

# Parenting is Hard



and then  
you die



A Fun But Honest Look at  
Raising Kids of All Ages Right

David E. Clarke, Ph.D.

Although this book will make you laugh over and over, it's not parenting light. It's filled with truth that will transform your home for good. I love that it's intensely practical. You get the feeling this father-and-son writing team has spent time observing your children (how else would they know so much!). Let this dynamic duo help turn your greatest frustrations in parenting into your greatest victories.

**ARLENE PELLICANE**

Speaker and author of *Parents Rising: 8 Strategies for Raising Kids Who Love God, Respect Authority, and Value What's Right*

If you really love your kids, take the time to read this book. *Parenting Is Hard and Then You Die* is a great combination of humor and Bible-based wisdom. Dr. Clarke's personal approach and creative strategies will help you raise healthy kids who love you and love the Lord.

**DAVID AND CLAUDIA ARP**

Cofounders of Marriage Alive and authors of *10 Great Dates*

In David Clarke's *Parenting Is Hard and Then You Die*, parents will find practical guidelines and insights that will change parenting from an ordeal to be endured to an enriching experience. This book is full of humor, biblical applications, and just plain common sense.

**HAROLD J. SALA, PH.D.**

Author and founder of Guidelines International

*Parenting Is Hard and Then You Die* is a fun, fun book—you'll laugh hilariously at your own life. David Clarke is insightful, practical, and very vulnerable, as well as funny.

**JIM CONWAY, PH.D.**

President, Midlife Dimensions, and author of *Men in Midlife Crisis*



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*and Then You Die*



A FUN BUT HONEST LOOK AT  
RAISING KIDS OF ALL AGES RIGHT

David E. Clarke, Ph.D.  
with William G. Clarke, M.A.



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People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

# *Gifts from God—or Instruments of Slow Torture?*

THERE IS ONE QUESTION that has haunted parents for centuries. Here it is: Are children gifts from God—or instruments of slow torture? Actually, they are both. Parenting has moments of wonder, excitement, and enrichment . . . broken up by long stretches of exasperation, total chaos, and suffering.

As you begin parenthood with a newborn baby, you just want this little person to survive. You sneak into the nursery every thirty minutes to make sure the little thing is still breathing. You meet every need of this small, helpless creature.

When your child hits the twos and threes and is systematically destroying your home—piece by broken piece—you begin to wonder if you will survive.

When your child moves into middle school and becomes a teenager, you *know* you're not going to make it. You realize with horror that the roles are reversed. You are now a small, helpless creature at the mercy of a far superior force: hormones.

If you and your ungrateful, hostile, and attitude-challenged teenager survive through high school, two things happen. One, your health is broken. Two, you must now spend your retirement savings on college. Talk about a gamble! All that money for a kid you're not even sure is going to turn out well.

With your health broken and your money spent, you must spend your declining years praying that one of your kids will have pity on you and take care of you. That's the main reason Sandy and I had four kids. We figure at least one of them will look after us when we're in our wheelchair years.

So far, it doesn't look too positive. In a recent conversation with our feisty third daughter, Nancy, the topic of what to do with an aging mom and dad came up. Nancy, deadpan, looked me in the eye and said, "Simple solution. I'm going to put you in a home." And I don't think she was kidding!

This brief overview of the parenting process is tongue-in-cheek. But there is truth to it, isn't there? Parenting is hard. Very, very hard. Just about impossible, really.

If you are raising a child, you are in a war. A war on many fronts.

## **A War with Your Children**

As my overview of the parenting process revealed, you are in a war with your own kids! Don't get me wrong . . . children are blessings from God. They're fun and endlessly entertaining. They enrich us. They give life new meaning. They are the future.

But kids are also selfish, fiendishly inventive, and naturally gravitate to behaviors that are bad for them. They'll fight you at every turn, test your patience to its limit, and may break your heart with poor decisions.

## **A War with Your Family**

It's common to fight with your spouse over how to raise your children. You have different family backgrounds, different personalities, different parenting styles, different standards of behavior, and different ideas of discipline.

If your spouse becomes your ex-spouse, the war over how to raise

your children really heats up. Now there are two different homes with two different sets of rules. If you remarry, these new spouses bring in their own ideas about parenting.

To make the war even more intense, all the leftover pain of the divorce transfers into the parenting process.

Other relatives—grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins—can also interfere with your ability to raise your children in a consistent, godly way.

### **A War with the Culture**

Satan is hard at work every hour of every day trying to damage your children. He's good at what he does. Very good. Look at how successful Satan has been:

- profanity and nudity on television
- the explosion of accessible pornography on the internet
- social media replacing real communication and real relationships
- the decriminalization of harmful drugs
- homosexual marriage legalized
- bisexuality approved
- transgender individuals applauded
- sex outside marriage normalized and promoted
- living together taking the place of marriage
- no-fault divorce laws
- no prayer and no discipline in public schools

Satan is a master of making sin appear incredibly attractive. It's what he does. His main target audience? Your kids.

It's a crazy world and it's getting crazier—and more sinful—every day.

Okay, that's the bad news. It's true, and it's very bad. But I have good news for you. Very good news.

## **Parents Make the Difference**

Fighting the parenting war on all these fronts can make you feel discouraged and even make you want to give up in despair. It's easy to believe that we are weak and powerless as parents. But that is not true!

My fellow parents, listen to me. We can do a lot as parents. The truth is, we do make the difference in the lives of our children. We have the power and the authority, from God Himself, to influence how our children turn out as adults. Don't just take my word for it. Listen to what God says in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."

There are two central truths in this verse I want to highlight. First, God is saying that parents can raise healthy kids. We can do it! We can train our children to grow up and live as wise, godly adults.

Second, and very importantly, God is saying that to produce a great kid you must follow a plan. You must have a clear and proper course of action. You don't hope for the best. You purposefully carry out your parenting plan. And, most of the time, your children will turn out beautifully.

## **A Battle Plan That Works!**

What you need, my fellow parents, is a parenting battle plan. A practical, carefully researched, and Bible-based plan. A plan that has been proven to work. It just so happens, I have such a plan.

What you'll read in this book is the way my parents (William and Kathleen) raised my brother, Mark—who is a pastor and a school-teacher—and me. So far, we've turned out pretty well.

My dad, William Clarke, is my writing partner. And my mentor.

And a source of godly, biblical wisdom. It's like writing a book with Moses. He's been married to my mom for over sixty years. He is a master's level marriage and family therapist who's been helping parents and their children for . . . well, forever.

This is the way Sandy—my beautiful wife of thirty-five years—and I raised our four children: Emily, Leeann, Nancy, and William. We've had struggles along the way, but we've stayed the course. They have turned into wonderful, productive, and godly young adults.

So far (hint, hint), we have three grandchildren: Chaz and Emily's Izzy (six) and Andrew and Leeann's Jackie (two) and Tyler (three months). As we support these parents, we're using our time-tested battle strategy.

It's the way I've taught thousands of parents, in my therapy office in Tampa and in my seminars, to raise their kids. As a clinical psychologist, I've worked with parents and their kids for over thirty years. Believe me, I've learned a great deal about parenting in my career.

My parenting Battle Plan isn't perfect. It does not contain all the truth in the universe about parenting. It just works.

## **Who Ought to Read This Book?**

If you are in any kind of parenting or quasi-parenting role, this book is for you:

- biological parent in a traditional family
- single parent
- blended parent family
- adoptive parent
- foster parent
- grandparent
- teacher (at a church or in a school)
- coach
- youth pastor

If you are in one of these roles, God wants to use you to positively influence the children in your care. My parenting principles can help you do that.

## **My Battle Plan**

My Battle Plan has five parts:

**Foundation:** How to form your parenting team

**Needs:** How to meet the five critical needs in the life of every child

**Discipline:** How to create a behavior-based system of standards, rewards, and consequences

**Teens:** How to deal with the six (finally, not five of something!) massive changes every teenager goes through

**Blended:** How to heal from the loss of one family and build a new, healthy one

If you follow my Battle Plan, you can win the parenting war. You can raise healthy kids in this crazy world. Kids with God-centered self-esteem. Kids who are responsible, independent, and able to develop good relationships. Kids who will be great friends of yours as adults. Kids who will impact the culture—and not the other way around.

Most importantly, kids who will love Jesus Christ and serve Him.

One gentle warning about my sense of humor: At times, I can be edgy, sarcastic, and over the top. But it's all in good fun. My humor is intended to help you understand and apply my parenting principles.

I love my four kids, and I loved raising them. I want you to have the same positive experience Sandy and I did. Parenting is both very difficult and incredibly joyful. I hope my humor and direct, honest

## INTRODUCTION

writing style get you through the hard times and help you enjoy the great times.

Now read and answer the following questions to begin your Battle Plan briefing from General David Clarke.

### **YOUR BATTLE PLAN**

1. In what areas are you struggling as a parent?
2. Who or what are you battling in your attempt to raise godly, healthy kids?
  - Your spouse?
  - Your ex-spouse?
  - Other family members?
  - The culture?
  - Your kids?
3. In what areas are your children doing well? In what areas are they not doing well?
4. What are your goals for each of your children?



PART ONE

# Foundation

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CHAPTER I

YOUR SUPERNATURAL  
TEAM MEMBER

DO NOT EVER sell a house. Do not buy a house. I'm serious. If you live in a pup tent next to a nuclear waste dump, stay there. It will be easier and better for your health than selling your house and buying a new one.

If you have ever sold a house and bought another one, you know what I'm talking about. "Living nightmare" doesn't even come close to describing the process.

My lovely blonde wife, Sandy, and I spent the last seven months selling our home of thirty-one years and purchasing another home. We're still in recovery.

Throwing out all the useless stuff we'd accumulated over three decades was exhausting. And a little embarrassing. Getting our house ready to sell was expensive. Keeping it cleaned and staged for showings was incredibly annoying. Searching and searching and searching for a new house was unbelievably frustrating. Packing up all the things we were taking was a brutal, never-ending job. I have decided to invest heavily in cardboard box manufacturers.

But the worst part of the miserable experience was dealing with the bank that finally . . . finally . . . finally decided to give us a mortgage loan.

I thought torture was illegal. It's not. Our wonderful bank forced us to reveal every penny we made and every penny we spent in our thirty-five-year marriage. Entire forests were cut down to provide the thousands of forms we signed. More forests were cut down to replace the signed forms that our bank misplaced. After inflicting the maximum amount of pain and suffering possible, our bank—two days before our closing—approved the loan.

As you can see, I could go on and on. I'll end with the two things I told Sandy as we drove away from our closing. First, I apologized for making fun of persons who need an emotional support animal. I get it now. I need at least three emotional support animals.

Second, and most important, I made it clear that I will die in our new home. Emergency responders or funeral home employees—I don't care which—will carry me out in a bag. Because . . . I'm never selling this house.

I feel better after my real estate rant. It's good to get the feelings out. But the real point of my sad story is that you can't sell a house and buy another house on your own. It takes a team to get it all done. I had Sandy. I had our four adult kids. I had my parents. I had Bob and Pam Johns, our best friends. I had Liz Menendez, our wonderful Realtor. And I had God, who got us through every twist and turn of the experience.

### **It Takes a Team to Parent**

Just as you shouldn't sell or buy a home on your own (while you can, it's not advisable), you can't be a successful parent on your own. Parenting is too hard. Too stressful. Too demanding. Too complicated. It's too much of everything to tackle without a team.

In this chapter and the next, I will introduce you to your winning Parenting Team. This team will give you the spiritual, emotional, and practical help you need to get the parenting job done right.

## **Without God, Forget About It**

Your most important team member is God. There's no question about it. I can't even imagine attempting to raise children without God's help. Sandy and I barely made it through parenting four kids *with* His help.

To be a successful parent, you must have these qualities: Love. Respect. Kindness. Compassion. Patience. Wisdom. Forgiveness. Insight. Intuition. Emotional strength. The ability to listen. Communication skills. Self-control. (A lot of self-control.) Understanding. Boundaries. Tolerance. Organization. Acceptance of rejection. Unselfishness. Generosity. The ability to speak the truth in love. Grace.

And this isn't a complete list!

Do you possess all these qualities? Of course not. I don't. Sandy doesn't. No one does.

Who does? God does. When you have a relationship with God, you have full access to Him and to all these qualities. God will give you these qualities and, by doing so, give you all you need to be the best parent possible.

You raising your kids in your own power won't work. It's simply impossible. God raising your kids *through you* will work.

## **To Know God, You Have to Know Jesus**

Becoming a Christian is all about Jesus.

There is one God, and He is the God of the Bible. There is one way to establish a relationship with God, and that is through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here is Jesus Christ, in His own words: "I am the way, and the

truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with God through Jesus. God sent Jesus to die for your sins—all the things you’ve done wrong—to provide forgiveness, so that you can have a relationship with God. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

This is what you must believe to become a Christian: “That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

When you believe these truths—Jesus died for your sins, He was buried, He rose from the dead—and ask Jesus to be *your* Savior, you become a Christian. You have a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus. You are forgiven!

You now have the power to improve your personal life. You have the power to parent. And, best of all, you’re going to heaven when you die.

## **You Can Become a Christian—Right Now**

If you are not a Christian yet, I urge you to become one. You can begin your relationship with God through Jesus right now by expressing your feelings and your decision by the words in this brief prayer:

*Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I’ve made many mistakes and sinned in my life. I realize my sin separates me from You, a holy God. I believe that Your Son, Jesus Christ, died for my sins, was buried, and rose from the dead. I place my trust in Him as my Savior. I give my life to You now.*

If you prayed this prayer of belief, I am very happy for you. If you're not ready to begin a relationship with God, that's okay. What I want you to do is read the rest of this book. By the end, I think you'll see how impossible it is to raise a healthy child in your own strength. When you realize this sobering truth, I hope and pray you'll become a Christian.

## **Once You're a Christian, You Must Grow Spiritually**

To know God through Jesus Christ is vitally important. To grow in your relationship with God is equally important. To maintain a steady supply of His power for your parenting (and all you do in life), you must stay close to Him.

## **A Daily Individual Quiet Time with God**

To grow in your relationship with God the Father, you must spend regular time with Him. Every day invest fifteen minutes or more with God. Virtually all of your personal spiritual intimacy will occur in your daily individual times with Him.

Your quiet time with God can be at any time of the day. In a private, no-distractions-allowed quiet place, meet with God.

I want you to do three things in each quiet time.

First, begin by reading a daily devotion. This is a brief spiritual message, usually tied to a Bible passage, that helps you focus on God and spiritual things. It acts like a spiritual cup of hot chocolate: It gets your soul warmed up. There are many excellent daily devotionals, both online and hold-in-your-hands book form. Check with your pastor or Focus on the Family to find one.

Second, pray. Praying is talking with God. I say "with" because you talk to God and God speaks to you through what He has given us—the Bible. He also speaks when you sit in silence, meditate, and listen. Open up and share everything with Him: what's going on in

your life, the good things He's given you, your struggles and anxieties, your fears, failures, sins, spiritual insights, spiritual doubts . . . Always take time to worship and adore Him for who He is. Never, ever, forget to thank Him for all He has done. End with your requests for Him to meet your needs and the needs of others.

Finally, read the Bible. The Bible is, quite literally, God's Word. When you read Scripture, God is talking to you: comforting, admonishing, convicting, encouraging, and teaching you. Read a short passage—a verse or several verses—and meditate on it for a few minutes. Consider how you can apply what you read to your life that very day.

While God is your most important Parenting Team member, He is not the only one. In the next chapter I'll introduce you to your other team members.

## **YOUR BATTLE PLAN**

1. Talk about a horrible, awful, very bad, painful experience (like selling a house and buying another one) you have suffered through in the past. Who helped you survive and move ahead?
2. Do you have a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus? If not, what is keeping you from beginning this relationship right now?
3. If you're not ready to begin a relationship with God, will you keep an open mind about God until you finish this book?
4. If you are a Christian, how strong and close is your relationship with God? If you're struggling in this relationship, why? Are you willing to follow my quiet time actions to grow spiritually?