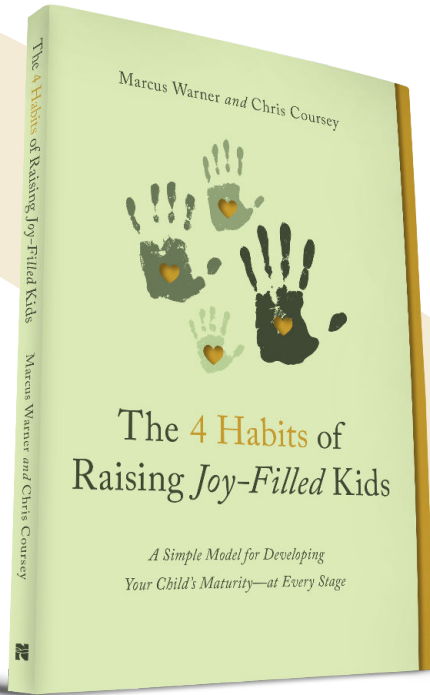


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The 4 Habits of Raising Joy-Filled Kids

book excerpt



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CHAPTER 1

Why Is Parenting So Hard?

YOU CAN'T BE A PARENT without feeling, at times, that for all the sense of reward and satisfaction in raising a child, it's also really, really hard. But why?

We think we've discovered a surprising reason why.

At the heart of this book is a unique idea: that families exist to grow joy. A clinical psychologist who has dealt with a lot of messy (and often scary) family dynamics through the years recently told me, "I've asked a lot of people what they thought the purpose of a family was, and none of them ever said that the purpose of a family was to grow joy." We want to change that. In fact, we hope this book launches a joy revolution, because we are convinced that transforming "low-joy" families into high-joy families can change the world.

What do "low-joy" families look like? When I (Chris) met my future wife, Jen, she could hardly get out of bed.

Jen grew up amid pervasive fear and depression. As a child, she struggled with suicidal thoughts and hopelessness. The depression was smothering her. It was hard for her to find hope, much less joy. Today, however, she and I train people in the skills and habits of joy-filled living.

This turnaround didn't happen overnight. It happened as Jen discovered specific skills she was missing. It was during this process that we met Dr. Jim Wilder and discovered the neuroscience of joy. Over time, we began intensive work focused on developing the missing skills in both of our lives. Eventually, with Dr. Wilder's guidance, we developed a training program that helps others grow these important skills.¹

Jen's story offers hope at several levels.

- Low-joy beginnings don't mean low-joy futures are inevitable.
- People raised in low-joy families aren't doomed to raise low-joy kids themselves.
- Skills and habits can be developed that increase our own ability to live with joy.
- Those skills and habits can be passed on to our kids.

The primary purpose of this book is to introduce you to four habits for passing important skills on to your kids to equip them live with joy in a low-joy world.

Raising joy-filled kids doesn't mean our kids are happy

all the time. That isn't even a desirable goal. Trying to keep our kids happy all the time just spoils them. Joy-filled kids see life as an adventure. They live with confidence that they can do hard things, develop curiosity and creativity, succeed at what is important, and recover from failure. They learn how to find the joy that is available to each of us every day of our lives and develop the skills to bounce back from hard experiences. In this sense, parenting is all about building the habits that grow our own capacity for joy and instilling those habits into our children. In the next chapter, we will explain the four habits of raising joy-filled kids, and in the chapters that follow, we will explain how to apply those habits as we parent our kids at the infant, child, and adult stages of life.

First, however, we want to take a look at why parenting is so hard, despite our best efforts do do it right.

WHY PARENTING IS SO HARD

Most parents have good intentions. Few of us bring children into this world with the express purpose of sucking the joy out of their lives and making them miserable. But it happens. It happened to some of us when we were kids. So why is parenting so hard, despite our best efforts do do it right? At the heart of many of our issues is the all-too-common reality that many of us are low-joy people from low-joy families. Here is a quick look at four characteristics of low-joy parenting.

1. Fear of failure. There is a major difference between fear-based parenting and joy-based parenting. Fear-based parents worry about messing up our kids. We worry what others will think of us. We can find ourselves trying to keep everyone happy, including our kids, only to discover that no one seems to be happy.

The fear of failure tends to make us angry, anxious, and avoidant. I (Marcus) can't tell you how many conversations I avoided with my kids until I got so angry that I finally said something I regretted. More than once I had to go apologize for snapping at my kids when the situation could have been resolved much earlier and with less distress if I hadn't been so avoidant.

Anxious parents are often clingy. They can't stand to see their children upset with them. Such parents often believe that the worst thing that can happen is for their kids to get angry at them. They then avoid conversations that might stir anger. They appease again and again, but it doesn't work. Their kids still end up angry. The point here is that avoidant parenting is fear-based parenting, and it doesn't produce joy-filled kids.

2. Lack of skills. As parents, we often feel overwhelmed. It can feel like we are piloting a plane we have no business flying because we were never properly trained how to read all the gauges and use all of the controls. When we lack parenting skills, we often go to one of two extremes.

We under-parent. When we under-parent, we like to

play with our kids, but we don't know what to do with the problems they face. It is not uncommon in families for one parent to be "the fun person," while the other, by default, becomes "the problem-solving person." It is easy to think that the fun person is the better parent, but that is often not true. Many times, the fun parent disappears when things get hard, leaving the other parent to handle the problems. It isn't that the other parent doesn't want to have fun, but they get abandoned to deal with the hard stuff so often, it becomes their role.

We over-parent. When we over-parent, we micromanage our children and become so focused on the problems we forget to have fun.

Chris and I don't point this out so that couples can fight over who is guilty of which extreme, but so that both can grow in their ability to work together.

Most of us picked up parental training by watching other people—especially our parents and grandparents. That is great if they were highly skilled and deeply loving people. However, if they lacked relational and emotional skills, chances are we don't have those skills either, because no one modeled them for us. In such settings, we become reactive parents. We have learned what we *don't* like and how we don't want to parent, but we do not develop important habits that help us raise mature children. A lack of healthy examples is the core reason for a lack of skills.

3. Unresolved pain. Unresolved pain can lead to a wide variety of parenting missteps.

Triggered parenting. Often, parents with unresolved pain get triggered and stop acting like adults. Triggered parents don't act like themselves—that is, they stop functioning like the caring, well-intentioned people they are and turn into someone others would hardly recognize. There were times I (Marcus) got triggered and felt angry as a parent. Most of the time, I remembered to excuse myself and calm down before I dealt with the issues, but now and then I would scold my child in the heat of the moment. It never produced good fruit. I always had to go back and ask for forgiveness and repair the relationship. I simply wasn't the same parent when I was triggered.

Distracted parenting. Many parents with unresolved pain are so focused on their own issues they don't give their kids the attention they need. Distracted parents are usually addicted to something—work, wine, TV, social media, novels, or darker attractions like porn and drugs. These addictions take priority over their children so that they are often out of touch with what is going on in their child's life. We have talked to many people who had to parent their parents when they were children. In one extreme case, a little girl we know lived with a mom who was regularly high and strung out on medications, which left the girl to not only get herself dressed, fed, and off to school on time, but to take care of her mom as well. It

became the girl's job to make sure Mom was okay. The girl was only seven.

Reverse parenting. Reverse parenting happens when we expect our kids to take care of us, instead of the other way around. Many parents with unresolved pain use their kids and expect them to adapt *to their needs* rather than sacrificially caring for their children. Some parents live through their kids' achievements in sports, music, beauty pageants, and more.

4. Broken bonding patterns. If we were not raised with enough joy in our own family, we probably developed a broken bonding pattern that makes it difficult to form joyful bonds with our kids. Three of the most common fear-based bonding patterns are dismissive, distracted, and disorganized.² Those can be experienced on a spectrum (like one through ten). They can also overlap, but it is helpful to understand them individually first.

Dismissive bonding. A dismissive bonding style is like Teflon—nothing sticks. People with dismissive attachment tend to float from relationship to relationship and have trouble with commitment. They can be present with you but not really engaged.

Distracted bonding. A distracted bonding style is like Saran Wrap—such people tend to be clingy, and it can feel like no amount of bonding is ever enough. This attachment pattern develops when children's needs are not being met on their terms. Just like a child who doesn't get

fed regularly begins to feel a desperation about the next meal, so a child who doesn't get connection at the times they need it will feel a similar desperation that creates this distracted bonding pattern.

Disorganized bonding. When the child wants to bond with Mom or Dad, but the parent is scary for some reason, the child will learn to be afraid to bond. They instinctively realize they are not safe and build a narrative around that feeling that says, "I want to be with Dad, but he can be mean. I'm not sure what to do." "I want to be close to Mom, but she gets really angry. I guess I'll stay away." It can also happen when the child sees that Mommy or Daddy is afraid. They think, "If they are afraid, maybe I should be afraid too." This can also work the other way around. Mom and Dad can have these feelings toward their kids. Disorganized attachment is the feeling that I want to be close to you, but I'm afraid of what will happen if I risk it.

THE CORE ISSUE: MATURITY

Low-joy homes produce low-maturity people. This is because joy and maturity are closely related. Maturity can be defined as the ability to handle hardship well because we have learned to remain relational, act like ourselves ("us" at our best), and return to joy.³ Without maturity life becomes a constant pursuit of temporary pleasures, and relational joy becomes elusive. In order to grow joy-

filled kids we need to guide our children to full maturity for the stage of life they are in. To accomplish this, we need to learn what maturity looks like at different stages of development.

One easy test of maturity is this: do our kids do things out of fear or out of joy? (We could ask ourselves the same question.) Immature people motivate themselves and others with fear. It takes continual practice in a variety of circumstances to learn how

to motivate ourselves with joy. So it is with guiding our kids. When our kids are motivated by joy, they feel like they can do anything. They are adventurous, confident, willing to take risks. When our kids are motivated by fear, they don't like trying new things because they fear getting hurt or getting in trouble or being embarrassed or failing in a way they don't know how to handle.

Fear happens when we think we will get stuck in emotions that overwhelm us. This is why one child sees swimming as a joy and can't wait to leap off the high dive, and another child will avoid getting wet altogether. One knows that even if it hurts a little, they will recover and be okay. The other expects to be overwhelmed by their emotions and left to handle them by themselves. When I (Marcus) taught my daughter Stephanie to jump into the deep end of the pool for the first time, I stood right

When kids are motivated by joy, they feel like they can do anything.

next the side of the pool and made it super safe for her to explore the experience. She already knew how to swim. Her grandmother and mother had been playing with her in the water. My job was to help her overcome the natural fear of simply jumping into the deep end on her own. After jumping into my arms a few times and realizing she was okay, she started jumping in by herself as I watched. Before we were done, she was diving to the bottom of the pool and recovering coins I dropped there for her to find. Swimming and diving in the deep end of the pool stopped being scary, but we had to take it one step at a time. Notice I didn't stand on the side of the pool and shame her into jumping in. It was relational and age-appropriate, marked by little victories each step along the way.

Who doesn't want to raise good, loving, mature children? Every loving parent wants their kids to grow up to become good, successful people who flourish in their relationships. In the next chapter we want to offer you a simple model that provides guidance to what parents need to do with their children at each stage of development.

At the end of each chapter, we will provide you with questions and exercises to help you recognize patterns in your own parenting style and put into practice the four habits of raising joy-filled kids. We will start with two assessments.

FEAR ASSESSMENT

1. What do you fear most about parenting?
2. What robs you of your parenting joy most often?

Next steps:

- Connect with some friends and compare notes on how you answer these questions.
- Connect with some people from an older generation and see how they would answer these questions.

GAPS ASSESSMENT

1. Do you feel like there are gaps in the parenting “software” you downloaded from your family?
2. What parents do you know who have skills you wish you had?

Next steps:

- Schedule time to connect with these parents and ask them about how they handle certain aspects of parenting that are difficult for you.
- Share stories with these parents about some of your favorite parenting moments as well as “redemptive failures”—the times you messed up but learned something valuable and redemptive.

HABIT BUILDER #1—*Nonverbal joy*

1. Practice nonverbal joy as a couple.
2. Practice nonverbal joy with your kids.

The goal of these exercises is to make the other person smile without talking to them or tickling them or using props (like toys or tablets). You might try cuddling, holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, lighting up with excitement, and other such techniques.

HABIT BUILDER #2—*Add verbal joy*

Do the same two exercises as before but this time, add words of appreciation. What do you like about the other person? What about them makes you feel joy? Put that into words in addition to the nonverbal actions that you would normally use to connect.

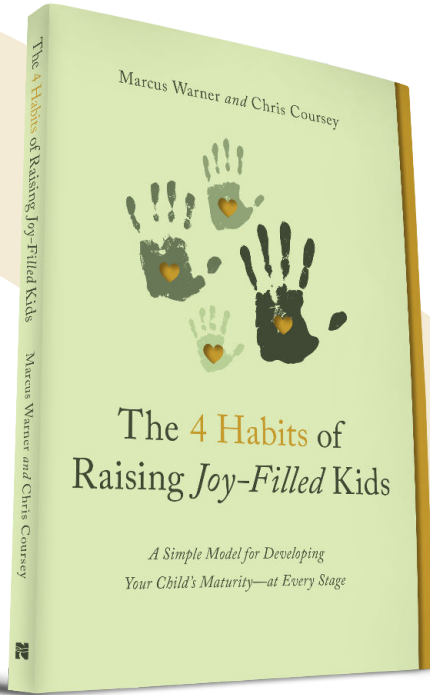
Joy is best grown using your face, voice, body language, and words to convey “I am glad to be with you!” We want to find ways to convey joy that best match the age and stage of our children. For young children, you watch and wait for their attention, then light up with a big smile on your face. Watch to be sure your energy responses match their energy level, so you do not overwhelm them with too much stimulation. With older children, use nonverbal elements to start joy but

include your words to share appreciation. It also helps to reminisce about moments of shared joy you have had together. Watch what happens!

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