

Foreword by Michael Farris

PARENTING
BEYOND
THE RULES

Raising teens with
confidence *and* joy

CONNIE ALBERS



Connie Albers wisely recognizes that it's relationships, not gimmicks or rules, that form the best bridge between you and your teenager. This book hands you what you most need: hopeful, practical ideas you can use this week to have the relationship with your child you've always wanted.

KARA POWELL, PhD, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute and coauthor of *Growing Young*

Parenting is hard. Parenting teens in this culture can be downright overwhelming. I'm grateful for wise guides like Connie Albers. *Parenting beyond the Rules* has a terrific mix of stories, down-to-earth practical advice, and tools for self-evaluation, all given without losing what's ultimately important.

JOHN STONESTREET, president of the Colson Center and coauthor of *A Practical Guide to Culture*

In a world where parents struggle to prioritize their families over many pressures, Connie Albers is a breath of fresh air. *Parenting beyond the Rules* is a must-read for every parent who desires a lifelong relationship with their child. Having raised her own five children to adulthood, Connie offers parents more than just anecdotal encouragement; she equips them to understand and engage with their teens every step of the way. The teen years can be some of the best years of parenting. Connie will show you how to get the most out of them.

HEIDI ST. JOHN, mother of seven, author of *Becoming MomStrong*, speaker, and founder of MomStrong International

As the father of four and an educator, I admire anyone who focuses time and energy on making life better for teens and their parents. Connie Albers has taken on the ever-challenging topic of parenting teens with experience, grace, and wisdom. Connie deeply understands that parenting moves from authority to influence,

rooted in a relationship that must be intentionally nurtured. This volume is a wonderful contribution and is a must-read for any parent who wants more!

PAUL J. MAURER, PHD, president of Montreat College

Parenting beyond the Rules will inspire, encourage, and strengthen you. Connie beautifully illustrates her truths with relevant illustrations and stories. They make the book easy to read and help you understand why teens behave the way they do—and how to best respond. Her ideas will help you stay connected to your teens as you prepare to launch them into the next phase of their lives. That's a definite strength of this book. For example, her practical ideas about being aware and available so your teens will engage with you are excellent. Read this now!

KATHY KOCH, PHD, founder of Celebrate Kids and author of *Start with the Heart*

A needlepoint hung in our home during our children's teenage years, reminding us that there are two gifts we should give our children: roots and wings. We want our children to know where home is and to always feel safe and comfortable there. But we also want them to know how to fly away and to exercise what they've learned. *Parenting beyond the Rules* provides the principles for developing both roots and wings with grace and confidence. Connie Albers shares solid principles for raising healthy adults who will also rise up and call their parents blessed.

DAN MILLER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *48 Days to the Work You Love*

I can't think of a better person to glean wisdom and practical advice from than Connie Albers. Her vulnerable stories from raising teenagers will encourage and inspire, showing you that

you're not alone in the day-to-day struggles. Her wise words will give you hope, fill your heart with joy, and help you improve your relationship with your teen. I will reread this guide year after year as I walk through the teenage years with my four boys. *Parenting beyond the Rules* is a must-have for all parents of teens!

ERIN CHASE, author of *The \$5 Dinner Mom Cookbook*

With vulnerability and sensitivity, Connie addresses the tough issues that parents and teens face together, with a focus on maintaining a loving and lasting relationship. Unlike many books that are limited to feelings and theory, *Parenting beyond the Rules* provides practical advice you can use every day.

SAM BLACK, a vice president at Covenant Eyes

Connie reminds us that the teen years aren't something to simply be gotten through but rather an opportunity to deepen our relationships with our kids, even as we prepare for them to leave us. During what can be an isolating season of parenting, we need practical advice and comforting encouragement, and I found both generously offered in this book. I would love a pocket-size version to carry with me into every interaction with my teenagers!

VANESSA HUNT, coauthor of *Life in Season: Celebrate the Moments That Fill Your Heart and Home*

A voice of gentle authority and experience, Connie gives us the necessary, practical, and biblical brushstrokes for parents who have—or will have—teens in the home. She shows that the beautiful journey of parenting teens is in the everyday stuff, not just in the finished masterpiece once they are grown. Connie leads parents in understanding that our job is not just about a set of rules to follow but more about how to find assurance and delight in these

few years left with the teens in our lives. I recommend this book to anyone struggling, anxious, or curious about how to navigate the teen years.

KRISTIN FUNSTON, author of *More for Mom*

Parenting beyond the Rules provides straightforward strategies for connecting to the heart of your child. Find encouragement to parent with intention and wisdom as you foster a lifelong relationship with your teen.

KATIE M. REID, MA, secondary education, mother to five and author of *Made like Martha*

My wife and I have spent significant time with Connie's adult children. They've shared stories and thought processes of some meaningful decisions they've made. One thing was clear: They had been parented for more than adhering to the rules—they had been parented to act independently yet interdependently, to think creatively yet cooperatively, and to live boldly yet humbly. We are hoping some of it rubs off on our seven children and are grateful for the Alberses.

JASON C. DUKES, pastor and author of *Live Sent* and *Inviting Along*

Connie has packed a lifetime of wisdom and experience into *Parenting beyond the Rules*. Every parent will find golden nuggets of actionable intel from the front lines of parenting. Don't just read it . . . USE IT!

RICK GREEN, founder of Patriot Academy

Parenting during the teen years can be incredibly isolating; we navigate challenges while honoring our teenagers' desire for privacy. You can't ask just anyone for advice anymore! Connie Albers has

stepped into the gap. Her combination of wisdom and practical advice was exactly what I needed to read, and I found myself sighing in relief. Connie has been where I am, she understands what I'm going through, and she offers guidance that makes sense.

DANA K. WHITE, author of *Decluttering at the Speed of Life*

Parenting beyond the Rules was a breath of fresh air to my soul. Connie's approach to relationships with her children, connecting on a level beyond rules, was precisely the inspiration that I needed. With Connie's heartfelt wisdom, I feel like I have a mentor that I can reference again and again as we walk through the teenage years with each of our children. Every parent should read *Parenting beyond the Rules* to learn how to form intentional relationships with their children that will continue into adulthood.

KASEY TRENUM, blogger, author, social-media influencer, and momma of four; www.kaseytrenum.com

As a parent of three teenagers, I am beyond grateful for Connie's encouragement. In *Parenting beyond the Rules*, I gained a new perspective of how to guide my children through their teen years. Connie places a strong emphasis on relationships over rules, always focusing on the heart of the child. I am inspired and encouraged that our best years are yet to come!

MORGAN TYREE, professional organizer and writer

Transparent, insightful, and practical. *Parenting beyond the Rules* gives parents sound advice, solid principles, and heart-relevant stories to encourage you in the journey of shaping a teen's life. Richer relationships can be ours when we apply what Connie lays out in this book. If you have a teen or know one, this book has your name on it. And their heart will have your name on it as a result.

BLYTHE DANIEL, literary agent and coauthor of *Mended*

Parenting beyond the Rules provides practical tools for demonstrating love to your teens while communicating and managing your own expectations. This easy-to-read book also helps you empower your family to approach life from a team perspective that will equip your teens for lifelong success as they move toward adulthood.

MICHELLE NIETERT, MA, licensed professional counselor supervisor

Connie Albers reminds us that we were once teens longing to have wings to travel our own journey. Helping a teen grow into responsible adulthood requires letting go while retaining their heart and their respect. *Parenting beyond the Rules* gives a concise guide of how to do just that.

JOANNE MILLER, author of *Creating a Haven of Peace*

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FOREWORD

MY WIFE AND I ENTERED THE raising-teens phase of our parenting in 1988, when our oldest daughter turned thirteen. For the next twenty-nine years, we had a steady supply of teenage children. We have ten children. Do the math: At one point, we had six teens in our house.

When my wife and I were first married, we had the real pleasure of serving as the leaders of a large group of junior-high kids in our church in Bellingham, Washington. We were qualified—or so we thought. After all, we had been teenagers ourselves only a year or two earlier.

Any thought that we knew all the tricks of guiding teens quickly dissipated as we began to see the complexities of this season of life. And when we became parents of teens almost two decades later, we remembered enough from those youth-group years to realize that we were entering a season that required wisdom beyond our own if we were going to succeed.

Connie Albers, a mom of five grown children, has created an excellent compilation of the kind of wisdom that she gained the hard way—successfully raising five children through the teen years to adulthood. Her dependence on God and his Word ensures that her wisdom is infused with eternal wisdom from above.

Let me warn you. If you are looking for a book with can't-miss formulas and easy tricks to turn raising teens into a season of unending joy, this isn't it. But I'll tell you a secret. Such books aren't worth the money you pay for them, nor the time it takes to read them.

Connie's book will give you some practical suggestions in each of the thoughtfully organized chapters. But don't underline these suggestions and miss the larger and far more important truth that she presents with winsome relentlessness.

Successful parenting of a teenager must be focused on building a great relationship with your child. Connie gives important suggestions on how to do this. But her bigger message has two important truths embedded in these suggestions and her many encouraging stories.

- If you want a great relationship with your teen, work on winning their heart.
- While what you *do* will impact that effort, the most important thing you can do to win your child's heart is to make sure that your own heart is right with God and right with your child.

Connie's narrative creates the opportunity for you to examine your own attitudes and heart condition as you parent. Don't miss this opportunity.

Win your teen's heart by making sure that God has your heart.
That's a truth worth knowing.

Michael Farris

CEO and general counsel for
Alliance Defending Freedom



INTRODUCTION

THE PICTURE EMERGED as we were standing in the Panera parking lot, my oldest daughter and I. I was at the beginning of a new parenting season—the youngest of my five children had recently graduated from high school—and so I had embarked on starting a business. My oldest daughter, a talented photographer and artist, was helping me with the branding.

As we reflected on the next steps in my journey, she started making a small circular motion with her left hand. She said, “Mom, you did some pretty cool things before you had kids.”

She was right. Before I had kids, I was a spokesperson and corporate trainer. I worked with celebrities, CEOs, and news anchors. I also did television and radio interviews and made many guest appearances on behalf of the company I worked for. I was even given the “Keys to the City” once by a mayor. (Honestly, I didn’t know what the keys were for, but I posed for pictures and politely said thank you.) Everything I did back then was fun and exciting.

My daughter took her right hand and began making another small circle. “And you’re doing some amazing things now that we’re grown.”

But then she started a new circle in the air, a larger one between the two small ones. “But Mom, this—” she stared into my eyes—“this

is your life's greatest work! Look at us kids. Look at our family. Look at the family you and Dad built."

And that was the key. Everything I've done or will do pales in comparison to having a close relationship with my family.

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I thought, *This is what Proverbs 31 is all about*. That our children will rise up and call us blessed. The desire of every mother—to hear a child say, "Look at our family." My kids know better than anyone how imperfect I was as a mother. They saw me at my worst. They know who didn't get along with whom. They know when I was at odds with their dad. And still, my daughter said, "Look at us." The lump in my throat made it almost impossible to swallow.

None of this happened because I have all the answers. I believe it happened because many years ago, I listened to God and intentionally applied what I learned. And one thing I learned is this: The teen years are not something to dread. This critical season of our children learning to become adults can be filled with joy and rich relationship by parenting beyond the rules.

I'm inviting you on a dynamic parenting journey. Along the way, you will discover why paying attention to your relationship with your teen—to keeping and prioritizing their heart—can yield the closeness you long for as you navigate this incredible season of parenting. Boundaries and direction are important in raising teens, but only in the context of caring well for their hearts.

Often, we parents are so busy managing life that the small, everyday things in our relationships with our children get overlooked. We find ourselves jumping from one crisis to another. We might have even been told that the small things don't really matter. Because our lives are so full, we accept this statement without really questioning its validity. But as you parent your teen, I urge you not to reject what you can learn from the small things. I know how easy it is to overlook the eye roll, the disrespectful comment, the little white lie,

or the forgetting the turn-off-devices-at-bedtime rule—or to simply address the action and not the motive underneath. As tempting as it is to ignore the little things, I urge you to look more closely at why your teen does what he or she does.

An ancient proverb says “out of [the heart] flows the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23, JUB). The issues your teen is working on will flow out. And most of the time, they will leak out slowly. That’s why we must diligently notice the little things and help our teens before the seemingly insignificant problems materialize into bigger problems. This care for their hearts and our relationships is how we can keep the hearts of our teens in a world trying to steal them away.

The teen years go by quickly. But after raising five amazing children into adulthood and working with teens for more than twenty-five years, I have seen and heard quite a bit. I’ve learned what works, what makes teens pull away, and what draws them closer. We have the opportunity to help guide them toward what God designed them to be. And for those of you who are keenly aware of your mistakes and shortcomings, it’s not too late to influence your teen. It’s my sincere prayer that through this book, you will learn how to keep the heart of your teen and enjoy building relationships that last well beyond the teen years.

The daughter who stood in the parking lot that day, speaking life into my heart, was once invited to paint a masterpiece for a pediatric charity fund-raiser gala featuring Tim Tebow as the guest speaker. As part of the evening, she was asked to stand in front of all the guests and add additional brushstrokes to the piece. Nothing big. Small strokes here and there where she felt the painting needed a little something.

Hers was the last piece auctioned off that evening. And, much to our delight, it sold for the most money. She had never had a piece sell for that much. I couldn’t help but wonder if those additional touches made all the difference. Those seemingly minor strokes on the canvas, which no one could tell were there, mattered.

Your child is a masterpiece in the making. And God gave you the opportunity to add little touches here and there as you navigate this critical season of parenting. There will be times you have to use large brushstrokes with bold colors to lay foundational truths. Sometimes you will need to step back and let the paint dry so you can see what else needs to be added. Other times, you'll want to use smaller brushes of insights and redirection to add accent colors, drawing attention to a specific area of the painting. Every parenting word, action, reaction, and angry outburst adds to the painting.

Parenting beyond the rules means knowing the brushes you have to work with and the colors you want to include but investing the time and valuing your relationship with your child so you can improvise in the midst of intentionality. Rules are important, but you want to be able to dig deeper than that, to see who your child is and prioritize the relationship so that the rules don't rule you. When you parent this way, intentionality and improvisation will work together as you paint a beautiful canvas, one that will be enjoyed for a lifetime. You are creating your family's legacy.

Most parents don't feel fully equipped for such a task. But you are! God has prepared you for this journey. Granted, some days will be more challenging than others. I can guarantee it. However, I promise you this: You are able to overcome whatever setbacks you encounter along the way. You can pull out the colors of forgiveness, grace, humility, and love and ask the one who formed and fashioned your child to help you paint over the areas that need a little something.

Are you ready to pick up your brush?



Chapter 1

WHEN THE DREAM CHANGES

I COLLAPSED INTO BED, utterly exhausted after another long night of trying to reason with my son. I replayed and analyzed every part of the conversation, hoping to determine what I might have said or done wrong or discover what I could do better next time. I felt a stream of tears run down the side of my face and soak my hairline. I longed to enjoy a relationship with Paul. I didn't think that was too much to hope for—so why did every encounter backfire on me? It felt as if all we did lately was clash. We got along fine as long as the conversations were surface level or I didn't expect him to talk to me about how he was doing. But that's not how I wanted our relationship to be.

Not a day went by that I didn't think about what was going on with Paul. What had happened to him? He was my compliant child; he'd made me believe I was a great mother. So where had I gone wrong? I hadn't changed anything, yet my parenting wasn't working anymore. Why wouldn't he listen to me? *God, I don't know what to do.*

I feared that Paul would leave our house and never look back. And honestly, there were some days I wouldn't have minded that one bit. But then the rational side of my brain chimed in. I knew I didn't want that. I wanted a relationship—with fun, laughter, obedience, minimal strife or friction. But how could I accomplish this? *God, please show me what I need to do, where I need to change, how I can do this parenting job better. I know there is no such thing as a perfect parent, but I long to be the parent he needs me to be.*

Tucked deep in my heart lay the vision I'd dreamed of when I first held that precious little bundle of joy. I saw a little boy who enjoyed being with me. I envisioned things like teaching him God's Word, taking long bike rides, going on ice-cream dates, playing kickball in the front yard, taking camping trips, going hiking and sightseeing. And for much of his life, that vision had played out as I'd hoped. I loved spending time with him.

As he grew, I began to hope for more profound things—like having deep, meaningful late-night talks where he would invite me into the sacred space of his inner thoughts, the place where parents learn what is happening in the hearts of their teens. Trust is critical if a parent wants to be welcomed into a teen's inner world. Paul and I needed to have a relationship secure enough for him to share hopes and dreams, fears and anxieties, as well as insecurities—all of which require a willingness to be vulnerable. Such openness can be scary for an adolescent; vulnerability can be emotionally risky. I pictured mapping out his life and experiencing a million beautiful conversations. I was his biggest cheerleader, and he knew it. I believed we wouldn't drift apart, as many other families do. We would remain close, and the teen years would be our best.

Unfortunately, most visions don't play out as we expect them to, especially when it comes to parenting teens. Detours and pitfalls cause us to doubt what we are doing as parents. This season of parenting isn't a straight line. It's full of mystery and wonder; it's a series of unknowns to explore.

BLURRY PICTURES

In the midst of Paul's teen years, the picture I'd envisioned wasn't turning out as planned. Paul was changing, and I was at a loss. I talked to peers. I talked to God. I even talked to myself. (Yes, I'm one of those people. Maybe you also have these two-way conversations with yourself, attempting to solve your problems!)

I started to question everything—because I knew if something didn't change, I was going to lose the relationship I'd worked so hard to build. What I was doing clearly wasn't working. After much prayer, introspection, and conversations with those I trusted, I slowly began to change my approach to having meaningful conversations with my kids. Not accusing them before knowing the facts was the first step toward achieving this goal. Then I tried easing up on the rules, but Paul wanted even more freedom. No matter how much freedom I gave, it seemed as if it wasn't enough.

I cried out to God, *I'm failing at this parenting-teens gig.*

Do you ever feel that way? As if you give and change and lighten up, but it's not enough?

Time to teach this principle: Freedom is granted when freedom is earned.

If you're like me, you have a picture of what the teen years will be like for your family. Most parents do. But as an older mom once told me, "You're raising people—people who have a soul, mind, will, and emotions. They will not always be in sync with what you're trying to teach them. And you will encounter conflict during this season of parenting."

Looking back, I see her wisdom. Her perspective proved to be a game changer for me. I began to look at conflict in an entirely different way. I still didn't like it, but I understood why it happened. My kids were people—not just children who complied with my every request. They asserted their independence. They desired to choose

for themselves—their friends, their activities, and their future. This parenting season—was critical to their overall emotional and mental health as adults; everything I'd been teaching them moved from mere head knowledge to core convictions—the foundation of who they would become and how they would live their lives.

My oldest daughter, the professional photographer and artist, goes into a photo shoot with an idea of what the finished product will look like. She takes hundreds of photos until she feels she has captured what she envisioned. As I accompany her on photo shoots, I pay close attention to the various angles she shoots from, watching how she constantly adjusts the lighting and noticing how much coaching she has to do along the way. She can't just point and snap. That doesn't work. It takes her hours to prepare before she ever pulls out her camera. She has to think about the location, lighting, model, background, timing, weather, and a host of other things.

Parenting a teenager is similar. We have to patiently try—over and over—to help our children understand the vision God has for them. As parents, we have the privilege of helping them become the people they were made to be so God can use them for the purpose he created them for. And we have to do this delicately, allowing them to gain independence and move away from us—first emotionally, then physically.

No matter your parenting situation, I want to reassure you that the difficult days will not last forever. Believe me, I know how you feel—especially after a bad day, week, month, or year. But God is at work. He uses those days to help you create the masterpiece he designed your child to be. During the process, you will need to do some changing too. Teens change; we adjust. It's the nature of the teen years. And yes, many days, the pictures turn out blurry. Each one, though, gets us closer to the vision God has for our teens' relationship with him and with those they love.

YOUR STORY

We all enter the parenting journey with a legacy our parents passed on to us. For some, it is a rich, godly heritage; for others, it's one we don't desire to repeat. I fall into the latter category.

My childhood experiences are not uncommon, though at the time, I felt utterly alone. We all have our own childhood stories. Perhaps you encountered a difficult situation or tragedy as a teenager. Perhaps you had a fraught relationship with your own parents. For many of us, those memories are still sharp. In some cases, you can remember where you were, what you were doing, and how an event affected you. Such memories are what I call *defining moments*. I have yet to meet a parent who doesn't have a story.

My family's communication issues during the teen years compelled me to parent this season differently. Something in me knew the arguing, lack of respect, and loss of trust weren't God's plan for the family. And I'm a firm believer that if we don't actively do something about it, history repeats itself. The good news is, our past does not have to define our future or that of our children. God's power breaks a generational curse.

When you don't know any different, you can't do things differently. This presented a problem for me. Because I couldn't yet understand the bigger picture, I didn't know how to keep the hearts of my teens. Conversations I had with other moms made me think that they didn't either. We make rules to keep order. We place boundaries for safety. But how do we foster a relationship without compromising order or safety? We adjust as needed.

One of the stories I heard while preparing to write this book came from a mom I'll call Crystal. Crystal had a wonderful upbringing. Her parents were loving, understanding, and supportive. She knew they adored her. *Almost perfect* was how she described her teen years. I thought I'd finally found someone who had a nearly perfect

childhood! But in reality, perfection doesn't exist. When I asked about her school and friends, her countenance immediately dropped. Suddenly, she was sixteen years old again. Her vivid memories made me feel as if I were standing right next to her the day her mom entered her room with explosive news.

"Crystal, honey, Dad found a job in Ohio, and we'll be moving in two months."

"What? We're moving?" Crystal's face reflected the pain she felt in her heart. "But what about all my friends? If I go to a different school, I'll have to make new friends."

"I understand that, but we'll *all* be making new friends. That's what you do in a new place." Crystal's mom nodded her head condescendingly.

Crystal flopped back on her bed. "But it'll be my junior year! Everyone already has all of their friends by the time they're juniors."

"Listen, I have too much to do to go into this right now. You're so friendly and likable; you won't have any trouble meeting kids and making new friends."

"But—"

"No 'buts.' We're moving, and that's the end of the discussion." Crystal's mom stood, smoothed her shirt, and left the bedroom.

Fast-forward three months. Crystal took her place alongside other cheerleader hopefuls in the gym of her new high school. Though she recognized a few girls from the first few days of class, she didn't personally know any of them.

She heard someone behind her say, "That new girl is way too tall and skinny."

Another girl chimed in, "Yeah, and her teeth look kind of dingy."

Crystal instinctively put her hand over her mouth.

"She's definitely not pretty enough. We don't have to worry about her being any competition," said the first girl.

Crystal's heart raced, and she felt as though she might faint. Was

everyone in the gym looking at her, analyzing her, and judging her as not good enough to be a cheerleader? She choked back tears, but it was too late. Her confidence had fled. Though the remainder of the tryout was a blur, she knew she performed miserably because she was so rattled. She didn't make the team.

The sad reality is that not all teens can counter such criticisms with logic and truth. Unfortunately, such personal attacks on how a person looks become life-shaping beliefs.

"I think I might have been okay if I felt like my mom had just listened to me. I didn't want to move, but when I told her that, she completely shut me down. She didn't realize how hard it was for me to change high schools. She didn't understand how mean girls can be toward one another. I felt like she didn't even try to understand my point of view."

Now, as a mother herself, Crystal sees things a little differently. Her mom wasn't trying to be insensitive; she just forgot what it was like to be a teenage girl. This event made such an impression on Crystal that she vowed to pay greater attention to her teen's fears and concerns. She felt that if her mother had listened and helped her navigate this transition, their relationship wouldn't have suffered as long as it did, and her insecurities about her looks could've been worked through long ago. Instead, Crystal spent years needing to be accepted.

I've heard so many if-only-my-parents-had-understood-me stories. These stories hurt, surprise, and challenge us, but have shaped us in one way or another. As adults, we know life is complicated, but our teens don't. They are just now learning how to handle situations as they come up. And as you know, teen crises come at a rapid rate. Our teenagers are writing the stories they will one day look back on. If you teach your teen to work through these trials as they arise, you'll help them avoid wrongly defining themselves in adulthood.

When I became pregnant, I read every book I could get my hands on. They offered differing opinions on the "right" and "wrong" way

to rear children. I kept thinking, *There has to be a guidebook*. This got me thinking about the years I worked for Walt Disney World. When guests arrived at the ticket counter, a cast member handed them a guidebook featuring a map of the park and descriptions of each themed area. It was simple. The problem was, most of the guests didn't read the guidebooks. (If you've done the same thing, no worries; you aren't the only one.) Nonetheless, I was sure there had to be a guidebook for parenting teens.

I reasoned that if Walt Disney created Walt Disney World and helped design the guidebook so guests could have a more enjoyable experience, then surely God, who created humans, had something that outlined his expectations of parents. As it turned out, he did: his Word. So I started reading it. Not as a book, but as a personal letter from a Father instructing parents in how to love and live and parent well. As David wrote in the book of Psalms, "You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; you know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something" (Psalm 139:15, MSG). I knew that if I was that special to God, then my child would be equally special to him. I used this as my starting point. Then, over time, I found other good books by mothers who had survived parenting. I needed to know what pitfalls to avoid, how to maneuver detours, how to guide my kids, and when it was okay to chill out.

Realizing that the Bible could work as my guidebook revolutionized my parenting. I became convinced that families didn't have to live with constant tension, strife, or angry outbursts. If we read and trust God's Word, we have no reason to be confused, angry, hurt, resentful parents. I could let go of painful childhood memories. The generational patterns of my past could be broken. I didn't have to keep trying to find fun in the middle of *dysfunction*. I gained comfort from knowing that relationships could be cultivated, even during the teen years.

I also realized that cultural norms (yelling, belittling, and disrespecting, to name a few) didn't have to define my family either. But changing those patterns—keeping the hearts of our kids—required surrender. Surrender of self. Surrender of control. Surrender of pride. Once we understand our children need safety, belonging, and identity, then we can humble ourselves enough to change our parenting so our teens can flourish and our families can enjoy doing life together.

Sure, we can put up boundaries, create a bunch of rules, give unfettered freedom, and lecture until we are blue in the face (my kids will say I was a world-class lecturer), but none of those externals deal with what matters most—your teen's heart. The key to their heart comes by way of relationship, not rules. We need to help them figure out who they are and what they are created to be. Yes, there is a place for rules and boundaries. We certainly don't want to throw out the rules! But we don't want the rules to take the place of the relationship. By merely focusing on external behavior, we risk losing the internal war.

Learning to focus on our relationships with our teens requires going beyond a set of rules and connecting on a deeper level. As we do this, we increase our influence in our teens' lives and keep their hearts. And when we develop trust with our teens through the strength of our relationships, we create family cultures in which confidence and joy flourish.

YOUR PARENTING STYLE

Understanding your story and the parenting lessons—positive and negative—that you've learned from your own parents is part of the intentional way you can choose to parent your own teen. Parenting styles are another element of this process. Most of us gravitate toward a particular style of parenting, even if we can't describe what it is. Some of us use any technique that works on any given day!

My parents believed it was their job to lay down the law, and we were to do as we were told. I had no problem with that because at least I knew the boundaries. I felt safe knowing what was required of me. My brother, on the other hand, thought of rules as mere suggestions. If he felt like following directions, he would; and if he didn't, then he accepted the consequences. It was like a game of chess to him. I think he was secretly hoping to say "Checkmate." I know he drove my parents crazy at times. I had a different strategy—the watch-what-he-does game. I seemed to get in less trouble that way. If my brother's actions resulted in punishment, then I chose a different path.

Everything changed after my parents' bitter divorce, however. The safety we once felt was completely shattered. Neither of us knew what to do in the wake of our parents' split. Once again, we reacted differently to our new life. He rebelled; I retreated. Though we were parented in the same way, our responses were very different. He fought and argued over every single thing. I just wanted to stay under the radar.

Just as my brother and I reacted differently to the same form of parenting, so will your child. If you have multiple children, your children are people with hardwiring all their own, which means we can't parent one child the same way we parent another child. Learning to parent uniquely for your unique child makes it easier to keep their heart and create a home where peace can reign.

Have you identified your parenting style? You may be thinking, *Why do I have to examine my parenting style? All I want to do is raise my teen and keep my sanity in the process.* We'll get to that. But this is a good place to start. Understanding specific parenting styles can give us a framework for how to approach each of our teens.

There are five main parenting styles: authoritative, permissive, helicopter, hovering, and lawnmower. As you read through the descriptions, determine which one describes you.

1. The **authoritative** parent “has been identified as the most effective and helpful to a child.”¹ *Flexibility* and *fairness* are often used to describe this style of parenting. An authoritative parent tends to listen and encourage communication and avoid rushing to judgment. When discipline is needed, it is typically just and predictable. While high standards are expected, grace and understanding are offered for extenuating circumstances. Teens comply with limits and expectations out of love and respect, not because they fear the consequences. Teens are less likely to rebel, withdraw from the relationship, or sneak around. Authoritative parents teach kids that they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to.
2. The **permissive** parent is best described as easygoing. Their teen might describe this parent as a “pushover.” Permissive parents generally issue fewer rules and give more leeway. Peace, harmony, and avoiding conflict are the foci. The permissive parent believes teens should be free to live their lives with minimal parental interference. This hands-off approach allows the teen to do as they wish, when they want, with whom-ever they want. The parent may believe this approach creates friendship and reduces rebellion; however, the parent’s lack of involvement may leave the teen feeling less loved.
3. The **helicopter** parent. This style of parenting is a combination of authoritative and permissive parenting. This parent believes in having family rules but tries to give their teen more freedom. Fear and anxiety often define these parents. Their teen usually texts or calls throughout the day because the parent requires constant updates. A helicopter parent is well-intentioned and deeply loves their teen. Their teen knows Mom or Dad is never far away. Because the parents give more

freedom, their teen doesn't usually feel smothered. These parents attempt to be protective without being overbearing.

4. The **hovering** parent. Shortly after the rise of the helicopter parent came the hovering parent. Hovering parents aren't just nearby; they watch everything. They literally hover, ready to swoop in at the first signs of trouble. They may monitor their teens' phone usage, computer history, and social-media posts. Hovering parents place parental controls on devices to protect their teens from the dangers of the online world. Some teens describe their hovering parents as too involved because these parents don't allow them to go anywhere without being in contact. Parents are more likely to know who their teens talk with online, what apps they download, and what friends they hang out with. Hovering parents are genuinely concerned about the safety and welfare of their teens, and for good reason: They know the times have changed. These parents tend to be Millennials. The rise in popularity of this style is said to be tied to 9/11 and the economic crashes of 2000 and 2008.²
5. The **lawnmower** parent. This style of parenting is largely the result of tough economic times, recent terrorist attacks, cyberbullying, and the realization that kids are competing in a global marketplace. The rising cost of living, the need for higher education, lower pay, and lack of benefits all but demand parental intervention. Lawnmower parents tend to distrust those in authority and doubt that others will have their teens' best interest at heart. They try to anticipate and make decisions for their teens to avoid mishaps and make sure their kids are positioned in the best possible way. They are more likely to call the teacher, speak to the coach, or argue on their teens' behalf. They are well-meaning, but they can adopt a mind-set that it is their responsibility to make sure

their teens don't experience failure.³ As one concerned teacher explained, parents who adhere to this parenting style “go to whatever lengths necessary to prevent their child from having to face adversity, struggle, or failure.”⁴

Each parenting style has its strengths and its weaknesses. For instance, a self-driven teen will struggle with a parent who hovers. He will feel you don't trust him to be responsible. A creative child might clash with an authoritative parent—not because she doesn't love or respect her parent, but because she needs more flexibility than what she is given. The distracted child needs more structure to stay on track, so the permissive parent needs to adjust his approach, perhaps providing checklists and deadlines.

Adhering to just one style of parenting doesn't prioritize the relationship or what is best for your teen developmentally. When you focus only on performance and rules, you're less likely to build a home where trust, honesty, love, courtesy, serving, patience, kindness, self-control, and peace are fostered. No matter your parenting style, pursuing the relationship with your teen and caring for their heart is crucial for their long-term growth and health. As you invest in knowing your child and being aware of your natural style of parenting, you can recognize and adjust your parenting practices in a way that strengthens the relationship between you and your teen during these years of change.

KEEPING THE HEART

Once when I spoke to a group of moms at a conference, a mother came up to me to tell me about her fourteen-year-old daughter. She was heartbroken because her daughter no longer desired to spend time with her.

I listened for a while, then asked, “Have you lost her heart?”

She said, “No, I gave it away.”

Her reply caught me off guard. I had heard many responses to this question, but not this one. She went on to say that she became so consumed with life and work that she didn't realize her daughter was turning to devices and friends in her absence. Realizing the current situation was largely her doing devastated her.

After our conversation, she left feeling hopeful. She spent some time in prayer and made some adjustments to her schedule, and she and her husband came up with a plan. Thankfully, this wise mom recognized the significance of what was happening between her and her daughter and made a conscious decision to win back her daughter's heart while she still had time.

Why so much attention to keeping your teen's heart? Because from it flow the issues of life. The heart of a teen is a special place to be invited into. Around the teen years, your child becomes much more aware of the changes they are experiencing, and many of these changes may scare them. They crave having someone to talk to. They want to know they can trust you with their deepest fears. They must be certain that you will not mock them, make light of their feelings, or try to fix everything. When you have their heart, you have influence. Even if they don't agree with you, they know you love them and want what's best for them. This provides the security they desperately need to grow and mature into the person God created them to be.

Your intentional attention to keeping your teen's heart may cause you to adjust your approach to parenting as they navigate the twists and turns of life. The strength of your relationship serves as a solid, sturdy foundation to build on and ensures a safe environment for your teen to grow up in.

You might be thinking, *I can never fully know what is going on in the heart of my teen*, and that's true. There is a difference, though, between keeping the heart and needing to change the heart. As much as you may desire for your teen to change, that's not something you

can do. Only the Lord can change a heart. But when we have solid relationships with our children, we can share truths about the one who can change hearts, which then becomes the foundation for good life choices.

Keeping the heart of your teen is possible when you focus on building a relationship, which includes learning about, connecting with, and listening to your teen. Your child is trying to grow up, and you are learning how to let go. One of the most critical things you can do during this season is adjust to the changes occurring in your relationship and focus on the heart of the matter, not merely on the behavior displayed on any given day.

If you are reading this book, then you likely desire to build a strong family and cultivate healthy relationships. That's why learning to navigate the teen years is critical. Laying a strong foundation based on principles that govern the decisions you and your teen make is the first step. Learning how to transition as your teen matures will reinforce the foundation you have laid. Once that foundation is solidified, you can comfortably build on it during the transition years, ever so slowly allowing freedom with responsibility.

WRAPPING IT UP



- What is your story? How were you parented? How does that inform your parenting?
- Identify your style of parenting. Think about your child. Is she sensitive, logical, compliant, a thinker? Is he outgoing, active, independent, creative? Take some time to consider your child's needs.
- How would your teen describe your parenting style?

- How would you like your teen to describe their relationship with you? What steps do you need to take to achieve that goal?
- If you think your parenting style is hurting your relationship, what needs to change so you can prioritize keeping the heart of your teen? At times, simple changes—like letting up on the unbending rules or helping your child handle more freedom—result in a stronger bond.