

# RESPONSIVE PARENTING

Principles for Raising Connected  
& Healthy Kids

## STUDY GUIDE

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## Introduction

Reactive vs Responsive parenting. These are two terms you will understand well by the time we complete this study. *Reactive parenting* is harmful to children and has long-term negative effects on their adult behavior. *Responsive parenting* is what parenting was meant to be. It is the place where parents and children thrive and stay connected through meaningful communication and shared experience.

Many young parents are completely overwhelmed with parenting and are very discouraged. The major problems young couples face today are marital conflict, financial problems, lack of emotional connection, disagreement in their parenting style, an inability to control their strong negative emotions, and an inability to resolve the conflict. In addition, many young couples are isolated from extended families and do not know where to turn for help. They are distrusting of many people and worry about confidentiality if they did seek help.

The journey you are about to begin today could change your life and your family. You must, however, be willing to admit your shortcomings and recognize where you need to improve. Call on God to help you, and he will. The principles in this book work because they have been proven in families over many generations. Dig in, study this together with your spouse, and implement what you learn as soon as you grasp it. Keep a journal of your experience starting today! When the class is finished, share what you have experienced.

**How concerned should we be about isolation in our children?**

**How would you explain *self-regulation*?**

**What is meant by *self-defensive behavior*?**

**What is meant by *parenting with a long view*?**

**What is meant by *principles that produce outcomes*?**

**How does the way we handle life influence the way our children handle life?**

## Chapter 1: Reactive Parenting—How Did We Get Here?

Reactive parenting is done in reaction to something, whether the child or the parent's own problems. Reactive parenting is charged with negative emotion like frustration, anger, and anxiety. There are two styles of reactive parenting: *permissive parenting*, which is an obsessive effort to make the child happy at any cost and *authoritarian parenting*, which is an obsession to make the child obey the rules.

Permissive parenting seeks a warm connection with the child, and authoritarian parenting demands respect. Children of permissive parents tend to act out because they feel uninhibited, while children of authoritarian parents internalize their anxiety. Both of these reactive styles produce poor results; they are nonetheless very prevalent, especially permissive parenting. Reactive parenting is not effective in resolving conflict. In fact, the opposite is true, it perpetuates conflict. It diminishes self-esteem, stunts autonomy, and creates defensive behavior. The effect of reactive parenting is low self-esteem in children.

**What is wrong with having a favorite child or comparing one child to another?**

**What happens to the children when parents don't agree on the parenting style?**

**Why is shame so damaging to a child?**

**Why is withholding love from a child so hurtful to the child?**

**Why is modeling self-control so important to good parenting?**

**How can we make good emotional deposits into our children's lives?**

## Chapter 2: Parenting Styles & Self-Esteem

We were made for connection with God and with others. The connection between mom and dad and each child is essential for there to be good parenting. Through that connection flows everything—the emotional intimacy we all need, the principles we want to instill, the self-esteem we hope they acquire, and the development of their own personality. Many things can destroy that connection, such as neglect (in fact neglect is just another form of abuse), unresolved conflict, and divorce.

Connection is the starting point for good parenting. If it is not there, then find a way to reconnect. The self-esteem of your child depends on it. Once we have the connection, we seek to find “The Way” God has for each child (Prov 22:6), primarily through acceptance of who they are (their personality and their interests). Find that way, and his self-esteem will grow.

**What is the impact of seeing your parents treat each other with disrespect and with respect?**

**Why is behavior modification not the best approach for older children and teens?**

**Explain what *autonomy* is and why it is so important to build a child’s autonomy.**

**What are some of the ways to decrease your child’s defensive behavior?**

**What are the effects on parents and children of unresolved conflict?**

**What is needed to resolve conflict in the home?**

**What happens to a child where the parents withhold affection?**

## Chapter 3: Where It All Began—Our Families of Origin

It is impossible to underestimate the impact of our families of origin. If a child grows up in a home where there is constant conflict, that child will most likely have a low self-esteem. We are influenced by the quality of our parents' relationship, how they treat each other, how they resolve their conflicts, and how well they are connected. If they have good emotional control, we probably will too, and if they don't, we won't. We tend to treat our spouse the way we saw our parents treat each other. We tend to parent the way we experienced their parenting growing up. We imbibe our parent's prejudices and their good qualities. We are the product of our family of origin.

**What things are children at a risk of experiencing if exposed to unresolved conflict in the home?**

**What are some of the ways children react to unresolved conflict?**

**What does research say about the ways substance abuse affects parenting?**

**What does the concept of *accessibility* mean to a child?**

**How true is it that children develop their parents' attitudes?**

**What is meant by saying a child's bad behavior is only a symptom of the real problem?**

## Chapter 4: Responsive Parenting

Reactive parenting is propelled by negative emotion, is reckless, impulsive, and causes collateral damage to those nearby. Responsive parenting is guided by positive emotion, is safe, and requires us to be thoughtful and responsible, not impulsive and reactive. It is parenting with the head first and then the heart. There is plenty of emotion and connection, but they are under the control of a rational brain. Responsive parenting is deliberate, with thoughtful dependence on God. It demonstrates emotional control that rises above the reactive interaction that can happen because of irritability or temperament. This style of parenting offers the child much needed emotional availability and warmth and provides the atmosphere in which children flourish. Responsive parenting creates a sense of dignity and purpose in the children.

**How can a person change a dysfunctional pattern such as lying, yelling, or avoidance?**

**When their parents do not collaborate in parenting, what message is conveyed to the children?**

**How does being patient and observant help you be a responsive parent?**

**Explain what is meant by *delayed gratification* as a concept, and how do we teach it to our children?**

**Why is control and connectedness such an important part of being a responsive parent?**

**What factors enable children and adolescents to better internalize their parents' values?**

## **Chapter 5: Pictures of Responsive Parenting**

Maybe you remember being with your mom or dad when you were a child, and that memory is with you today in a special way. I can remember riding with my father as he drove trucks. He was so gentle and proud to have me with him even though I was so little. I can still remember the sights, sounds, and even the smells of the places we went. I felt safe, and my brain recorded these very powerful memories that can today be triggered by certain smells or sounds. Good childhood memories are the focus of connection where we flourished in a home where we felt loved. How important are good childhood memories? What are some of your most meaningful ones?

**Why do some parents fearfully avoid confrontation with their children?**

**How does teaching a child to be respectful positively affect their future social interactions?**

**How does inconsistency in discipline confuse a child?**

**Why should a parent never discipline a child impulsively?**

**How does reactive parenting deny accessibility to your child?**

**Forgiveness keeps what things out of our lives and allows what other things in?**

**What does the illustration of the cat and the squirrel demonstrate?**



## **Chapter 6: Responsive Parenting Strategies**

To be emotionally connected as a family, we have to have quality family time. Eating meals together as a family is so important because it is a wonderful opportunity to share time together, to talk, and to laugh, which we need to stay connected. Important ventures always have a plan with strategies. The invasion of D-Day was planned for over two years before it happened on June 6, 1944. Even day-to-day operations at work and school follow a plan, then why not the family?

If we want to become responsive parents, we need a strategy. For example, if young parents can agree on teaching respect to their children, and they start early, they will see the dividends for years to come. Another example is, as parents, our job is not to keep our children from being bored. If we do that, we are creating a co-dependency. Our will children see us as their recreation directors and not as their parents.

**Why should children's involvement in sports, arts, academics, etc. be carefully considered?**

**How are children most influenced in the way they treat others?**

**What is *learned helplessness*?**

**What causes children to be resilient?**

**Does parenting differ from one child to the next?**

**Inflexibility in parenting produces what in our children?**

**How can a parent help a child who has experienced shame?**

## Chapter 7: Helping Our Children Grow Their Personalities

When we make our children feel safe and loved and refuse to pick a favorite child, then they will flourish. It is important to understand that we do not bond on the same level with each child at the same time. When we refuse to compare them and instead accept them as they are, their personalities begin to blossom. If we are too controlling, then they will be dependent on us, and if we are under-controlling, they will be unprepared for life. We want to see their personality and their autonomy grow together. We do that through unconditional acceptance, forgiveness, exercising our own emotional control, and learning to be resourceful as parents.

**How can a parent better prepare their children to experience rejection?**

**How does emotional intelligence help us be resourceful in parenting?**

**When we teach a child self-worth, that child is freed from what things?**

**What is meant by the phrase *making meaning out of chaos*?**

**Explain the connection between the words *redemption* and *accommodation*.**

**How does God help us overcome painful memories?**

## **Chapter 8: When Parents Combine Their Gifts**

When mothers and fathers have a cooperative parenting style, they minimize conflict. When parents cooperate with each other, children are less confused and respond better and faster. Responsive parenting helps parents enjoy their children more by helping them appreciate each stage of development instead of wishing for the next one to come. The parents are there to share the load of parenting with each other.

Collaboration eliminates the competition and recognizes that mothers can do things that dads are not very good at, and dads can do things that are harder for mothers to teach their children. Both bring a different skill set and a different mindset to the task of parenting, and both complement each other. When two parents agree, they have a better chance of being responsive. Reactive parenting is about putting out fires, but responsive parenting wants to know how the fire got started so it doesn't happen again. Responsive parenting even teaches the kids how to put out the fire.

**Why is it important for both parents to play with infants and small children?**

**What are the benefits of a secure attachment with mom and dad?**

**What happens to children when parents keep their promises to them?**

**Besides teaching children appropriate behavior and social adjustment, what are parents simultaneously teaching their children?**

**How does a child benefit from watching parents take ownership of their own lives?**

**Why is it so important for a child to have a model right in front of them on how to live life?**

## **Chapter 9: Combating Shame with Acceptance**

Reactive parenting is associated with shame and fear—two dangerous components that hinder healthy development. Responsive parenting is deliberate and thoughtful. It employs mature emotional control from the parent that rises above the reactive interaction. This style of parenting offers the child much needed emotional availability and warmth. Children need parents who are approachable no matter what the situation. They need to know that they will be heard and the parent will make an informed decision about their complaint. Most of us can remember some situation we faced growing up when we didn't feel there was any accessibility.

**What kind of reactions can shame cause in our children?**

**How does God often heal the shame a child has experienced?**

**How important to our sense of self-esteem is a relationship with our creator?**

**How can we build an unassailable self-esteem in our children?**

**What is meant by the special window for a child?**

**What happens to a child when they feel emotionally disconnected?**

**What about an adult when they feel disconnected in a marriage?**

## **Chapter 10: Resolving Conflict**

We all long for connection because God made us that way. This connection was meant to begin in the earliest stages of our lives. Isolation may be more damaging to an infant than early mistreatment. Isolation hinders the baby's neurological brain circuitry from fully developing, which will eventually show up in the child's ability to concentrate and control his emotions. A baby who is ignored for hours on end in a neglectful home will eventually stop crying. The emotions of this little infant just shut down.

Men or women who show little emotion usually grew up with poor connections. What we all need and desire is to be loved, accepted, and connected all through life. We all need to make meaning out of confusing communication and clarify our thoughts and feelings. Making meaning out of confusing communication or apologizing for misspoken words helps create cohesion.

**Is conflict always a bad thing in a family?**

**What happens for children when they see and hear their parents talk through a family conflict?**

**What is wrong with identifying a problem member of the family?**

**What is the best way to prevent any member of the family from getting hurt and becoming bitter?**

**How often should we forgive?**

**How does a family create an other-person focus in the family**

**Why is it important to grow your faith in God as a parent?**

## **Chapter 11: Don't Ever Quit!**

Whatever you do, don't quit! Don't quit on your marriage, no matter how hard it gets. Get help through counseling, reading good books, and talking to people who are older and whom you admire. Look at how their kids turned out and ask them what they did. Share your struggles with someone who really cares about you and who will pray for you. Don't give up on your kids no matter how difficult it gets. Never stop praying for them and loving them. If you don't give up on them, they won't give up on you. The fact that you are there year after year, even when they mess up, is what gives them hope and confidence. That is what you call unconditional love. There isn't a parent out there who at one time or another didn't feel like a failure. The only difference between responsible and irresponsible parents is one thing. The responsible parent does not quit!

**What does it mean to you to not quit on your marriage and family?**

**Where can you find help for your marriage?**

**Why is it important to admit our mistakes and learn from them?**

**How are discipline and love related in parenting?**

**Why is prayer such an important component in parenting?**

**What have you lost that you long to recover?**

**In the story of the red lizard, how much are we mastered by our natural desires?**

## **Chapter 12: Attitude Is Everything**

It all comes down to one little word—attitude. It is impossible to stress how important attitude is in life. It is our compass that defines our direction. It is our altimeter that influences our level of functioning. It is the motor that drives our values and beliefs. Unless our attitude is attached to something immovable such as our belief in God and his Word, our attitude will fluctuate in reaction to day-to-day events.

Attitude is everything when it comes to parenting. Your attitude as the parent sets the tone for the children. If you are irritable and hard to get along with, they will follow your example. The older child will treat the younger the way you are treating him or even the way you are treating your spouse. If you have a persevering attitude that is encouraging, they will model that. When was the last time you had a meaningful conversation with your kids about attitude?

**How can we help our children develop a strong emotional intelligence?**

**Why do parents need quiet time to slow down and reflect on God's greatness and sovereignty?**

**What happens to us when we experience loneliness?**

**Why is it important to express how we feel to God?**

**What is the difference between lonesomeness and loneliness?**

**How do we learn to prioritize and separate worthy from unworthy things in our lives and families?**

**Why is doing the right thing never a bad thing?**

## **Chapter 13: Overcoming Adversity**

Responsive parenting is all about parenting your child in such a way that he or she develops a capacity to manage life successfully without you. Often young parents choose making their child happy as the goal of parenting. This kind of parenting can be an overwhelming task, especially when your child realizes that this is your goal.

There are some real problems with the “trying to make your child happy” parenting style because it creates dependence and diminishes autonomy in the child. Secondly, it’s not real life because when your child is old enough to go to school or be around other people, she will discover things are very different. The teacher cannot see her principle task as trying to make your child happy. Of course, we all want our children to be happy, but happiness has to come as a result of other things, not because it is our primary pursuit in life.

**How can we learn from our mistakes?**

**Why is making a child happy not the primary goal of good parenting?**

**How many ways are there to look at adversity?**

**How and when is character developed?**

**What is the secret of the Christian life that will influence your children?**

**Can a parent who has failed ever raise good kids?**



## Chapter 14: Learning Self-Control

The older I get, the more I realize that self-control is so important in life. It is essential to being good at anything we do. Just think about how great athletes have to continually work on self-control in their handling of the ball, the bat, or whatever their sport requires. Self-control is about mastering concentration and staying focused. However, the greatest self-control is needed when it comes to interpersonal relationships. If you want to be a good husband or wife or great parent, you have to learn to exercise self-control. Think about the needed self-control it requires to break a negative old habit by taking responsibility for it and refusing to make excuses for it.

**How many areas of life are related to self-control?**

**How do we learn to master self-control over our emotions?**

**What are the signs a person is exercising self-control?**

**What essential qualities does self-control employ?**

**What does *"She knows how to push my buttons"* really mean?**

**What is an effective way to overcome anxiety?**

**If we are still making excuses for our lack of self-control, then what does that indicate?**

## Chapter 15: Growing Future Mothers & Fathers

Why is it so important to have a good marriage in order to be a good parent? Because you are influencing your children by your marriage. Why is it so important to be honest and authentic with your spouse and children? Because this is the only way to produce that same authenticity in them. Why is it so important to exercise self-control in your interaction with your family? Because you are teaching your children how to interact with others. Why is it so important to have a clear and understandable faith? Because it is the only kind your children will readily accept from you as their own.

Our children will learn to tolerate negative emotion, such as being patient with another person who is upset or angry, if they have seen us do that. If they have felt our impatience and disregard for their feelings and desires, they will do the same to their peers. If, on the other hand, they have seen patience modeled and respect demonstrated, they will do that. If they have seen our determination to be truthful and honest time and time again, then they will follow that pattern.

**What does it mean to *put a child in a bind* when the mother and the father do not agree on how to discipline the child?**

**What happens to a child who has been dumped on by a parent complaining about the other parent?**

**How do children learn to tolerate negative emotions?**

**What are two dysfunctional ways to parent teenagers?**

**What is harmful about protecting teens from making mistakes?**

**Helping your child find his or her own identity takes two parents.**

## Chapter 16: Passing the Torch of Faith

Good parenting helps your child connect the dots so they will be prepared for adult life. We have talked about: *forgiveness, accessibility, making meaning out of chaos, connection, acceptance, resolution, turning negative emotion into positive emotion, modeling, self-control, authenticity, and resiliency.* However, the list would not be complete without talking about *faith*.

Faith is the essential component that children need to finish the picture. Specifically, they need to see your faith modeled in front of them. They need to see and experience a faith that makes sense—a faith that works. It is helpful to realize that our children see our faith as a lot of details that they don't understand. That is why it is so important to help them get the big picture of what God is doing in this world and in our lives. One of the most intriguing ways to make sense of your faith for your children is to help them see how it works in your family.

**Why is it so important for children to see and experience their parents' faith?**

**What is meant by the saying *our faith must be practical in the family*?**

**Is there any part of life that is not influenced by our faith?**

**Can God help calm the storms of conflict in homes?**

**What are techniques to help couples learn to control their arguing?**

**What is the benefit to the children to have a family meeting?**

**What happens to us when we realize our purpose comes from our creator?**

## Appendix

### Principles that Produce Outcomes in Children

Think of these principles as seed that is sown in the lives of your children. Your daily interaction with your family in a responsive way, as we have seen in this book, will make these seeds germinate and grow into beautiful plants. Think of parenting as planting, watering, fertilizing, and cultivating.

- **Principle of Forgiveness:** When parents forgive, it gives children clarity and resiliency.
- **Principle of Self-Control:** When parents have self-control, it gives children accessibility.
- **Principle of Respect:** When parents respect each other, children experience acceptance.
- **Principle of Responsibility:** When parents model responsibility, children acquire character.
- **Principle of Accountability:** When parents are accountability, children feel connection.
- **Principle of Humility:** When parents demonstrate humility, children learn authenticity.
- **Principle of Kindness:** When parents are kind and patient, children learn the skill of resolving conflict.
- **Principle of Generosity:** When parents are generous, children experience the joy of sharing.
- **Principle of Diligence:** When parents are diligent, children learn to be industrious.
- **Principle of Faith:** When parents possess genuine faith, children embrace it and model it.
- **Principle of Integrity:** When parents keep their promises children learn the value of commitment.
- **Principle of Courage:** When parents model courage children overcome their fears.
- **Principle of Trust:** When parents demonstrate trust children develop the ability to believe.
- **Principle of Self-Restraint:** When parents demonstrate self-restraint children learn to wait.
- **Principle of Faithfulness:** When parents are faithful to each other children learn to love.

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