

A group of diverse teenagers, including a girl with curly brown hair and freckles in the center, looking up at the camera. The background is a bright, slightly overcast sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

Raising Kids Who Listen

Follow Through, and Take
Ownership Without
Yelling or Nagging

Tracy Huff

Introduction

I'm thrilled you're here.

Because if you're reading this, it means you're part of a community that often feels isolated—the world of motherhood. Whether you're a stay-at-home mom, a business owner, or juggling multiple jobs, I know the weight you're carrying. I know the **loneliness** that can creep in, even when your days are filled with noise, tasks, and people who depend on you.

Motherhood is beautiful, but let's be honest: **it's overwhelming.**

Whether you're managing a home, leading a business, or doing both, it can feel like you're stuck on a treadmill that never stops. You're constantly moving—helping with homework, attending work meetings, running errands, staying up late folding laundry—yet at the end of the day, it feels like you've barely made a dent in the never-ending to-do list.

And worse? **There's no manual for any of it.**

The world expects so much from us, but no one tells us how to balance it all **without losing ourselves in the process.**

You're Not Alone in This Struggle

I've been there.

I know what it's like to question every decision you make as a mom. To wonder if you're doing enough—or if you're doing too much. To lie awake at night worrying:

- *Am I screwing up my kids?*
- *Will this decision affect them for the rest of their lives?*

For years, I raised my children while my husband was on active duty and deployed. For the first **15 to 17 years** of our lives together, we spent more time apart than we did together. There were times I felt **completely overwhelmed**, like I was carrying the world on my shoulders, and no one could truly understand.

I juggled **parenting, personal goals, and the constant worry** of whether I was getting it right—or completely messing it all up.

And then there's time.

Oh, time.

I've looked back on **years that disappeared** in a blur of tasks and obligations, asking myself:

"Where did the time go?"

A friend of mine, Will, once gave a talk that stuck with me. He said:

"You're always doing one of three things with your time: you're either spending it, investing it, or wasting it."

And if I'm honest? **For a long time, I was spending my time on the wrong things.**

I was focused on **what other people expected of me**, rather than on what truly mattered to me.

Sound Familiar?

If any of this resonates with you, here's what I want you to know:

It doesn't have to stay this way.

There is a way to **break free** from the cycle of overwhelm.

There is a way to shift from simply **spending your time** to **investing it**—in what truly matters:

- Your **family**
- Your **dreams**
- **Yourself**

I won't pretend it's easy. And I won't tell you I have all the answers.

But what I can do is share **what I've learned**—from raising my kids through those chaotic years, from working with families as a **martial arts instructor**, and from coaching parents just like you who are looking for a way to find balance and meaning in the chaos of everyday life.

This Isn't About Adding More to Your Plate

The tools and strategies in this book **aren't about doing more.**

They're about **gaining clarity, reclaiming your time, and building a life that feels fulfilling, not exhausting.**

They're about making **small, meaningful changes** that ripple through your life in **big ways.**

This is a **no-judgment zone.**

I'm not here to tell you that you've been doing it wrong.

I'm here to **offer what's worked**—for me, my family, and the countless families I've worked with over the years. My hope is that these experiences and insights will help you **create something different for yourself**—a life that feels a little **lighter, a little simpler, and a lot more joyful.**

You're Not Alone.

Let's take this journey together.

Chapter 1: When Patience Runs Out

Parenting is a job that demands endless patience—and yet, sometimes, we feel like we have none left to give. From sleepless nights with a newborn to the endless “*why?*” stage of toddlerhood to the “*you just don't get it*” phase of adolescence, parenting challenges us at every turn. Patience wears thin, and in those moments, we react—sometimes in ways we regret.

It was one of those mornings.

James was about a year old, and I was in one of the most exhausting times of my life. I was **Active Duty military**, living on post while my husband was stationed two states away. To make things more complicated, I wasn't just a working mom—I was a working mom with a **5:00 a.m. commute, 6:00 a.m. physical training, and a toddler** who didn't care about any of it.

That morning, I woke up late, already behind schedule, scrambling to get both of us ready.

And James? He was not in the mood to cooperate.

Every time I put something on him—a sock, a shirt—he ripped it off and threw it at me.

- Sock on. Sock off.
- Shirt on. Shirt off.

Every second that passed felt like a ticking time bomb, and my frustration built fast.

And then I lost it.

Out of frustration, I **spanked him**, packed us up, and rushed to the babysitter's.

By the time I arrived at work, **frazzled, drained, and defeated**, I realized I forgot to put on a part of my uniform.

But the worst part? It wasn't the uniform.

It was the **guilt**. The overwhelming realization that my frustration had taken over. That I had reacted instead of responding. That I hadn't solved anything—I had just made both of us feel worse.

Sound familiar?

The Ripple Effect of Losing Patience

We've all had those moments. The mornings where nothing goes right, the days when the kids won't listen, the nights where exhaustion takes over. You try to hold it all together, but the pressure builds, and before you know it:

- You raise your voice, and your child **shuts down**.
- You demand, and they **dig in their heels**.
- You feel guilty, and they feel **confused or hurt**.

The problem is, these reactions don't actually help. In fact, they make things worse.

Science shows that when kids are yelled at or exposed to **angry tones**, their brains shift into **fight or flight mode**. In that moment, they're not absorbing your words. They're not thinking about what they did wrong. Nobody wins. We don't get the cooperation we want, and our kids don't develop the skills we're trying to teach

They're simply trying to **protect themselves** from the stress of the situation.

The Turning Point

That morning with James taught me something important:

- **Patience isn't something you're born with—it's something you build.**
- **It's not about never feeling frustrated—it's about learning how to manage it.**
- **Small shifts in how you respond can change everything.**

So, what's a busy, overwhelmed parent to do when patience runs out?

Parenting Isn't About Perfection—It's About Progress

That morning with James didn't define me as a mother. And your hard moments don't define you, either.

- Patience isn't about never getting frustrated—it's about choosing how to respond.
- It's about guiding instead of controlling.
- It's about leading with clarity, not reacting with anger.

When you start making **small, intentional shifts**, you'll feel **more in control, more confident, and more connected** to your child.

And that's when everything starts to change. Making small adjustments to your routine can make all of the difference. Imagine how different it could be—the next time frustration builds,

instead of reacting, you feel calm. In control. Your child listens. The morning flows smoother. It's possible, and it starts with small, intentional shifts. Here's how to begin.

How to Start Small

1. Get Clear on Your Expectations

Kids can't meet expectations they don't understand.

Instead of saying:

- *"Be good."* → Try: *"Keep your hands to yourself and use kind words."*
- *"Clean your room."* → Try: *"Put your toys in the bin, books on the shelf, and clothes in the hamper."*

When expectations are clear, kids are more likely to follow through.

2. Communicate Calmly and Clearly

Your tone matters more than your words.

- Kids respond better to **calm, steady** voices than to yelling.
- If they don't listen the first time, **rephrase instead of repeating**.
- Get down to their **eye level**—it increases connection and focus.

When you **stay in control**, they learn to **follow your lead**.

3. Explain Consequences Ahead of Time

Instead of reacting in the moment, set the rule **before the problem happens**.

- *"If the toys aren't cleaned up before bedtime, we won't have time for a story."*
- *"If you don't finish your homework, you won't be able to use your tablet after dinner."*

Then, **follow through**—so they learn that choices have real outcomes.

4. Give a Time Frame

Kids struggle with transitions when they feel like they have **no control** over what's happening.

- *"In five minutes, it's time to brush your teeth."*
- *"After this show, the TV goes off."*

Giving them a **time frame** makes them **less likely to resist**.

5. Calm Yourself First

You can't teach patience if you don't have it yourself.

- **Pause** before reacting. Step into another room if needed.
- Take **three deep breaths**—it instantly calms your nervous system.
- Ask yourself: *"What do I want to teach in this moment?"*

When **you model calm, they learn to mirror it**.

A New Approach to Patience

That morning with James was a turning point for me. It didn't mean I suddenly became the perfect parent—because perfection isn't the goal. But it was the day I realized something powerful: *patience isn't something you have or don't have—it's something you build*.

I started making small shifts. Learning to pause before reacting. Seeing the moment for what it was—an opportunity to teach, to connect, to lead with intention.

And you can do the same.

Patience doesn't mean never getting frustrated. It means choosing how you respond instead of reacting on autopilot. It means guiding instead of controlling. Building trust instead of breaking it.

Parenting will always test your patience. But when you take a breath, reset, and step forward with clarity, something shifts.

Your child listens more.

Your home feels calmer.

Your connection deepens.

It won't happen overnight. But every small step you take leads to something bigger—a home where respect flows both ways, where discipline is about learning instead of punishment, and where you feel more in control, even in the chaos.

And the best part?

You don't have to do it perfectly—you just have to start.

Chapter 2: Breaking the 'Good or Bad' Cycle

As a martial arts instructor, I've worked with countless kids—from toddlers to teenagers. And one of the most heartbreaking things I hear, even from children as young as two or three, is this:

"I'm bad."

Every time I hear it, it stops me in my tracks. No child should see themselves that way. And yet, so many do.

When a child says, *"I'm bad,"* I always kneel down, look them in the eye, and remind them of something important: *They're not bad. They're amazing. They just need to make better choices.*

Why Labels Matter

This idea of “good” and “bad”—and how we talk about it—plays a huge role in shaping how kids see themselves and the world.

The words we use as parents and teachers **matter** because they shape the beliefs our children develop about themselves. Over time, those beliefs become their reality.

- A child who hears, *“You’re so bad,”* starts to believe it.
- A child who hears, *“You’re such a good girl,”* may feel like they have to be perfect to be worthy of love and approval.

And once a child internalizes a label, they unconsciously start to live up to it.

Does this sound familiar?

You’re rushing out the door, and your child refuses to put on their shoes.

Or they throw a tantrum over something small.

Or they forget their homework... again.

And in frustration, you say something like:

- *“Why do you have to be so bad today?”*
- *“You’re being impossible.”*
- *“You’re such a good girl when you listen—why can’t you always act that way?”*

We don’t mean harm. But words stick.

How Labels Shape Behavior

When kids believe they're "bad," it doesn't just hurt their feelings—it changes the way they behave.

- They start acting out *because* they believe that's who they are.
- They seek attention in negative ways because they expect to be labeled that way.
- They stop trying to improve because they assume they *can't*.

And even **positive labels** can have unintended consequences. When kids are constantly praised for being "good," they may:

- Feel pressure to **always** be perfect.
- Become **afraid of failure** because it threatens their identity.
- Struggle with **self-worth** when they make mistakes.

But here's the good news: **you can shift the way your child sees themselves—starting today.**

Shifting from Labels to Learning

I see this dynamic play out in my martial arts classes all the time.

At the end of each class, I give my students a chance to earn a small prize for following directions, giving their best effort, and showing respect.

Most of the time, they earn it. But sometimes, a child doesn't meet the expectations. And when that happens, I hear the same heartbreaking response:

"But I want my prize!"

It would be so easy to say, *"You didn't get a prize because you were bad today."* But that's not the message I want to send.

Instead, I sit down with them and say:

"You didn't earn it today because you weren't listening, but here's what you can do next time."

I want them to understand that their behavior is something they can change.

That they are **not** defined by a single moment.

That they have **control** over the choices they make.

And that's what I want for you to take into your parenting.

How to Break the 'Good or Bad' Cycle

Here are a few simple shifts that can help your child develop a **stronger sense of self**—without relying on labels like "good" or "bad."

1. Focus on the Behavior, Not the Child

Instead of saying:

"You're being bad." → Try: "That wasn't the right choice."

Instead of:

"You never listen." → Try: "I need you to focus on what I'm saying."

By separating the behavior from the child, you help them understand that mistakes don't define them—they are always capable of making better choices.

2. Be Honest and Specific with Praise

Instead of vague praise like:

"Good job!" → Try: "I love how you put your toys away without being asked!"

Instead of:

"You're so smart!" → Try: "You worked really hard on that problem. I can see your effort!"

Why? Because kids thrive on **specific feedback**—it helps them understand what behaviors to repeat.

3. Praise Effort, Not Just Outcomes

Avoid praising kids for things they're already expected to do, like finishing homework or brushing their teeth.

Instead, focus on **their effort—especially in challenging situations**.

I once had a six-year-old student who struggled with anger. When he started training, he would lash out whenever he felt frustrated.

Fast forward a few months, and his mom told me how he handled a tough moment—his friend accidentally hit him with a toy, and instead of reacting, he shrugged it off.

That's the kind of progress worth praising.

- *"I noticed you stayed calm when your sister took your toy. That was a great choice."*
- *"I saw you trying again even when the puzzle was hard. That's how you get better!"*

These small shifts build **confidence and resilience**.

4. Give Them Tools to Make Better Choices

Instead of just telling your child to "be good," equip them with strategies to handle difficult emotions.

- Teach them to **take a deep breath** before reacting.
- Encourage them to **walk away** from conflict instead of escalating.
- Show them how to **ask for help** when they need it.

When kids know they have options, they feel **empowered** instead of trapped in negative patterns.

A New Way of Seeing Themselves

When we step away from the **language of “good” and “bad,”** we open the door for our kids to see themselves as:

- ✓ **Capable** – because their choices shape their outcomes.
- ✓ **Resilient** – because mistakes don’t define them.
- ✓ **Worthy** – because they are valued for *who they are*, not just what they do.

Kids are going to make mistakes. That’s part of growing up. But when we **guide** their behavior instead of labeling their character, we teach them how to **learn, grow, and thrive**.

And that’s what parenting is all about.

So, the next time your child struggles, take a deep breath. Shift the words you use. Help them see that every mistake is an opportunity to learn.

Because when they believe in their ability to change, **they will**.

Chapter 3: The Gift of Failure

As parents, it’s natural to want to protect our kids—from pain, from failure, and especially from making the same mistakes we made. It feels like our job to shield them from hard lessons, to smooth out the bumps in their road.

But here’s the truth: **it’s in those bumps, those challenges, and yes, those mistakes, that they grow.**

Think about it. When have you learned your most valuable lessons? Probably not from your successes. The lessons that shape us, the ones we never forget, are the ones we learn when we fail.

Tony Robbins says humans are motivated by two things: **the desire to gain pleasure and the drive to avoid pain**. And when we fail, we feel that pain deeply—which is exactly why we work hard to avoid making the same mistake twice.

As parents, we often **step in** to prevent our kids from experiencing that pain. We don't want to see them struggle, so we smooth out the path before them. But when we do, we unintentionally **rob them of the opportunity** to build resilience, responsibility, and problem-solving skills.

And that presents a big question:

How will they learn to handle life's challenges as adults if we never let them face any as kids?

If they don't learn to pick themselves up after a fall now, they'll be left trying to figure it out when the stakes are much higher—and by then, they may not know how.

When I Chose to Let My Child Fail

I remember one morning when my child forgot their school project at home. Every instinct in me wanted to **rush back to the house and save them**. I wanted to **fix it, protect them, spare them the discomfort**.

But I didn't.

I let them experience the natural consequence of forgetting it.

It was a hard day—for both of us. They were upset. I felt like the worst parent in the world for not “rescuing” them. But you know what? That experience **taught them something I never could have taught by stepping in**.

It taught them to **be responsible**.

They realized they needed to be more mindful, to double-check their things before leaving. That lesson **stuck**. Because they felt the pain of the mistake **themselves**.

And that's when I realized something else:

It's not just our kids who feel the sting of failure—**we feel it, too**.

Watching your child struggle or fail is gut-wrenching. As a martial arts instructor, I've seen it happen countless times.

One of my students, **Dayanara**, was preparing for her Red Belt test. She had struggled with confidence throughout her training, and this test was **not** an easy one. She gave it everything she had... and she didn't pass.

It ended in **tears—for both of us**.

In that moment, I felt like I had failed her as an instructor.

Should I have pushed her harder?

Should I have prepared her better?

It would have been so easy to comfort her by lowering the standards or telling her it didn't matter. But **that wasn't the lesson she needed**. She needed to feel the disappointment **so she could grow from it**.

Fast forward a few months.

Dayanara took another test—and this time, she **crushed it**.

I told her how proud I was, and she said something that stuck with me:

"I don't ever want to test like I did last time—that was horrible."

That moment of failure gave her the **motivation** to work harder. It showed her what success really felt like.

Mistakes are painful—but they are also essential. They teach lessons we can't learn any other way.

How to Help Your Child Grow from Failure

The best thing we can do as parents isn't to **prevent** our kids from failing—it's to **support them as they learn how to recover**.

Here's how you can start:

1. Let Them Experience Natural Consequences

- When your child forgets their homework, resist the urge to rush it to them.
- When they put off a school project until the last minute, don't rescue them by running to the store late at night.

It may feel harsh in the moment, but **real-world consequences** teach responsibility and accountability better than lectures ever could.

2. Give Them Space to Problem-Solve

Instead of jumping in with the solution, ask questions to help them **think through the problem themselves**.

- *"What part of this feels hardest?"*
- *"What could you try to figure it out?"*
- *"What would you do differently next time?"*

This helps them develop **critical thinking skills and confidence** in their ability to handle challenges.

3. Create a Safe Space to Fail

Kids need to know that **failure is not something to be feared—it's something to learn from.**

- Encourage them to try new things without worrying about being perfect.
- When they mess up, focus on what they can learn rather than dwelling on what went wrong.

This creates an environment where **growth is more important than immediate success.**

4. Model Resilience

Your kids are always watching you.

- When you make a mistake, **don't hide it or brush it off.**
- Instead, talk openly about what happened, how it made you feel, and what you're doing to fix it.

For example:

"I feel frustrated that I forgot my appointment, but here's what I'll do next time to make sure it doesn't happen again."

This shows them that **failure isn't the end—it's just a step in the process.**

5. Praise Effort, Not Just Outcomes

Celebrate the **process of trying**, even if it doesn't lead to immediate success.

- If your child struggles with a math problem but keeps working at it, praise their persistence:
"I love how hard you're working on this. That's what's going to help you figure it out."
- If they try out for a team and don't make it, celebrate their courage:
"I'm proud of you for going after something you wanted."

This helps them see that **effort—not perfection—is what leads to growth.**

A New Way to See Failure

As hard as it is to let our kids fall, **it's one of the greatest gifts we can give them.**

Because every time they bounce back from a failure, they grow a little stronger, a little wiser, and a little more confident.

They learn that mistakes aren't the end.

They're just part of the journey.

So, the next time your child forgets their project...
Or struggles with a challenge...
Or falls short of a goal...

Take a deep breath.

Let them fall.

And then, watch them rise.

Chapter 4: What's Behind the Behavior

Parenting is hard. And let's be honest—when kids act out, it's easy to get caught up in their behavior and **miss the bigger picture**.

They talk back.
They throw tantrums.
They refuse to do their chores.
They act out at school.

And our first instinct? **To correct the behavior.**

But here's the thing: **behavior is almost always a symptom of something deeper.**

It's not just about what they're doing—it's about what they're feeling.

If we only address the behavior, we **miss the chance** to truly connect with our kids and help them work through the real issues driving it.

Why Kids Act Out

Our kids are strong, resilient, and capable of handling so much—but **they're not mini-adults**.

They don't always have the emotional vocabulary to explain what's going on inside them.

So they do the only thing they can: **they act it out.**

- A toddler who throws a fit in the grocery store? Might be overstimulated or overtired.
- A tween who snaps at you after school? Might be carrying the weight of something that happened in class.

- A teen who suddenly becomes withdrawn? Might be struggling with friendships or feeling overwhelmed.

But here's the tricky part: **their behavior can fool us.**

Because kids are busy—constantly shifting from school to sports to family activities—they **seem like** they're handling it all. But when something feels off, they revert to what's comfortable.

And if they don't have the words to express their emotions?

Their emotions show up in **tantrums, defiance, outbursts, or withdrawal.**

The Mistake We All Make

Let's be real—life moves fast.

Between work, family, and the endless to-do list, **it's easy to see behavior as the problem instead of the clue.**

And that's where we get stuck.

We focus on the behavior—whether it's whining, meltdowns, or talking back—and try to **"fix" it** with punishments, lectures, or consequences.

But if we don't take the time to understand the root cause, we're not really helping our kids.

We're just treating the symptom.

And we all know what happens when you treat the symptom instead of the cause—**the problem keeps coming back.**

The Moment I Realized This Had to Change

I learned this lesson the hard way when my son **Stephen** was in middle school.

He was struggling with peer pressure and trying to figure out **who he was.**

At school, he was acting like someone completely different—**talking back to teachers, hugging girls inappropriately, getting into trouble.**

It wasn't who he really was.

But he was trying to fit in. Trying to live up to what he thought people expected of him.

And the school system? They didn't care why.

They had a **one-size-fits-all** punishment system. Every infraction—whether it was skipping school or hugging a friend—was treated the same.

He was labeled “**troubled.**”

They were about to place him in a program that **singled him out as a problem child.**

As a parent, it was heartbreaking.

Because I knew this wasn't about him being “bad.”

It was about him **struggling to navigate pressures**—trying to find his place in the world.

But the labels, the punishments, the lack of understanding?

They weren't solving anything.

They were making things worse.

A Better Approach: Curiosity Instead of Judgment

The good news?

When we **step back** and approach our child's behavior with curiosity instead of frustration, we **open the door** to understanding what's really going on.

This doesn't mean behavior **shouldn't have consequences.**

It just means that those consequences are **more effective** when we take the time to understand what caused the behavior in the first place.

Here's how you can start:

1. Pay Attention to Patterns

Behavior rarely happens in a vacuum. Start **noticing when and where** certain behaviors occur.

- Does your child act out **more in the morning**?
- Do meltdowns happen **after school**?
- Does defiance show up **during certain activities**?

Identifying patterns **gives you clues** about what's triggering the behavior.

- If your child **throws tantrums** during homework time, maybe they're feeling overwhelmed.
- If they're **irritable in the evening**, maybe they need downtime before bed.

Once you understand **the patterns**, you can address **the root cause** instead of just reacting to the behavior.

2. Get Curious, Not Angry

When your child acts out, take a breath.

Then, instead of **reacting**, try to **ask questions** that get to the heart of the issue:

- *"What happened today that made you feel upset?"*
- *"How were you feeling when that happened?"*
- *"What do you think we can do differently next time?"*

By **asking instead of assuming**, you create a **safe space** for your child to open up.

This not only **helps you understand their perspective**—it also teaches them **how to express their emotions**.

3. Let the Consequences Fit the Behavior

Discipline **isn't about punishment**—it's about teaching.

The key? **Making sure the consequence is fair and connected to the behavior**.

- If your child forgets their homework, the natural consequence is **getting a lower grade**—not losing screen time.
- If they're rude to a sibling, the consequence might be **writing an apology note**—not taking away their favorite toy.

This approach **teaches accountability** instead of just making them feel punished.

4. Model Emotional Awareness

Your kids learn **how to handle emotions** by watching you.

So when you're feeling frustrated, talk about it.

- *"I'm feeling really stressed right now, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths to calm down."*
- *"I made a mistake today, but I'm going to fix it by doing XYZ."*

By modeling **healthy emotional awareness**, you're teaching your kids that:

1. **It's okay to feel big emotions.**
2. **They can handle those emotions in a healthy way.**

5. Celebrate the Good Moments

Finally, don't forget to **notice the good**.

In my instructor training program, we call this **"being a good finder."**

When your child does something right—even if it's **small**—acknowledge it.

- If they **solve a problem on their own**, let them know you noticed.
- If they **show kindness to a sibling**, praise that effort.

This helps them feel **seen** and reinforces the positive behaviors you want to encourage.

A New Perspective on Behavior

When we **shift our focus** from **"fixing" behavior to understanding it**, everything changes.

Our kids feel **seen, heard, and supported**—and that makes them **more likely to open up** when they're struggling.

Because behavior? **It's just the surface.**

When we take the time to look beneath it, we find:

- The emotions.
- The challenges.
- The unmet needs.

And when we address **those**, we're not just **correcting behavior**—we're **helping our kids grow** into emotionally aware, resilient, and confident adults.

Chapter 5: Finding the Balance Between Authority and Choice

Parenting is a balancing act.

On one hand, we want our kids to grow into **confident decision-makers**—able to express themselves, think critically, and discover their unique identities.

On the other hand, **rules are rules**, and as parents, we need to set firm boundaries **without negotiation**.

Finding this balance? **That's the challenge.**

It's easy to feel like we need to **explain every decision** or give our kids **more choices** than necessary.

Because, let's be honest—explaining ourselves **feels right.**

We want our kids to feel **respected, heard, and valued.**

But here's the catch: **over-explaining and over-democratizing decisions can backfire.**

When Explanation Turns Into Negotiation

When kids push back against a rule, our instinct is to **justify or explain** our decision.

And in doing so, we unintentionally send the message that our rules **are up for debate.**

- **They keep questioning, and we keep explaining.**
- **They push harder, and we start second-guessing.**
- **They argue, and we feel frustrated.**

Before we know it, what **shouldn't be a choice** turns into a **negotiation battle.**

And if this becomes the norm?

Our authority **weakens**, our kids **get confused**, and suddenly, even simple requests turn into **power struggles.**

When Too Many Choices Become Too Much

This also happens when we **give kids choices they don't need.**

We want them to feel empowered, so we **ask their opinion**—even in situations where a decision has already been made.

- *“Do you want to take a bath?”* → (It's not really a choice.)
- *“Do you want to go to bed?”* → (Bedtime isn't optional.)
- *“Can you clean your room?”* → (It needs to be cleaned either way.)

Too many choices **create confusion.**

Kids **need structure and security.** They need to **know who's in charge.**

And when they don't?

They'll test the boundaries—not because they're bad, but because they're wired to **figure out where the limits are**.

The Moment I Saw This in Action

I learned this lesson early on in my martial arts teaching journey.

In our classes, we emphasize **respect**.

Students say “Yes, *sir*” or “No, *ma'am*.” We maintain an environment of mutual respect and discipline.

What surprised me?

How **shocked** some younger students were when I called them “sir” or “ma'am.”

That small shift changed everything for them.

Because it wasn't just about **them respecting me**—it was about **me respecting them**.

This taught me an important lesson:

Respect isn't about over-explaining or allowing endless negotiation.

It's about being **clear, firm, and consistent**—while still acknowledging their perspective and treating them with dignity.

How I Applied This at Home

When my kids pushed back against rules, instead of engaging in **long-winded debates**, I took a different approach.

I was inspired by *Training Day* (yes, the Denzel Washington movie).

In the film, Denzel's character keeps asking:

"Do you want to go to jail, or do you want to go home?"

It's **brilliant**—because it limits the options while still giving a sense of **agency**.

So I started applying this principle with my kids:

- “Do you want to finish your homework now or lose screen time later?”
- “Do you want to clean your room before dinner or right after?”

This simple tweak **changed everything**.

- They still felt like they had **control**.
- I stayed in **authority** without micromanaging.
- And most importantly? **There were fewer power struggles**.

How to Find the Right Balance

So, how do we help our kids **express themselves, think critically, and make decisions**—while still maintaining **our authority** and **setting clear boundaries**?

It starts with **being intentional** about when and how we explain ourselves **or involve them in choices**.

Here’s how you can start:

1. Ask Yourself: Why Am I Explaining?

Before explaining a decision or rule, pause.

Ask yourself: *Am I explaining this because they need to understand? Or am I explaining this because I feel guilty or pressured?*

- If they’re **genuinely curious**, take the time to explain.
- If they’re **pushing back to test boundaries**, hold firm and say, *“This is the rule.”*

For example:

- If your child asks why they can’t watch TV before homework, **explain the importance of priorities**.
- If they keep pushing? **Stay firm and say, “The answer is no.”**

2. Limit Their Choices

Giving kids **too many choices** overwhelms them.

Instead, **control the options** so they still feel involved—but within the boundaries you set.

- Instead of “What do you want for dinner?” → Say, “Do you want spaghetti or chicken?”
- Instead of “Do you want to clean your room?” → Say, “Would you rather clean now or after lunch?”

This way, they feel **empowered**, but you **stay in control**.

3. Be Honest When You Don't Have All the Answers

Sometimes, kids ask **why**—and we don't fully know the answer.

That's okay.

It's **better to be honest** than to make something up or let them argue you into a corner.

Try saying:

- *"I'm not sure why, but this doesn't feel right to me."*
- *"I don't have all the answers, but I know this is what's best for you."*

This **models authenticity** and helps kids see that even parents **don't have it all figured out**—and that's okay.

4. Avoid "Because I Said So"

Yes, we want to avoid **over-explaining**.

But **flat-out dismissing** their curiosity doesn't help either.

Instead of *"Because I said so,"* try:

- *"This is the rule because I need to make sure you're safe."*
- *"This is the way we do things in our family."*

It **reinforces boundaries** while still modeling **respectful communication**.

5. Stay Consistent and Clear

Kids thrive on **structure, consistency, and predictability**.

If they know **what to expect**, they're **less likely to push back**.

- If you **say no**, mean it.
- If you **set a boundary**, stick to it.
- If you **give a choice**, make sure it's one you can actually enforce.

Clear boundaries create a **sense of security**—and that helps them thrive.

Teaching Respect Through Action

Every interaction with our kids is an opportunity to **teach them how to communicate, make decisions, and respect boundaries**—not just with us, but with the world.

The way we **set rules, explain ourselves, and offer choices** shapes their understanding of **authority, responsibility, and respect**.

Because we're not just raising kids.

We're raising future adults.

And by finding the **right balance** between **authority and choice**, we prepare them to navigate life with **confidence, resilience, and respect for themselves and others**.

So the next time you feel the urge to **over-explain or negotiate a boundary**, take a deep breath.

Remember: **Your role as a parent isn't to justify every decision.**

It's to **guide, teach, and model** the kind of **communication and respect** you want them to carry into adulthood.

Chapter 6: Raising People, Not Just Kids

As parents, it's easy to forget that our kids **won't stay little forever**.

Right now, they're children, but one day, they'll be **adults navigating the world on their own**.

And our job? **To prepare them for that.**

It's easy to get caught up in teaching kids how to behave, follow rules, and meet expectations. But beyond all of that, what they really need is to **be treated as people—real individuals with their own thoughts, feelings, and instincts**.

Because the truth is, if we don't show them **respect and trust now**, how will they learn to respect and trust themselves later?

Why Dismissing Kids' Emotions Can Backfire

Life moves fast. We're busy. We're juggling a million things. We don't always have time for **long conversations about feelings**.

So, when our kids express frustration, sadness, or fear, we sometimes brush it off without thinking. We say things like:

- *“Calm down.”*
- *“It’s not that bad.”*
- *“You’re fine—stop crying.”*

But let’s flip the script for a second.

Imagine you’re venting about your bad day at work, and someone tells you:

- *“It’s not a big deal.”*
- *“You’re overreacting.”*
- *“Just get over it.”*

How would that make you feel?

Unheard? Invalidated? Frustrated?

That’s exactly what happens to kids when we **dismiss their emotions**.

Instead of feeling understood, they learn to **shut down**, second-guess their instincts, or bottle up their emotions.

And over time?

- **They stop trusting themselves.**
- **They start seeking validation in unhealthy ways.**
- **They struggle to express their emotions as adults.**

But when we take a moment to **listen and acknowledge** their feelings, we give them a powerful message:

Your emotions matter.

Your instincts are worth trusting.

And that’s the foundation of **raising confident, emotionally intelligent adults**.

Tough Part of Being a Grandparent

One of the phrases I **can’t stand** is:

“Don’t be a punk.”

My son James sometimes says this to my grandson Aidan when he's upset.

- *"It's not that bad."*
- *"Only babies cry."*

Every time I hear it, it **drives me up the wall**.

Because I **know** how damaging it is.

When kids are constantly told to **"toughen up"** or that their emotions aren't valid, they start to believe:

- *"I shouldn't feel this way."*
- *"Something must be wrong with me for being upset."*
- *"It's better to stay quiet than express what I'm really feeling."*

But when we **teach kids to trust their emotions and instincts**, they become stronger—not weaker.

Let me tell you about a night that proved it.

The Night My Son Chose His Instincts Over Peer Pressure

When my son Stephen was in middle school, he was going through a tough transition.

New school. Peer pressure. Trying to figure out who he was.

One day, he asked if he could go to a **sleepover**. I said yes.

Later that night, James left the house, saying he'd be back soon.

Fifteen minutes later? **Both boys came home**.

Something was up.

At first, Stephen didn't want to say, but eventually, he admitted:

- The **sleepover had turned into a party**.
- The **host's mom wasn't home**.
- Older kids had **shown up with alcohol**.

And here's what I love:

Stephen **trusted his gut**.

- He knew it wasn't a **safe situation**.
- He **called James for backup**.
- And they **both came home**.

He didn't care what his **friends thought**.

He cared about **doing what felt right**.

That moment told me everything I needed to know.

He had learned to **listen to his gut**, trust himself, and make decisions based on **his values—not peer pressure**.

How to Raise Kids Who Trust Themselves

When we treat our kids as **people—real individuals with their own feelings and instincts—we help them develop**:

- **Confidence** in their own choices.
- **Independence** in problem-solving.
- **Emotional intelligence** to navigate life's challenges.

Here's how you can do the same:

1. Validate Their Feelings

When kids feel something deeply, **acknowledge it**.

- Instead of *"It's not that bad,"* try: *"I can see that this really upset you. Want to talk about it?"*
- Instead of *"Stop crying,"* try: *"It's okay to be sad. I'm here for you."*

Validation doesn't mean you **agree** with them—it just means you **acknowledge their emotions as real**.

And that **teaches them to trust what they feel**.

2. Ask Questions Instead of Jumping to Solutions

It's easy to **jump in with advice** when our kids are upset.

But sometimes, the best thing we can do is **ask questions**.

- *"What do you think would help right now?"*
- *"What's making you feel this way?"*

- *“How do you want to handle this?”*

This does two things:

1. It helps **you** understand their perspective.
2. It teaches **them** to think critically about their emotions and problem-solve on their own.

3. Give Them Age-Appropriate Independence

Let kids **make decisions** and **learn from them**.

Start small:

- Let younger kids **choose their outfit** or what to eat for lunch.
- Give older kids **control over their schedules** or involve them in family decisions.

The key?

Provide **guidance and support**—without **micromanaging**.

Because when kids feel like they have **some control**, they learn to **trust their instincts**.

4. Model Emotional Awareness

Kids don't just **listen to what we say**—they **watch what we do**.

If we bottle up emotions or overreact to stress, we teach them to do the same.

Instead, be **open** about your emotions and how you manage them:

- *“I’m frustrated right now, so I’m going to take a few deep breaths.”*
- *“I made a mistake today, but I’m going to fix it.”*

This teaches them that:

- **It’s okay to feel big emotions.**
- **They have the tools to handle those emotions in a healthy way.**

5. Teach Them to Trust Their Own Judgment

Celebrate when they **make good decisions**—even the small ones.

- *“I love that you stood up for yourself.”*
- *“You trusted your gut, and that was the right call.”*

Because the more they trust **themselves**, the less they'll rely on **outside validation**.

Seeing Them as People

Our kids are **more than just “our kids.”**

They’re **people—capable, intelligent, and full of potential.**

When we treat them with **respect and trust**, we’re not just helping them navigate childhood.

We’re **preparing them for adulthood.**

Because at the end of the day, our job isn’t just to **raise kids.**

It’s to **raise adults**—adults who **respect themselves and others.**

So the next time your child is upset, **pause.**

- **Listen.**
- **Ask questions.**
- **Give them space to figure things out.**

And remind yourself:

They’re not just kids.

They’re people in training.

Chapter 7: Guiding Their Dreams, Not Ours

Every parent wants their child to succeed.

Who doesn’t love seeing their kids accomplish something great?

We all do.

It’s natural to want to **see them reach their full potential**, to give them the opportunities we never had, to push them toward success.

But here’s where we have to be careful:

Are we **guiding them toward their own dreams**—or **pushing them toward ours**?

It's one of the hardest things to recognize as a parent.

We think we're **helping**—encouraging them, motivating them, setting them up for a bright future.

But sometimes, without realizing it, we start shaping their path based on **our own goals, values, or unfulfilled dreams**.

And when that happens, we risk **leading them away from their true potential**, rather than toward it.

Are We Guiding or Controlling?

There's nothing wrong with challenging our kids to:

- Work hard
- Push themselves
- Step outside their comfort zones

That's part of parenting.

But **where do we draw the line** between **guidance** and **pressure**?

- Do we celebrate their strengths—or only push the ones we value?
- Do we listen when they express new interests—or dismiss them as “just a phase”?
- Are we building them up—or shaping them into a version of success that looks good to us?

It's a fine line, and it **often shows up when kids hit obstacles**.

Take martial arts, for example.

The journey to a **black belt** is tough.

It requires:

- Discipline
- Dedication
- Resilience

And at some point, almost every student **wants to quit**.

Parents come to me asking: *“Should I make them stick with it?”*

Here's what I tell them:

Earning a black belt is like earning a diploma.

- It's something that, once achieved, **can never be taken away**.
- It teaches perseverance—the ability to push through when things get hard.
- And most people quit before they get there.

Some parents use this as an opportunity to **teach perseverance**.

Others recognize that **their child's interests have shifted** and let them step away.

So, who's right?

It depends.

The key is listening.

- Is your child struggling because it's hard—but they still love it?
- Or are they losing interest because they were never truly passionate about it in the first place?

Our job isn't to **force them to stay on a path that isn't theirs**—it's to help them **figure out what truly excites them** and support them in seeing it through.

When Success Becomes a Burden

If we're not careful, we can create **pressure, resentment, or even self-doubt**.

- A child who loves **art** might feel pressured to play sports because **that's what their parents value**.
- A child who enjoys **science** might feel like they need to **pursue business instead** because it "looks better."

At first, they might go along with it to **please us**.

But over time, they may:

- **Lose confidence in their own passions.**
- **Start to resent the things they once enjoyed.**
- **Feel like their worth is tied only to achievements.**

It's **heartbreaking** to watch a child **lose motivation** or **question their own interests** because they feel like their success is more about **our expectations** than their own fulfillment.

How to Support Their Dreams (Not Just Ours)

You can **guide your child toward success** while still **respecting their individuality**.

Here's how:

1. Listen to Their Interests

When your child talks about what they love, **pay attention**.

Even if their passions **aren't what you expected**, validate them.

- If they love **music** but you always imagined them as an athlete, **support their desire to join the band**.
- If they prefer **writing over math**, **encourage their creativity instead of pushing them toward STEM**.

This doesn't mean letting them quit every time something gets hard.

But it **does** mean honoring **who they are**, not just who we imagined they'd be.

2. Focus on Their Strengths

Instead of pushing them toward **what you want for them**, look at what **comes naturally** to them.

- Are they a **problem solver**? Support activities that challenge their critical thinking, like **robotics or chess**.
- Do they **love working with their hands**? Maybe they're built for **engineering, design, or crafts**.

When kids feel **seen for their unique abilities**, they develop **confidence** and a **love of learning**.

3. Teach Perseverance (With Flexibility)

There's a difference between **teaching kids to stick with something hard** and **forcing them down a path that no longer fits**.

Ask yourself:

- Are they **pushing through a challenge—or dragging themselves through something they hate**?
- Are they still **excited about the goal**—or just trying to meet expectations?

If they **value** the goal but feel stuck, **help them break it into smaller steps.**

But if their **passion has changed**, it's okay to let them **pivot and explore something new.**

4. Be Open to Change

The **dreams they have at 7 won't be the same at 17.**

- The child who loves **dinosaurs** might grow into a passion for **biology.**
- The teen who loves **video games** might realize they want to **design them.**

Be **willing to adapt.**

The more we **embrace their growth**, the more they'll feel **free to explore their true potential.**

5. Check Your Own Motives

Take a moment to ask yourself:

- *Why do I want this for my child?*
- *Is it because it aligns with their strengths and passions?*
- *Or is it because I think it "should" be their path?*

Being honest with yourself helps you **parent with more clarity and empathy.**

It's okay to **want the best for them.**

Just remember—"the best" might look different to them than it does to you.

Helping Them Thrive

At the end of the day, **our job isn't to mold our kids into what we want them to be.**

It's to **help them discover who they're meant to be.**

That means:

- **Listening** to their dreams
- **Supporting** their interests
- **Teaching** them to navigate challenges in a way that aligns with **their values**

When we focus on **guiding their dreams**—instead of **projecting our own**—we give them the **freedom and confidence** to create a life **they're proud of.**

So the next time you find yourself **pushing your child toward a goal**, pause and ask:

Whose goal is this?

Because when we **support their dreams instead of shaping them**, we:

- **Strengthen our relationship.**
- **Build their confidence.**
- **Help them grow into adults who are true to themselves.**

And isn't that the ultimate goal?

You're Not Alone

The Parent's Journey

Being a parent is, without a doubt, one of the hardest things you'll ever do—yes, even more challenging than testing for a first-degree black belt. It's a journey filled with highs and lows, overwhelming days, moments of doubt, and times when you just want to pack a bag and take a vacation all by yourself.

(Believe me, I've done that—when I was pregnant with Stephen, I took a trip just to be “Tracy” for a while. Not mom, not wife, not business owner, not sister. Just me. And it was exactly what I needed.)

And maybe, in your own way, you've felt that too. That urge to escape. That exhaustion that makes you wonder, *Is this really how it's supposed to be?*

But here's what I want you to know:

Parenting will push you to your limits, but it will also shape you into a version of yourself you didn't even know existed. And as you think about that, you may begin to realize... this journey isn't just about raising your child. It's about growing *with* them.

Let's Be Honest: Parenting is Hard

There are moments where it all feels like too much.

- ✓ You lose your patience.
- ✓ You say the wrong thing.
- ✓ You wonder if you're getting it all wrong.

Parenting demands so much—your time, your energy, even your sense of self.

And at some point, you might have asked yourself: *How do I keep giving when I feel like I have nothing left?*

But as you sit with that question, something shifts. Because deep down, you already know the answer...

Parenting is as Much About Your Own Growth as Theirs

I'll be honest—my relationship with my son James was the hardest one I've ever had.

We are so much alike—both goal-oriented, strong-willed, and determined. And yet, for the longest time, it felt like we were speaking different languages. If I said black, he said white. If I pushed, he pulled. There were days I wanted to throw my hands up and stop trying.

Maybe you've had moments like that too.

But what if those struggles aren't signs of failure—what if they're invitations to grow?

Because something amazing happens when you keep showing up, even when it's hard. One day, your child turns to you—not out of obligation, but because they *trust* you.

Fast forward to today, and I never thought I'd have the relationship with James that I do now. He calls me for advice when he needs the truth. He knows I'll always be honest, always hold him accountable, always believe in him.

And maybe, as you imagine your own child growing up, you can start to see that possibility for yourself too.

Parenting Isn't About Being Perfect—It's About Being Present

You don't have to get it all right. You just have to keep showing up.

✓ This book has been about avoiding seven common parenting mistakes—from losing patience to focusing too much on what we want for our kids.

✓ Each mistake came with a lesson and a solution, all designed to help you build a home where respect, trust, and cooperation come naturally.

✓ But the biggest lesson? You can't pour into your kids if you're not pouring into yourself.

Stephen Covey said it best: "You can't keep making withdrawals without making deposits."

So imagine, just for a moment, what it would feel like to make that shift.

1. To move from exhaustion to ease
2. From repeating yourself to being heard
3. From doing it all yourself to feeling supported.

And when you're ready to take that step, I'll be here to help.

Parenting isn't something you have to figure out alone. If you're feeling stuck, overwhelmed, or just ready for a change, let's talk.

Book a **free Family Strategy Call**, and together, we'll tackle your biggest parenting challenge. We'll identify what's not working, map out a clear plan to help you move forward, and see if our program is the right fit for you.

No pressure, no obligation—just real support, real solutions, and a path toward a calmer, more connected home.

Go to familymaa.com.

A Journey Worth Taking

Looking back on my own parenting journey, I can tell you—it wasn't easy. It was full of tears, struggles, and moments of doubt. But it was also full of growth, joy, and connection.

A friend once told me, *"This is the best time of your life, and you don't even know it."*

She was right.

Even in the hardest moments—the tantrums, the eye rolls, the fights—there's beauty in the fleeting nature of childhood.

Because one day, they won't be little anymore.

One day, you'll look back and realize that every challenge, every late-night worry, every conversation that felt impossible... it was all shaping them into the person they were meant to become.

And maybe, just maybe, it was shaping *you* too.

So, as you move forward, remember this:

Parenting is not about perfection.

It's about love, patience, and the willingness to keep showing up, even when it's hard.

It's about growing alongside your kids and becoming the kind of person you hope they'll become.

You're not alone in this journey.

And as challenging as it may be, I promise you—it's worth it.

You've got this.