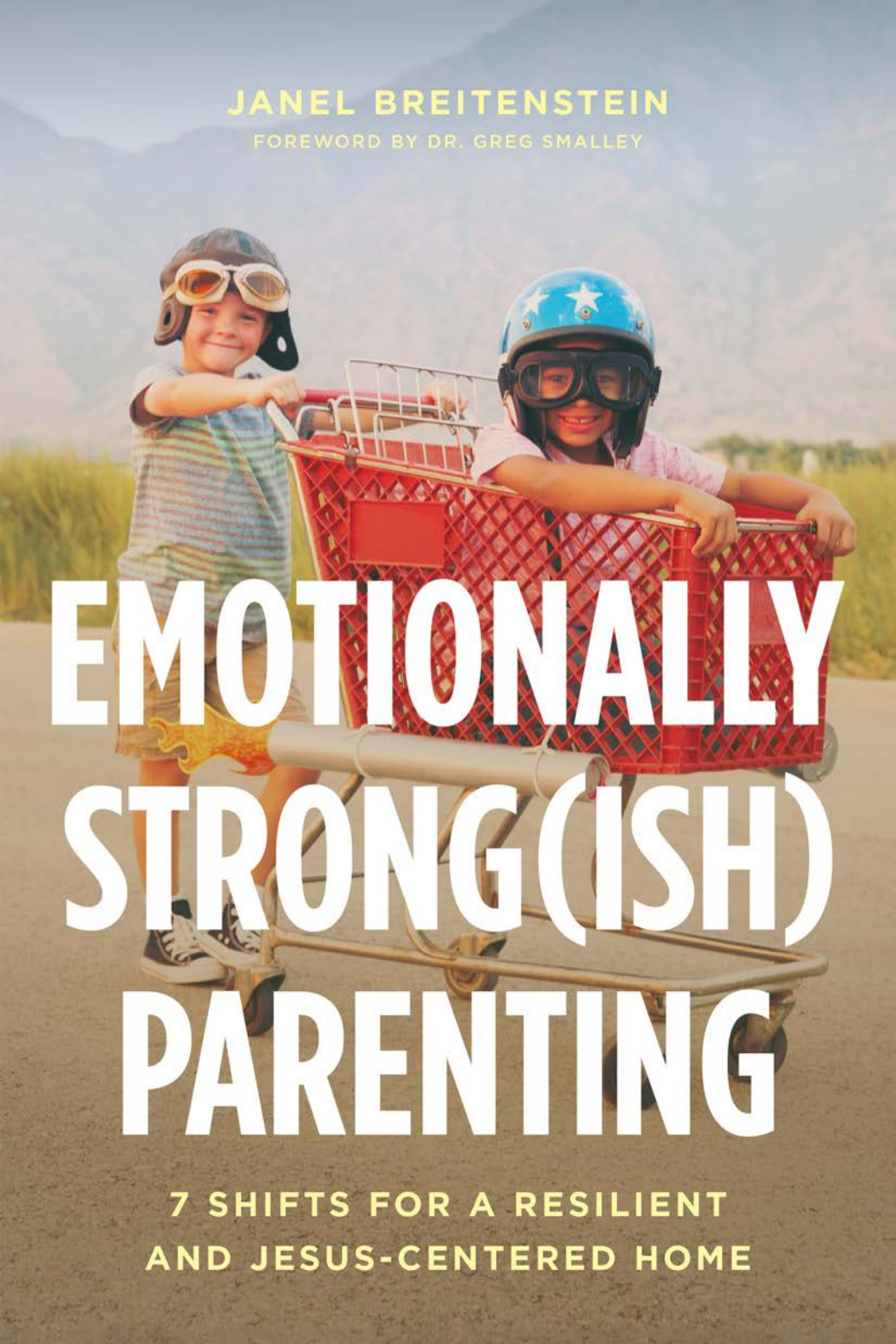


A photograph of two young children in a red plastic shopping cart on a paved path. The child on the left is wearing a brown aviator helmet with goggles and a striped shirt. The child on the right is wearing a blue helmet with white stars and large black goggles. They are both smiling. The background shows a grassy field and mountains under a clear sky.

JANEL BREITENSTEIN

FOREWORD BY DR. GREG SMALLEY

EMOTIONALLY STRONG(ISH) PARENTING

7 SHIFTS FOR A RESILIENT
AND JESUS-CENTERED HOME

Your first job as a parent or child caregiver is to manage yourself. Not your child. Yourself. In *Emotionally Strong(ish) Parenting* Janel Breitenstein will move you forward by leaps and bounds toward that goal. Engaging, practical, and filled with hope, this book will help you love and care for your children well in ways that matter most.

RON DEAL, senior director at FamilyLife, conference speaker, family therapist, and bestselling author or coauthor of *The Mindful Marriage* (with Nan Deal), *The Smart Stepfamily*, and *Building Love Together in Blended Families* (with Gary Chapman)

Janel's latest book packs a punch, for it deals with the difficult moments when our emotions collide with our children's. For such a topic, shallow, sappy, sweet ideas won't help. Janel gets that, and she's wisely crafted seven mind shifts for moms and dads, knowing change must begin with the parents. God made every family for discipleship, both for parents to teach and coach children and for parents to finish the process of growing up themselves. Getting to know him is the hidden work he desires in every home every single day. Practical, creative ideas come naturally to Janel, and in this book she shares tested practices to help you guide your child to God in the everyday craziness of your family.

BARBARA RAINEY, author of *Letters to My Daughters: The Art of Being a Wife* and cofounder of FamilyLife

In *Emotionally Strong(ish) Parenting* Janel Breitenstein cuts through the noise of endless parenting debates to offer something far more transformative: an invitation to parent ourselves first. The seven shifts she outlines aren't theoretical—they're hard-won wisdom from a mom who tells the truth about her own struggles. Whether you're in the thick of raising toddlers, navigating the turbulent teen years, or releasing an emerging adult into the world, these pages will meet you where you are. Having walked alongside hundreds

of parents, I found Janel's grounding conviction deeply resonant: Emotionally healthy parents raise whole and healthy disciples—and that wholeness becomes a gift that extends far beyond our own homes. This is a resource I wish I'd had sooner.

DR. TERESA ROBERTS, vice president at Ozark Christian College and author of *Raising Disciples*

Emotionally Strong(ish) Parenting is the best kind of parenting book. Janel's insights challenge me to recognize where I'm not leading my kids well, but she does it with a big dose of vulnerability and humor so I can't help but nod along. Janel takes my hand and says, "I get it. We've all been there," but she won't let me stay there; she points me into deeper relationship with God and my family with her practical encouragement.

CHRISTIE THOMAS, author of *Little Habits, Big Faith*

Every week through my work with *Parenting Beyond the Rules* and *Equipped to Be*, I hear from Christian parents who love their children deeply and wonder if they have what it takes to raise them well. *Emotionally Strong(ish) Parenting* is the book I will be recommending to every one of them.

Janel Breitenstein writes the way the best mentors teach, with solid biblical grounding, refreshing honesty, and practical wisdom parents can use today. Readers won't just feel informed. They will feel like they are parenting alongside someone who genuinely understands what this season requires.

Thought-provoking questions, grounding Scriptures, and real prompts parents can use directly with their children make this more than a book to read. It is a resource to return to.

For any parent who wants to raise emotionally healthy children while growing stronger themselves, this is your next read.

CONNIE ALBERS, author of *Parenting Beyond the Rules* and host of *Equipped to Be with Connie Albers*

I am so appreciative of Janel's book! She uses humor, her own struggles with parenting, and God's truth stated in a way that is full of both grace and truth to write on a topic that is deeply needed in families today: emotionally intelligent parenting! This is a great resource for Indigenous families throughout North America but also for many other families and parents who are struggling to do the best job they can at one of the hardest tasks in life (if not *the* hardest)—raising healthy, God-loving/-fearing children. I highly recommend this book!

DR. RYAN O'LEARY, member of the Ojibwe tribe in Minnesota, leader of First Peoples Initiative, president of the National Association of Native Evangelicals, and member of the United States board of directors for the National Association of Evangelicals

7 SHIFTS FOR A RESILIENT
AND JESUS-CENTERED HOME

EMOTIONALLY STRONG(ISH) PARENTING

JANEL BREITENSTEIN



Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



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Emotionally Strong(ish) Parenting: 7 Shifts for a Resilient and Jesus-Centered Home

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Foreword

If you're burdened by recurring thoughts of your own parenting foibles and you're wishing that somebody could reassure you with empathetic insights and practical tips, I'd like you to meet your new best friend: Janel Breitenstein. Grab a cup of coffee, settle in for a good read, and be assured that *you are not alone*.

You probably entered parenting with some pretty high expectations regarding your offspring. Your toddler would never throw a tantrum in the grocery aisle. The neighbors' windows (and your bank account) would be safe from errant baseballs. There wouldn't be any swear words scrawled in sidewalk chalk in front of *your* house (after all, where would the kids even *hear* such language?). Exemplary class projects, excellent grades, no trips to the principal's office, no student driver fender benders.

And your expectations for yourself? You would never raise your voice. Every meal would be nutritious and ready just as everyone sat down at the dinner table. Your turn for the carpool . . . completely clean, fully fueled car at the curb—on time, every time. Family devotions and vacations would be the stuff of social media legend. Your son would proudly wave to his parents in the bleachers at every game. *Your* daughter would never cry herself to sleep wondering if Dad even notices her existence, much less loves her.

Every member of your household would be a shining example of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Check, check, check.

But of course, reality has likely been . . . different.

You’ve wished you could crawl under the table because certainly everyone in the restaurant was giving *your* family the side-eye. One or more of your kids has stood in the rain waiting for you to get across town from a late-running appointment. Your son can tell you exactly how many ceiling tiles are in the principal’s office because he’s counted them through multiple lectures. Permission slips have disappeared into a laundry-pile wormhole. More than one electronic device has gone through the washing machine.

Perhaps you led your kids in a spontaneous act of adventure—ignoring your spouse’s cautionary “I’m not sure that’s a good idea”—with the resulting memory now infamously living in family lore under the heading *Well, It Seemed like a Good Idea in the Moment*. (I, Greg Smalley, *might* have personal experience in this area.) You’ve probably regretted a few harsh words before they’ve even passed your teeth. There are few things in life so humbling as having your own shortcomings called out by a pint-size prophet who looks at you with hurt-filled eyes and trembling lips, whimpering, “But you said God tells us *not* to say things like you just did.” *Ouch*.

I’ve always loved how the apostle Paul describes the constant struggle that even those of us who try to follow Jesus often encounter. It’s especially relatable as paraphrased by the late Eugene Peterson:

What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. . . .

. . . I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really*

do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

ROMANS 7:15, 18-23, MSG

Paul is referencing sin in general, but that's also pretty much Parenting: Exhibit A.

The good news is that even though we simply cannot, in our own strength, be the dads and moms we want to be, when we put our faith and trust in Jesus, we are empowered with the Spirit who raised him from the dead (Romans 8:11). And as Janel is about to show you, that truth is the ultimate game changer.

As we continually experience God's unconditional love, we can learn to more genuinely love and support our kids without restraint. When we experience Christ's forgiveness, we can in turn be quicker to forgive our families (and ourselves). With heaven's grace permeating our hearts, we're better positioned and motivated to extend grace to those we hold most dear. Knowing that God wants and provides the absolute best for us (even if we don't always recognize it for what it is), we can have the growing faith to think the best of our children and our wife or husband. With the Creator and King of the infinite universe on our side, we are set up for success.

In the pages that follow, Janel is going to get real. She is also going to be practical, encouraging, and occasionally challenging. She won't hold back or leave us hanging. She is going to repeatedly point us to

the Source of all wisdom—the Lord who designed and formed each of us uniquely in our mother’s womb.

Parenting is tough. But God can—and will—give you the insight and grace to do it well. Janel Breitenstein’s insightful words in these pages will help. Blessings to you and your family!

Dr. Greg Smalley
Vice President of Marriage and Family Formation
Focus on the Family

PARENTING'S SECRET SAUCE

I held the phone in my hand, preparing to apologize for shouting at a four-year-old. *My* four-year-old.

It had been a classic situation in my paper towel–commercial life: I had four kids under five, and I was perpetually wiping . . . everything. Which was a lot like running a twenty-four-hour preschool. Daily I rode waves of apple juice, laundry, and exhaustion. My emotional control felt translucent, perhaps correlating with my need to shower.

I'd attempt to leave the house with these culprits, but one would mess their pants or fail to produce matching shoes. *Agh!* Margin (whatever that was) felt nonexistent.

So I was frequently late. And frequently yelling, as was exemplified that morning in the flurry of leaving for my single, coveted day in the office. I'd erupted at my oldest, Baden. I'd called it discipline.

I'd apologized in the moment. But the apology had not been pulled from the heart level. Focused on his disobedience, I'd huffed

out the door, slapping a smile on my face while I dropped the kids at my mom's.

I now phoned him there, metaphorical hat in hand, attempting an interaction more like one of Jesus'. But with zero hesitation during that call, my prekindergartner spoke Jesus to *me*.

"Mommy, I forgive you. And I want to let you know that even when you do bad things, I still love you. And even when you do bad things, God still loves you." The breathtaking power of my teachable moment lay in my preschooler repeating the gospel back to me. He not only got it; he applied it.

Now I felt *really* crummy for yelling.

In that moment, Baden chose emotional strength. He opted against punishing or stonewalling me; instead, he extended a preschool version of redemption. Meanwhile, God had overcome my parental arrogance and superiority so I could humble myself before a child and lean toward him—my enemy of the moment—rather than away, like God did for me (Romans 5:8). What had been an awkward, destructive interaction suddenly bloomed into beauty.

I'm saying your worst parenting moments are God's best gospel opportunities—if you're brave enough to apologize out loud.

WHEN FAILURE = YOUR OPEN WINDOW

Failures turned gospel opportunities remain a theme in our house. In my experience, just-blew-it moments (my kids', my husband's, and mine) aren't just occasions for repentance or discipline. On our blackest parenting days—ones filled with gutting loss, fear, health crises, heartfelt confessions—God has handed my husband, John, and me our greatest opportunities for kneading God's "attachment love" into our family. These dark moments become wide-open end zones for his *hesed*—unconditional, all-in, no-way-out covenant love—to touch down.

Because in our hours of intense need, God moves toward us. Not away.

Emotionally healthier, stronger, and more resilient parenting is about embracing what I'll call everyday gospel opportunities: *This is what Jesus looks like. This is how he loves us.*

Together, we will find the way back to wholeness.

Emotional health is the difference between raising kids who hide from you and kids who run to you with the ugly truth—because they've watched you do it with God first. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *emotional intelligence* as “the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically.”¹ Or in plain English, I'd describe it as understanding and empathetically managing how we and others feel and applying that knowledge with love and intentionality. *Oxford* says that the phrase has only existed since 1849, though I find parts of this definition all over Scripture. (Throughout this book, I will include references to endnotes for those of you hoping to explore further.)

It's possible you may have picked up the idea that emotional intelligence is pink and squishy. That it's nice for people who want to sit around in group therapy and maybe sing “Kumbaya” while shaking a rain stick. But what about the rest of us, who want to get stuff done for the Kingdom of God?

Maybe you're wondering,

- *Is “emotional health” actually self-infatuation or self-indulgence—when instead we should be denying ourselves, forgetting ourselves?*
- *Is emotional intelligence really a psychobabble term for going soft in places where Christians should retain fortitude despite how we feel?*
- *Aren't our hearts deceitful and sick (Jeremiah 17:9), so maybe we shouldn't be listening to them at all?*

I wager the opposite, on all counts.

We all parent out of our own health or dysfunction, from truth or from our trauma.² Usually both—hence the contrasts you’ll find in the upcoming chapters. If we are to deny ourselves and live Jesus’ way, we must take the time to discern—to listen for—the healthy or dysfunctional responses within ourselves. We need an examined life, one undeceived by our hearts. In order to “let love be genuine” (Romans 12:9), we must intimately decipher which parts of our hearts are authentic and which are false.

In other words, following Jesus *demand*s that we grow toward emotional health. And parenting has demanded that John and I prioritize soul-level healing and health.

Intriguingly, John Calvin asserts that the “sum of true wisdom” is namely “the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” Without this, separating our inner selves from God, we offer a “false show of righteousness.” He goes on, “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.”³

We’ve all known Christians whose “righteousness” doesn’t seem to address what’s really going on inside. Sadly, they can be some of the most offensive representations of Jesus on the planet.

That’s because spiritual health invites us not just to know *about* God but to usher him into our deepest parts. We bring unresolved questions and uncomfortable emotions into our worship: “*All* that is within me, bless his holy name!” (Psalm 103:1, emphasis added). We can’t just leave the bad stuff outside, sniffing or grabbing a smoke.

I think of Asaph in Psalm 73, staring down his intense bitterness over injustice—and the perceived futility of his faith. Yet his jaded train of thought pivots on bringing these challenges into his worship: “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, *until I went into the sanctuary of God*” (Psalm 73:16-17, emphasis added).

Asaph’s brutish ignorance—his words, not mine (Psalm 73:22)—dissolves when he realizes God’s presence with him in his injury and

anger: “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. . . . My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:23, 26).

Emotional resilience like Asaph’s—that ability to return to inner equilibrium—means acknowledging our feelings and then intentionally directing these feelings toward God in order to manage them with God. It’s not psychobabble to Asaph.

Jackie Hill Perry writes,

God’s Word and God’s nature must inform your emotions.
 . . . [Emotions] become a danger to us and the world
 whenever they are detached from God’s Word.

. . . Emotions aren’t the problem; the flesh is. So then, in becoming more holy, doing away with emotions won’t serve us. What will is that God-breathed Word. . . . People will feel all kinds of ways all of the time, but they can and they must reflect God’s nature when they do.⁴

Practicing emotional intelligence as Christians empowers us to test our feelings and inclinations at any moment by asking ourselves questions like these:

- *Which parts of my desires and perspectives are legitimate, even holy?*
- *Which parts are corrupted or out of their God-given order?*
(See Jonah 4; Luke 15:28-32.)
- *How is God present with me in this situation?*
- *How can I honor him and his image bearers with how I respond?*

Emotional strength is the difference between being frustrated with a soul-sucking office environment and taking it out at home on your preschooler versus dealing with that emotion with God while at work or in your car on the way home. It’s the difference between

fearfully forbidding your preteen from hanging out with certain friends versus collaborating with your kids to make wise yet loving friendship decisions.

WHY EMOTIONAL STRENGTH MATTERS: EXHIBIT A

Let's look at emotional intelligence in your own kitchen, with your own squirrely kids. Think about your own preteen, perched on a kitchen barstool after school, munching jalapeño kettle chips Cookie Monster-style, crumbs flying. Maybe you mention a verse you've been thinking about, and the obnoxious potato chip eating falls silent.

Preteen: "Yeah, I'm not sure if the Bible is true." Their pupils slide to you, eyeing your reaction.

If you're like a lot of Christian parents, inner sirens may nearly drown out the sounds of your child's resumed munching. Stress sweat pricks your armpits.

Is this kid deconstructing? Deconverting? I gotta fix this. STAT.

Consider a few of your knee-jerk response options:

- a. Dust off those apologetics answers from college. Get ready to defend the faith and train your child in the evidence for Christianity. Order all available Lee Strobel books, requesting that your child give a book report on each. Raise the issue frequently until your child's heart softens.
- b. Correct your child immediately: "Sweetie, God's Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. What you're thinking is simply a lie. Do you have sin in your life? Let's pray."
- c. Commence guilt-tripping: "I can't believe you'd turn your back on our faith." (Pro tip: Watch out for emotional manipulation, demanding sympathy for yourself—*Focus on*

my world!—rather than engaging with your child's emotions, concerns, and experience.)

Or consider that you can pause for a beat and respond more like this:

- d. Put on your unshocked, curious, come-as-you-are face. Within yourself and to God, acknowledge your fear. Ask for God's help, trusting him with your child's faith journey. Sit down to listen, refraining from interrupting or offering easy answers. Gently ask questions to understand the issue beneath your child's presenting concern: "Exploring doubts and questioning what you believe takes courage. Thanks for trusting me. Can I hear more?"

When *curiosity* rather than quick correction leads these conversations, it creates doorways to, rather than exits from, deeper faith. One analysis of Barna data suggests that kids who feel safe bringing questions and doubts to their parents may be up to four times as likely to remain engaged in church as young adults than those raised in environments where doubt is discouraged.⁵

Four times as likely.

Your emotional strength isn't a nice add-on. It's key to raising lifelong disciples.

How you handle this moment can set the table for you and your child to dialogue about faith questions and doubts for decades. Or it can successfully shut your child down, thanks to responding with the "right" answers, like those pseudo solutions above in options *a*, *b*, and *c*. Those emotionally impulsive (not resilient) responses can sever communication and effectively send your child who-knows-where for more satisfactory answers. You might unintentionally communicate that real Christians don't give doubts any legitimate attention (which is to call Asaph total weak sauce).

There are, of course, plenty of additional emotionally healthy responses beyond option *d*.

Will you be a conversation starter or stopper?⁶

MORE THAN THIS MOMENT, MORE THAN THIS CHILD

The magic of instilling emotional health in our kids lies in *being* emotionally healthy. Cliché, but true: We repeat what we don't repair. What issues from your past have you neglected to look in the eye in order to do the hard work of healing?

Call me an alarmist, but I have found that how emotions are managed within parenting fight-flight-freeze moments can reverberate for decades, even generations.

We all know families whose combustible anger or suppression of conflict borders on legendary. We have friends who don't talk to Dad anymore. Or those for whom Mom's anxiety defined their childhood.

Most of us parent the way we were parented—until the pain of staying the same finally outweighs the pain of changing (or until you open your mouth at 4:02 p.m. on a Tuesday and one of your parents falls out).

Some of us are still yelling because our dads yelled or perfect-performing because our moms guilted us. Or are emotionally constipated because feelings were minimized or seen as the enemy to godliness in our house.

Think about it: Your obstacles with your own parents are likely emotional health issues.

Our inability to productively tackle what's hard, due to our own emotional landscape, can leave our kids vulnerable and left to wing it on their own. Or perhaps worse, to get help from someone else. When we don't look tough issues in the eye, where will our kids turn?

One friend of mine recalls her mom's evasive answers to any

questions about sex. When she asked as a child how a baby would come out of a pregnant woman's tummy, her mother explained that "everyone has a little door that God created that opens at just the right time to let the baby out."

My friend felt confused. "I couldn't find a door on my own body. My conclusion was that either I was malformed because I had no door or my mom wasn't telling the truth." When my friend was a high school freshman and overheard her parents talking about her mom's birth control pills, my friend later asked about the container of pills. Her mother, a nurse, claimed she didn't know what they were.

Friends, let me reiterate that God has so much mercy and kindness even when we fail to parent with emotional intelligence. Yet, tragically, the mistrust spawned by this mother's answers—clearly untrue, even in the mind of a child—ballooned into serious consequences when my friend was sexually abused. "How could I trust her with something so very personal and violating? She couldn't enter the hard with me even with seemingly simple things, like birth and birth control pills." Among many other contributing factors, "That's part of what set me up to endure the abuse for two years rather than tell my parents right away."

You can imagine how families' lack of emotional health tragically seeps into the emotional health of whole communities. Hip-hop artist and *Christianity Today* editorial director Sho Baraka reports, "Research on teen dating relationships that studied [young men's] interpersonal and stress management skills observed that 'the lower the score for these dimensions of Emotional Intelligence, the more violence is exercised.' In some circles, anger is the only socially acceptable emotion for men to express without their masculinity being questioned. When men are unable to express all of themselves, they may often default to violence, whereas Scripture shows that we have the power to be both angry (Eph. 4:26) and gentle (Prov. 15:1)."⁷

Baraka profiles an advocate for urban youth who works to “free men from what he calls ‘emotional incarceration.’ . . . Young boys should not be abandoned to fend off systemic injustice, community violence, and the generational trauma passed down from parents who never learned to explore or express their emotions.”⁸

I’ve also witnessed the powerful flip side of grappling for emotional health in tenuous moments. For one of my sons, the teen years were a (very) rocky road. John and I chose daily to resist visceral impulses: pounding fear, punishing anger, protective emotional distance. That son recently drew a lump of tears to my throat, saying, “If you and Dad hadn’t responded the way you did, it would have taken me a lot longer to come back to God.”

Wise exploration and expression of feelings is a daily maintenance task, because these moments of powerful potential pop up on an average Thursday when you’re answering your child’s questions about same-sex attraction. Or when you discover your child or their friend shoplifting. Perhaps it’s when you’re discussing God’s response to someone else’s moral failure. Or when you find something in your child’s backpack or on their phone that you wish you could unsee.

Your emotional strength in the moment—or your lack of it—could lead you to connect or to disconnect; to truly see your children or to deny reality; to receive and shepherd or to ignore and scold.

DOES FAITH REQUIRE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE?

Perhaps it makes sense that in most occupations emotional intelligence (EQ) tends to be a higher factor in success than even IQ.⁹ EQ has proven to be a key variable in a person’s stress levels and romantic relationships.¹⁰ Could EQ be even more important than a kid’s traditional education?

If you're looking at Scripture, maybe none of this is causing a light bulb moment. Over and over, God's commands are distilled to two:

1. Love him above all and in all.
2. Love his image bearers like we love ourselves.¹¹

If those two commands summarize all of God's law, the *quality* of our love rises to top-shelf importance, right? Maybe even more than a child's GPA or SAT score. *How we love* affects how well we fulfill every other one of God's commands and desires for us—or don't (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3)—and how wholly, intimately, and functionally we can love him back.

Emotionally healthier parenting is all about how we receive and give God's love. First Corinthians 13 reminds me that even when I love my kids on paper and check all the Christian parenting boxes—*Memorization of Scripture! Respect toward adults! Virgins until marriage! Airtight theology!*—I can miss every single thing that really matters. The fruit of the Spirit (joy, peace, gentleness, and self-control, to name a few) either informs my love for my kids . . . or doesn't. Right alongside where they're commanded to "bring [kids] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord," dads are commanded not to "provoke [their] children to anger" (Ephesians 6:4).

God doesn't just care about the *what* of our parenting. He cares about the *how*, too.

I can tell you what interferes with the sincerity and purity of my parenting love:¹² my driven agendas and unresolved past. Not to mention my manipulation, fear, ego, impatience, moods, hurt, internal lies. These dark, destructive responses, when ignored, end up parenting my kids.

Scads of factors contribute to how we respond to and love our kids at any given moment, such as aspects of our physical bodies, like

hormones, nausea, or the lack of a REM cycle; our fluctuating feelings; and our spiritual state with its questions, dryness, exuberance, or faith crises.

God requests an all-access pass to each of these.

See, we imitate God's own unity when we love him with every part of us (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). David prays, "Unite my heart to fear your name" (Psalm 86:11). James warns us about double-mindedness, contrasting it with pureheartedness, a oneness of substance (James 4:8). Jesus tells us that rather than those serving two masters (Matthew 6:24), it's the "pure in heart" who see God (Matthew 5:8). God gathers our hearts and lives into congruence with him, closing the gap between our outer and inner selves and pulling down our masks (Matthew 15:7-9).

So emotionally healthier and stronger parenting unites faith with love, feelings, and the thought life: "*The* only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6, NIV, emphasis added).

We can choose to help our kids braid faith and emotion together. When I gasp awake at 3:23 a.m. to a small, anguished face seven inches from mine, yes, it's a chance to remind my child to trust God or to quietly encourage them with Scripture. But I can also hold that trembling little body against the warmth of my own, whisper-praying into their sweaty hair—and let them *feel* God's affection and trustworthiness in that moment.

We pursue God within our emotions, not despite them, so that more and more easily we and our kids return to places of shalom and wholeness.

And that sense of emotional integrity (as in *integration*) prompts the seven shifts you're about to encounter in this book. We'll explore paths away from tendencies like anger or shame, distraction or over-control, toward more Jesus-centered postures, like peacemaking, exposing guilt, being present, and empowering our kids.

ARE FEELINGS ANTI-FAITH?

I have a friend who is always chest deep in ministry. Facing cancer testing for a family member, she said she'd handle it like she always does: *Just keep going. Don't think about it.*

Her response reminded me of the old-school evangelical graphic of a train. The engine is labeled “fact” and is followed by train cars “faith” and “feeling.” The implication: *Don't let feelings pull your faith downhill.*

But listening to my friend as we shivered in a parking lot on a Colorado February evening, I wanted to say, *Wait. Lean into this.*

Yes, our faith is to be “steadfast, immovable” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Yet, like for David, inviting God into my dark spaces has resulted in some of the richest and most intimate, transformative, and establishing moments of my faith. It's made my faith more *genuinely* resolute—not fake strong.

In the past, I have at times not leaned in, failing to fully grieve or actively engage with what is wrong about this world. I didn't mourn or labor with God because I was convinced a Jesus-saturated Christian is not sad, discouraged, or furious.

I'd gotten the idea that feelings logjammed my relationship with God. I responded to sadness, fear, or anger with a Barbie-like, frozen smile: “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). *Have a cookie!*

My emotional avoidance resulted in a plasticky sort of Christianity of stilted worship and hollow obedience. It was Calvin's “false show of righteousness,” and I was content with playing in the shallow end. In my haste not to complain, instead of seeking God's goodness in discomfort, I pretended hurt, loss, disappointment, and anger weren't around at all. (Oh, for a 1985-bound DeLorean so I could hand this book to my younger self.)

This avoidance informed the version of Jesus people saw in me

too. The “Jesus” I reflected was irrelevant to their most blistering, least presentable questions. He was unable or unwilling to dive into their deepest, most haunted places and was wholly uncomfortable with life’s unanswerables.

Yet these tough feelings are a necessary part of full-blown Christianity. Jesus encountered the entire emotional spectrum. He was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3; see also Luke 19:41-44; John 11:35). In Scripture, we see him angry and upset, joyful and peaceful.¹³

His true worshipers worship in truth (John 4:23), not in denial.¹⁴

Peter Scazzero, author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, explains how emotional health affects how we love God and people, kids included: “When we do not process before God the very feelings that make us human, such as fear or sadness or anger, we leak. Our churches are filled with ‘leaking’ Christians who have not treated their emotions as a discipleship issue.”¹⁵ That “leaking” could look like raging at a customer service representative or taking a controlling posture with others in order to eliminate fears of uncertainty.

In parenting, too, I needed to look my “leaking” emotions and motivations in the eye. When my son wanted to bleach his hair and my daughter asked to get a nose ring, what was I afraid of? When a friend asked me to disallow Harry Potter in our family since our kids played together so often, why did I respond as I did? Did I struggle with a fear of people? Did she have a point? What would it have looked like to honor her as a sister in Christ?

My actionable decisions in these situations might look the same whether I am emotionally self-aware or not. But underneath, my heart may be stuffed with pride and fear, motivated by people-pleasing—or stuffed with wise discernment and faith, motivated by Spirit seeking. Those parenting freak-outs, deer-in-the-headlights moments, and facepalm incidents are often not only the most revealing but also the

most critical. Can we return to that place of emotion that is anchored in God's truth and constant availability?

PRESENCE: START HERE

Therapist K.J. Ramsey describes the presence of God as a source of *emotional regulation*.¹⁶ That's when our bodies, nervous systems, and emotions return to healthy, regulated equilibrium rather than feeling out of control.

So as an aspect of emotional intelligence, I'll define *emotional resilience* like this: the ability, in God's compassionate presence, to return to emotional equilibrium, even joy. We're peaceful, not angsty, unsteady, or soul hungry (Psalm 23:1). God wants us to be established and rooted in his love (see Ephesians 3:14-19) so we're not blown over.

Would that describe my parenting, I wonder?

Ramsey writes, "The most regulating thing for our nervous systems at any point of any day is co-regulation. Experiencing the presence of someone else with us who is kind emboldens us to face our fears with trust."¹⁷

Co-regulation: I think of my dog Charlie leaping into my arms when he hears thunder. My daughter, Corinne, wanting a hug when she wakes up. My son Jack verbally processing what angers him.

"*Courage*," Ramsey says, "*is choosing to commune with someone who has already chosen to be with us.*"¹⁸

We see it all over Psalm 23. God portrays himself as extending green pastures and quiet waters—perhaps similar to your reading a picture book with your child in the beanbag chair. He offers real-time protection and direction, like you might on the ride home when your daughter unpacks the girl drama at gymnastics. God prepares a table in the presence of enemies. Do we mirror this as we heat a cup of cocoa after our child's day of peer rejection?

Ramsey explains that regulation “is what we have in Christ. There is never a moment that God is not in us and with us, carrying our fears and hopes into a future kingdom of love.”¹⁹

Or as David puts it, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?” From highest highs to lowest lows, we can’t unbuckle ourselves from his presence (Psalm 139:7-8).

God’s parenthood welcomes us, restoring us back to our joy center.²⁰ It’s not glib, chipper, or naïve. It’s an anchor for storm-soaked souls. And it’s our parenting superpower: “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

His presence forms the stuff of any love song. Beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation, he wants to be *God with us*, in our midst and getting a kick out of us (Zephaniah 3:17; Revelation 21:3).

God wants to rule with us. To abide. To stroll with us in the cool of the day again. To hover within us and over our chaos, drawing out order. To be the fourth man in the fires of our lives (see Daniel 3:16-26).

In Jesus, he could at last be Emmanuel not just physically on earth, but forever. God sought to restore his “with-ness”—signaled in a ripped Temple veil. Jesus “died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live *with him*” (1 Thessalonians 5:10, emphasis added).

And that enduring presence sets up ground-zero change in families.

Think of the men dialoguing on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-15), discussing the horror they witnessed around Jesus’ death. They articulate to a “stranger” not just their story but their epic loss. Walloped expectations. Confusion at the hands of friends. “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. . . . Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. . . . They came back saying . . . he was alive” (verses 21-23).

These guys keep it real. They acknowledge what’s unfinished, the near-choking question marks curling around them.

And this flings open a door for Jesus to show up, speak directly to the places their hearts are bleeding, and change them forever.

As we “walk by the way” with our kids (Deuteronomy 6:7), can we do the same? Can we connect over what’s raw and vulnerable and messy to shape our families, weaving God’s truth into the fabric of our lives?

The power on the road to Emmaus wasn’t just an emotionally safe space for authenticity. It was the man who walked with them, received their story and dashed hopes, taught them, and talked with them to the point that they begged him to stay and eat with them (Luke 24:29-30). They describe their bodily emotional response: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road . . . ?” (verse 32).

Perhaps more powerful than (their equivalent of) Sunday school or family devotions, connecting with each other and Jesus at this level proved nothing short of transformational.

THE GOAT OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Clearly, in the understatement of the year, *God is an emotionally intelligent Parent*. As we see on the road to Emmaus, the Author of love and emotion is present in his kids’ big feelings, which aren’t a threat but rather an invitation to care.

Psychologist Dr. Curt Thompson articulates how Jesus, anticipating his own torture and death, dealt with his own fight-flight-freeze responses in Gethsemane. At the risk of shoehorning Jesus into a model for my convenience, I do want to recognize the emotional health he demonstrated:

1. **Jesus *identified* how he felt:** “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matthew 26:38).

2. Jesus *managed* his emotion by submitting to God's will: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (verse 39).
3. Jesus *shepherded* his emotion by asking God for what he longed for: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (verse 39). He sought community in friends but *managed* his response when they fell asleep (verses 40-44).²¹

SIX STEPS TOWARD EMOTIONALLY STRONGER PARENTING

As we seek to parent with God's brand of love, we will find that emotionally resilient parenting requires at least three elements in us, which we then pass along to our kids: *identify*, *manage*, *shepherd*. With practice, this can take a matter of seconds, but for now, let's flesh out each step. (Feeling skeptical of this process? I'll include more Scripture references in the notes so you can formulate your own thoughts.)

Help Yourself

1. **Identify:** Figure out what's happening inside you and express it to God.²² Rather than tuning the knobs of our hearts to self for answers and disproportionate focus, we're seeking connection of our hearts to God's. You could ask questions like these:
 - » *What am I feeling? Why?* Acknowledge the answer to God. Ask him for help to understand what's going on.
 - » *What do I want—even if it's not good?* Asking this helps keep your desires from managing you from behind and helps you approach God in truth (John 4:23), openhanded, willing to let him shape change.
 - » *What lies am I believing? What am I afraid of?* Separating out what is anti-God within us can act as a spiritual and

emotional immune system: Here's what to fight. Here are my obstacles to God's ways.

2. **Manage:** Set appropriate boundaries on your emotion. Here's what this could look like in prayer and reflection:

- » *Father, your presence is with me. You see and experience firsthand what's happening. Your peace, wisdom, love, self-control, and presence are available to me.*
- » *Holy Spirit, you stand ready to help me walk with you rather than listen to the sinful part of me (Galatians 5:16-17, 22-23). Help me listen to your voice and exchange my thinking for yours.*
- » *Do I need to step away from the situation to allow you to get control?* (Is this an option, given the circumstances?)
- » In positive emotions and realizations, turn to God in gratitude. In "negative" emotions and realizations, lament to and with God over what is lost—over what doesn't seem right about this situation, perhaps revealed in your anger, sadness, fear, and/or guilt.
- » Therapists may employ a "bracketing" technique that can also be helpful for parents. They temporarily set aside personal reactions, judgments, and values in order to prioritize a secure emotional place when gathering information from a client. As a parent, this might also mean waiting to attach (and often react out of) your own narrative: *This is because we chose that schooling option.* Or *I'm such a crummy parent* or *What will my mom think when she hears about this?* As you address a situation with your kids, what issues or reactions do you need to bracket to deal with later?²³

3. **Shepherd:** Allow God to shepherd—that is, to lovingly lead. A few ideas for how to rest in this posture:

- » *Father, what do you want in this circumstance? What could your Kingdom coming, your will being done, look like right now—even if this person or situation doesn't change?*
- » *I want to ask you for . . .*
- » *What does it look like to choose to be with you, Lord? To submit to you and love this person as myself?*
- » *Father, what is your heart (or emotion) toward me right now?*
- » *How should I reflect your heart toward others?*

It's helped me to journal my answers to this process when I can. This practice helps me employ this process more fluidly even when I can't step away from the situation.

When you've done these steps—even over the course of a few deep breaths—you're ready to lead someone else. You're ready to parent.

Help Your Child

4. **Identify (round 2):** Help your child identify their feelings and desires. Take time to identify *with* your child in empathy.

Ask yourself, *How can I connect, offering my child God's presence and empathy—God's with-ness—in this moment rather than just parenting from above?*

5. **Manage (round 2):** Like God does for us, establish healthy boundaries for your child's emotions. (This is different from exerting unhealthy control.) For example, God says, "Be angry and do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). He tells us to only use words that build up and don't tear down, that are timely, and that

give grace to listeners (Ephesians 4:29). He says that when we feel afraid we can choose to trust in his love and control our thoughts.²⁴ So you could say to your child,

- » “It’s okay to feel [emotion]. It’s not okay to hurt others, yourself, or the things around you.”
- » “Our bodies don’t always get to be in charge, but we can always listen to them.”

Setting healthy limits on emotional expression helps our kids learn from a young age that God deeply values what we feel. Our feelings are important—so we want God and his Word leading the way.

In this management stage, you’re helping your child take age-appropriate steps to fully feel and deal with emotion. From the time they’re born, kids are growing in their ability to manage themselves in age-appropriate ways. An infant throwing a tantrum when they’re hungry is 100 percent appropriate; a teenager doing the same isn’t.

6. Shepherd (round 2): Shepherd your child’s whole person. Help yourself do this by asking:

- » *How can I lead—rather than push—my child into God’s desire for them, both now and in the future?* (This is discipleship, or making disciples, which may include discipline.)
- » *What heart-probing questions can I ask to help my child listen, now or someday, to the Holy Spirit?* Some possible questions for your child:
 - › “What could it look like to be loving in this situation? What about to be wise?”

- › “What heart attitude and behavior do you think God would want you to ‘take off’? What about to ‘put on’?”²⁵
- › “What could it look like to please God here?”

God commands us to manage and shepherd our kids.²⁶ They learn self-discipline from discipline imposed on them. (Again, I’m not talking consequences; I’m talking *being made disciples*.) We’re modeling our own emotional management and then training our kids to grapple with *their* feelings—so eventually they encounter and respond to God in the middle of it all.

The 60-Second Reset Every Christian Parent Needs

identify → manage → shepherd → identify with child → manage with child → shepherd child

If you’re game, consider buying in with the following covenant.

I aim to no longer make my children pay for my unhealed places.

Today I choose to do the hard, humble work of becoming an emotionally safe place for their hearts—because that’s what God has been for mine.

Signed _____

Date _____

PRACTICAL IDEAS

Consider these practical tools suggestions—not prescriptions!—to shift toward patterns of emotional strength in your home.

- **Connecting with God:** In personal time with God, I’ve personally shifted my focus from *learning about God* to *connecting with and intimately knowing God* (Philippians 3:8-11). These two

pursuits are of course not mutually exclusive. Perhaps it's similar to a date night with your spouse: If you only talk about your upcoming schedule and that discipline issue with the kids, you've had a business meeting but haven't really connected in your souls.

Part of this means allowing God to ask me, *Where are you?*²⁷—like he asks people throughout Scripture.²⁷ I want to welcome God's with-ness into all of me in mutual, intimate knowing.

- **Identifying God's current quest for you:** In personal time with God, I ask myself, *What questions is my soul asking right now?* Sometimes this helps me ensure I'm addressing what's really going on in me rather than walking away without taking those questions up with God.

With older kids, I describe this concept as a quest in a video game, a challenge that requires completion before reaching the next level of maturity. I ask what quest God has their soul on right now. Sometimes we even describe what tools, weapons, or NPCs (non-player characters that the player doesn't control) God might be providing for them on this current quest. In the soul hunger God allows me to feel, I think of Deuteronomy 8:3: "He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna . . . that he might make you know that . . . man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

- **Naming feelings:** Consider posting a printable feelings wheel prominently in the house to help give language to your own emotions and help kids identify theirs. Talk about how you're feeling, how you sort through those emotions, and how your feelings are important indicators but not dictators.²⁸ Communicate welcoming God into emotions rather than trying to connect with God despite the emotions.

Especially for younger kids, when exploring books, movies, and friend situations, help them expand their ability to empathize

and identify feelings by asking, “What do you think that person is feeling?” You can even role-play using stuffies, action figures, or dolls. “Let’s say [stuffedie’s name] feels left out. What might have happened? What could [another stuffie] say or do to be a loving friend?”

- **Checking in on emotions:** Add emotional check-in pit stops to your kids’ daily rhythms, perhaps after school during a snack, in a car ride, or before bedtime prayers. Start with questions like the classic “What was your high today? Your low?” Then, “Tell me more.” Before problem-solving, opt for empathy. Younger kids might need help labeling emotions, but in general, ask before assuming how kids feel.
- **Enjoying God:** It’s too easy to divide life into categories of spiritual and secular. Instead, bring God into your kids’ natural strengths and pleasures. Mention enjoying God and his enjoyment of your kids. (Sometimes parents more naturally bring him only into corrective moments.)

You could say, “I know you love mac and cheese! I bet that makes God so happy.” “You are a talented artist. I think God loved making you like this, and I bet he loves to watch you create.” “I know God already knows about your day—but I think he’d love to hear you talk about it if you feel like it. And I would too.” “I love just being with you, and I get the idea that God does too.”

- **Navigating grief:** When kids feel grief, help them identify what’s been lost and its value. Once when my parents left after visiting our family in Uganda, our kids were weeping. John rubbed their backs and said, “I’m not going to say, ‘Don’t cry.’ Crying speaks of something valuable you’ve lost. Go ahead and cry!”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Use these questions for moments of prayer, discussion, and journaling.

1. What did my home of origin do well in the area of emotional health? How do I hope to be emotionally healthier than my home of origin?
2. How well can my child articulate what they're feeling? How well can they identify and empathize with how others are feeling?
3. What emotions am I the least comfortable with in myself? In others? What do I typically do with that discomfort? (Deny those feelings? Forbid them to show? Oppose them?) What could it look like to honor those emotions instead?