

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
RESOURCES

HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

**Preparing Your
Children
to Be
Winners
in Life**

Dr. Kevin Leman



TYNDALE

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Home Court Advantage

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**HOME IS
WHERE THE
HEART IS**



You Can't Have It All

Defining the Problem

If Kevin Leman is in the air, two things are probably true. First, he's sitting in the front row. I get a bit claustrophobic, and after flying over three million miles, it's the least my airline can do to allow me a little extra space.

Second, the words "American Airlines" are painted on the tin can I'm flying on. I've been a frequent flyer with American since 1988. Early on, I flew other airlines as well, but now, as long as American can accommodate me, I'm pretty loyal to this one airline.

Why?

It's all about the "home court advantage." Irregular flyers can sign up for the frequent flyer program, but they get credited with their actual miles. Me? I get *double miles* wherever I go, which adds up pretty fast. Plus, on occasion I get free upgrades—even free tickets!

And when my schedule changes, American goes out of its way to please me. You might get to the airport three hours before I do to get

your name on the standby list in hopes of catching an earlier flight. I might show up just 30 minutes before the plane pushes back, but I'm the one who gets the seat. Why? With over 3,000,000 miles in my account, I'm what they call a "Lifetime Platinum" member, which is airline-speak for "Please this sucker at all costs, because he's spent enough on plane tickets over the years to buy the plane he's flying on."

In short, when I'm flying American, I have a distinct advantage. If I step onto a United flight, or a Northwest flight, or a Southwest flight, I'm Joe Schmo. I'll get the same packet of peanuts as everyone else. Some other lug will get the good seat up front. And I might even be stuck in a middle seat, which at my age and size feels like a rhinoceros being crammed into Tweety Bird's cage.

It's a nice feeling, living life on American Airlines as a Lifetime Platinum member.

Wouldn't you like to give your kids the same sense of security and joy and even happiness? Wouldn't you like them to feel that being born into your family has given them something special? Wouldn't you like them to be as loyal to you as I am to American?

Well, that can happen if you'll learn the magic of creating the "home court advantage."

A sports team gains significant advantage while playing on the home court, where its greatest fans cheer it on and create an energy that can mean the difference between loss and victory. It's the same with your family. A home court advantage comes from seeing home as a place of security, joy, and memories. It means the best part of a kid's life will come from what happens within the four walls of that blessed place spelled H-O-M-E. It means his or her parents won't let the outside world with all its enticements and opportunities take that child away from the place that matters more than anyplace else.

This book is all about giving your child the home court advantage.

Besting Your Best

Charlie's mother wanted the best for her 12-year-old son. He already took piano lessons, but Mom wanted to broaden his experience. When she found a wonderful instructor to train him on the violin—a man who would nurture her son's love of the instrument and encourage his gifts—she was ecstatic.

But music wasn't all that occupied Charlie's time. Every Saturday he attended enrichment classes to supplement his Monday through Friday schooling. During the summer he took an S.A.T. prep class at the university to give him an extra edge for the college placement test four years down the road.

Charlie loved the violin, but hated his mother's expectations. "*Mom,*" he would complain when his mother criticized his technique, "I just want to play!"

Charlie wasn't the only one in his class who felt the pressure to perform. Another student's mother was so critical during lessons that the instructor had to ask the woman to remain outside so the young musician could concentrate. Still another student, only nine years old, was performing three times a week with the metropolitan ballet company's production of "The Nutcracker," training for gymnastics twice a week, and attending a Brownie meeting every other week. Her mother had bought the girl a Day-Timer to juggle homework and activities.

After a month, however, Charlie finally got a break—in a manner of speaking. Despite the boy's love for the violin, his mother pulled him out of lessons.

The reason? Her son didn't bring home enough homework, she said. The instructor just wasn't pushing him hard enough.

You may think Charlie's mother crossed the line. But if you're like most parents, you want the best for your child, too—the best schools,

teachers, and neighborhood. You want your son to succeed in his second grade reading class, and your daughter to excel in after-school gymnastics. This desire is as natural as the wonder you felt when she first entered the world, and as common as the apprehension you sometimes feel about doing your best as a parent. Any dad or mom with an ounce of love wants the best for his or her child.

But if you're also like many parents today, in spite of your intentions, you may not be giving your children what *is* best for them.

What's best, you ask? A steady diet of Mozart in the womb? Harvard-educated English tutors? One-on-one pointers from a Russian gymnastics coach?

No. I'm talking about the *best* thing, the most important thing, the thing that trumps placement on the state champion traveling soccer team or a full-ride scholarship to summer tuba camp. I'm talking about the foundation upon which security and stability are built in your children: Time together. At home. As a family.

Oh, come on, Dr. Leman, you may think, get with the program.

The program today, fellow parent, *is* the problem. In a society frenzied with activity, time together at home is more important than ever. In our efforts to help children "get ahead," we're bypassing the most important factor of their development—leisurely love and gracious attention at home in a hurried and harried world.

Please think about that phrase, "leisurely love." I've talked to thousands of children, and one thing has come through crystal clear in our conversations: "Rushed" love doesn't feel like love to a child. If your child feels like he's "on the clock," or if she thinks she's always interrupting you, *love* won't be the first word that comes to her mind when she thinks back on her childhood.

So much competes with time together at home as a family. The

Baskin Robbins of Life doesn't just offer activities in 31 flavors—it offers 31,000, and parents drool over the options like kids at an ice cream counter. You can shell out hundreds of dollars for your seven-year-old daughter to perfect her tee-ball swing with a former major league coach. You can arrange for your three-year-old son to begin working aggressively toward his judo black belt so he can shoulder-throw bullies in the preschool lunch line. You can hire a Metropolitan Opera star to give voice lessons to your kindergartner.

Activities, however, really are like ice cream: They may suffice for an occasional treat, but they don't make for a healthy diet. Those standing behind the counter might have you believe that all your little Einstein needs is the right combination of flavors to help him construct a unified quantum theory by the time he hits puberty. If you're like many parents, you may end up ordering a cone of activities piled so high you can't possibly handle all those scoops. When that happens, you've fallen victim to the lure of overparenting.

Overparenting: Don't Push It

A mother called an Atlanta physical therapy clinic, anxious to squeeze in an appointment. Her nine-year-old daughter had injured her arm swimming six times a week for two swim clubs. Now she was having trouble even lifting that arm.

The physical therapist made room for her in his schedule that afternoon. He grew concerned when a quick examination revealed that the girl, who was also involved in competitive soccer, couldn't raise her arm without significant pain.

“She really needs to rest this arm,” the therapist advised.

“But the district championships are in 10 days!” Mom said.

“That may be so, but she needs to take at least one week off—a full seven days, and then we can reevaluate her. She’s overworked this arm and needs to lay off.”

“You don’t understand,” the mother argued. “It’s the *district* championship. She’s a *great* swimmer. She has such potential!”

Everywhere I go, parents like that mom want their kids to win. They want them to rise above the competition, finish first, and stand out.

Winning isn’t bad. I don’t go to the University of Arizona Wildcats basketball games to admire the team logo painted at center court. I *love* it when my team wins. But if it loses in the final 1.3 seconds on a brilliant three-point play by the opposing team, I won’t turn to my youngest daughter and say, “Lauren, let’s go tip and burn a police car, and maybe finish the evening throwing a few garbage cans through local business windows. What do you think?” Winning is good—in proper perspective.

But what difference is missing a couple weeks of swimming practice and a district meet going to make in the “swimming career” of a nine-year-old girl? Is she really going to miss the NCAA Swimming and Diving Championship ten years down the road because she didn’t compete for four days in July? More to the point, why is this mother concerned about swimming stardom for her nine-year-old in the first place? When Proverbs, that age-old book of wisdom, says, “Train a child in the way he should go,”¹ it isn’t talking about daily 5 A.M. laps in the pool.

High parental expectations are nothing new, but greater disposable time and income now allow us to pursue pie-in-the-sky dreams to a degree perhaps never seen before. Parents are throwing time and money at their kids’ future “success” as if parenting were career coaching and family life were training for the Olympics.

I realize that most of you aren’t packing your bags for the Olympic

training facility in Colorado Springs. But if you step back and evaluate your expectations, you'll probably find that in some ways you *are* packing your child's emotional bags for that destination the world calls success.

Who knows? you think as your 18-month-old son picks up his little plastic golf putter and swings aimlessly at his little plastic golf ball. *He could be the next Tiger Woods.*

He may—though the odds are about a billion to one against it. But stare at that tiny glimmer of a thought too intently and it can slowly pollute your priorities. The PGA Tour is among the furthest things from your toddler's mind. That fantasy belongs to someone else—you, the parent, who may be trying to live out your dreams through your children.

These dreams need not be grandiose; often those that work their way most insidiously into a family's daily activities are the subtle assumptions. For example, you and your spouse, both teachers, may not expect your child to follow your career path; you may even be careful to let him choose his own vocation. But because both of you were once straight-A students, you may expect the same from your child whether he's going into theater management or biophysics research. What happens when you discover that your little Norbert is not an Albright scholar—that in fact, he's neither a scholar nor all that bright?

Or perhaps your high school plastered the gym wall with plaques of your all-star record-breaking feats. Your competitive streak may show from the soccer field sidelines as you yell for your elementary school daughter to "Go for the ball!" when all she wants to do is stand at mid-field and talk with friends about the new student in class.

Such underlying expectations are hard to recognize in ourselves; it's easy to assume that what came naturally to us will come naturally to

our own flesh and blood. And it's easy to push kids into all sorts of activities to get ahead.

The *activity trap*, I call it. It's not easy to escape, because you don't feel steel jaws biting into your leg when you're in it. More likely, your entrapment will be applauded. You may receive the praise of parents in your neighborhood carpool and believe you're helping your child advance. But if your family relationships and your child's character development are more important to you than whether he makes a career of hitting a little white ball long distances or is admitted to East Coast schools that are overgrown with ivy, then you need to examine how these misconceptions subtly affect *you*.

Conflict of Interest

"My daughter has such potential."

"We want to help our son get ahead."

"We're giving our kids the opportunities we never had."

These statements sound self-sacrificing, noble—even loving. If you've been saying them, no doubt you're doing so with good intentions. But examine your motives closely, for you may be pushing your child for your own good rather than hers.

Many parents today are like mountain climbing guides who drive their little clients to summits rising in their own imaginations. These moms and dads expose their kids to the fierce winds of competition and exhaust them in the process.

Ironically, many parents contend that such help benefits the child, enabling him to succeed and bolstering confidence. After all, the child is the one who'll apply for college six years down the road; better beef up that sixth grade résumé. The child is the one who'll face a fiercely

competitive job market; better develop a track record starting with impeccable second grade 4-H club projects.

But is the child really the one who benefits?

“That’s Wilhelmina’s painting?” you hear during open house, “Oh, you must be so proud!” The praise feels so good you don’t mention that you helped Wilhelmina choose her subject matter, mix the colors, and add a few, key touch-ups to bring the composition together.

“Your boy sure can throw a football!” a fellow dad confides to you along the sidelines at Saturday morning’s game. In reality your son *hates* football and the father-son practices you’ve come to make him do.

Your daughter’s report card reads, “Beatrice is a pleasure to have in class.” The teacher doesn’t know about the exhausting hours you and little Beatrice spend turning the family room into night school. Keep that up and soon Beatrice won’t be a pleasure to have at school, home, or anywhere else!

Eventually, these kids may quit developing their own strengths to overcome obstacles and simply let their parents drag them along until they turn 18—and give up on themselves altogether.

I sometimes joke about visiting a school’s science fair to search for a project that was done by the child himself. I can imagine the parents exclaiming the night before, “Would you turn that TV down? I’m trying to do your homework!” It’s as if some moms and dads feel they’re being graded themselves, hoping for a report card like this to post on the refrigerator: “Mr. and Mrs. Beasley are an absolute delight to have outside class! A+++!”

It’s easy to feed off the positive strokes we get when we’re stuck in the activity trap; people assume we must be great parents. But the consequences of our expectations can push our children out of the nest far too early.

No Worm for the Too-early Bird

“The sooner [children] are stimulated, the more they’ll learn in the long run,” says one mother who “tries to collect every video made by the Baby Einstein Co.” Hers is a notion held by many parents, who by hoping “to boost their infants’ and toddlers’ IQ levels have made the brain-development niche one of the toy industry’s strongest sectors since 2000, according to the Toy Industry Association.”²

Some parents, not wanting their kids to be left behind in anything, push them to get ahead in everything. Believing the early bird gets the worm, they may think that bird must try its wings earlier and earlier to reach the head of the pecking order. Thus the early childhood years, which should be a time of bonding between parent and child, are transformed into a survival-of-the-fittest battle among the little peeps.

This push to give young kids a head start begins subtly, when parents compare their children’s vocabulary, make mental notes on who’s still in diapers and who’s graduated to the toilet, and assess who can finger-paint the best impressionistic rainbow in the neighborhood play group. Before long you might find yourself thinking, *No doubt about it—the Carsons’ kid is ahead of ours*. When children are piloting cross-country in Cessna airplanes at the ages of seven and eight³, it’s easy to feel your hatchlings are lagging behind.

But have you ever watched a nest of baby birds? The strongest hatchling, the one who often ventures into the world first, isn’t always the most successful. In fact, if it leaves the nest too soon, it may not survive the first few weeks. Even if your kids get an early start, it doesn’t always have the intended effect.

You’ve probably heard of the famous 1993 study by Rauscher, Shaw, and Ky regarding the so-called “Mozart effect.” It suggested that children who listened to classical music while they were very young

developed higher IQs than those who didn't. The findings became so popular that in 1998 the governor of Georgia, Zell Miller, began giving classical music CDs to every child born in the state.

But independent studies have since shown that the Mozart effect doesn't exist. Today, developmental psychologists say the best way to stimulate a youngster's brain is through multisensory input. " 'Babies learn through multiple senses being rewarded simultaneously,' says Irving Lazar, a developmental psychologist and professor emeritus at Cornell University. 'This means the best opportunity for a child to learn is from another person,' who can stimulate sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, sometimes all at once."⁴

Many parents still use the "baby genius" videos, thinking, *Well, they can't hurt*. But Lazar and Lisa Bain, editor of *Parenting* magazine, caution that filling toddlers' time with such screen-staring can remove the foundation of their development—human interaction.

"Flashcards for an infant?" asked one toy store manager, who refused to carry them. "I can't imagine flashing cards at a 6-month-old. Take them for a walk. Let them see a real flower."⁵

In short, social interaction rather than intellectual exercises is what nurtures your child's development. And what more important social interaction is there than that within the family?

It's easy to defer to the so-called experts and marketers who'd have you believe that their products are integral to your baby's development. But if you want to have a homegrown child, raising your kid isn't something a TV set—or a stranger—can do.

Making an Indelible Imprint

Dr. Brenda Hunter, psychologist and author, describes what I call the "indelible imprint" that a parent leaves on a child. She believes that the

parental relationship forms the basis for a child's perceptions of himself or herself. "According to Bowlby," she says in her book *Home by Choice*, "a young child forms 'internal working models' of himself, his parental attachments, and his world out of the raw material of his parental relationships. Based on the way his parents treat him, a child will form certain expectations about how others will treat him. If the parents are warm, loving, and emotionally accessible, the child comes to believe that *he* is loving and worthy. As he matures, he will possess high self-esteem; he will be able to trust others and, later in life, have the capacity to be intimate with a spouse and children. Secure in his parental attachments, this individual will expect others to treat him the same way his parents have."⁶

Those raw materials include your physical affection, your presence at home, and your spoken words to your child. The child whose introduction to language from her parents includes hearing that she "doesn't amount to much" will soon come to believe what she hears. Conversely, the child whose introduction to the world through language is shaped by consistent affirmations that she is loved will form a mental image of herself that fits those messages.

Before you read any further—*stop!* Do you understand what Dr. Hunter is pointing out here? Slowly reread those two paragraphs above—out loud even—because they are *so* crucial to our discussion of setting up the home court advantage and leaving that indelible imprint on your children.

The Lights Are On, But No One's Home

Unfortunately, some parents aren't passing many messages to their kids at all. No doubt you've heard of the study showing that, on average, fathers communicate with their teenage children just 35 minutes per

week.⁷ Thirty-five minutes! I spend more time than that picking lint from my belly button. And it isn't just fathers who are absent from their children's lives. Another study, published in *Time* magazine, found that "72% of women with children under 18 are in the work force—a figure that is up sharply from 47% in 1975."⁸ The reasons for parents' absence may be complex, but the bottom line is that they *are* absent.

I realize that some may have legitimate reasons for not having a parent at home with the children. As that same issue of *Time* magazine stated, "Since the mid-'70s, the amount of the average family budget earmarked for the mortgage has increased a whopping 69% (adjusted for inflation). At the same time, the average father's income increased less than 1%."⁹ Often, Mom picks up the slack by jumping into the marketplace.

But many of the families I see as I travel throughout the country have their children in child care for other reasons. It's not because they have no options, such as enlisting family or co-op child care, or adopting a less expensive standard of living. It's because they have other priorities: climbing the corporate ladder or keeping up with the Joneses. Many parents use child care to stay in the rat race, or don't even consider whether Dad or Mom might be able to stay at home even part time. That's tragic, when the most important thing you can give your children is your presence—more important than a better house in a better neighborhood in a better school district.

But aren't we supposed to be able to "have it all"? Isn't it the American dream to have a new house, two kids, two cars, and two upwardly mobile jobs?

If funding those car and mortgage payments takes needed time away from your child, it doesn't matter how great the *house* looks if the *home* inside isn't doing so hot. I know this isn't a popular thing to say, but when you hand your child over to day care, regardless of your motives,

you're missing literally thousands of opportunities for positive imprinting. That missing piece is the most critical one. When it comes to establishing a homegrown relationship with your children, raising them at home for the first six years really is the best option.

Can day care give your child a safe place to play? Yes. Can it provide a positive place for social interaction? Yes. Can it provide a basis for a good education? Yes. Can it reinforce your values? If you choose your day care provider carefully, maybe.

Where day care fails is in nurturing a relationship with you. That's because you can't have homegrown kids without being regularly involved in their lives.

As you read this book, I want you to examine the time you spend away from home. *Why* do you do so? Is it really because you have to, or is it because you've embraced more opportunities than you can manage and have locked yourself into a tyrannical schedule? Consider how you might—and will—cut back to spend more time at home together as a family. No matter how much or how little time you have in the end, commit to making the most of what you have.

I understand that making time to be with your kids—especially keeping them home during the preschool years—takes sacrifice. My oldest daughter, Krissy, and her husband, Dennis, recently had their first child; they made the difficult decision for Krissy to stay at home. Because of that decision, they're just barely making it financially. But I believe that they—and you—can rise to the challenge.

“An August 2003 poll for the Center for a New American Dream, an organization based in Takoma Park, Md., that focuses on quality-of-life issues, revealed that although 60% of Americans felt pressure to work too much, more than 80% wished for more family time and that 52% of them would take less money to get it.”¹⁰ If that statistic is indeed representative, the fact that you're reading this book means

you're probably among those willing to make the sacrifice to keep your children at home with you as much as possible. Will Krissy and Dennis have to reevaluate their decision? Perhaps. But they're giving it their best shot, committing to make the sacrifice, and then stretching to live in line with their priorities.

Is it worth it? My guess is that years down the road, for them the answer will be a *yes* more unequivocal than they feel even now—a *yes* from both them and their son, Connor. That's because kids really do garner a positive self-image and a sense of security by spending time with their parents in a loving environment.

Having a homegrown child—creating the home court advantage—is well worth the sacrifice.

What Is Homegrown?

Homegrown parenting and the home court advantage begin by looking forward. Years from now, when your daughter heads off to college or your son moves into his first apartment and you bid her or him farewell with teary eyes, what do you want your child to be able to handle? What kind of foundation would you like him or her to have?

A homegrown child isn't known by what she *does* as much as by what she *is*. That's an important distinction that can be developed only through time and parental involvement.

Maybe you've heard the parable of the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. Given the choice between the two, sand seems at first the way to go; certainly it's the path of least resistance. It's easier to sink pillars into sand than rock, sand is easy to level, and it usually comes with a great view of the ocean.

But even though a house on the beach might seem like a dream

come true, it may be a nightmare in the making: storms and waves might wash away all that you've labored over the years to build. As you watch your house float out to sea, you may think twice about your choice of foundations—which is what I hope you'll do as you think about the foundation you want to build for your child.

Laying a firm foundation doesn't happen overnight. If you want a homegrown child—one who's nurtured at home by involved parents, who has downtime, who is raised for character and not just achievement, who values faith and family—you construct that foundation in layers, day by day.

But the work is worth it. The tremors of childhood and adolescence can shatter other, weaker foundations. A homegrown child will stand firm when she's ridiculed for having big ears, when he gets cut from the team, when her boyfriend breaks up with her and it feels that the ground beneath her is quaking.

A homegrown child has values and lives by them. He has the moxie to stick with it because you've given him Vitamin E—for Encouragement. She has the courage to say “No” because you've given her Vitamin N.

A homegrown child is different—from the inside out.

The Homegrown Difference

You may ask, “Does it matter? Can you really tell the difference?”

Well, let me ask you this: Have you ever eaten homegrown sweet corn?

A while back we had some people over for steaks cooked outside on the grill. My wife, Sande, is an excellent cook; the last thing she brought outside was a massive platter of hot corn on the cob, the steam curling into the air.

I love corn on the cob, so when I saw that plate I began salivating. I was remembering the corn we eat in western New York all summer long—so sweet you'd think someone had sprinkled sugar on it. After slathering a piece with butter and pelting it with salt, I started into it like a mad woodpecker.

By the time I reached the end of the first row, however, my face began to scrunch up. *This stuff's awful*, I thought. Though it looked like sweet corn, it was anything but!

If you think there's no difference between supermarket and homegrown sweet corn, compare what you get at your local grocery store with what's offered at a farm stand where they've picked the corn that morning. Your eye may not see a difference, but your taste buds will.

The same thing is true with children. Many kids may seem on the surface to be well-mannered and polite. Get past those exteriors, though, and you may find that they play by the rules but lack the inner core of their own convictions.

There's more to having homegrown children than simply cultivating certain behaviors. A homegrown kid is like that sweet corn—the secret lies inside. That's where a special relationship connects parent and child. What defines homegrown kids more than anything else is an authentic, carefully cultivated relationship with their parents. They have been nurtured with the home court advantage.

This book is all about that relationship. It's about embracing what matters most. It's about setting priorities that will help your family meet a standard of success that makes sense.

In the next few chapters, we'll identify myths that sidetrack many parents. In the second section, we'll look at raising kids from the inside out. Finally, because many parents replace the rat race outside the home with one inside, we'll consider practical tips for escaping the activity

trap—even how to encourage family time together without driving your kids to hate it.

Creating the home court advantage is easier than you might think—especially when compared with trying to keep up with the Joneses, who never should have set the pace in the first place. Let’s turn now to some of the ways we tend to forget a crucial truth—that there really is no place like home.

Let’s Remember:

- Time together at home as a family is the foundation upon which security and stability are built in your children.
- Having a homegrown child is all about the relationship. Your relationship with your children—how you see and interact with them—forms the basis for their perceptions of themselves.
- You *can’t* have it all. Ask yourself: *What are my priorities and am I truly living them out?*
- To avoid the activity trap:
 - (1) Beware of the *subtle* expectations you may have for your children, the things that come naturally to you but may not come naturally to them;
 - (2) Beware of telling yourself that you’re encouraging activities for your child’s benefit—they may be for your own benefit in the praise you receive from your peers;
 - (3) Beware of early comparisons between your children and others;
 - (4) Keep in mind that the best way to stimulate a youngster’s brain is through multisensory stimulation, namely social and familial interaction at home.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Proverbs 22:6.
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