

PARENTING AT THE SPEED OF LIFE

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Editor: Tom Neven

Cover Design: Brian Mercurief

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I ntroduction



Time! With all the talk about how much we have to do and how little time we have to do it, you'd think that God wasn't making as much of this precious commodity called "time" as He used to. Ever since the invention of the wheel, we've been trying to gain time by finding new ways to cut corners. However, despite our best efforts, we still manage to run out of time before we run out of tasks, even though we own a thousand timesaving devices. It seems that just when we get our lives fitting into the 24/7 we've been given, our to-do list expands.

One of the key factors that contributes to this phenomenon is the "bigger is better" culture we live in. Every time we get life under control, it's time to get a bigger house, a bigger TV, or a bigger vacation. And quite simply put, "bigger" takes more time—more time working to pay for it, more time to look after it, and more time (if we have any

left) to actually enjoy it. But the plain fact is, bigger is not better when it's too big to enjoy because it stresses us out, uses up more time than we have, and hardly ever gives us the "better" it promises. Bigger isn't always better. It's just bigger.

I found that this bigger-is-better view had snuck into my relationship with my children, and when I saw it I determined that I'd rather be a better parent than a bigger parent. You see, I had begun thinking that being a good dad was taking my kids on big vacations, buying them big presents, and giving them big amounts of my time. Unfortunately, I was so busy doing all the other big stuff there were not many big amounts of time left to give to my kids.

You may think that you know where this is going: stop working so hard so you'll have more time with your children. That's part of it, but what I want to help you do is stop looking at "big" as the thing that will make them happy. You *don't* need bigger amounts of time to make your kids happy—you need to use what you have better. Tomorrow we'll all have the same amount of time we had today, and life will con-

tinue to expand to gobble up that time. We often frustrate ourselves by constantly looking for those big chunks of time we can put aside to be better parents. Often, the big chunks of available time never show up. So what is the key?

The Bible says that he who is faithful in the small things will be made ruler over the big things (Matthew 25:21). This doesn't necessarily mean that you'll graduate to bigger responsibilities and blessings if you do the small ones well. It can simply mean that if you take care of the small things, the big things will take care of themselves. Look at it this way: If you put away your clothing when it's in your hands, pick up things that are out of place when you see them, clean up as you go in the kitchen, and do the dishes right after every meal, how hard will it be to keep your house clean? Hanging up your coat is a small thing, but keeping your house clean is a big thing. If you're faithful over the little, you'll rule over the big.

This principle works in every area of our lives, from housekeeping to finances and from our careers to our parenting. The old saying "If

you look after the pennies, the dollars will take care of themselves” is so true. I stopped looking for big chunks of time to use to become a better dad and started to use the pennies—or the minutes—that I had. This turned out to be the most important and effective parenting skill I ever learned, and it’s made a huge difference in my relationship with my children. In being faithful with all the small opportunities to be a good dad, I’m being made ruler over the big task of being a parent. The dollars are taking care of themselves.

When I first thought of writing this book, I chuckled at the irony of writing something that would make all the parents who felt they didn’t have time to be a good parent feel even guiltier because they didn’t have time to read the book. But the readings in this book match the solution I have outlined. Beyond this introduction you’ll find 60 short essays that will take only a few minutes each to read. Each one contains a simple suggestion that will help you become a better steward of your parenting moments. It won’t take a lot of time to read and apply one

every day. The key to the big task of parenting isn't trying to find more time, nor is it reading a parenting book and all of a sudden being a perfect parent. Just start using your minutes well and the huge job of being a parent will start taking care of itself.

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1 Bring a Smile

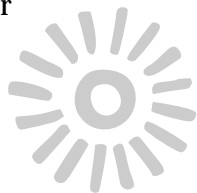
It was my 10th birthday, and the large box was on my knees for only seconds before paper flew in every direction. It was what I'd wanted *sooo* badly—a Charlie McCarthy ventriloquist mannequin. I proceeded to read every library book on ventriloquism and began practicing daily. I soon learned that keeping my lips from moving wasn't the hard part! What was really difficult was separating my facial expression from the tone of my voice—for example, if my script called for me to smile while making Charlie talk angrily. My voice wanted to follow my face.

I was reminded of this years later when I answered my son matter-of-factly about something and he asked, “Dad, why are you upset?” But I wasn't upset. I was simply in a hurry and was trying to think my way through a problem when I answered him.

God has made us so that our attitudes, thoughts, facial expressions, and the tone of our voice all seem to be connected. A sour thought or a negative attitude pulls down the corners of our mouths and tenses up our voices. Fortunately, this process can also work the other way. If we make a conscious choice to smile even when we're not feeling particularly happy—and *keep on smiling*—that smile shows up in the tone of our voice, causes us to think happier thoughts, and even makes our attitude brighter.

I now use what I learned from Charlie and my son to help my parenting. Just before I walk into a room to remind one of my children about something or to give instructions, I take 10 seconds to relax and smile. *Then* I walk into the room. That smile works its way into my voice and right back to my attitude.

Try it. Take a few seconds and smile before speaking to your children. It will make a world of difference.





2 As You Wish

One of my all-time favorite movies is Rob Reiner's film *The Princess Bride*. Westley, the stable boy, is deeply in love with Buttercup, the girl whom he serves. No matter what she asks him to do, Westley's reply is always, "As you wish." In other words, "Yes." Buttercup finally realizes that whenever Westley says, "As you wish," what he's *really* saying is, "I love you."

Over the years, I've noticed that people who really care try to say yes. When asked for help, they say yes.

"Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Yes."

"Can you do me a favor?"

"Yes."

Whenever they *can* help, they do. They may not be able to help



every time, but if they can, they don't make excuses.

I look for ways to say “As you wish” to my children as often as I can. Simple requests like, “Dad, can we talk?” or “Can you build LEGOs with me?”—these things often take only a few minutes but have long-lasting benefits. Sometimes my initial reaction is to think their requests will take a huge chunk of my time. But I discovered that, because of children's short attention spans, usually after a few moments they were happy to continue by themselves.

Mind you, some requests require a qualified yes. If they asked, “Can I build a puzzle?” I would immediately envision puzzle pieces left scattered. If they said, “I need to call my friend right now. Can I do the dishes later?” I pictured dishes not getting done. But when I looked at such requests as an opportunity to say, “I love you,” I said yes even if I had to add, “As long as you clean up after you're finished” or “Yes, but please have the dishes done by eight.”

When our children's requests are reasonable or good, let's not say no just because saying yes would be inconvenient.

3 Happy Histories



I was looking through some old photos with my daughter and came across a picture of her that I just had to explain. As a baby she loved pickles, and after chewing her pickles she'd wipe her hands in her hair. The pickle juice would make her hair stick straight up in fine spikes. It was so incredibly cute! My daughter beamed when I told her this story. She has that picture in her personal collection to this day.

I discovered that telling her this “you’re-so-cute” story let her know that I love her. What you say or the stories you tell about your children demonstrates how you feel about them. Tell your friend or relative about the bad thing that your child did, the bad mark she got in school, the awful thing he did to his sister, and your child who is within earshot gets the feeling that you don’t think highly of him or her.

A while ago I started taking time each day to tell a story about when one of my children had made me laugh, made me proud, or simply made me glad they were mine. When I go through a photo album and see a picture of a happy moment, I take it out and put some of those tacky fridge magnets to work. The photo reminds me to tell the right kind of stories and reminds my kids how much I love them.





4 Sticky Minutes

One of the first parenting minutes I tried seemed to be a little too sappy, but the results floored me. Somewhere I heard that writing encouraging notes to your kids and putting them in their school lunch bags was a good idea. I was sitting at my desk when a memory from earlier that day triggered pleasant feelings about my kids.

I wanted to record and pass on my positive thoughts, so I grabbed my ever-handy Post-it note pad and started to write. Well, the reminder morphed into three Post-it notes—one written to each of my children. I then stuck the notes in their rooms. As soon as my children saw the notes, they responded with big smiles, hugs, and comments. I then made a point to do this before going out of town for a week, again with wonderful results. To my surprise, my kids didn't think it was sappy,

and in some cases the notes were left up for weeks where even visiting friends could see them.

Then I got out of the habit. Some time had passed since I'd last left a Post-it message. Then one day I was telling my son about how proud I was of him because of something he had done that day.

After I'd finished, he was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Dad, do you know what I really like?"

"What, son?"

"When you leave me sticky notes."

Write sticky notes and stick them up in your children's rooms. Don't worry if it seems a bit sappy to write wonderful things about them. It's not. It takes only a minute, but the results and memories will be around for a long time.



5

I 'll Be Back in a Minute

It's just before dinner on a weekday. At least one of my children has appeared in the kitchen asking what and when we'll be eating. Pots and pans are rattling, both the oven and microwave are on, and then I open the fridge door. That's when I discover that a necessary ingredient for fine in-home dining is missing. (Probably because someone has dutifully returned a container to the refrigerator even though they'd emptied it.)

I'd like to freeze-frame the next step in this familiar process, when someone has to jump in the SUV and go out to the store quickly. This is one of my favorite times to pack in some wonderful and valuable parenting minutes. I briefly consider which of my children I'd like to or need to spend a few minutes with and ask, "Hey, I need to zip down to the store. Would you like to come for the ride?"

Including the brief run into the store, a mission there and back is about a 15-minute round trip. In that period of time, I've been able to unearth things happening below the surface, discover things going on at school, give asked-for advice, bring encouragement and correction, resolve unresolved issues, and get closer to my child by just sharing a laugh or listening to his or her favorite new CD.

Now admittedly, I've also been conned out of extra money, coerced into buying treats, and talked into volunteering for the school or youth group in these same 15 minutes, but hey, fair is fair. My children have also caught on to the value of these parenting moments. Yours will, too.





6

Moment Messaging

When my children got their own e-mail addresses, a new opportunity for me to have quality parenting moments was born. One day at work, while opening and answering e-mail, I was pleasantly surprised by an e-mail from my oldest daughter. I found myself smiling from ear to ear reading her one rather silly line to me that basically just said hi.

We all know that wonderful feeling you have when someone thinks of you and calls or sends an e-mail, not for any reason other than just to say hello. My daughter started it, so I took a few minutes to say hello back to her and to be just as silly.

One day, I had nothing to say in response to her e-mail, so I wrote her a short, little nonsense story that would mean something to her. The next day my story came back to me, but it was longer. She had

added to it. We've now taken turns adding to the story and sending it back and forth for a few years. She and I have created silly characters and nonsense story lines together, and share a language that no one else understands but which gets us both laughing. Each addition to the story has taken only from three to 15 minutes, done while going through my daily e-mail, and I wouldn't trade those minutes for all the donut holes in Canada. (An inside joke from our e-mail story.)

Now, you need to understand that when we read each other's e-mails, we're usually both in the same place: at home. The point isn't to communicate information; it's to communicate the powerful message of "I care" that comes from taking the effort to just say hello.



e e 7 Hello Minutes

“Just five minutes sitting down with the newspaper!” “I have to prepare dinner right now or we’ll be eating late.” “I wonder if I can grab a quick nap on the couch before we eat?” “I’d better get these frozen goods into the freezer.” We often rehearse in our heads exactly what we would like to do (or what we *will* do) as soon as we walk through the door into our homes. In our busy, busy culture, many of us have become masters of creating mental agendas during our commutes from one place to the next. I found that I’d become so proficient at it that I’d come into my home like a man on a mission.

One day my agenda required me to track down and discuss things with each of my children—things like music lessons, youth groups, sleepovers, etc.—so I could set my mental agenda for the evening. I

needed to make sure it was physically possible for everyone to get where they were going on time. As I tracked down each of my children, I stopped to say hello and to hug them before launching into the evening's master plan. At the end of this task, I found that my mind was no longer on the evening's mega-agenda but squarely on how my children had responded to being sought out and hugged when I got home. I was also feeling in touch with my children and quite warmed by their responses to me. The light dawned.

From that day forward, the first item on my commute time mental agenda, my first "to do" after arriving home, has been to take a few minutes to find everyone and say hello. These parenting minutes generate that warm feeling of family connectedness that always carries us through the evening's crazy agenda.



8

e Saving Time in a Bottle

Jim Croce wrote a song called “Time in a Bottle.” In the final verse, he says that he’d like to save time in a bottle so that he could then spend it with the one he loves. But he brings us back from the romantic beyond in the chorus when he says that there never seems to be enough time to do the things one wants to do. I like the song, but it always struck me as odd. It seemed to me like the song was saying, “I’d like to spend all my time with you if I could, and hopefully knowing that will make you feel good while I’m constantly somewhere else, not spending any of my time with you.”

The truth is, there’s only one way to save up time, and that’s to spend it creating great memories with those we love. Then the bottle that contains the memories and benefits of that time can be opened and

enjoyed again and again in the future.

I used to view my children's cameo appearances as interruptions, but I now do my best to view them as opportunities. They're probably only asking for a few minutes, and I've found that giving them five minutes when they ask for it is far more meaningful to them than giving them several hours when I finally find the time to spare. It's better to say, "Hey, I have to finish this or that, but I can take a short break for you," than to have to say no and then try and re-create the moment later.

It's more meaningful to spend a few minutes when they ask for your time than trying to save time by putting your children off until later. By being open to their "interruptions" you communicate to your children they they're more important to you than your tasks—not vice versa.





9

Home-Along Moment

I was flying into Chicago on United Airlines shortly after they had completed their new terminal. The captain welcomed us to Chicago and “The New Terminal of Tomorrow.” He went on to explain that everyone who’s tried to catch a connecting flight out of there understands why it’s *really* called “The Terminal of Tomorrow”—because you might not get on your connecting flight till tomorrow!

I’ve often waited in the Chicago airport. It’s a very busy place and reminds me of my home: children’s parties, sleepovers, friends coming and going, neighbors calling, extended family dropping by. And there are the departures. The car just doesn’t stop. There are youth groups, lessons of all sorts, sports, school, church, errands to run, and children’s friends to pick up or drive home. Sound familiar? In the middle

of all the flights in and out, once in a while I find a wonderful parenting moment with one of my fellow travelers.

The first time it happened, everyone had flown in and back out of “Osborne O’Hare,” and only my son and I were left. During the next few hours he had his agenda, and I had mine. However, in the middle of that time the two of us needed to sit down and eat a meal. What followed started with me pointing out that it was cool that it was just the two of us guys.

Then we decided to have some guy food and talked about guy things, and we even used some guy table manners (intentional oxy-moron). We laughed a lot and afterwards headed back to our own tasks. The meal needed to be prepared anyway, but the time we had was memorable. I now watch for “home alone” moments. My son and I have our “guy time” every time the Osborne Terminal clears out, and I have special dad-and-daughter meals whenever I find myself alone with one of them.



10

Teachable Moments

One of my favorite TV commercials opens with a close-up camera shot of two kids staring into the camera with looks of bewilderment on their faces. The camera then cuts to what they're looking at. It's Mom standing beside the toilet with a toilet paper roll in one hand and the plastic tube in the other. She says, "Now this gets placed inside the roll like so. Then . . ."

It's our job as parents to prepare and train our children so that when they leave home they know how to go through life on their own. These life skills include everything from changing a toilet roll to running a household budget. There was a time when I envisioned myself finding enough time to sit down and train each of my kids in every life skill they would need. Boy, was I dreaming!

I woke up from my dream one day when I asked my son to sweep the floor. The expression he gave me reminded me of the look a deer gets when it's frozen in the center of the road, watching your car barrel toward it. I quickly translated the look: He had never swept the floor before. I took the time right then and there to teach him.

Ever since then, whenever I'm doing some task and there's a son or daughter in sight who needs to know how to do it—whether it's hammering a nail, cleaning up a pet's mess, or filling up the SUV gas tank—it's time for a life-skill lesson. No, my children don't run away every time they see me get off my chair. They actually enjoy the challenges. I'm not giving them things to do; I'm teaching them how to live.

I did teach them one important life skill as a formal lesson, though. I was tired of changing the empty roll, so I called a meeting in the bathroom. There was a lot of laughter when I said, "Now, this gets placed inside the roll like so."

