



Parenting

Finding the Fun

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I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE!

It seemed like I'd just closed my eyes when I heard a gentle, nurse's knock on the door of my room. I was tempted to roll over and tell the nurse 'It's okay. You look after her. I'll get some sleep.' With two other little ones at home, sleep had not been on my agenda for a while. But a midwife had swaddled my brand new baby so that all I could see of her were two enormous brown eyes that peeped out from among the blankets, blinked at me and drilled straight through to my heart. There was no going back to the nursery for her. I was in love with my new baby girl.

But less than two years later, after I'd retrieved her from climbing to the top shelf of the pantry and frustratingly cleaned up the four-hundredth mess for the morning, I found myself in a fed up heap on the floor.

Sobbing.

Screaming!

'GOD! I CAN'T DO THIS ANY MORE!'

What happened between the moment when I fell in love with my child and the moment I found myself on the floor, exhausted, depressed and defeated?

Life and motherhood is what happened. I'd given everything I had, and still, being a mother seemed to require more.

As I lay there face down and spreadeagled, at the lowest place I'd ever been, a verse of scripture that I'd sung as a teen and accidentally memorised came wafting into my consciousness.

'Be still and know that I am God.'

In my heart it was translated as 'I've been waiting for you to let Me! You've been relying on yourself. You have been fighting so hard to stay in control of everything. No wonder you're exhausted. Why don't you let Me take over?'

It would make a great story if God sent a band of angels to rescue me and clean the house, do the washing, make endless meals, drive the car to the kids' schools, pick up their dad from work, clean up the ever-lasting drips that landed on the floor, read fifty-two story books a day, clean sticky fingers and faces, answer the three-year-old's three-hundred 'whys', rescue little ones from the top of the pantry cupboard ...

But angels—the heavenly variety with wings—didn't arrive to take away my work. Something much better happened.

God showed me how to rely on God's strength - and not my own. On that first day, in three different places; on the radio, in the book I was reading, and in the words of a friend, I heard the words,

'God is faithful'.

During the next few days, weeks and months, as I made it from one difficult moment to the next, under my breath and at the top of my lungs I recited 'God is faithful'.

My eyes opened up to the 'angels' with skin on: the women at church, my friends, other mums, books about parenting, voices on the radio, my family at the other end of the telephone line, and my poor husband who'd been filling in all the gaps. Instead of continuing to feel as though I needed to be the expert, I opened up my stubborn head to the wisdom of others who were only too willing to offer loving and helpful advice, care for me and the kids in practical ways, and teach me how to love my children and my husband.

Over the next few months and years that followed, I learnt how to love in new and different ways. The new ways worked... Anything would have been better than what I had been doing!

Ours used to be a 'No' House.

If the children asked for something, back then the answer was 'No'. If they reached out to touch something, they were reprimanded with a 'No!' If they stepped one metre outside of my reach they were called back,

'No! Don't!'

Even if we, the parents, wanted something for ourselves, we thought the 'godly' answer was 'No!' Where on earth we learnt this, we weren't sure. Neither of us had grown up in homes like that. But we were a long way from our parents.

It was certainly voiced loudly by some authoritarian writers of books about raising 'godly' children—who had probably never spent a day alone with small children. And we'd certainly heard it over and over again from other members of the community who told us that our three-year-old's mischief was due to a 'lack of discipline'. More often than not, that statement sounded something like,

'What that child needs is a good smack!'

Smacks did not solve the problem.

The children each expressed in their own way that life was not as it should be. The five-year-old took control of everything—and everybody. The three-year-old bounced off walls and grabbed attention any way he could. The baby became an expert tantrum-thrower.

I thought I appeared calm on the outside, most of the time, but on the inside I was screaming, stressed out and miserable.

Devoted and meticulous, my husband attended to all the jobs for which I had neither the energy nor inclination. After too many hours in his lab, he would come home to pick up everything that hadn't been done in the home all day, every day. If anybody had asked him, he may have answered that he could not remember the last time he had laughed with his family.

It's not surprising that the joy of parenting had gone from our daily lives.

The 'Yes' House

One day, our children's preschool teacher took me aside and asked in her deepest, sweetest voice, 'Miss Julie, is there a reason I don't hear you saying 'Yes' to your children?'

I didn't have an answer. But that question changed our family's life path.

When preschool ended that day, for the first time ever I squatted down and held my arms out as wide as I could. My children spread out their arms and ran into mine. I'm glad they knew what to do because it was new to me. But it restored the smile that had gone missing.

From then on, at every possible opportunity, I watched people like that preschool teacher in action, and then I'd go home and practise. We read lots of books and listened to other people who had a much gentler and more enjoyable approach to parenting – with better results. I didn't make it obvious to anybody else what I was doing. I certainly did not ask questions. But I took everything in, and our house gradually became a Yes House.

Saying 'Yes' didn't mean that we gave up 'discipline' but rather, it changed the way we disciplined. We had confused discipline with punishment. After lots of research we discovered that they have little in common.

We learnt that to discipline means to 'train'; that is **to show how**.

We learnt to show our children how to touch things gently – placing their little fingers in ours and helping them to touch things, such as books, china and baby brothers and sisters...gently. When we responded with a 'Yes, that's right. Gentle,' we found we were more likely to see that behaviour repeated. Eventually we realised that reacting with 'No. Don't!' didn't help our child know what to do next. It just confused them.

Others helped us to see that children whose needs are being met are much more eager to please their parents, than to disappoint them. They are much more co-operative when they know what they're expected to

do. When given small, manageable tasks and when they know that the rest of the family 'team' relies on them to do them, children tend to rise to the expectation.

We learnt more positive ways to communicate with our children. For example, when the children wanted to change activity, instead of saying 'No. The room is a mess; No, you haven't finished your homework; No, your hands are filthy; No, No, No!' we learnt to answer 'Yes, when the Lego has been put away...Yes, when you've washed your hands...Yes, after you've written two more sentences of your homework...Yes.'

We learnt that when expectations of a child's behaviour are consistent with the child's development and ability, discipline becomes much more realistic, manageable and enjoyable. We began to look for signs of discovery and wonderment rather than be on constant alert, looking for trouble. By observing our children we learnt to follow their lead in learning new things, playing, seeking reassurance and resting. I gradually learnt how to join the children in their play, describing what they did, laughing and pretending, allowing them to sort out minor quibbles by themselves but intervening when necessary.

Two Rules

The Pre-school teacher taught me two very concise but brilliant rules which we were able to adapt to our home:

Please be gentle with the people here.

Please be gentle with the things here.

When the rules were broken, she taught me to sit with children while they had a moment or two of 'thinking time'—time to just sit quietly and let their bodies and minds be still— for just long enough for their brains to catch up to their energy level. Then she taught me how to debrief with them using the questions;

What are the rules here?

Were you being gentle?

What will you do next time?

What do you need to do now?

If the Pre-school teacher had criticised what I was doing wrong, I would probably have got in a huff and run off in the opposite direction. Instead, she came alongside me and coached me to love my children...and my husband. She taught me how to love in a very real way — unconditionally, practically, positively and with an element of fun.

We discovered that we were not the only parents who were separated from their own parents by distance. So we formed our own little community to encourage, laugh, cry and support each other. The Pre-school teacher organised a parenting course for us all in the local church. While we watched a video and had discussion, the church fed pizza to our kids and kept them occupied with fun activities in the Sunday school classrooms. And we discovered that most of the trials we were experiencing as parents were pretty normal.

'If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got!' **Henry Ford**

I used to try the 'boot-camp' style of change. It usually back-fired because I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I thought that I didn't have the right to expect my children to be tidy, stay on task, be polite, say the right thing, stick to a routine...unless I was perfect first. I would get so caught up with what I 'should' be doing—according to everyone else—that I forgot about doing what I 'could' do. Instead of showing the children 'how' to do something, I'd judge myself and tell them 'Don't be like me!' and I'd land in a heap of unforgiveness toward myself... again.

So the children would be left to their own devices, and get up to mischief...again. Then, at last, I learnt that if I tweaked what I was already doing, a little bit at a time, parenting was more manageable.

Henry Ford said 'If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got!'

Nobody starts out as a parent wanting to scream and shout at their child – or at the other parent. But what we find ourselves doing in moments of stress is often exactly what we promised ourselves we would never do. It's our default mechanism – our automatic reaction **unless** we learn other ways.

Having worked with our own family and hundreds of other families, I've learnt that when parents know about other options and practice them, they use them. Their parenting becomes calmer and their family becomes more responsive and team-like. Every family can change if they are willing to take a look at what they're doing and be prepared to change what doesn't work.

Grace filled parenting

If you wander into my home unannounced, on most days you'll soon see that I'm still neither tidy nor organised. I'm anything but the perfect mother. But somehow our children have grown into adulthood being loving, responsible, caring and contributing members of the community.

We learnt through watching others with their kids and through many, many mistakes of our own, that children don't need perfect parents. They need parents who know about grace—that is, parents who know how to give without expecting anything in return. Grace in parenting isn't about constantly nagging at our kids: It's recognising that simply by being, they are likely to get into trouble – that's what real-life brings. But grace is about picking them up, dusting them off, and loving them anyway.

Over the past twenty years, I've been observing, reading, studying and practicing ways that work (and some that don't): Practical ways for parents to be more effective parents. I've taught parenting classes and mentored families. I've watched many families make small changes to what they do, and their attitude to parenting, which have resulted in big differences to their families.

I don't usually go up to people and offer parenting advice. I understand how awkward and confronting that can be for a parent. However, while I was shopping in the fruit and veg department, I saw a young mum struggling with two pre-schoolers who were in a shopping cart. They'd been in the shop for less than two minutes before the kids began to get fidgety and demanding. The mum was frustrated and looking for ways to deal with her children. She was at her wits end. So when I passed her I gently encouraged her with,

'I feel for you. I've been there. Something I've found helpful is to give the kids something to look for while they're shopping. That way they're part of your team.' I winked at her and went off in the opposite direction.

As I left them, the mum went over to the trolley and said to the children,

'We need to get something for daddy's lunch. What do you think he needs?'

Immediately the children responded with suggestions and from then on were cheerful and enthusiastic. When I encountered the family several aisles further along, the mum whispered to me, 'Thank you! It's working!'

Where do I start?

If you're not sure where to begin, play is a great place to start. It may be as simple as **making time** to play with the kids — that doesn't mean buying an X-box, but physically being with your child on the same game. Try turning off all the electrical gizmos and phones. Bring out balloons, balls, bubbles or play-dough. Use timers to get tasks done together or to help share favourite toys or trampolines. Take the family outside to look at the sky; splash in puddles; listen to the magpies; swing on swings, float a dried leaf on a puddle, drive match-box cars in the dirt. Grab a picnic rug or a bench in a park and sit by yourself or with your family. Watch the breeze move the leaves on the trees—particularly great for grizzly babies, and refreshing for weary parents.

If you can't go outside, grab a sheet or blanket and drape it over a table or some chairs and play in your new 'castle' or 'rocket-ship'. If you're on a restricted time schedule, set a timer for as long as you have. Then **don't let anything** disrupt you from playing.

If the kids get bored or restless, change activity. Generally, the younger the child is, the less time they'll be able to concentrate on one activity. Clap a rhythm, or copy what the children are doing. It's a great way to engage with them. Then watch what they do and take their cues as to how to continue. Remember that the play and adventure is in the doing, not necessarily the result.

Finding a balance

You may be surrounded by mess or chaos, but as the adult, you don't have to be part of it. As the adult, you have the major control of the atmosphere in your home. And more than anything else, a parent's mood affects the atmosphere in the home. If you are giving out all the time without taking time to care for yourself, you will run out of puff. It's just like what the airline attendants warn you about when you're about to take off on a plane trip:

'Please ensure your own mask is in place before you attend to others.'

In other words, it's no use trying to help others if you're unconscious.

In most cultures all over the world, the recipe for a healthy life is a balance of the mental, physical, spiritual and social aspects of life. The bible speaks about this balance in many places, and gives Jesus' life as an example. 'And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.' Luke 2:52.

Many parents of young children are physically tired due to less sleep and the constant physical demands of children. Some parents miss the social interaction with other adults or the mental stimulation they may have had before children. Though some of us find children really interesting, that does not necessarily mean that caring for children fulfils all of our needs. Our society isn't at the stage yet where the care of children is recognised as the most worthwhile occupation or best investment of our time. So there is often a reduction in income as well as a change in social and mental activity. Most communities have other families in similar circumstances who you can meet with and who can listen and offer support. You can often meet them at the local playground, walking trails or library.

Sometimes illness, depression and circumstances leave us in a state where taking charge of the atmosphere seems impossible. Again, as the adults, we need to do something to gain control of the atmosphere, so it is not toxic to our kids. Beyond Blue, Life-Line and other local community organisations are great places to start for ideas on how to find support through difficult stages of life. Talk to your GP or your Pastor to find resources in your community.

Making it work

A family I worked with had trouble finding a balance in their family life. Dad worked afternoon shift, so he only saw the kids on the weekends. Mum was exhausted and lonely for adult company, but also craved some time by herself, away from the constant demands of small children. When the mum learnt about looking for a balance, and recognised that she was in charge of the atmosphere in their home, the parents decided to go to a family restaurant every Saturday morning. The family ate there together, shared what happened during the week, discussed their plans for holidays or the weekend, told really bad 'dad' jokes, and got to know each other again. Then dad would go to play with the kids in the playground for a while, while mum had a quiet cuppa and some much needed 'time-out'. When mum was ready, she'd invite dad over to have a 'date' while the kids kept playing. The whole atmosphere in the house changed because some of their needs were at last being met.

Some single parents, and partners of Fly in - Fly out workers, who I met during parenting sessions, shared how they miss the support of other adults. Simply by sharing in the group, they opened up opportunities to take it in turns to care for each other's children, while they each had time to themselves.

Others worked out a 'debriefing' session on the phone each night, after the kids went to bed. Some found that they could phone their own parents at night time. Being able to talk about their day to an objective listening ear helped these mums and dads wind down and sleep more peacefully. It was also reassuring to them that others were available and knew what was going on, in case of emergencies.

Spiritual needs

Often parents find they have ignored or been unaware of the spiritual aspect of their life. Wandering through a park, lying outside looking at the stars or the clouds, or spending time by a trickling creek are all ways to produce wonderment and allow our souls to search for the spiritual. Some people find or express their spirituality in art or creativity; in dreaming and journaling; or in being with others.

I found that the changing demands of being a mum side-tracked my own spiritual journey. I had great expectations of being able to sit in a quiet place to meditate and study the bible. My children had other ideas!

By joining a craft group of Christian women, I was able to talk through my frustrations. It seemed as though my whole life was only-just-functioning through a sleep-fog. The older women helped me to know that they too had struggled, and reassured me that eventually the sleep would return. They helped me understand that Jesus is just as loving and understanding towards struggling, bleary-eyed mums as with anyone else. And during the journey, Jesus will never, ever leave me. Jesus is faithful.

It's now more than twenty years since I was in that screaming heap. With new skills and knowledge, and an open heart and mind to the wisdom of others, parenting has been much more bearable – dare I say, enjoyable. We have certainly had our 'moments' since then, but the family has survived and learnt to bounce back from the trials of life. Generally, we have a lot of fun when we are together, and keep in touch when we're apart.

As our children have grown, we've realised what the Pre-school teacher and all those who took their time to teach us did all those years ago.

They taught us how to love.

They taught us that to love means to make a positive decision towards another person - no matter what they do or don't do, just because they are who they are. And they taught us about grace: That our kids aren't perfect, and neither are we - but God loves us anyway.

Every now and then, a little verse that I accidentally memorised when I was a teen, comes wafting back into my consciousness,

'Be still and know that I am God.'

And I'm reminded to keep my eyes open for angels with skin on, and that God is and always will be...faithful.

HELPFUL LINKS

For family fun and resources

happyland.com.au

For parenting resources

raisingchildren.net.au

theparentingplace.com

For parenting information

Parent Helpline:

Australian Capital Territory - (02) 6287 3833

New South Wales - 1300 130 052 or 1300 272 736

Northern Territory - 1300 301 300

Queensland - 1300 301 300

South Australia - 1300 364 100

Tasmania - 1300 808 178

Victoria - 13 22 89

Western Australia - (08) 9368 9368 (metro) or 1800 111 546

For health information

healthdirect.gov.au Phone: 1800 022 222

For crisis support

lifeline.org.au Phone: 131114

For parental mental health and wellbeing

beyondblue.org.au Phone: 1300 22 4636

For Christian parenting resources

growministries.org.au

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- Depression
- Grief
- Guilt
- Forgiveness
- Conflict
- Stress
- Relationships
- Addictions
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- Illness
- Dementia
- Pain

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Messages of hope 

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They'd be happy to hear from you.

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go to www.lutheranmedia.org.au.

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