

# RAISING *the* CHALLENGING CHILD

STUDY GUIDE

For Christian Parents,  
Caregivers, and Small Groups

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# WEEK 1:

## Setting the Stage

As someone who was raised in the church and who, along with my husband, tried to instill a living faith in our boys, it seems only natural for me to view the lessons in *Raising the Challenging Child* through a Biblical lens. If only we could all love and support our children as God does us! It is my prayer that this study guide will help you explore His instruction for your parental challenges, both big and small.

As a parent, the support of small groups in various forms has been my lifeline. Being able to share and be in fellowship with other Christian parents traveling on the sometimes celebratory and sometimes painful journey of parenting has sustained me and comforted me. It is my prayer that this guide will bring you together with other believers who will share the Spirit and love of Christ with you when you need it most.

Blessings to you on the journey!

*Althea Reed*

*Karen Buckwalter*

### An Introduction to the Foundation of the Lessons

Children are an amazing gift from God. And we as parents have been given the awesome responsibility to support, guide and help shape the person our child grows to be. Science has proven that parents literally sculpt their child's brain — an awesome responsibility indeed!

Those of you reading this with toddlers or teens may be questioning your sculpting abilities...that is why we wrote *Raising the Challenging Child*. Like any craft, understanding a few foundational tenets — be they scriptural, experiential, driven by research into our brains and bodies or, in the case of this book, built on all three — can make the task easier. Not easy. Easier.

There will be days when it may seem like a stretch to have even mustard seed size faith in your ability to shape the vessel that is your child. And yet, we are also promised in Philippians 4:13 that, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It is our prayer that our book, and this guide, will help strengthen your efforts to shape your child in ways that honor God and guide them to reach their true potential.

# Core Parenting Concepts

In the coming weeks, we will help you consider the lessons from *Raising the Challenging Child* through the lens of scripture, however we think it will be helpful to start with an understanding of core concepts about the parent/child bond.

Children form their view of the world based on their earliest interactions with a caregiver. Humans have a biological need to attach to another individual for healthy brain development, and that attachment impacts our behaviors and emotions. Attachment is not just a word we use to talk about the connection between a baby and his or her parent. It is a well-researched field of study and lens through which to understand the brain and what drives behavior in relationships. The good news is, we can continue to sculpt our child's brain and behaviors into adulthood based on how we interact with them. No parent, or child, is perfect. Thankfully, God's grace — and the amazingly adaptable way he created our brains and bodies — allows us to change our actions, and in turn our child's response.

Most people tend to parent based on the way they were parented. Just as we can sculpt our kids' brains, our parents helped shape ours. Your instinctual responses are a result of your own early experiences. When you start to understand this, you can make intentional choices about changing behaviors that are not serving you well in your relationship with your child. It is not about right or wrong, "should" or "shouldn't". Sometimes, the most helpful responses you could provide to your child are not instinctual because they do not reflect what you have experienced. Parents often don't recognize that they are repeating patterns they experienced until they intentionally reflect on their own childhood.

Also, the brain has plasticity. That means, it is possible to impact a child's behaviors by creating new pathways in the brain — new wiring, if you will, that help your child's mind and spirit recognize that, "when I do this, that will happen." Think of each interaction with your child like a thin piece of yarn between your child's actions and your response. One single piece of yarn is not that strong, but when a child experiences the same response over and over again — each time adding another strand to the pathway — their brain starts to trust "when I do this, you will do that."

# Discussion Questions

1. Think of an interaction with your child that you wish had gone differently. Does that experience remind you of anything from your own childhood? For example, if you had a parent who yelled or was volatile, maybe as a child you ran and hid. If you have a child who yells or is volatile, do you respond by retreating?

2. Are you willing to change your own behavior to impact your child's behavior? Even if the new behavior runs counter to your instincts?

3. What changes do you hope to see in your relationship with your child...specifically? Broad statements such as "more respect" are vague and can mean different things to different people. It is hard to reach an unclear goal.

4. Matthew 7:12 challenges us to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Parenting is about do unto your child as you would have them do unto their child. How will your parenting ripple through the generations of your family?

# WEEK 2:

## *Be a Leader, Part One*

Learning from Lessons 1-5

If you want to influence your child's behavior,  
the best place to start is with your own.

### LESSON 1: INVEST IN THE RELATIONSHIP BANK

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. *Love like that.*

EPHESIANS 5:1-2, THE MESSAGE

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Did the lesson resonate with you, or were there places in the chapter where the words "should" or "shouldn't" ran through your mind?
- What are some specific ways you will invest in the relationship bank with your child(ren)?

### LESSON 2: LET EVERYONE CALM DOWN

A *gentle* answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

PROVERBS 15:1

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What types of situations are likely to send you or your child into back brain thinking?
- What tips from the chapter will you use to avoid or diffuse such situations in the coming week?

**LESSON 3:  
TAKE CHARGE &  
STAY IN CHARGE**

It takes *wisdom* to build a house, and understanding to set it on a firm foundation.

**PROVERBS 24:3, THE MESSAGE**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you use too many words when setting limits?
  - Did any of the suggestions for how to stay in control surprise you?
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**LESSON 4:  
PROVIDE CLEAR  
CONSISTENT LIMITS**

Train a *child* in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it.

**PROVERBS 22:6**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you have clear rules in your home?
  - Does everyone know what they are?
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**LESSON 5:  
BALANCE,  
STRUCTURE &  
NURTURE**

And we *pray* that God, by his power, will fulfill all your good intentions and faithful deeds.

**2 THESSALONIANS 1:11**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you skew toward structure or nurture? What does that look like?
- Do you see the other side of the pendulum as “harsh” or “babying”? Why do you think that is?

**REFLECTIONS:**

Both Joshua 1:9 and Deuteronomy 31:6 challenge us to be “strong and of good courage”.

- What are your key takeaways from the first 5 chapters to help you find that sweet spot?

Have you considered...Do you and your spouse have different perspectives on the lessons outlined above? If so, how does that impact how you view the other as a parent? How do you think that impacts your child?

# WEEK 3:

## Be a Leader, Part Two

Learning from Lessons 6-10

What strategies have you tried from last week's lessons? Did they have the impact you thought or hoped they would?

### LESSON 6: RESPOND DON'T REACT

Let the wise *listen* and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.

PROVERBS 1:5

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which of your child's behaviors is most likely to "push your buttons" and cause you to react?
  - What steps can you take to remain calm in such situations?
- 

### LESSON 7: SHARE POWER TO GAIN POWER

Therefore *encourage* one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:11

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- In what ways can sharing power help your child develop important life skills?
- Does negotiating with your child feel like "caving in?" If so, why do you think that is?

**LESSON 8:**  
**BE PLAYFUL  
& SURPRISING**

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...a time to weep and a time to *laugh*.

**ECCLESIASTES 3: 1 & 4**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Have you ever used playfulness to diffuse a tense situation?
  - How did your child respond? What was the end result?
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**LESSON 9:**  
**APOLOGIZE IF YOU  
MAKE A MISTAKE**

First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will *see* clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

**LUKE 6:42**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you think it is important to take the lead in repairing the relationship with your child, or is it better to expect them to take the first step?
  - What if your child's behavior "started it"? Does that change how you should respond?
- 

**LESSON 10:**  
**KEEP THE  
GOAL IN MIND**

A *cheerful* heart is good medicine,  
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

**PROVERBS 17:22**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- What questions should you be asking if you find yourself thinking or saying you are doing something "for your child's own good"?
- What are your thoughts on the concept of noticing versus judging?

**REFLECTIONS:**

In Romans 12:2, Paul challenges us, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will."

What are your key takeaways from the first 10 Lessons?

Are there areas where you might benefit from "renewing your mind" related to how you are leading your child?



# WEEK 4:

## *Dig Deeper, Part One*

Learning from Lessons 11-15

You will make more progress by looking at the "why" of your child's behaviors rather than the "what."

### LESSON 11: RESPOND TO WHAT'S BENEATH THE BEHAVIORS

Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults — unless, of course, you want the *same* treatment.

**MATTHEW 7:1, THE MESSAGE**

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Are there specific behaviors your child uses to "cover-up" something they are feeling? If you have more than one child, how do their cover-up behaviors differ?
  - What would it look like if you were curious about your child's behaviors?
- 

### LESSON 12: IT'S OKAY TO REVISIT AN EARLIER STAGE

Do not withhold *good* from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.

**PROVERBS 3:37**

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Can you identify examples of times your child signaled a need to revisit an earlier stage?
- It can be easier to recognize that need in a toddler. What has it looked like for your teenager? Are you okay with treating your teenager like "a little kid"?

**LESSON 13:**  
**REAL SOLUTIONS  
INVOLVE THE  
WHOLE FAMILY**

May the God who gives *endurance* and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.

**ROMANS 15:5**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- What are the power dynamics within your home? Is one parent unconsciously undermining the other through their words or actions?
  - What “role” has been assigned/assumed by siblings (i.e. The responsible one, the troublemaker, etc.)?
- 

**LESSON 14:**  
**CHANGE YOUR  
STEPS IN THE DANCE**

I will *instruct* you and teach you in the way you should go;  
I will counsel you and watch over you.

**PSALM 32:8**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- What is one specific way you can change your steps in a dance within your home?
  - What do you think will happen when you do?
- 

**LESSON 15:**  
**DON'TS ASK  
"WHAT'S WRONG"**

Fathers do not exasperate your *children*; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

**EPHESIANS 6:4**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Think of a time when you responded to your child’s behavior. How might that interaction have gone differently if you had mirrored their emotions?
- Does responding to their emotions feel like you are somehow “letting them off the hook” for their actions?

**REFLECTIONS:**

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

**LUKE 6:38**

What “measure” have you used with your child in the past?

Did Lessons 11 – 15 change your perspective? Why or why not?

# WEEK 5:

## *Dig Deeper, Part Two*

Learning from Lessons 16-20

Embrace that your child is fearfully and wonderfully made — quirky behaviors and all!

### LESSON 16:

ALL KIDS DO  
GOOFY THINGS

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I *thought* like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:11

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever wondered if a particular behavior your child exhibits is “normal”?
  - How do you think your response to that behavior might be impacting it?
- 

### LESSON 17:

HELP A CHILD  
FEEL VALIDATED  
& VALUED

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. The *discerning heart* seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly. All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

PROVERBS 15:13-15

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How can you provide a pressure release valve for your child?
- If you feel like you “shouldn’t have to” do that, why do you feel that way?

**LESSON 18:  
TALKING BACK IS  
BETTER THAN  
HITTING**

But *encourage* each other daily, as long as it is called "Today", so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

**HEBREWS 3:13**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Think of a behavior of your child's that you find particularly frustrating. What is a baby step that would signal progress toward a desired change?
  - Do you see celebrating anything short of the desired behavior as "settling"?
- 

**LESSON 19:  
CELEBRATE WHO  
YOUR CHILD  
REALLY IS**

*Accept* one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

**ROMANS 15:7**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- What hopes and dreams do you have for your child that they don't seem to share?
  - Should you push through their resistance if you think it is "for their own good" or that "some day they will thank you"?
- 

**LESSON 20:  
LOOK FOR WHAT'S  
BEHIND YOUR OWN  
REACTIONS**

And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you become like little children, you will never enter the *kingdom* of heaven."

**MATTHEW 18:3**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- How has the way you were raised shaped your expectations for, or reactions to, your child?
- Do you tend to over-function or under-function? What does that look like?

**REFLECTIONS:**

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

**HEBREWS 4:1**

What is your biggest takeaway from Lessons 16 - 20?

In what specific ways can you offer your child, and yourself, a measure of confident grace?

# WEEK 6:

## Prepare for Success, Part One

Learning from Lessons 21-25  
Sometimes a side road is the best route.

### LESSON 21:

#### TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Above all else, guard your *heart*,  
for it is the wellspring of life.

PROVERBS 4:23

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- In what ways does your picture of a “perfect parent” add to your stress?
- What pieces of that picture do you need to let go? What one thing will you do in the coming week to fill your tank?

### LESSON 22:

#### SAY IT WITHOUT NO

This is *why* I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority — the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not tearing you down.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:10

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- In what areas do you power struggle with your child?
- How can you use “and” to neutralize the conflict?

**LESSON 23:**  
**EVERY TWO HOURS,  
FEED AND WATER  
THE KIDS**

Jesus answered: It is written: Man shall not *live* on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

**LUKE 4:4**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- In what situations do you think offering your child a snack, drink or movement might make things go more smoothly?
  - Which of these do you most tend to overlook for yourself?
- 

**LESSON 24:**  
**STAY ALERT TO  
WHAT YOUR CHILD  
REALLY NEEDS**

Let us not become *weary* in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

**GALATIANS 6:9**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Are you willing to compromise with your child? Why or Why not?
  - How do you think being curious might impact interactions with your child?
- 

**LESSON 25:**  
**DO IT  
TOGETHER**

*Teach* them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

**DEUTERONOMY 11:19**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- How do most days start and end in your home?
- Are there small changes you could make that would have a big impact?
- What rituals, routines or traditions do you have in your family?

**REFLECTIONS:**

I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances may be. I know how to live when things are difficult and I know how to live when things are prosperous. In general and in particular I have learned the secret of...facing either plenty or poverty. I am ready for anything through the strength of the One who lives within me.

**PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13**

- How have you modeled for your child, and helped them develop the skills, to work through both the joys and challenges in life with strength and contentment?
- What takeaways from lessons 21-25 will help with that?

# WEEK 7:

## Prepare for Success, Part Two

Learning from Lessons 26-30

Wonderful is not the same as perfect.

### LESSON 26: GIVE HEALTHY TOUCH

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your *power* to act.

PROVERBS 3:27

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Does it feel like a mixed message to offer your child caring touch when you are frustrated with them? Why or why not?
  - What are ways you do or could “sneak in” touch with your child?
- 

### LESSON 27: BE PRESENT FOR THE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your *teaching* show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

TITUS 2:7-8

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Does giving a child a “re-do” feel like you are not holding your child accountable? Why or why not?
- When was the last time you enjoyed a spontaneous, joyful connection with your child?

**LESSON 28:**  
**REHEARSE FOR  
TOUGH SITUATIONS**

In their *hearts* humans plan their course,  
but the Lord establishes their steps

**PROVERBS 16:9**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Do you see the idea of practicing for and reminding your children about transitions as helpful or something you shouldn't have to do?
  - What are additional situations where it might be helpful for you or your child to rehearse a response?
- 

**LESSON 29:**  
**EXPECT SOME  
CONFLICT**

Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouths,  
but only what is helpful or building others up according  
to their needs, that it may benefit those who *listen*.

**EPHESIANS 4:29**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Think about a key source of conflict with your child.
  - Are you able to provide a consistent "broken record" response, or is there some trigger that causes you to over or under respond?
- 

**LESSON 30:**  
**THE GIFT YOUR  
CHILD WANTS  
IS YOU**

For where your *treasure* is,  
there your heart will be also.

**MATTHEW 6:21**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- What time of the day, or during what type of activities, do you feel the most connected with your child?
- How do you think your child would respond if we asked him or her the same question?

**REFLECTIONS:**

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

**HEBREWS 4:16**

- What stood out to you in lessons 26-30 that will help you offers your child the same type of grace and mercy that you yourself would hope to receive as a parent?



# WEEK 8:

Let *love* and *faithfulness* never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.

**PROVERBS 3:3**

Children are an incredible blessing. That doesn't change the fact that parenting is hard. Each child — and parent — is a unique and amazing creation...with their own personalities, experiences, hopes, fears and strengths...that stretch the depths of a parent's love and faithfulness in ways we might never have imagined. It is our hope that our book, and the scriptural underpinnings and discussion questions highlighted in this guide, have provided new insight, tools, and encouragement for the amazing journey of raising a child.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Which of the lessons from the book resonated with you the most? Have you tried using them with your child? What was the result?

2. Were there any of the lessons that you did not think would work for your child? Did you try them anyway? What was the result?

3. Did any of the lessons challenge your picture of what a parent should or shouldn't have to do? Why do you think that is? Where did your picture come from?

4. Did viewing the lessons through the lens of scripture change your perspective on any of the concepts presented in the book? Was there anything in the book that felt inconsistent with the way Jesus interacted with his flock?

5. Overall, what new insights have you gained as a result of reading this book?

Every parent wants to bring their very best to their child. It is our hope that this study guide has provided additional tools to help you do just that. Even with the best tools, however, it is difficult not to worry about your child...Have you provided the solid foundation to enable them to make good choices? Did you make the right decisions about when to stand firm and when to bend? Have you supported them in the right ways to encourage them to be all God created them to be?

That's where the most powerful tool of all comes in. Prayer. Wrap your children in it. Bring your fears and concerns for your children, along with your hopes and dreams, to God with a grateful and confident heart. Do your best, and then give it to him. He's got this.

*Our blessings to you on this journey*

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7**