have trouble getting our children what they need. Sometimes an issue is too big for us to handle on our own; sometimes we just don't know how to get answers.

Knowing how to choose an advocate and acting as one yourself often require the same skill set. In the following chapters

you'll discover guiding principles that will help you develop and exercise those skills—in a way that makes your advocacy effective and consistent with your values.

Ready or Not, Stand Up

I certainly wasn't prepared to advocate for the life of our preborn son all those years ago. But I was thrust into the role anyway.

Maybe you anticipate a big “fight” on the horizon on behalf of your child, and you hope this book will help prepare you for it. Maybe your child has a chronic or life-threatening illness that forced you into this role early on. Whether it's due to a mental, physical, relational, or spiritual cause, you may always find yourself on call to stand in the gap—ready or not.

Does your child have a learning disability? Is she gifted? A benchwarmer? A prodigy? Do you find yourself having to defend your child to another son or daughter or even your own spouse? Does living in a blended, single, or extended family complicate the problem? What if a friend allows your child to watch television shows and movies that you don't allow in your home? Are you battling humanism in a public school, legalism in a private Christian school, or competitive philosophies if you homeschool? Is your child learning how to stand up for herself by watching you?

Whether advocating for your child shoots tingles of intimidation or exhilaration down your spine, you won't lack for opportunities. Let this book help you hone your “stand-up” skills—so that when the time comes, you can be your child's hero.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vicki Caruana is, first and foremost, the wife of Chip and the mother of Christopher and Charles. An educator who's taught students in grades from kindergarten through college, she also homeschooled her two children through the elementary years and helped them with their transition into public schools.

Like you, Vicki has found herself standing up for her kids more often than she'd like. She continues to learn how it's done from the greatest model we could have for an advocate, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Vicki's books include the best-selling *Apples & Chalkdust* and *Before the Bell Rings*, as well as *Brain Food: Recipes for Success in School, Sports, and Life* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). She has written more than 20 books designed to educate and encourage parents and teachers to strive for excellence.

The author of more than 150 magazine and newspaper articles, Vicki has been a regular contributor to publications such as *Focus on the Family*, *Teachers of Vision*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *Christian Parenting Today*, *The Old Schoolhouse*, *Teach*, PTA's *Our Children*, and many more. She speaks regularly to education, homeschooling, parents', and women's groups about issues surrounding children and education. Vicki is represented by Speak Up Speaker Services; to find out more about including her at your local, regional, national, or international event, contact www.speakupspeakerservices.com.

Vicki is one of four parenting experts to appear on the Focus on the Family DVD *Starting Points*. A regular guest on various

Focus on the Family broadcasts, she is also a contributor to focusonyourchild.com, offering advice on topics such as school choice, goal-setting with kids, giving children the excellence edge, and learning styles.

Born and raised in Staten Island, New York, Vicki lives with her family in Florida, where she teaches at a public middle school. She works with students who have the greatest needs, and is often their only advocate.

Vicki knows what your busy parenting life is like. For more information on her many educational and parenting endeavors, visit her on the Web at www.vickicaruna.blogspot.com and www.standingupforyourchild.blogspot.com.

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