

FOCUS^{ON} THE FAMILY[®]

PRESENTS



SEVEN TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE PARENTING

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CHAPTER 2



*Change is the only constant in life.
One's ability to adapt to those changes will
determine your success in life.*

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

*Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass.
It's about learning how to dance in the rain.*

—VIVIAN GREENE

IN SCIENCE FICTION, adaptability is often presented in a cautionary manner. An artificial intelligence becomes a threat to humanity when it learns to “read” a complex set of circumstances and adjust its actions accordingly. The more adaptable the AI becomes, the more human—and then superhuman—it becomes. In sci-fi, that’s when the excitement and the danger of the plot really kick in.

In real life, though, adaptability is one of the most valuable qualities a person can possess. Adaptability is the capacity to adjust to all kinds of circumstances and to manage

the mind's response to whatever a person is facing at the moment.

Adaptability is also one of the most elusive qualities. In order to be adaptable, we must be able to assess and accept others as they are. Not as we assume they are or as we would like them to be, but as they really are. For most people, that's not easy because we tend to see others through the lens of our own experiences. While our bodies are incredibly designed to adapt, our minds sometimes prevent us from adapting well to new situations and unexpected circumstances. Deep emotions, personality differences, time constraints, and preconceived expectations are just a few of the factors that make it difficult to be adaptable.

To get an idea of how difficult adaptability can be, consider the issue of personality differences. There are a variety of tests that determine a person's personality type. Yet even the most sophisticated of them reveal only a quick glimpse into the complexity of an individual's own personality and how his or her personality interrelates with others.

Some personality types—for example, the flexible, the adventurous, the social, the spontaneous, and those less attentive to detail—are better equipped to be naturally adaptable. People at the other end of the spectrum—the inflexible, the safety-conscious, the opinionated, the traditional, and those more attentive to detail—find it more difficult to be adaptable. When you combine family members with variations of these personality traits, you get encounters that are ripe for stress.

I vividly remember a phone call I answered while serving in the counseling department at Focus on the Family. The mother on the line was screaming and crying. She had locked herself in the bathroom. I could hear her children calling for her and knocking on the door. She said she was done and couldn't do it anymore. She wanted to beat her children and had locked herself in the bathroom to protect them. She was exhausted, lonely, and completely overwhelmed. To start, we talked about what had led to that moment. After she calmed down, she was able to regain perspective and adapt to the trying situation she faced by implementing a different set of strategies. She needed to introduce structure to the chaos. She needed a plan to deal with her own emotions and to more effectively influence her children's responses to her. I thank God for that divine appointment and for the opportunity to help her from hundreds of miles away through the telephone!

Over the years, I have spoken with parents in many situations that were difficult to adapt to—everything from a child taking his own life to sharing chores as new parents to schedules packed with endless activities to a child being diagnosed with autism, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. The variety of situations that parents must adapt and respond to is endless. And the challenge is that being adaptable means knowing that many times when we have a plan, the plan inevitably changes.

Recently I was standing in church, with my eyes closed, singing along with a praise chorus, when I felt a tap on my

shoulder. My son asked, “Dad, can we talk?” This was the second time in the past year that my teenage son had asked for us to do this together at church. What an honor and unexpected surprise! My plan was to sing and spend some time with God. I wasn’t fully prepared for my son’s request, but I was certainly available. This was my son’s journey intersecting with my availability. There is nothing that can fully prepare us for all the ins and outs of our kids’ needs. We simply can’t predict what they’ll need and when they’ll need it. They will need moments of warmth, sensitivity, and playfulness as well as moments of boundaries, demands, guidance, and focus. This can’t be planned for, so we must adapt by being prepared and available to respond to these unexpected moments in our kids’ lives.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

In my counseling practice, the analogy that I use for adaptability involves, of all things, city planning and roadwork. If you’ve driven any distance lately, chances are good that you encountered some kind of roadwork. No matter where you go, something is always under construction. And to get where you want to go, you have to adapt to the roadblocks and detours that construction creates.

The same is true for families. Visualize a state map—this represents your family. Within the map, each family member is represented by a city. So in my family’s state map, there are four cities, which represent me, my wife, my son, and my

daughter. My family's state is characterized by my family's traits, and each city in my family's state is characterized by the unique traits of each family member. From each of the cities in your family's state, imagine drawing roads or major highways to connect the cities, depending on the strength of the connections between family members.



When a husband and wife first get together, they bring their past experiences, which include connections (roadways) to cities in other states and the unique characteristics that have been built into their own cities.

Think about when you first started dating your spouse. You visited each other's cities for the first time and loved what

you saw. The more you spent time in each other's cities, the more you connected. With all of that traffic, however, came the need for roadwork. There were bound to be accidents and deterioration of the roads over time. It took time and intentionality as you adapted to one another's differences and decided to get married and build a permanent major highway between the two of you.

As two spouses build a major highway they establish stronger connections with each other over time. The husband and wife significantly and directly influence the development of one another's cities. They also can take characteristics of each other into their own cities. However, it is inevitable that there will need to be ongoing and constant repair, construction, and awareness from both as they adjust to each other's differences and work to maintain and expand a thriving highway connecting the two of them. Each of them will also need to have awareness of what it is like for others to visit their city. Is it ready for visitors? Do people feel welcomed, important, and loved as they enter the city? What other connections need to continue, be downsized, or be cut off? These are all important questions a couple needs to ask as they begin to establish an expanding and healthy state.

The couple's children begin as small cities with dirt roads initially connecting them to their parents and then to others around them. The more time, warmth, and attention are given to the children, the faster highways are built. The development of the children's cities is directly influenced through these relational highways. Kids learn the ins and outs of

building and maintaining their own cities. Their cities, under constant construction, also take on unique characteristics.

God, in all of this, is the Master Architect, Designer, and Builder of both the cities and the highway systems. He has already mapped out the ultimate construction plan for each person. He loves to be a part of the foundational development of cities and highways. The more and the earlier kids learn to invite God's presence into the construction of their cities and roadways, the stronger and better developed they will be. God, through the death of His Son on the cross, initiated the ultimate highway-repair system. He introduced grace and forgiveness as essential ingredients for road repair between cities.

Keep in mind that some highways are bigger and better maintained than others. Some highways may have well-functioning bridges, while others have dilapidated or broken bridges. Through our parenting, kids learn that building and maintaining their cities is up to them. They also learn that maintenance, repair, and construction of highways to other cities is up to them. For example, a child can learn that sleep and proper nutrition help with overall city maintenance, and taking the time to reflect on his or her thoughts, feelings, and beliefs is like creating overall structure to the city.

The analogy raises a few questions:

- What happens when a city is cut off from other cities?
- What happens when there is very little traffic from others into a city?

- What happens if a person never builds or maintains his or her city?
- Is my city ready for a visit and connection with others?
- What will another person experience when they visit my city?
- What is the theme of my city?
- What do I want my city to resemble?
- Are there any roads or bridges in need of maintenance?
- What happens when a bridge between cities is broken?
- What can be done to repair the bridge?

Cities that are cut off from other cities won't thrive. Similarly, cities that are completely dependent on another city won't thrive. That's why it's important to develop interdependence in children rather than independence or dependence. Kids must learn that a maturing life is about creating, maintaining, and repairing connections between cities as their own cities continually grow and develop into the cities God designed them to be.

When a city doesn't develop quite like God intended it to develop, the surrounding cities miss out just as much as the city that was stunted in its growth. However, delays and difficulties are part of the process of growth and development for every city. Each city needs to be in constant communication with the Master Architect, Designer, and Builder as it adapts to the ever-changing and ever-challenging process of city, road, and highway development and maintenance.

I remember plenty of times I've had to repair bridges and highways with my family. One time in particular stands out. I had a lot on my plate that day. There was a project I was struggling to finish and a deadline I was trying to meet. There were multiple things converging at once. The situation felt like a Dallas freeway—chaotic and overwhelming. The pressure was pretty intense. By the time I got home, I felt as though my brain was going to explode. I was thinking about everything I needed to get done, and I wanted to spend some quiet time with my family. Yet, I walked in the door with a backpack full of paperwork still calling for attention. That's when Lexi and I intersected.

Lexi wanted us to connect. She was ready to visit my city and wanted me to visit her city. My daughter, Lexi, can get instantaneously hyper—in a good way, of course! She's warm, relational, talkative, outgoing, enthusiastic, and full of energy. Her exuberance, combined with her love of singing, can be incredible—but can also be somewhat overwhelming when your sensory networks aren't ready for it. On this particular evening, it was obvious that she was excited about something. Even out in the driveway I had heard her beautiful voice singing! Before I had a chance to put my things down, she ran up, hugged me like a boa constrictor around my waist, and in the process also squeezed my intestines and spleen. She told me all about her day and started launching a barrage of questions my way.

At the same time, my wife was trying to talk to me, while my son chimed in for my attention. This is when my brain

experienced “a moment.” Rush hour traffic was happening in all of the major connections to my city.

“Stop!” I said sternly, as I sent a search team out for my brain. Almost immediately Lexi’s face changed. She stepped back. I stopped all traffic coming in and out of our cities. In an instant, I could see Lexi felt disconnected and hurt. I realized that I had not handled that moment well. Lexi didn’t know what had been happening in my city all day. I was having a difficult time adapting to the many demands on me, and as Lexi and I intersected, she quickly found out I was not ready for any more traffic.

I know that I’m not unique in this build-build-build-and-pop moment. Every day parents face sleep deprivation, school meetings, schedules, work, kids lacking self-control, illness, messes, diaper changes, marriage, friendships, questions—the list could go on and on. Sometimes we do it right, and sometimes we don’t. Parenting truly is a journey toward sanctification and learning to be contributors, however imperfect, in our children’s lives.

PARENTAL STRESS

It’s fascinating to me that at each stage of parenting, parents have common stresses. Before birth, stress is caused by the preparation—earning as much as possible, preparing a room for an infant, and knowing that your lives will be changed forever. After birth, stress is caused by sleep deprivation, diapers, and caring for a child who is completely dependent

on you for survival. Often there are financial, time, and energy stresses during this stage of parenting, especially if you have more than one child.

A couple of years later, stress is caused by the well-known terrible twos and threes. A child's behaviors, opinions, and independence that seem to come out of nowhere make this a stressful time for parents.

At the preschool age, stress is caused by the pressure that parents may not be exposing their child to enough books, words, experiences, or educational toys. Comparisons between parents are thick. Parents may not admit it, but if we could see their thought bubbles, we would find a flood of insecurities, comparisons, and judgments. A lack of energy, finances, and time continue to add stress.

At kindergarten, stress is caused by emerging friendships, endless comparisons, and kids spending more time at school. For many parents, it is a big stress for a child to be at home less and to spend more time at school and with peers. Behavior issues, household finances, time crunches, and a lack of energy can also add to stress. This is a critical age for kids to learn self-control. Many kids will need very focused help in this area.

During the elementary-school years, parental stress is caused by chores, grades, vacations, and day-to-day demands.

During the preteen years, stress is caused by the anticipation of and preparation for adolescence. The body begins to change, and puberty begins to emerge. The brain is preparing for some big changes that will affect growth, mood, and

responses. This changes the child's behavior in ways that are difficult for parents to adjust to.

During the teen years, stress is caused by the influence of peers on a child's decision making as well as by time demands and growing independence. The teen brain is at its most vulnerable because it's so responsive to rewards, risks, and new things or experiences. The teen years offer an incredible time for learning. All of these changes can present a lot of challenges for parents as they help a teen grow toward adulthood.

This is a quick and very general list, but you get the point. The challenges are unpredictable and unique to each child and to each family. We must adapt as our kids grow and change. This may cause stress, but it also brings great opportunity and great reward.

One thing I love about parenting is that as we influence our kids, they also influence us. For example, kids are wired for engagement from the time they are infants. They seek their parents' faces, voices, and attention and draw their mom or dad in toward a smile, tickle, touch, or play for however long they can keep their parent engaged. If a parent is too stressed out or distracted, he or she may miss out on these cues toward connection and attachment.

Unfortunately, the parent will also miss out on the oxytocin release that can come from emotional connection. Oxytocin is a bonding hormone that our body secretes to build attachment and foster feelings of safety, security, and connection with others. It also helps calm down stress in

our limbic system. God created our bodies to respond to connectedness.

Oxytocin is released when the body experiences a safe and soothing touch, like a hug, soft touches on the arms or face, or even a massage. In our home, growing up as a Latino, I was used to touch. There were lots of hugs and *cosquillitas*, which are soothing tickles on the arm, face, back, or head. When my mom would give me *cosquillitas* at church, I would feel calm, safe, and relaxed. I have continued the tradition of *cosquillitas* with my kids, and they love it. I can easily see that this has created a greater bond through the release of oxytocin. Safe and loving touch is an essential component to attachment. I have noticed that I also feel calmer and more relaxed when I am giving my kids *cosquillitas*. We get a mutual stress-reducing benefit even though I'm the one giving them *cosquillitas*.

Other ways in which oxytocin can be released include hearing a loved one's voice, seeing his or her smile, and laughing together. Interestingly, stress reduces the production of oxytocin and the overall functioning of the oxytocin system. Additionally, when there is ongoing conflict in the home, oxytocin is also suppressed. As a result, there is less relational glue and fewer emotionally calming hormones flowing, which then increases disconnection, depression, frustration, and conflict.

God, in His incredible design, created oxytocin as a neuroprotective chemical for our brain. He designed the human body to have amazing benefits from healthy connections with others through touch, smiles, hugs, encouraging words, familiarity, *cosquillitas*, attention, and relationship.

The potential sources of parental stress are almost endless. On top of their own personal, relational, professional, financial, spiritual, emotional, and material needs, mothers and fathers need to think about protecting and providing for their kids. What's more, they have to meet this incredible challenge in the context of an ever-shifting culture that lacks an understanding of the importance of a relationship with God.

Thanks to persuasive technology, which is designed to persuade its users to change their attitudes or change their behaviors, parents have even more challenges as they raise their children. Technology and other entertainment offer an ongoing barrage of new things parents need to monitor, discuss, and limit. In fact, a new term introduced to our culture is *technoference*, which refers to the interference of technology in relationships. Parents consistently say that their biggest challenges in parenting are teaching their kids about biblical sexuality, limiting entertainment and technology, and managing different personalities in the home. These present additional challenges to getting the oxytocin benefits of genuinely connected, face-to-face interaction.

"WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY. AND HE IS US"

How many of us fall prey to the belief that life must be easy, without any inconveniences, discomfort, or pain? I would venture to guess that most of us want things to go the way we want them to go, and we want everything to turn out just

right and safely, especially for our children. For years I have prayed, “Lord, keep us safe, keep my family safe,” but I am learning that as contributors, God wants us to be steadfast followers and believers, not just safe ones. In our attempts to protect our children, we often expend great effort trying to control things that we can’t control.

Adults find plenty of big things to be stressed about: health care, mass shootings, money, the economy, family relationships, relationships in general, family responsibilities, and the speed and pace of modern life. That’s just part of the story, of course. There are hundreds of smaller, more personal factors that also have to be taken into account. What’s more, the longer we live and the more our brains experience, the faster time seems to move. This, too, increases our sense of being under pressure. The faster the wheel turns, the more desperate our desire to find a way off the merry-go-round, and sometimes we just feel like sleeping, screaming, or crying.

People look for relief in many different ways. Some of us use entertainment or technology. Some of us become easily angered or irritable. Some of us stop caring and disconnect from relationships. Others slip into anxiety or fatigue or try to find a way out through addictive behaviors or some other form of escapism. In every instance, the external conditions, whatever they may be, are allowed to push the brain “over the edge” and into a place where it becomes reactive.

When we’re operating in a reactive mode, we tend to blame our circumstances. We say, “I’m worried because I don’t have enough money to pay my bills” or “I’m angry because Johnny

failed his math test.” What we don’t realize is that it’s not the situation but our interpretation of the situation that’s causing the problem. The trigger is on the inside, not the outside. The power to flip the switch and purposefully choose how we respond lies completely in our own hands.

Stress is primarily the result of our interpretation of a given situation. We look around, take in the details of our surroundings, and decide what we think is going on. We jump ahead and judge the situation as good or bad instead of observing what is happening and choosing how to respond. For example, when my family is late in leaving for vacation, many emotions and thoughts can arise in my mind. I would love to leave as early as possible, but it rarely goes as planned. I could interpret our lateness as bad by assuming that those few hours we are late are critical to making the vacation fun. However, I could instead choose to see the extra preparation hours as an opportunity to model patience, love, and cooperation. I can respond by making the preparation time fun and by seeing that time as a part of our vacation time together. I can guarantee you that my response makes a big difference in how the family vacation begins emotionally for all of us.

Moms and dads have a lot of power in setting the tone in the home and in everyday moments. How my wife and I choose to respond to every situation has a ripple effect that runs through everyone in our home.

Scripture can get the mind where it needs to be regardless of the circumstances. Look at Romans 5:3-5:



Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

The apostle Paul faced many stress-inducing circumstances during the course of his remarkable ministry. He faced opposition, prison, problems in the churches, and differences of personality with people in ministry with him. It became excruciatingly difficult for him along the way, but he learned to manage his thinking in order to handle these challenges. He knew the challenges of the mind. Consider what he wrote:



And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:7-8)

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

These Scripture passages give us a glimpse into the strategies Paul used to take control of his thoughts and to adapt to the

situations he faced in a way that was beneficial to him and honoring to God. These Scriptures show us what it means to be an adaptable Christian.

As Christians, we also have the miraculous and amazing reality of the Holy Spirit living and working through us. This reality makes us adaptable to circumstances through prayer, trust, and alignment with our heavenly Father. Prayer can help the mind realign with God. Prayer is also a way for multiple minds to be united toward a common desire. It brings hope and peace to an often chaotic brain.

Through relationship with the Holy Spirit and the healthy directing and redirecting of the mind, our own spiritual being is built on a solid foundation and we are able to grow and mature. This is what helps us adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of life and parenting.

It is critical that our children learn to have a relationship with God rather than seeing God as a distant being waiting to lay down rules and punishments. But if children learn, instead, to align their minds with the mind of Christ, they will learn to see life, circumstances, and relationships differently. They will be able to see a loving God, the sacredness of marriage, the benefits of family, and the transforming role of parenting. Psalm 119 provides an incredibly solid understanding of God's laws and statutes as beneficial to guiding the mind. The psalmist mentions his intention to meditate on God's precepts, works, and promises six times in Psalm 119.

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON STRESS

When you're under stress, your body secretes a powerful hormone called cortisol, which, like many beneficial drugs, can have harmful effects in large doses. Chronic stress depletes the body of neurotransmitters, leading to an increase in anxiety and depression. It can also trigger the onset of psychophysical symptoms such as memory loss, irritability, ulcers, and irritable bowel syndrome—conditions with which many overtired parents are all too familiar.

All of this can do significant damage to your body, mind, and soul. It can also hurt the people around you and introduce conflict into family relationships. Stress has a ripple effect. When parents react, it's easy for children to misinterpret. This, in turn, creates stress in their young hearts and minds.

I recall all too well how my own stress level affected my son, Alex, when he was only four years old. Parents often assume that toddlers are oblivious to what's going on in the adult world. They aren't. In the early days of my marriage, I struggled to adapt to the challenges of working, counseling, raising a child, and relating to a spouse. Though he couldn't have expressed it in words, Alex could see what was happening to me.

One night at dinner, when my brain was completely “locked up” in my own perceptions of my problems, he suddenly got down from his chair, grabbed a toy screwdriver, and came over to where I was sitting. “Daddy broken,” he said, holding the plastic screwdriver to my side. It was as if God was speaking to me through my little boy. Tears came



Past Performance Does Not Equal Future Results

God has wired us to learn, grow, and adapt. Wouldn't it be great if we always used past experiences carefully to make new and better decisions? In case you haven't noticed, human beings are smart but make lots of mistakes. Researchers are discovering that this may have a lot to do with our stress levels.

According to studies conducted by neurologists from the University of Iowa, New York University, and the California Institute of Technology, the frontopolar cortex of the brain helps us predict future events on the basis of past experiences.¹ In other words, it has the power to project an established pattern onto circumstances that haven't yet come to pass.

This region of the brain is what helps humans make the best possible decisions in unpredictable and unfamiliar environments. The brain gathers information from what is known and tries to figure out what could happen.

What a person has experienced, how the experiences were remembered, and what the experiences meant to that person are all filtered through a personality lens that is unique to each person. The person then interprets the current situation, and the brain uses shortcuts to respond quickly and efficiently. This leaves a lot of room for error.

The functions of the frontopolar cortex can be useful in some situations. But in others it can produce needless worry and stress. That's because we can draw conclusions that aren't based on what really happens but on what the brain has concocted as possibilities.

For example, a child may hit another child because he's tired, but he may be acting out because of anger or any one of a number of reasons, including stress, loneliness, or feeling rejected by the other children. The list of possibilities is long.

The parent may react to the hitting by assuming the worst about why the child is acting out based on the parent's past experience. However, it's best to correct the behavior and then intentionally explore why the child chose to hit someone. Adapt what you think about the event by connecting to the world in your child's mind. This takes time, energy, patience, and careful listening.

down my face as I looked at my son's innocent and loving face. My mind and his connected as I felt compassion and love for my son. My brain was renewed by God's transforming love, which snapped me out of my brain-lock and made it possible for my mind to reengage with my family. Thanks to God speaking to me through Alex, I was able to recognize the real source of my stress: the chaos in my brain. That was the first step toward taking control of my response.

FOUR KEY STRATEGIES

As in every other area of parenting, there is no perfect pathway to adaptability. I've already pointed out that certain personality types find it easier to manage stress than others. This is further complicated by the fact that personality is itself a kind of adaptation: It's basically your individual method or style of interacting with the world around you and the filter you use to interpret what is happening in and around you. While parents play a huge role in shaping the family environment, they are also shaped and molded by it themselves. But none of this should be taken to mean that we're helpless in the face of the stresses we face as parents. It simply suggests that adaptability, like every other aspect of parenting, is an art rather than a science.

There are four strategies you need to adopt if you want to develop as an adaptable parent.

1. Having a Flexible Mindset

Flexibility is the ability to see things from multiple perspectives. It's about leaving room for humor and imperfection in the midst

of the pressures and disappointments of everyday life. This comes naturally to some people, not so much to others. But it's a skill that we all need to cultivate if we want to survive and thrive as parents in a world of adversity and unpredictability.

Flexibility requires an open mind and a willingness to dig deeper. This is important because there's always more than one side to every story as well as multiple ways to interpret any situation.

Let's say you catch your child in a lie. Just to complicate matters, let's also suppose that your child is defiant as well as untruthful. The easy thing to do—the inflexible thing—would be to focus on the dishonesty and the disrespect and to hand out some kind of punishment immediately. But flexibility—an openness to seeing things from multiple perspectives—might lead you to take a very different approach.

For instance, you might ask some questions about the circumstances that inspired the dishonesty. What might your child have seen, heard, or interpreted, whether from you or from someone else, that could possibly have influenced her to tell a lie? Is she struggling with a particular emotion—fear, anxiety, frustration, or anger—that might have played a role in shaping her behavior? If so, is there anything you can do to address that emotion and get to the root of the problem?

If your daughter is afraid of telling the truth because she thinks it will get her into trouble, it might be a good idea to ask, “Do you think feeling afraid of getting in trouble or losing your toy caused you to choose to lie? It makes sense that you would lie if that is how you see it. You don't want to get in

trouble or lose a toy. I wouldn't either, but I want to have a great relationship with you, and I want you to have a great relationship with other people, so it is super important for you to learn to be honest no matter what. Dishonesty disconnects and creates distrust. If you're trying to protect yourself, do you think there might be a better way of going about it rather than lying?"

We have a couple of mottos in our house. Whenever it makes sense to, we ask ourselves, "Is there another way to look at this?" Whenever we face difficulties, we say, "There is always a solution." Having a flexible mindset makes a big difference in how we respond to what is happening and how we manage relationships.

2. Looking at the Bigger Picture

Stress and shortsightedness can cause a vicious cycle in our lives. On the one hand, shortsightedness causes stress. That's because when we focus too intently on our own problems, we tend to lose touch with the rest of the world. This has the effect of constricting our horizons, increasing emotional claustrophobia, and heightening our sense of helplessness.

On the other hand, stress causes shortsightedness. That's because stress has the effect of magnifying our difficulties and making them look bigger than they really are. Under its influence, problems swell to the point where we can no longer see beyond them.

Once you're in the loop of stress and shortsightedness, it can be hard to escape. One of the best ways to break free is to move our thoughts toward the bigger picture.



Exercise: Family Role Play

Here's a great way to broaden your perspective and understand the other members of your family. It's also good for breaking down barriers and generating lots of laughs! I call it the Family Role

Play game, and this is how it works.

Get everyone in your family together and take turns switching roles and pretending to be one another in exaggerated ways. Your goals are to create laughter and connection and to gain insight about each other. Keep in mind that the kids need to be able to handle being funny yet respectful with the understanding that the exercise is intended to help the family grow closer. This shouldn't become an opportunity to make fun of a family member or to point out a flaw in a mean-spirited way. Use discernment as you consider using this exercise.

The key to the exercise is to imagine that the whole group is in some kind of interesting, unusual, funny, or stressful situation. For example, you're on a road trip, and the car has just broken down in the middle of nowhere. Then act out the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of the family member you've been assigned to impersonate as faithfully, accurately, and respectfully as you can. You'll be surprised to see other people's interpretations of your actions and behavior! When the role play is over, talk about what you've seen and heard. This will be a good opportunity for some genuine, heart-to-heart communication!

We were waiting to go swimming when my son and daughter decided to start the Family Role Play game. My daughter pretended to be me. She made it clear that I love to ask questions. She said with a serious tone and look, "Okay, kids, tell me what you're thinking about. What are your dreams? What have you been feeling?" She also decided to show my somewhat antsy side: "Guys, hurry and finish eating so we can go swimming together." I can't remember all of the other things she said in my place because we were laughing so hard at the truths we were lightheartedly revealing about each other. We had a great time, and it was helpful insight for me on how I come across to my wife and kids.

Seeing the bigger picture means cultivating our ability to pause and consider how we're interpreting what is happening and then seeing things from multiple perspectives. This requires stepping outside of ourselves.

Think about the analogy of cities and highways. Things look much different when you look at the road map than they do when you're actually in each city or on a highway. Picture yourself stepping back and looking at a road map of your family's cities and highways. What do you want and hope for each other's cities and roads? Is there too much going on in your city? Do you need to say no to a few things? What can you do to regain perspective? Your children need your mentoring along the way. Very little about what children do to misbehave is personal to you as a parent. Children are just responding to their experiences in life as they learn how to manage themselves.

It is helpful to hit the pause button long enough to get your bearings and think through your plan of action. I once counseled a mom who told me that she'd had enough. "It's all too much for me," she explained with a haggard look on her face. "I've got nothing left. I'm empty. Done. I don't want to be a mom anymore."

As she continued to visit my counseling office, one thing became clear to me: This mother didn't have any pause buttons in her life. She had forgotten how to stop and observe. She didn't know how to say no or to step off the treadmill and figure out how to take care of herself. As a result, she was overwhelmed by everyday life and, sadly, emotionally and mentally distracted when she was with her children.

As we talked, she agreed that pause buttons were crucial and would be helpful to figuring out what to do and where to go mentally and emotionally. She drew “pause” buttons that she posted around her house and in her car as reminders, and she was able use these moments of pause to observe what was happening, gain perspective, and consider what guidance her mind needed. She saw the benefit of learning what her children’s cities looked like and how to build highways of connection with them. This mom made a point to consistently take time to pray, go for a quick walk, do some stretching, and find time to laugh. These things helped fill her emotional bucket, and as a result, she was able to listen more attentively to her children, respond to them, and be more patient with them. In other words, she learned to create peace in her mind while the outside world was chaotic.

This mom worked hard to understand herself and others. For example, when her daughter was misbehaving, instead of just reacting, she practiced noticing what might be happening in her daughter’s life. She considered what might be contributing to her daughter’s choices. She looked through her daughter’s eyes with compassion and wonder, and she mentally stepped into her daughter’s world.

She also learned to observe her own internal chaos when she wanted to say yes but the best thing to do was to say no. She realized that her mind had been tricked into the quicksand of wanting to please people. She was exhausting herself trying to gain love by saying yes to everyone and everything that was asked of her, which was not a sustainable or healthy way to find love and acceptance.



The Pause That Refreshes

Sometimes stress can be so intense that it causes us to forget. We forget appointments, meetings, house keys, where we parked our car—you name it! This suggests that one of the biggest challenges involved in “hitting the pause button” is simply remembering to do it! When things get too hectic and pressured, this little exercise will remind you to stop and take another look.

All you need are some sticky notes and a pen. On each sticky note, draw a circle to represent a button. In big letters, write the word *Pause* in the circle. Then post the notes in different locations around the house: the refrigerator, bathroom mirrors, doors, dresser drawers, cupboards, computer

She used the pause moments to visualize herself and her children visiting each other's cities and managing the various highways connecting them to one another. This was not an easy task! She learned that it was up to her to build what was needed in her city and in the highways connecting her city to other cities. She was also able to recognize the importance of stop signs in her city and on the highways to other cities. This is what it means to look at the bigger picture.

3. Having a Growth Mindset

A few years ago, Carol Dweck came out with an essential book (*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Ballantine Books) describing two important mindsets: the growth mindset and the fixed mindset. In her book, she gives compelling evidence for the importance of having and instilling a growth mindset in our children. Having a growth mindset includes letting go of the pursuit of perfection. It involves making a willful decision to stop focusing on certain things that

stymie you and shifting your attention to other things that allow for the possibility of progress. It involves managing attention, practicing patience, and consciously choosing which battles to fight and which thoughts to allow to dominate your mind. This is excruciatingly difficult!

I sometimes fall into a more fixed mindset in times of stress. This means I think I either have the skills to deal with the issue at hand or I don't. This keeps me from being able to see creative solutions and to allow myself space to experiment, change, and grow. A fixed mindset perceives oneself as static and unchanging. A fixed mindset will stunt your growth.

In contrast, a growth mindset sees life as an endless opportunity for change and growth. It leaves plenty of room for experimentation, failures, do-overs, resets, and restarts. In a growth mindset, grace toward self and others helps us adapt to human imperfections. The grace inherent in a growth mindset also helps you

screens—anyplace where you and your family members will see them. Let everybody know that they can “press” one of these “pause” buttons whenever they feel stress or chaos beginning to take control. It's a good way to stay mindful of the need to stop and reorient your viewpoint every once in a while.



Shoulds vs. Coulds

We often use the word *should* in our mind and in conversations because we would love to predict or control the future or other people; however, the word *could* is much more freeing. For example, if you think a vacation *should* go a certain way, you're bound to a particular expectation. And if the vacation doesn't meet that expectation, you're set up for disappointment or judgment. On the other hand, if you think of what the vacation *could* be like, the pressure is off and you have freedom and flexibility. It's okay if the vacation isn't perfect or is different from what you envisioned.

A common conflict, especially for dads, is the expectation that their sons or daughters *should* do well

maintain the perspective that raising kids is a journey of ups and downs.

Letting go of the ideal and moving toward growth as a child of God is freeing. God gives both parents and children many opportunities to grow. He never said parents were going to start with all of the necessary skills to be perfect parents. He consistently says to trust in Him and connect with Him along the journey.

Consider Joseph (see Matthew 1:18-25) and Mary (see Luke 1:26-38) when they received the unexpected news that Mary, a virgin, would miraculously conceive and bear the Savior of the world. They both did as the Lord's angel commanded and viewed the moment through the lens of a contributor. In fact, Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). In their wildest dreams, they couldn't have foreseen that this was what God had for them. They both certainly had much more conventional ideas about their future together as husband and

wife. However, they let go of how they thought things should be and pursued obedience to what God was saying. This required a close and intentional relationship with God. Their relationship to God provided them with the necessary discernment, acceptance, and patience to respond to the uncertainties and challenges they faced. Mary and Joseph let go of the belief that life would be easy and without inconveniences, discomforts, or challenges. This open, growth-oriented mindset, founded on trust in God, helped them adjust to the amazing life God planned for them.

4. *Learning and Adjusting*

The last essential ingredient of adaptability is a willingness to learn and adjust your parenting while you're on the job. Parenting is a challenge because children don't come with instruction manuals. Parents must adjust their strategies by using the knowledge they gain along the way and the wisdom they gain from what God is doing in them and in

in a sport. Substituting the word *could* is revolutionary for some parents. It provides them with the freedom to love their child regardless of how he or she performs. The word *could* allows parents to let go of what they cannot control.

their children. Parents learn about their own personalities, their children's personalities, and the specific triggers that tend to bring out the positive and negative aspects of their personalities and parenting.

In parenting, you are shaping another human being while also being significantly shaped along the way. There are moments of growth for both you and your children. The ultimate challenge is that nobody on earth has ever raised your unique child before! Shelves of great parenting books have been written by hordes of eminent parenting experts, but not one of them is specific enough to speak directly to your son's or daughter's special and specific design. There's a sense in which the particular challenges you're facing are unique in the history of the world.

There's only one way to meet those challenges effectively: You've got to manage your mind and stay in the game, even when things aren't going right. Stick close to your child until you discover what makes him tick and what gets him moving in the direction of learning and growth. Study your child until you see patterns emerging. If in the process you sometimes feel like running, screaming, or throwing in the towel, remember that it's the twists and turns of life that keep us on our toes. Time, listening, and relationship are key ingredients to learning and adjusting.

Accept your own imperfections, seeing them as inevitable opportunities for growth. Lean on the Lord for strength and understanding. Take notes as you progress and learn from your mistakes. If you do this, not only will you succeed at your task, but I predict that you will also set the kind of personal example that will enable your children to grow spiritually. All you have

to do is bring your imperfect self to the job and give everything you can give out of your imperfect best. You are, after all, the very best candidate for the job.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

Now that you understand the four key ingredients of adaptability, we can finish this chapter with a few thoughts on simple stress management. As I said at the beginning of the chapter, stress is a given for all of us at every stage of our earthly existence, but especially during the parenting years. None of us can escape it, but we can all start practicing some basic strategies to help us handle it more efficiently.

Keep this fundamental principle in mind: Situations don't cause stress; perceptions do. I realize I've already made this point, but I think it's worth reiterating here. Stress is self-generated. It's not your leaky radiator or your son's report card that pushes you over the edge. It's your perception of the significance of a major car repair or a failing grade that gets the stress rising.

Similarly, it's not necessarily your hectic schedule that frazzles you. After all, some people seem to thrive when their calendars are maxed out. Instead, the frazzle may come from your perception that you should react to your schedule in a certain way ("Yikes! When will I ever have a chance to get some rest?"). It's the *should* that creates the stress.

You can relieve some stress by making an effort to see the situation from a different angle. For example, if you assume that it's your responsibility as a parent to ensure that your child



Stress Menu

Draw a stress continuum of 0 to 10 for yourself. Zero is having no stress—you might describe it as peacefully lying on a hammock by a beach with no demands. Ten is having major, catastrophic stress. Add the numbers 1 to 9 to the continuum and label each number with a word that describes something that you find stressful. These stress-inducers should escalate progressively from *hammock* to *disaster*.

Next, make a list of things that you could do for self-care in a time of stress. You can make a list of things that will not take much time and effort and a list of things that will take more time and effort. Keep adding to the menu as you think of new things. You can access this stress

stays happy all the time, you'll respond with stress every time you suspect your child is unhappy. If you shift your perspective and remind yourself that you aren't in charge of your child's happiness, you can rid yourself of that burden fairly easily. It's simply a matter of altering your viewpoint.

It can also be helpful to understand that emotions help us experience moments and are not necessarily bad. For example, sadness helps us grieve and shows that something was lost. Anger helps us understand what we strongly dislike. Emotions make sense of the context of our situation and our thoughts.

There are at least four things you can do to prepare yourself when you know that life is about to hit you with a barrage of potentially stress-producing demands.

Pray

When family circumstances seem overwhelming and your mind is in chaos, prayer is the believer's indis-

pensable reset button. It's the very best way to get back to basics and regain your grasp on the bigger picture. Prayer has helped me remember that the window of influence as a parent to my children is brief and that I need to make each day count.

Sleep

Consistent and adequate sleep is an essential ingredient to succeeding as a parent and in managing stress. Sleep deprivation is quite common among parents. A recent study suggests that REM sleep is associated with mental flexibility as well as greater problem-solving and creative abilities.² Our brains need sleep to prepare for the next day. The way I love to picture the need for sleep is to picture each day as a fun gathering. My brain needs time to clean up from today's fun gathering and to organize and prepare for the next day's gathering. If I don't give my brain enough time through sleep to clean up, organize, and prepare, the event will be a mess the following day.

menu whenever you notice your stress level climbing.

You can do this exercise as a family to learn each other's stress levels and inducers as well as what each of you finds helpful for bringing your stress level down. Encourage one another to use the list of self-care activities. It is difficult to remember to use healthy stress reducers when we are in the middle of stress. It is as if we go on auto-survival mode.

Moderation

Use wisdom and moderation in your consumption. There's a strong connection between the brain and what we consume physically (food), emotionally (in our relationships), and mentally (entertainment, technology, news). This means that what we consume is vital not only to physical health but also to good emotional and mental health. Placing safeguards in these areas of your life can give you the health you need to respond well to stress. What are you consuming physically, mentally, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually?

Exercise

Exercise helps maintain the functions of your brain, your nervous system, your digestive tract, and your heart and blood vessels. I can tell you from years as a counselor that parents who made the time for exercise were less stressed, more engaged and more confident, and generally sported a more open and wise mind in parenting. Exercise is also a great way to help your mind let some things go and to allow for a helpful endorphin release for your brain.

TRUST—GOD WITH US

God has pledged to stand beside us and give us the strength and wisdom we need as we courageously face the difficulties and uncertainties of raising kids and living life in this world.

Let these encouraging passages take root in your mind as

you consider how you can manage your mind and adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of raising children.



You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. (Isaiah 26:3)

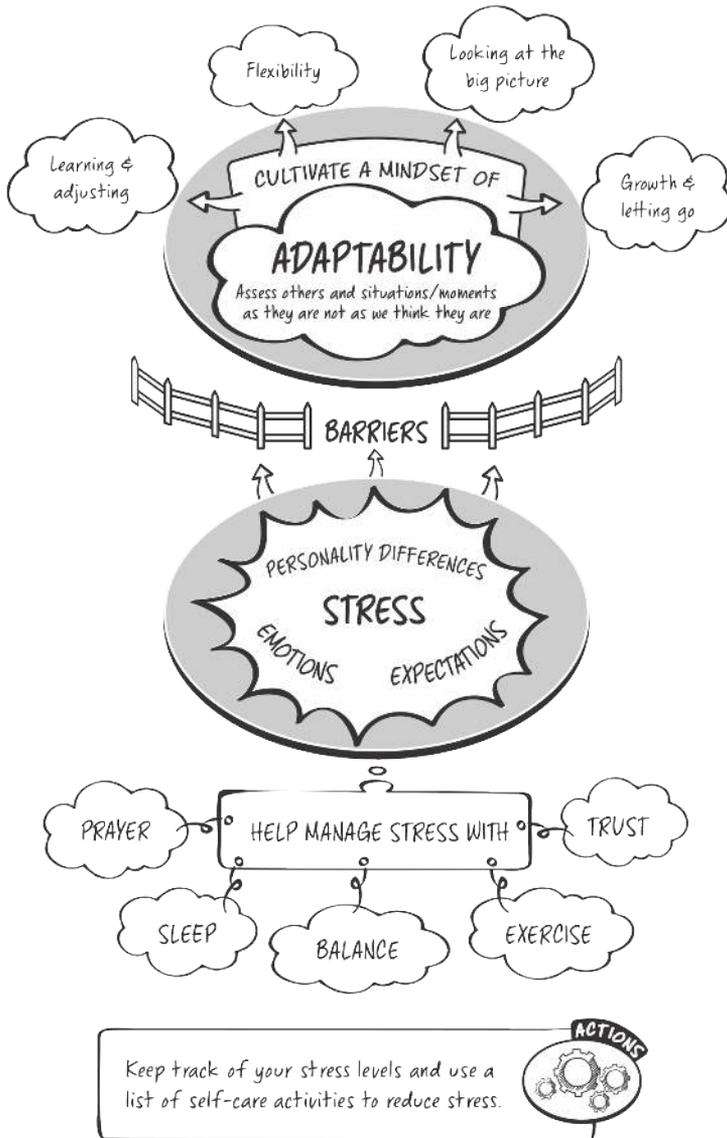
I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. (Colossians 3:15)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

CHAPTER 2

ADAPTABILITY





EXPLORE MORE FROM THE SEVEN TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE PARENTING!

We hope you enjoyed this FREE chapter on Adaptability. But don't stop now! Here's two more steps you can take:

1) **Take the FREE [7 Traits of Effective Parenting Assessment](#)** to find out what your unique parenting strengths are and identify the skills you need to raise healthy, mature, responsible children.

2) **Order the [Seven Traits of Effective Parenting](#) book** by licensed family counselor Daniel P. Huerta, Focus on the Family's vice president of Parenting & Youth. This definitive book shows the biblical, research-based characteristics that mark grace-filled, successful households — and good news, you've already got some of them! Based on years of Focus on the Family study, this book is loaded with real-world exercises and ideas you can try at home in order to learn, grow, and make a difference in your marriage and family life.