



COME
on
HOME

*A Grace-Filled Guide to
Raising a Family
Who Loves (and Likes)
Each Other*

JESSICA SMARTT

Come On Home warmed my heart from the start and left me inspired—to be a more intentional mom and a better daughter, and to cherish every bit of family God has given me. This book is packed with heartwarming stories, sage advice, and some of the very best resource lists! I think this may be the only family/parenting book you need—and that says a lot, since I’ve written a few myself! What a gift *Come On Home* will be to the world!

MONICA SWANSON, host of the *Monica Swanson Podcast* and author of *Boy Mom*, *Raising Amazing*, and *Becoming Homeschoolers*

Come On Home invites parents to nurture the kind of homes their children will want to return to someday. With delightful personal stories, biblical insight, and plenty of practical ideas, Jessica Smartt has provided a trusted guide for fostering unshakable bonds that will pull a family together even when the world seeks to tear them apart.

JAMIE ERICKSON, author of *Holy Hygge* and founder of the Biblio-files

In a world that pulls families apart, *Come On Home* guides us together again. Jessica Smartt reminds us that home is where we are known, loved, and truly belong. The insights and reminders in this book will inspire you to build a family culture that reflects grace, joy, and love while discarding anything less.

RACHEL WOJO, wife and mom to six, author of *Desperate Prayers* and *One More Step*

In *Come On Home*, Jessica Smartt offers a refreshing and grace-filled approach to building a strong, loving family. With practical wisdom, heartfelt stories, and biblical truth, she reminds us that creating a close-knit home is both possible and deeply impactful. As a wife, mother, and fellow believer, I found her insights to be encouraging and transformative. This book is a must-read for anyone longing to cultivate a family that not only loves but truly enjoys one another.

RACHAEL ADAMS, author of *Everyday Prayers for Love* and host of *The Love Offering* podcast

Come On Home is a witty, honest treasure trove of experience, godly insight, and practical ideas that invite a group of people who happen to be in a house to become a “family with a home.” The book threads the balance between nurturing your kid’s God-given dignity and their need for tough love. It’s refreshingly honest about the fatigue and confusion of parenting, yet somehow you are left feeling a kind of inspired courage.

ROGER EDWARDS, therapist and father of seven

If you’re looking for a relatable, practical, and encouraging motherhood book, *Come On Home* is it. As I read Jessica’s words, it felt like I was having a conversation with a good friend. The experiences she shares about raising her family are inspiring, and the ideas she gives to prioritize what really matters are wonderful and doable. I’ve both laughed and cried as I read her words on building a strong family because I was so inspired and motivated to mirror her ideas in my own family. A must-read for every mother no matter what season of life they’re in.

MACKENZIE WILCOX, homeschool mom and writer @twigsandsage

Come On Home is an incredible look at what it takes to be a strong Christ-centered family in this ever-changing world. With a perfect blend of practical applications and a strong call to steward our homes well, I was inspired and convicted as I read each page.

ASHLEE WILLIAMS, Grace and Grit homeschooling content creator

Jessica Smartt's words are wise and encouraging, providing the practical truth families need to intentionally grow a firm foundation. But the best part is that she doesn't pretend to have it all together (who does?). Instead, she paints a vision of what can be (and why it matters) and offers practical steps to get there. The concepts in *Come On Home* matter deeply for the world we are leaving our children. It's that important.

BROOKE MCGLOTHLIN, mom of two and author of *Praying for Teen Boys*

Come On Home

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Come On Home: A Grace-Filled Guide to Raising a Family Who Loves (and Likes) Each Other

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*In honor of my grandparents,
Don and Harriet Hawk and Walter and Polly Warrington.
I can't wait to see you again.*



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A Note from Jessica

Dear sweet reader,

Before you jump into this book, there are a few things I want you to know.

Strong family is not only a passion of mine but a gift I have received. I live on a family compound with eighteen family members, for crying out loud. Excepting a few aggressive roosters, no one has been murdered. For the most part, we genuinely enjoy spending time together. Same with my husband's family (minus the compound and the murdered roosters). We hold this rare treasure of close-knit, healthy families with thankful hands.

But also: our family is still in process. I have kids who fight—not subtly, with friendly pokes under the dinner table, but loudly, with blood drawn. I am right here with you, raising normal kids. I'm not writing this as a gray-haired, seventy-year-old grandma, passing down my infallible, repeatable formula for family togetherness. I'm walking alongside you—as hungry as you are for wise voices, for practical ideas to sink our teeth into. I wrote this book because I needed it too.

I know that family is tricky. I know that you face your own specific challenges as you raise your family. I don't pretend that your family looks like my family, or your life looks like my life. While I would love to help equip you for every possible scenario, I can't

do that in the scope of this book. What I have done instead is to offer general principles so you can flesh them out in your particular situation. I have tried my best to be nuanced, sensitive, and careful with my wording. I hope this comes through.

Next, while this book is about raising strong families, I'll primarily be talking to moms, since I am one.

One more thing: I am a Christian. If this is not a faith you share, I want you to know two things. One, I am so, so grateful that you have chosen to pick up this book. I see the value in having people around me with different opinions and different voices. My heart is that you would not feel “on the outside” but would receive my own experience with the measure of grace with which it is intended. Two, I hope (and know!) that you will receive much inspiration from this book as you seek to raise your own strong family.

Oh, and one last thing. If you're like me, thinking about all this strong family stuff might make you feel things. Things like:

I messed up there.

Missed the boat on that.

It's too late.

All moms—all good moms—struggle with self-doubt, past guilt, and parenting fails. *Don't let it get to you.* Here is the truth. Hold on to this, okay?

You are the right mom for your kids.

It's never too late.

You aren't alone.

*Love,
Jessica*

PS: I would love to hear from you. You can email me at jessicasmartt@gmail.com.

INTRODUCTION

LEGACY

How Moms Can Change the World



October 4, 2021.

Two weeks from Grammy's ninety-third birthday. Six of us huddled around her bed.

There are so many details I can't forget. The crackling rattle in her labored breathing, each breath so unnaturally far from the last one. My sister on the other side of the bed, so strong, singing hymns. Her voice wavered and caught, but she kept singing, distinctly and loudly.

I was not sure when it happened. Her breaths were minutes apart. When was she gone? When was she here? We told her she could go, that we would be okay. We realized she was crying—eyes glassy, distant, fixed on nothing—but somehow we knew she had heard.

In the final minutes, my dad spoke familiar, comforting words

over her. “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”¹

It was a holy room, full of sorrow and hope, aching and beauty . . . and so much love.

She was dearly loved. I don’t want to die, but I do want to die like that.

Ninety pounds with a handful of sweaters to her name when she died. But Grammy? She was the richest, whole-est person I have ever met. She built a legacy.

legacy: the long-term impact of the events or actions in a person’s life.²

To use the word *legacy* feels so cliché, imperfect. How can I explain what she left? What she did?

Seven children, twenty-one grandchildren, thirty-six great-grandchildren. Every single one of them knew they were loved by Grammy.

One time Grammy was going to the store. “Do you need anything?” she asked me with her beautiful smile. “Oh, yes, some potato chips, some pretzels, some ice cream, some candy . . .” It was a lame attempt at a joke from a nine-year-old.

She came back an hour later, saying, “I think I got it all!” I felt terrible, and terribly loved. She lived meagerly, spent all she had on us. Always on us. Her double-wide was the house of canned peaches and Schwan’s pizzas and perfectly layered macaroni and cheese and Push Pops and *Country* magazine and the old awful couches where we made so many memories.

Grammy made home. She defined it. Her life was spent at the kitchen sink and the stove. She poured hours into loving

people with sausage, eggs, and Folgers coffee. She gave us a rich, rich life.

I want this kind of legacy. Her life was not wasted.

One time my husband told my mom, “Thank you for loving Jessica so well. You loved her well, and now she can love well.” My mom was loved, and she loved, and I can love. It has been legacies of love.

Of all my privileges, the most profound is the gift of family to propel me into life. I’m closer to my aunts than some are to their mothers. I’m closer with my cousins than many are with their siblings. We gather still, hordes of us, in a big living room, bringing our pasta salad and baked beans and babies in car seats and teenagers in hoodies, drinking tea and playing music late into the night. Cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts, sisters, in-laws and “out-laws” (as my dad jokingly calls his sons-in-law)—and there are always one or two extras who didn’t have anywhere to go, anything to do. This kind of family is magnetic, compelling, loud, and messy in the very best way.

WHAT IS A STRONG FAMILY?

I imagine you reading this now. Are you crying with me? Grammy is an inspiration to those of us who hold a deep desire to be intentional with the ones God’s entrusted us with, to build a lasting legacy of love and faith.

But if you aren’t crying, maybe you’re mad. Because maybe this all feels foreign, impossible. Family is so messy, so terribly specific and practical. You wonder if you have what it takes to break the cycle, to overcome the challenges in your circumstance to give your kids a different legacy. If that’s what you’re bringing to this book, I see you. And I want you to know: *family doesn’t have to be perfect to be strong.*

I often draw deep strength from thinking about my Grammy as

a young mom. Her husband was a traveling, amusing-but-mostly-absent man. She had no support system and moved thirty-four times in her marriage. They were so poor my Grammy would cook dandelion soup and cow tongue for dinner for her little ones. There was nothing else to make. She struggled with health issues. Although we grandkids joked that she “never sinned,” she assuredly was human and did not parent perfectly. Despite all this, what a legacy she built!

You and I each come to this book with our own ideas of what a “strong family” is.

Maybe we unconsciously picture this perpetually cheerful family, the perfect marriage—no big blowups, minimal stress, everyone magically agreeing about everything and being thrilled to spend time together.

Fortunately, that is not it. The really wonderful news is this: a strong family is not about perfection but *grace*.

A strong family is not about superficial harmony but *deep friendship*.

A strong family is not about physical proximity but *unshakable loyalty*.

One of the things my mom would often say to us over the years is this: “Come on home, and then we’ll figure it out.” Maybe one of us had had a frustrating day, felt bogged down by unresolved problems or unsettling conversations. “Just come on home,” she’d say. “We’ll figure it out.”

Come on home.

Home is the place you can go when you don’t have the answer.

Home is the place you can laugh through the tears, rest when you’re weary, hunker down when you’ve made a mess of things.

Home is the place where you’re loved, where you’re safe.

This kind of home, this kind of family is powerful.

The truth? Strong families like this will save the world.

THE POWER OF CLOSE-KNIT FAMILIES

You might be thinking, *Strong families are important, but to say they will “save the world”? Is that true?*

Yes, and here’s why.

Kids with good roots can hold up in the world and hold the world up.

A strong family undergirds you with strength to face whatever comes. I love how child psychologist Kim John Payne puts it: a strong family offers “a place to retreat to, to restock, restore, to repair . . . and to prepare for going out into those bumpy seas.” It’s a “safe harbor” that fills us and heals us to go back out into that harsh and difficult world. When we create strong families, he muses, we get a kid who can say, “I know I’m alone in the playground, but I don’t have to be alone in my life. I’ve got my family.”³

Strong family grounds you, and also launches you out to change the world. Whether our kids are meant to be teachers, programmers, entrepreneurs, nurses, or pastors, *kids who are undergirded by a strong family can take risks, love well, make mistakes, try again.* Additionally, they just might save thousands of dollars and so many years *not* unpacking their deep-seated family traumas in therapy sessions. (I mean, let’s be honest, my kids will probably still have some therapy, but hopefully less?)

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In the rest of this book, we will unpack what a close-knit, healthy family really looks like. Uncovering research, stories, and ideas, we will go behind the metal doors to see “how the sausage is made,” sparing no corner of insight to reveal the recipe.

First, we will look at the *foundation* for a close-knit family, or what a family needs to grow strong. You know how in college certain courses have prerequisites? The characteristics we’ll explore are

sort of the “prerequisites” for building a strong family. Of course, the college analogy breaks down a bit, because unlike when you take a class and you’re done, these foundational elements are a process throughout our lives! You might have noticed the chapter topics for part 1: *honesty, perspective, authority, partnership, and prayer*. Those words might feel a little abstract, but this “get ready” section will be anything but bland, as we cover mom self-care, keeping the marriage spark alive, side gigs, miraculous answers to prayer, and the ideal kind of parenting: “elephant parenting.” (Intrigued about that one? Stay tuned!)

In part 2, we will look at the *picture* of a strong family, or how a strong family looks as it grows. We will unpack eight key characteristics of close-knit families: *time, connection, memories, nest, roots, loyalty, friendship, and grace*. This is where we will get down to the nitty-gritty, with all those ideas, resources, and examples you’re hoping for. Every so often, I’ve “given the mic” to some amazing parents I know and respect—from all different kinds of families—to share their stories.

This book is *packed* with ideas, stories, and examples—things I’ve learned or observed in strong families. But of course, these are ultimately suggestions. No one could do all of this; some of it may not fit for your family. Don’t feel pressured or overwhelmed. Take what’s helpful; leave what’s not.

I want to make you two promises for this journey.

First promise. The principles I will share are things that anyone can implement. You don’t have to have a lot of money. You don’t have to have great examples. Maybe you’re a widowed mom, a divorced mom, a mom with a blended family. Maybe you’re raising children with special needs. I know that your life and your parenting represent some unique challenges. My hope and prayer is that these foundational principles will be relevant and life-giving to you—*no matter where you are or what your situation*.

LEGACY

Second promise. While building a family will feel hard at times, it will be worth it. Because after all, here is what you do when you give your kids a strong family:

- You tether them to something solid in a changing world.
- You give them friends, people who are really and truly behind them.
- You give them memories, good ones, to draw from in dark and lonely times.
- You give them a soft place to land.
- You give them theology that is Velveteen Rabbit—real, with skin and bones.
- You build a healthy society, because healthy families build healthy people build healthy cultures.
- In building a legacy, you are changing the very tint of time.

Some of us in this race are handed the baton by others running behind us. It is our job to hold on to it and keep running.

Some of us *start* the relay. We must pick up that baton and take the first step.

Someone has to start the race. There is always a person who starts.

For me, it was Grammy.

Look at your life. Has someone else started the race for your family? Or will it be you? Can it be you?



PART 1

CULTIVATING THE SOIL

What a Strong Family Needs

HONESTY

Admit Where You Are to Build What You Want



*Honesty is often very hard. The truth is often painful.
But the freedom it can bring is worth the trying.*

FRED ROGERS

“If we’re going to medicate you, I want to *medicate* you.”

I am sitting on a cold, blue plastic chair. It is May outside, but nothing feels warm or full of light in this sterile OB office with the beady-eyed doctor. My mom is nodding. It feels like I am not here, have lost all say in my life.

But this loss of autonomy is necessary. They are worried.

I am crying constantly. I don’t like being a mom. Two weeks in, and I feel madly deceived. Why, I wonder, does everyone throw showers for this? Why did I get those glittery blue-sparkle Hallmark cards that said “Congratulations!”?

Congratulations for what, I wonder? If everyone thinks this is wonderful, then clearly something is off with me. How could I have been so horribly wrong all my life, when all I longed for was to be a mother? How could this be my calling if I am so terrible at it?

Such were my first experiences as a mother. I thought I would be the world's most amazing mom, and then I actually became one. We moved into my parents' house for three weeks because I was unraveling at the seams. It was a crushing embarrassment.

It was during this season that I began seeing a kind, old counselor. I confessed it all—how I was failing, how no other moms I knew seemed to be struggling like I was. He was quiet for a minute, then looked at me with soft eyes, a twinkle hiding behind them, and said the words I will remember for the rest of my life: “I think if anyone says they love poop, they are lying.”

We had a good long laugh.

When I look back, I'm impressed with the genius of his counseling. Laughing was something I hadn't done in a month. Knowing that he, too, hated the smell of poop was weirdly reassuring. And he gave me permission to be honest. Slowly, I began to grow.

I absolutely love being a mother now. I would not say I am the world's *best* mother, but even on the bleakest of days, we haven't had to resort to living in my parents' guest room, so I would say that is a win. The fact that I adore being a mom and am writing this book is a true testimony to the miracles that God is able to do.

Being honest about my struggles was the first step. Once I said it out loud, admitted the state I was in, and asked for help, I began to heal.

HOW YOU ARE DOING MATTERS

Fortunately, the state of things in *your* life isn't likely to be as bleak as it was for me in those first weeks of motherhood. But the truth remains: the first step to improving anything is being honest. *Before you can have the family you want, you have to get real about the family you have.* In this chapter, we are going to do an honest inventory in which we'll cover four aspects of *you*, the mom: capacity, health, gifts, and weaknesses. With these honest assessments,

you'll be able to see where you're thriving and where you're merely surviving, and then you'll be empowered to make choices that set the tone you want for your family.

To have a great family, you have to realize that YOU (the mom) are the one who affects things the most in the family. This may be a bit controversial, but based on my experience and years of study, I believe that a mother is the single greatest influence in a family, for bad or for good. In *Habits for a Sacred Home*, Jennifer Pepito shares that during a rough patch of motherhood, her dad told her, "You are the cheerleader of this operation, and if you are down, everyone is down."¹

Moms are active, not passive. We set the tone. It has been a decade and a half of embracing the fact that as a mother, I am a thermostat and not a thermometer. As I am not a science-y person, I have to think about the difference between these two for a minute: a thermostat sets the temperature; a thermometer reads it. As mothers, we aren't reading the room, we are controlling it.

If you are like me, this makes you feel a little stressed out. It is a big responsibility we carry. But it is also exciting. You are not powerless. You are powerful!

GETTING REAL ABOUT YOUR CAPACITY

To me, one of the most frustrating things about life is that we can't do everything. I tried, and I can tell you the exact moment that I realized we cannot. It was a Thursday afternoon in June, and I was lying on the couch, withering away in life. Cause of death: Summer VBS. I fell asleep smack-dab in the middle of the living room, with three little kids doing who knows what all around the house. I woke up once and remember thinking I could not lift my arms. It was like a giant monster was sitting on top of me. Since I have hypochondria, there were sundry explanations for my coma-like state, most involving tumors and blood disorders.

It took a very good friend to say it: “Jessica. You are doing way too much. You need to stop.” I was homeschooling two kids while I had a very busy toddler. I was making all our food from scratch because my son has multiple life-threatening food allergies. (I’ll tell you more about this in chapter 5.) I had taken on a position as children’s ministry director, and not content to merely organize VBS, I decided to be the head Bible teacher, the MC, and in one final hurrah of micromanaging, to make all the hot dogs for the cookout. WHAT WAS I THINKING?

This was a truly shocking epiphany: my capacity is limited! I have to be choosy. There is so much I *could* do, but that does not mean I should do it all. I would love to say that I got up from the couch, quit children’s ministry, and never made this mistake again. Unfortunately, only two of those three things happened. My adult life has been a constant dance: get way overwhelmed with my commitments, quit them, and repeat. I am a slow learner. But I am learning. Each breakdown gives me yet another tool to tuck away for the next season of overwhelm.

Another pivotal moment happened five years later, when I was ten thousand feet in the air on the way to San Diego for one of my son’s allergy treatments. I was reading the book *Essentialism* in seat 16B. In it the author encourages readers to choose only what is essential in life and eliminate the rest. “I can do anything but not everything,” he says.²

I had a hunch that I wasn’t exactly living by this wisdom and that maybe it was the source of the ball of stress I was carrying constantly. I made a list of all the things I was doing. So many things. Too many things. Have you recently made a list of all the things you do? One question the author asks is, if this commitment or opportunity were not on your plate, how hard would you work to obtain it?³ I realized how many things I was doing not because I really wanted to do them but because I didn’t want to do the work

of off-loading them. I mentally took all the things off of my plate and then added back only the things that were truly essential, that only I could do. I was left with a delightfully doable list.

My fear is that you would walk away from this book burdened and overwhelmed. *What I want you to see is what a gift you could give yourself.* This moment, right now, wherever you are—whether you are glasses-on, sleepy-eyed in bed, or scrounging a few free minutes while the kids swim in the plastic pool—this is your chance. Maybe this is the answer to that low-lying guilt or overwhelm you've been carrying for so long.

I encourage you to take a minute right now and list everything you do.

You probably just read that sentence and didn't do what I recommended, right? Because that is what I usually do when I am reading a book. But I beg you to do it. This little exercise was one of the most powerful things I have done in the past five years. Trust me? Get up from that comfy spot and grab a pencil. You'll find some space at the end of this chapter to write down your list of responsibilities.

Now. Read over your list. There is too much on your plate, maybe. Perhaps that is why you are so tired, so overwhelmed?

Clean off that plate. What should remain are the things that only *you* can do. You are a limited You. Your bucket is only so big, and your days only so many. Are you doing what you truly want? We mothers are intuitively really good at knowing the answer to that question, if we would only take a minute to listen to ourselves. What is your gut telling you?

GETTING REAL ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

Maybe when you read this subhead you were thinking *physical* health, like the inexplicable fatigue you're constantly seeking the cause of. (Hint: it's children. The cause is children.) My definition

of health here is not less than that, but more. What I mean is, *Are you thriving?* We need you to be the *best* You that you can possibly be. How are you doing? This building-a-strong-family thing is a marathon, not a sprint. Is your pace sustainable? Do you have injuries (literal or figurative) that you need to stop and deal with?

Think back to my thermostat versus thermometer example. People who are maintaining the “temperature” for the whole house have a big job. It’s a great idea to build a strong family, but maybe you need to take a minute and deal with a few things. Do you need counseling for past trauma? I’m sorry for such an un-fun sentence, but these sorts of things do not get better by sitting untouched for a few decades. What about your marriage? Could it use some attention? (More on that in chapter 4.) Or if you’re a single mom, are you finding time for friendships that nourish your soul? Has it been years since you’ve had your blood work done and you’re hobbling through life? Whatever it is, maybe you’ve been waiting for a sign to deal with “that thing.” Here is your sign, mama!

Sometimes these are hard questions to answer well for yourself. We are all skewed to see things a little bit wrong when it comes to our own needs. To get a really good answer, ask someone who knows and loves you well. Maybe your husband? Say something like “What’s one thing you wish I would do to take better care of myself?” I dare you to ask.

Growing a strong family takes work, and work wears you down. I struggle with navigating the balance of caring for myself and caring for my family. Sometimes I look at other moms, like my sister Jenny, and am so convicted by how they pour out their lives for their families. I feel like a lazy bum compared to them. I have friends who exude cheerfulness and peace. I wonder if it is because they are so wise in implementing life-giving rhythms. I feel convicted that in my hurried busyness I don’t care for myself

well enough and the stress bleeds into my family. What is the right balance? How do you care for yourself well—but not *too* well, you know?

Obviously, there's no one-size-fits-all answer, but God gave me a vision recently that might be as helpful to you as it has been to me. I should note that I'm a Presbyterian and therefore don't get these "vision" sort of moments too often, so don't get worried I'm going off the deep end. I'm going to throw a few different word pictures at you. My mom would use visual metaphors when I was growing up to teach me lessons, and I hated it, and now I have turned into her.

The first vision was of me. As I write this, it is the end of a homeschool school year, and I am parched for rest. God showed me, "Jessica, this is what you are like." The image was of my nephew, Tommy, when he was learning to juggle. He would dive one direction, dip the other, drop one tennis ball, and frantically toss up another one. This is what I am doing, only instead of tennis balls, it is like I am juggling eggs—raw eggs—and way too many of them. If I drop one, it will go crashing to the floor, totally destroyed. It is a desperate, unsustainable dance.

And then my mind flashed to a different image. A peaceful one. I saw, in my mind's eye, one of our hens sitting on her nest, patiently, calmly, carefully brooding over her precious eggs. I feel like God was telling me, "Those eggs you think you're juggling—you're not actually in control. But I've got them. They are in my loving care. Rest and relax."

I wasn't made for juggling a dozen uncooked eggs. I can only hold two things, really, one in each hand. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength* (that's one thing), and *love your neighbor as yourself* (that's the other thing).⁴ Those are my priorities. That is the job God has given me.

And that's our job as mothers as we take care of ourselves and

our families—to love God, love others. Our job is to hold those two “eggs” as we walk through this marathon of life. We fulfill our calling from God to love others well (that’s our families too!), and then we leave the results to Him.

Godly self-care is what helps you do that job well. If I stop and get a good night’s sleep, I can do my job better. If I spend time in prayer, I can do my job better. If I get away once in a while with my husband and sleep in, eat yummy food, and hike in nature, I can come home and do that job better.

On the other hand, if my self-care distracts me from loving others well, that might not be ideal. If my self-care has me thriving, but my kids or my husband are struggling, I may need to consider whether I’ve gone too far the other way. Good self-care strengthens us to do our work. And let’s not forget, our work as mothers is a God-given assignment! We are to raise these kids well, to the glory of God and for the good of the Kingdom. We love Him and we love others.

How are you doing with those eggs? Are you holding the right things? Are you feeling the stress of juggling things you weren’t meant to juggle? Are you taking care of yourself on this walk of motherhood? Are you healthy? Is there a wound that you need to pay attention to?

When I was in the thick of raising little kids, I learned something about self-care that might be helpful to you if you’re in a similar season. I treasure the memories of these years, but gosh, at the time, it often felt like I was trapped in the house perpetually. At one point, Todd and I finagled a way to escape to a resort across town for a few nights. It was heavenly. I ordered the luxurious crab cake Benedict every morning because why would you not? One morning we biked across town, and I remember feeling a bit depressed that this vacation would soon be over. *How can I carry*

the spirit of this back with me into my normal life? I wondered as I pedaled. The thought came to me, *I can't. But what would be magic is if I could create little happy moments in my day to recharge . . . while being with the kids.*

If you're in a season where it's hard to get away for large chunks of time, can you think of ways to recharge *with* your family? This is a tricky sort of math equation, because kids are exhausting and don't perhaps naturally share your hobbies. But it is worth brainstorming. Because if you could think of things that fill your cup AND build a strong family—wouldn't that be gold? See the list of "Self-Care Activities *with Kids*" for a few ideas I came up with. Some of these might sound terrible to you, but maybe the list will get you started. Now obviously, any of these scenarios have the capacity to crash and burn entirely if someone suddenly has a meltdown. Meltdowns are not restful. Amen.

Self-Care Activities with Kids

- Sit on a blanket and read while your kids play at the park.
- Take nature walks together.
- Plan a girls' trip with your daughter.
- Take your son on an overnight to a fancy hotel for a significant birthday. (My friend does this—she gets to "wine and dine," and her son lives it up in the pool.)
- Get away with your husband.
- Take your daughter with you to a bridal or baby shower.
- Take a kid to Costco. (You get an extra hand for boxes; they get free samples. One child of mine still talks about his fifteen minutes in the sample massage chair.)
- You run while your child rollerblades. (Recommended only with experienced rollerbladers. Not beginners.)

GETTING REAL ABOUT YOUR GIFTS

One thing that is cool is that I am not you. We are different. Maybe wildly different. Maybe you are the kind of girl who forgets to eat lunch, for example, or some other inconceivable quirk. As you seek to raise a strong family, your unique traits and gifts can be used strategically. In fact, God made you just the way you are for a reason. As we launch into building this strong family, I encourage you to personalize your approach. You are equipped—just as you are—to be an amazing mom.

It might not always feel that way. Something I haven't mentioned yet is that I struggle with OCD and anxiety—yet God picked me to parent a child with life-threatening allergies! Do you find this as funny as I do? At first glance, doesn't it feel wrong? A mistake? I said so to my pastor, and I will never forget what he told me. “Honestly, Jessica, I think God made a perfect choice. If I were God, I think that is exactly the kind of mother I would want for a child like that. You are smart. You pay attention. You are careful. God knew exactly what He was doing.” This flip-flop to my thinking has carried me through many dark times. I am uniquely gifted for parenting my son.

As you frame your family's culture, you will need every last ounce of your unique giftings. Who you are is not a mistake. How did God uniquely equip you for your task? What are the unique pros of your circumstances? Take a minute to look through the lists of ideas in “How Has God Equipped You for Your Task?” and “What Are the Pros of Your Circumstances?” Underline and highlight and be grateful.

Look hard with joy at the gifts you have, even the ones that might have been wrapped in pain or adversity. None of these are coincidences. Look at your life with a new set of eyes; God has uniquely prepared *you* to build this strong family.

How Has God Equipped You for Your Task?

- Do you love adventure? Can you make people smile with spontaneous humor?
- Do you feel things deeply? Can you detect minuscule changes in others' temperaments and know intuitively how each person is doing?
- Are you artistic? Can you make a space or a meal beautiful?
- Do you have a lot of energy? Can you survive on little sleep?
- Do you remember people's birthdays and give great gifts?
- Are you a take-charge personality? Is it easy for you to lead?
- Are you a peacemaker? Do you have a warm presence?
- Are you a great multitasker? Can you accomplish a lot in a short amount of time?
- Are you neat and tidy? Are you great at sensing when things need to be organized?
- Are you good at operations, making things run smoothly?
- Are you kind and thoughtful?
- Are you careful? Don't miss much?
- Are you organized?
- Are you playful?

What Are the Pros of Your Circumstances?

- Do you have a strong support system and community?
- Do you have grandparents, uncles, or aunts who love the snot out of your kids?
- Do you have financial breathing room?
- What is great about where you live?
- Did you grow up with strong examples of healthy families?
- Do you have a motherhood mentor you admire?
- Are you able to stay home with your kids? Wow. What a gift—time!
- Are you able to homeschool? Again—gift of time!
- Was your family of origin a hot mess? This can morph into its own uniquely powerful motivation. You know the importance of this calling. You know which mistakes you will not repeat.
- Have you overcome hardship and trauma? You are a model of strength and perseverance to your family—a true gift.

GETTING REAL ABOUT YOUR WEAKNESSES

But what about that elephant in the room . . . what about the hard things? Everyone has liabilities. When I was a sophomore in high school, my cousin/best friend called me a pious brat in a heated fight. I was utterly thunderstruck. Me? Pious? I was very lacking in self-awareness. A lack of self-awareness makes your liabilities even more so. We have to know what we are bad at.

That might be your problem, too, but more likely you know what you stink at. More likely, your failures or struggles are weighing you down subtly. What is the right thing to do with our hard things? I have two suggestions.

First, admit and pray. Bring your weakness out in the open. Example: *God, I acknowledge that I have massive anxiety. It often interferes with my ability to serve and love You and others. Will You help me deal with this? In Your mercy and strength, will You take this weakness and instead of letting it harm others, will You redeem it and use it for good? Amen.*

Then we do our best to fulfill our calling in the strength and wisdom He provides and leave the results to Him.

Second, have support systems in place. Do you have a plan in place to help you with your liability, or are you kind of ignoring it and hoping it goes away? Here are some concrete examples:

Example 1: Your extended family is complicated. Are you proactively inviting “substitute” support systems into your own life and the lives of your kids?

Example 2: You aren’t naturally organized. Do you let your husband or another trusted person give you advice? Do you read books and listen to podcasts for tips?

Example 3: You're not a strong personality, and you have a strong-willed child. Are you letting your child steamroll you, or are you working hard to be a strong and loving parent?

What this inventory category *isn't* meant to do is to be a burden, an opportunity for self-loathing, and a piling on to your to-do list. Rather, the next time you feel overwhelmed by your own weaknesses as you seek to build a strong family, take comfort that there is a path forward: pray, lean on others, repeat.

One more word of encouragement. Don't let the enemy convince you that your Hard Things are too hard or too many. In the words of Paul David Tripp,

God never calls us to a task without giving us what we need to do it. God never sends you into anything without going with you. . . . This is the story of the whole Bible. This is why God sent his Son to earth. . . .

What does this have to do with parenting? Everything! It means that if you are God's child, it is impossible for you to be left to your own limited package of resources. . . . He knows how hard your task is. He knows that it drives you beyond the borders of your patience and wisdom. He knows that there are times when you feel that you have no clue of what you're doing. He knows there are moments when you wish you could quit and walk away. . . . He knew what every piece of your struggle would be as a parent, so he knew that the only thing that would help you would be himself.⁵

Some of the strongest families I know were forged while desperate mothers were on their knees daily, begging God for relief

and guidance. Like I mentioned before, my Grammy, the matriarch of our amazing family, faced many of the hardest things you could think of—poverty, constant upheaval and moves, health issues, no outside support, a lonely marriage. Similarly, my mom is one of my heroes (what a family she has grown!), and her life has not been easy either. So many of the struggles she faced were unknown to us kids until years later. One thing we did know: while my dad was always a loving, faithful father, he was gone a lot with work. My mom's support system was nonexistent, aside from calls to her sisters while washing dishes, the phone cradled on her shoulder. I now know she also battled significant health issues and ongoing fatigue, even facing seasons of profound loneliness and depression. My mom is the best mom ever. *And* there were days she didn't think she could function. She would wake up and beg God for strength to love others. He showed up. He promises us that His strength is made perfect in our weakness.⁶

As you seek your strong family, *you do not have to be perfect*. Maybe your places of deep weakness are exactly where He will meet you.



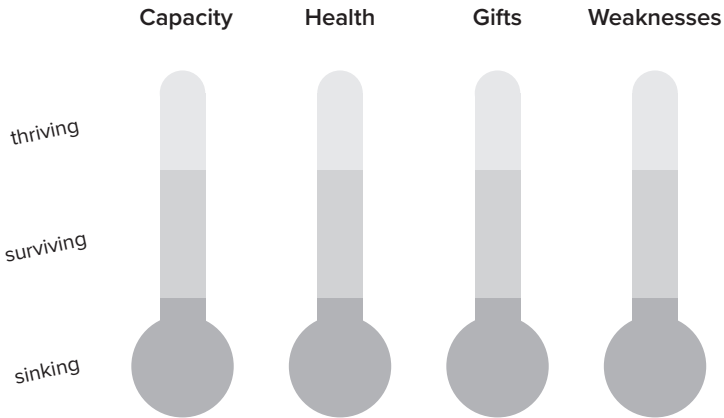
SUMMING IT UP

- Before you can have the family you want, you have to get real about the family you have.
- You have limited capacity. Spend your time on the things that only you can do.
- Godly self-care helps you do your job better.
- You have unique gifts to raise a strong family.
- You have liabilities, too, but commit these to God; His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

HONESTY

TALKING IT OVER

1. What do you think is the biggest struggle you face in building a strong family?
2. Which things on your plate are things that only you can do, and which could someone else do?
3. How would you assess yourself in each of the four inventory areas? Color in the thermometers below to indicate your “temperature.” Ask God to show you how you could move closer to thriving in each area.



COMING HOME

1. If you haven't already, use the blank page at the end of this chapter to jot down all the things you do in life. Be simultaneously amazed and overwhelmed at all you do. Then, pray about off-loading some of the things you're doing solely out of obligation.
2. Ask your kids what you do best as a mom.
3. Think of one new self-care habit you could try out this season.



One Family's Story: The Lukes

Both Jim and Carrie grew up with challenges in their families of origin, and they have still built a beautiful family. I am so grateful to Carrie for sharing her story.

I was twenty-four when my daughter Maggie was born and had never really been around children. But when they put Maggie in my arms for the first time, I felt like I had come home to myself. She was very much wanted.

By God's grace I found myself in a parenting Bible study at church that taught me about boundaries with love. As our girls grew, we did our best to implement what I had learned.

Our daughters always enjoyed their room time, allowing me much-needed breaks. We read a ton, and our home was a home of stories. We kept a consistent dinnertime, and the girls and I read the Bible each morning at breakfast. We went to church consistently and invested in our church family. We limited screen time and sugar and video games. We played outside a lot. Even if they just took a blanket outside to read, we were outside for my own sanity.

When Mags turned four, the bottom fell out of my life, because that was the age I was when I was severely abused. I became depressed and sought help, but the wheels fell off of our lives. I was homeschooling and having terrible nightmares. This is where community was so important. I had friends who would watch the girls, no questions asked, so I could go to my counseling appointments.

As I healed and learned more about the truth of my own story, along with Jim doing the same, we put up boundaries with our families of origin, where there was no repentance from them. This has been costly, but in the end has saved us.





One important thing that was different than my upbringing was that I knew what it felt like to be blamed for your parents' problems. I refused to do that to my daughters. If I was having a hard day, I did not take it out on them. We just went to the park or the library or Chick-fil-A. If I needed to cry, I cried, but I told them it was not about them or our family. I gave them the words they needed to feel secure but allowed them their innocence.

When Mags began asking questions about sex, I prayed and I showed up in a way that was healthy for her. I did not talk about my abuse. I told her about God's design for procreation and pleasure. I wanted her to have her own experiences and not be burdened by my own.

When my girls became teenagers, I did not want them to feel the pain I had experienced. One night, I felt Jesus saying to me, "Carrie, I cannot get to Maggie because you are always there before Me. You need to give her some space, so that I have room to meet her in a real way." That was very powerful. I was still there for my daughters, but I didn't try to fix everything.

When they grew up and left home, the Holy Spirit began bringing to mind ways I had let my daughters down. Instead of rationalizing, I was able to go to my daughters and say that I was sorry. It is never too late to repent as long as it is sincere and genuine. I let them put words to their feelings. Now they are so good with things that they just say, "Mom. Enough. You did great."

