



GIST

The Essence of
Raising *Life-Ready* Kids

Michael W. Anderson, L.P. and
Timothy D. Johanson, M.D.

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY[®]

Gist is a potent dose of advice from a pediatrician and a child psychologist, both of whom have witnessed the unfortunate results that come when parents try to protect, prevent, and control at every turn instead of preparing their kids for life. Combining the expertise of their respective professions with very practical tips, these authors offer a how-to manual for any parent who wants to prepare their kids to thrive as adults.

JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS

Former dean of students, Stanford University

I have been a colleague of Michael Anderson for more than thirty years and have found him to be provocatively insightful and practical. So it is no surprise that *Gist* is extraordinary. Michael is joined by Dr. Tim Johanson, with his own stellar background as a pediatrician, and *Gist* is filled with their eye-opening, nontraditional insights. I would recommend *Gist* to anybody who has children or cares about them, whether parent, grandparent, teacher, or counselor. The writing is clear, profound, and immediately useful.

JEFF VANVONDEREN

Certified intervention professional

It has been many years since I have read a book that I recommend as strongly as *Gist*. I consider it a must-read for today's parents. I was absolutely riveted by how the authors wrote about self-esteem and shame in this book. Anderson and Johanson, a psychologist and a pediatrician, have written a grounded and remarkable book that will challenge parents to the core. It did me.

JANICE MCWILLIAMS

MDiv, licensed clinical professional counselor, and mom

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MICHAEL W. ANDERSON, LP, AND
TIMOTHY D. JOHANSON, MD



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The case examples presented in this book are altered stories or composites based on the authors' clinical experience with hundreds of clients through the years. People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the important factors of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK JUST WOULDN'T GO AWAY.

Both of us, in our own ways, tried to push it off for a decade or more. For the longest time we couldn't quite see how to write a book about "how to" parent when the "how to" advice nearly always started with, "That depends . . ." In both our respective offices, parents sat in the waiting room and hoped they would learn some way to "treat" the presenting problem, whatever that happened to be.

Frequently, the presenting problem was not the real problem. Bad grades, stress symptoms, frequent fussing, defiance, depression, self-destructive behavior, and conflict often brought families in for help. But the real issue was that the families were stuck, tired, angry, and confused about where their problem came from. They didn't know what to do and they wanted that behavior, fear, and pain to stop now.

We found ourselves helping parents think differently about a situation and were amazed at how quickly the problem improved or disappeared simply by seeing it in a new and accurate light. *We came to believe that the best hope in addressing parenting issues is to think differently about parenting issues.*

That belief is what motivated us to capture these thoughts and stories in a book. Thinking better won't solve every parenting challenge, as parenting is a difficult and formidable

task. But better thinking is our best chance of making parenting successful, enjoyable, and hopeful.

We certainly don't intend to imply that healthy parenting is rare or nonexistent. However, too many parents are tired and lost these days. For parents who are drowning, this book could be a lifeboat. For parents who are doing well, this book will be a pleasant and validating read as they learn more about the wisdom of their own approach.

Long before we met, we were both troubled by how stressed out kids seem to be as they grow up, and we both chose careers that gave us the privilege to watch and learn. This book came out of our experience spending, collectively, more than fifty years listening to kids in our offices, then listening to their parents, then listening to kids again, and then their parents again. When we first met, we would spend hours discussing why we sounded like we were contradicting ourselves, when we knew we weren't. There isn't one right way to fall in love, to chase a dream, to have a career, or to grow spiritually—and there isn't one right way to parent.

A parent recently asked us at a workshop, "What should I do if my seventh-grade son leaves his homework on the kitchen counter when he leaves for school in the morning?"

"That depends on your son," we answered. "Tell us about your son. Overall, is he a fairly responsible seventh grader?"

"Oh yes, he's extremely responsible for his age."

"Then just jump in the car and run his book up to the school. And by the way, stick two dollars in his math book for a sports drink. You don't need to teach a responsible son to be responsible. He already knows that—he just forgot his homework. You have other things to teach him that are more relevant."

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If the son had been perpetually irresponsible, we would have recommended a different approach. One-size-fits-all parenting would most likely recommend teaching him a lesson he didn't need to learn while adding needless strain to the whole process.

How to parent a situation will depend on in which areas your child is doing well and in which areas he or she is falling behind. We feel a good parenting book will show how and why one child should be parented differently from another child—or the neighbor's kids. Here's the thing: We don't know your children and where they come from. Are they biological or adopted? Are you a single parent or in a two-parent family? Do your children have reading disabilities or social limitations? Are they depressed or angry? All these factors will affect your parenting decisions.

Good parenting needs to be learned and practiced since it doesn't come naturally for most people. In fact, much of parenting is counterintuitive. The natural thing to do is often the wrong thing to do, so we need to learn new skills and practice them until they begin to feel natural. For example, too many reprimands—even those with best intentions—might actually hurt a situation without our awareness. Even the desire to be a “great parent” could hinder our ability to parent our child effectively and efficiently. It may sound like a good thing, but parents who are overly concerned with how well they are doing may lose perspective and become too emotionally involved in a situation to think clearly. Therefore, new skills are more effective than more effort.

We want parenting to be easier and more effective because wasted energy is a big problem for parents today. Many hours and much emotional energy are spent in parenting strategies

where nothing positive is produced. We hope this book will be practical and helpful. Perhaps it will even be a breath of fresh common sense for an endeavor that has become far too complicated and laborious.

As professionals working with children and teenagers, we have both recognized that kids today need to be raised in a way that reduces stress, shame, and resentment. Too many kids struggle with discouragement, so we have taken an extensive look at why this is so. Perhaps the most pervasive struggle for older kids is their awareness that they are not ready for life. We have seldom come across any child older than ten who doesn't have some fear that adulthood will arrive before he or she is ready.

We have rarely met a child who didn't innately value and respect any adult exhibiting wisdom, kindness, strength, honesty, firmness, and humility. While kids act and talk as if they just want their own way, they really want adults in their lives they can lean on as they do the hard work of growing up, and do so without damaging the adults' feelings or their connection together.

We've chosen the title *Gist* as it means the bottom line, the truth, or the inner workings of something. We say "the gist of it" when we want someone to know the way something really works. This book is about preparing your kids for life, and doing that in an effective way. As we discuss what qualities a *life-ready* child would have, it seemed that it would be helpful to devote part of the book to a brief description of the nature of life as we see it. Therefore, the first part of the book is about love, learning, living, and joy. You may have a different opinion about these foundational characteristics of life, but at least you will know where we are

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coming from as we reflect on these crucial topics. We need to be life-ready adults if we are going to raise life-ready kids. We encourage you to read this first section as a way to gain valuable insight for parenting in a way that focuses on all of us being life-ready.

The second section of the book is about learning solid parenting thought processes and implementing proven strategies.

The third section takes a deeper look at the unintended consequences of ineffective parenting.

With all the stories, insights, and advice, we still know that the real power for change is learning how to think differently about parenting. We share this book as a labor of love and with excitement.

If you would like to discuss the ideas in this book with other parents as you read it, you can download a free study guide with additional Christian content at Tyndale.es/GIST.

PART I

Foundational
Principles
of Life

1

LOVE MUST EVOLVE

*We are not the same persons this year as last;
nor are those we love. It is a happy chance if we, changing,
continue to love a changed person.*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

A FAMILY WAS OUT DRIVING and saw a dead adult female red fox lying in the road. In the weeds nearby they spied a baby fox. The little guy was clearly terrified and did not know whether to run or stay. About six weeks old, he was strong and agile, but without his mother he wouldn't be able to survive in the wild.

The family brought the fox home and built a wonderful and comfortable kennel for him. They named him Hank and fed him grain-free food from the pet store. He had a dozen toys in his kennel and enjoyed a wonderful life. Soon there was a mutual trust, and Hank became a much-loved pet. The family planned to raise the fox until he was fully grown. When he was ready to fend for himself, they

would release him back into the wild near the spot where he was found.

Hank was a perfect specimen of a red fox. He was 10 percent bigger than most wild foxes, and his beautiful red coat glistened in the sunshine pouring through the living room window. This was the only sunshine Hank saw, with the exception of brief, leashed potty breaks. The family knew he would surely run away if unleashed, and he was in no way ready to survive on his own in the wild.

Soon the family celebrated Hank's fourth birthday. By then they had switched from their two-year plan to a four-year plan, fearing that Hank would more likely become prey than be able to find food on his own. For years, the family had told their friends they were raising Hank with the goal of setting him free. Now, four years into Hank's life, people were starting to ask why Hank was still lying on the couch and wasn't out in the woods. The family wanted to keep their commitment to release Hank, but they knew he had no skills for survival in the wild. Strong and beautiful as he was, after six hours in the woods Hank would have been looking for a bag that read "Science Diet." Hank's family reflected on how they got into this mess.

This family had brought Hank home four years earlier, intending to protect him and prepare him for life in the wild. They hadn't realized that love must evolve, and had failed to prepare Hank to live free and on his own.

A first child is born. Strong emotions fill us as the miracle of birth happens before our eyes. Impassioned, we reach down to touch tiny fingers and smell the unique newborn fragrance. We listen with wonder to cries, grunts, and cute infant squeaks. This child seemingly comes out of nowhere,

yet contains our DNA. She holds our inheritance within her, along with a world of possibilities. We are captured and fall completely in love with this tiny, vulnerable child.

Along with this love, we face an endeavor of greater magnitude, potential, and pitfalls than any we've previously known. Instinctively jolted, at least temporarily, out of self-centeredness, we step into a new level of existence. With an acute sense of the task's importance, we realize that we have entered into legacy for the first time in our lives. This precious child before us is the enduring part of us that we will pass down.

When we break down the elements of this love, we are aware that this child:

- came from us
- needs our protection
- is our legacy
- has immense potential
- is a miracle
- is totally accepted
- is completely vulnerable and precious

The pure love we experience in that first week of life is so uncomplicated. Not easy, but certainly uncomplicated. Many parents find that first week to be perfection—a perfect child embraced in perfect love. Eventually this love will need to evolve into something different. In every relationship and aspect of life, love must evolve to survive.

Bringing this child home must evolve into sending that child into the world. Potential must evolve into limitation. Hope must evolve into disappointment. Perfection must evolve into reality and failure.

Because love always emerges as something other than what we hoped for and something different from how it started, it follows that our love as parents must evolve. It might even need to evolve from a “would never hurt” love into a “need to allow hurt” love. This little miracle may evolve into a bad dream.

When does the simple love during infancy need to start changing?

It Starts with a Will

The journey for parents to a new love is launched when a child exhibits a will. The caring and protecting mode changes into managing differences between the child’s will and the parent’s will. Bedtime is no longer driven by a primal need for sleep; now it is driven by a child’s personal desire to stay up. We start on the road to adulthood with the onset of joys and disappointments, give and take, negotiation and compromise.

Both joys and disappointments are initiated when a child begins to have opinions. This exertion of demands or will is traditionally followed by wants, followed by opposing opinions, followed by conflict, leading to a relationship that is completely different from the one that began at the birthing center.

A new environment emerges from will and personal opinion. This environment includes such principles as authority, discipline, disappointment, relationship, and achievement. While this is not an exhaustive list, it captures a lot of the challenges facing parents. In its simplest terms, the essence of loving our children is about moving our vulnerable and beautiful child from infancy to adulthood. An

understanding of authority, discipline, disappointment, relationship, and achievement will all be needed for the child to reach maturity. Any person without a significant understanding of these essentials has not developed and is not ready for adulthood.

This is why many parents reach out to get help. We hear, “My child has a problem with authority” or “My child has a problem with discipline” or “My child has a problem with relationships.” Perhaps the most common is, “My child has a problem with disappointment.”

Too many kids become adults who are underdeveloped or not developed at all in one or more of these areas. It is not surprising these children are underprepared for life. Their parents’ love did not evolve over time and they did not learn the necessary lessons. This isn’t to say the parents lacked love, only that it did not evolve.

Authority and hierarchy require a child to lay aside his or her will. This is a foundational truth for families and any society. Everyone has to answer to someone. All must comply with laws and authority that may differ from what they want or think is fair at that moment. Without a respect for this truth, one can’t be adult. To correctly love our children we must teach them that this is the nature of life. It’s not love if we’re not preparing them for this reality. This is far more loving than giving presents, trophies, and encouragement.

Another aspect of this evolution involves oppositional bonding—practicing a love that stays constant or grows, despite differing opinions. In an unhealthy family, conflict or opposition can negatively affect relationships. Kids in these families can grow up to believe that harmony is an

essential part of bonding. However, healthy families allow for oppositional positions; in these families, family members can disagree without having that conflict diminish the relationship. If this ability isn't developed, conflict can feel like abandonment.

Know Where You're Headed

We won't be afraid of or disillusioned by this parenting journey if we understand where the journey is to take us. It starts with a child who is adored and protected, but it must give way over the course of twenty years to a child who is free and equipped. That is our destination.

How does this evolution happen? The steps that lead to maturing transitions must be taken intentionally and skillfully. Except for the few truly "natural" parents who do this instinctively, most parents need to be deliberate about leading their child to a place of self-governance and being equipped for life. In our era and particularly in our Western culture, many parents have become sidetracked with performance and other urgencies, while the process of ensuring that their child becomes an equipped, independent, and responsible adult suffers due to lack of focus.

What if this process doesn't happen? The consequence will be a twenty-year-old with the maturity level of a fourteen-year-old. There's nothing wrong with a fourteen-year-old maturity level. It just looks awkward in someone who's twenty-something. If you wonder whether this is an exaggeration, just look around and see how many twenty-year-olds are living without direction, accountability, independence, and a sense of responsibility. Much of this can be traced back to a child who was deeply loved, but with a love that didn't evolve.

Age-Appropriate Development

Knowing when and how to transition to a different kind of love is a talent that parents need to develop. It is as problematic for a two-year-old to be given freedom and responsibility as it is for a twenty-year-old to be only adored and protected. In many families we can see both of these errors of focus. Some start too early in their zeal to be good parents, pushing their children to excel in their accomplishments beyond what's age-appropriate. This type of rushing is all too common and occasionally even reaches the news.

Several years ago a seven-year-old girl crashed a small plane in the western United States as she attempted to become the youngest person to fly across the country. She needed more protection and less self-sufficiency for this mission. In our opinion, her parents' love was not age-appropriate.

It is a wonderful thing for a child to develop in normal, healthy, and age-appropriate ways. Here are a few examples of expected tasks for a typical three-year-old:

- learning the language that allows the child to express ideas and thoughts related to his or her environment
- counting from three to five objects in a group to determine how many objects are in the group (rational counting)
- classifying objects into categories (size, shape, color, etc.), ordering objects and identifying shapes such as squares, circles, triangles, and rectangles
- recognizing characteristics of different seasons and weather

- beginning to observe, explore, and describe a wide variety of live animals and where they live

You get the idea. These are wonderful and amazing things for a three-year-old to learn. There is a corresponding list of wonderful and amazing things for an eighteen-year-old to learn. Expected skills for an eighteen-year-old include:

- listening to and evaluating the viewpoints of others
- delaying gratification (ability to put off what he or she wants to do now because there are more important things to do or because there is a better time to do it)
- accepting the fact that he or she can't always win, and learning from mistakes instead of being demoralized by the outcome
- differentiating between rational decision-making and emotional impulse
- separating true love from transitory infatuation
- taking ownership and responsibility for personal actions

These are just some of the developmental qualities a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old should be exhibiting.

Customizing Your Love

When you pay close attention to your child, it's not that difficult to know how your parental love needs to change next. A book—even ours—may not help with this process. Evolving love is a universal issue. Whether it's our relationship with

an aging parent, an ex-spouse, a sibling, or a partner, if we're evolving, our love for the other must evolve too.

Without knowing you or your child, we can't tell you *how* this evolving love has to take place. But it *must* take place. We can't tell you how much to protect or push your eighth-grade child. Some children need to be held in and some need to be pushed out. Endeavoring to know this is what an evolving love is about.

The GIST of It

- It's very important for parents to recall the joy and pleasure they experienced at the birth or adoption of each of their children. Remember those precious times, full of hope and anticipation. When times get tough, it's easy to forget all the good—and great—times and focus on the negatives.
- If you love your child the same way for four years, your love is not evolving. Watch your child closely in daily life and you will figure out where and how your love needs to evolve.
- How we love our kids needs to change along the way. We cannot nurture them, compliment them, protect them, or adore them into becoming mature, life-ready young adults. It just won't happen that way. Our job is to train our children, prepare them, and in them leave a legacy. Training them for adulthood means freeing and equipping them. This is our primary role.