What you do this week matters.
“When it comes to parenting or leading children, it’s easy to forget what matters most. Playing for Keeps is the reminder we all need!”

ANDY STANLEY
Senior pastor, North Point Community Church and author, Deep and Wide

“Reggie Joiner has been my friend through a variety of times, and I have watched as he has prioritized for what matters most. Playing for Keeps reminds us all that we only have a certain amount of time to spend, and how we spend that time will make all the difference.”

JOEL MANBY
CEO, Herschend Family Entertainment and author, Love Works

“I want to give this book to every volunteer serving in children’s ministry today! What a great way to convince them that what they do year after year in the lives of kids is a significant faith investment. Thanks Reggie!”

SUE MILLER
Children’s ministry expert and author,
Making Your Children’s Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid’s Week

“Playing for Keeps flips the telescope and helps us look through the other end. When you read the ideas in this book, you won’t want to just hug your kids, you’ll want to love them linebacker style and tackle them.”

BOB GOFF
President and Founder, Restore International and author, Love Does

We could dedicate this book to the kids in our own lives—those who have captured our hearts and inspired most of the words in this book. But you don’t know them. So, instead, write down your own list. Who are the kids in your family or circle of influence that compel you to Play for Keeps?

TO:

I WANT TO GIVE YOU ...

time over time, so we can have a history worth repeating.
love over time, so you will understand your eternal worth.
words over time, so you can have a better direction.
stories over time, so you can imagine a world beyond yourself.
tribes over time, so you will always have a place to belong.
fun over time, so you will have joy that lasts a lifetime.
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**YOU CAN'T MAKE A KID LOVE GOD, HAVE FAITH, OR CARE ABOUT WHAT MATTERS . . .**

. . . BUT YOU CAN GIVE THEM 6 THINGS OVER TIME.

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you can't make a kid love god, have faith, or care about what matters . . . but you can give them 6 things over time.

you can make the kind of history that shows them why they matter to god.
6 THINGS

EVERY KID NEEDS

OVER TIME

+ 6 HABITS

and

18 SOMEWHAT PRACTICAL IDEAS

So you can make whatever matters matter even more!
You may not even be aware why the ordinary things you do every week will matter one day. So, we want to clarify what matters and why it matters.

If you’re reading this because someone gave it to you, you’ve probably realized by now you’re being manipulated into caring about children. We think that’s okay.

SERIOUSLY.
If you had . . .
a mother who gave birth to you, parents or guardians who didn’t let you starve to death, or any adult who kept you from running into the middle of a busy street, then you should be willing to give a little of your time to a kid.

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY:

If you presently exist, it’s only because some adult somewhere cared enough to be present in your life. And if someone gave you enough time and attention to help you get where you are, then you should probably do the same for some

- sweaty
- sticky
- smelly
- snotty
- snobby
- selfish
- stubborn
- CHILD who acts like you did when you were that age.

THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT . . .
managing your time more effectively.
or getting more done in your day.
or adding more to your “be a better leader or parent” list.

INSTEAD, it’s a book about why you should keep doing the things you are already doing for kids.

We assume if you’re reading this book, you already care deeply about children and teenagers.

More specifically, you are interested in this book because you are serious about helping kids build a better future. You are intentional about investing in the Simons and Erics of your world.

(If you don’t recognize those names, it means you skipped the fiction side of this book. So flip it and start over.)
If you are honest, sometimes you wonder if any of this really matters.

You think it’s . . . just expected. part of your role. what you do every week.

In your real, bland, mundane world, these tasks seem rather unremarkable, ordinary, and routine.

But what we hope you discover in this book is that there is a secret hidden in the rhythm of your regimen. The gift of your time is much more remarkable than it seems.

That’s why what you do this week, and every week, matters.

It’s simple really.

We should feel obligated, because we were all kids once. And if we are still part of the human race, then we are expected to take care of our young.

And not just those of us who are parents, but all of us who are old enough to make a difference. We are called to be present in the lives of the next generation.

We are all responsible.

That’s why, this week, some of you will . . .

Because over time . . .

You are making a permanent imprint on the soul of a child. You are leaving a legacy. You are playing for keeps.

It’s time to get serious about what you do with your time.

Ride a bike

Cook a meal

Host a party

Catch a fish

Laugh out loud

Play a game

Throw a ball

Write a note

Take a walk

Tuck someone in

Sing a song

Say a prayer

Change a diaper

Tell a story

See a movie

Go to church

Dance a dance

Or take a trip
IT TAKES TIME OVER TIME TO MAKE A HISTORY WORTH REPEATING
Several years ago, we handed out jars of marbles to parents and to leaders who work with kids and teenagers.

THERE WERE 936 MARBLES IN EACH JAR.

936 IS THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF WEEKS BETWEEN BIRTH AND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.

Parents and leaders were challenged to reduce the number of marbles in the jar to match the actual number of weeks they had left with each child.

Then they were given a simple assignment:

REMOVE ONE MARBLE EACH WEEK.

Over time, the practice of losing marbles had a strange effect.

IT REMINDED THEM TO VALUE THEIR TIME.

IT MADE EACH WEEK MATTER A LITTLE MORE.

IT REINFORCED A SIMPLE PRINCIPLE:

WHEN YOU SEE HOW MUCH TIME YOU HAVE LEFT, YOU TEND TO DO MORE WITH THE TIME YOU HAVE NOW.

If you’re a parent you may be thinking, “That’s a really stupid idea. I already feel enough pressure. I can’t wait to be reminded every day that I am running out of time with my kids.”

Okay.

Maybe there is a downside to creating a marble countdown clock. Like . . .

Depression
Guilt
Anxiety
Drinking
SO, YOU COULD CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVE:

Ignore that time is slipping away, watch a lot of TV, and pretend your kids will never . . .
care about how you dress.
stop eating kids’ meals.
be interested in dating.
ask for the keys to your car.

What if you could really find balance between living in total denial that your kids will pack their bags and move out one day and the sheer panic that makes you double-bolt and padlock the doors?

Now, if you’re a leader, you may actually be excited about the fact that someone is moving on. (No, of course you aren’t.)

A HEALTHY UPSIDE TO VISUALIZING YOUR TIME IS THAT IT HELPS YOU STAY FOCUSED ON THE VALUE OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. IT’S POSSIBLE THAT CREATING A SIMPLE COUNTDOWN CLOCK WILL BE JUST WHAT YOU NEED TO REMIND YOURSELF WHAT YOU DO TOGETHER OVER TIME MATTERS.

DOES THAT MEAN you have to make every SECOND count, turn every MINUTE into a teaching opportunity, and keep a daily journal to record it all? Not unless you want to drive yourself and those around you crazy.

WHAT ABOUT A MORE PRACTICAL IDEA? An idea that works for both parents and leaders.

What if you just decide to make history? One WEEK at a time.

What if you start acting like what you do WEEKLY is more critical than what you can do in a DAY?

The point is ... If you are investing in a kid or teenager, you are already making history every week.

The problem is ... When you’re making history, you usually don’t know it.
That’s the real reason we are writing this book:
Simply to remind you that what you’re doing now matters more than it feels like it does. And that’s why this week and every week is really important.

Let’s think about it another way.
Most kids don’t know what you’re doing this week is going to be a formative part of their history.

They are just kids.
They only see “now.”

To them you just . . .
built a sandcastle.
took them to swim lessons.
played basketball in the driveway.
saw a movie.
ate some pizza.
cleaned up their . . .
(not sure that’s appropriate to write.)

BUT YOU ARE AN ADULT.

You see yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
So, you should know better.
You should realize by being present in their life week after week in a variety of different ways,

YOU ARE ACTUALLY MAKING HISTORY.

It’s kind of like a good country song.
Trace Adkins talks about it when he describes a dad taking his daughter fishing.

“And she thinks we’re just fishin’ on the riverside
Throwin’ back what we couldn’t fry
Drownin’ worms and killin’ time
Nothin’ too ambitious
She ain’t even thinkin’ ‘bout
What’s really goin’ on right now
But I guarantee this memory’s a big ‘un
And she thinks we’re just fishin’”.

The good news is you don’t have to be a gifted communicator, famous musician, innovative designer, or savvy entrepreneur to make meaningful history.

Any parent or leader can do it as long as they decide to show up and be present week after week in the life of a kid or teenager.

When what you do this week is repeated next week, it will begin to earn credit in someone’s life.

Rome wasn’t built in a day.

Okay, I know that’s a cliché, but it’s true.
Rome was built over 365,000 days.

THAT’S WHAT HISTORY DOES.
History accomplishes something over time that is

**UNIQUE**

**POWERFUL**

**LASTING**

**RICH**

**MEANINGFUL**

Some things just can’t be accomplished in a day. Or a week. They take multiple weeks. It takes time over time to . . .

discover a vaccine.
write a novel.
play the violin.
grow a Duck Dynasty beard.
raise a child.

But you have to resist the temptation to take shortcuts. There is no such thing as instant faith or character.

Did you ever stop to think:
The reason you can’t see spiritual growth is because it’s too “spiritual”? The reason you can’t predict pivotal moments is because they are too unpredictable?

The best thing you can do is choose to keep . . .

investing in what you can’t see.
being present for what is not happening.

trusting that time over time will do what God has designed it to do.

Again, the secret is **time over time**.

Our attraction to immediate results can keep us so busy we never engage in work that has lasting impact. We get so pre-occupied with what we can measure, we don’t give attention to what we can’t measure.
If time was created, then time obviously matters. It has a unique purpose in the greater scheme of the universe.

In other words, it’s no accident the earth spins on its equator at approximately 1,000 miles per hour, causing the appearance of the sun to rise and set with mathematical accuracy.

It’s no accident the earth moves through space at a speed of 67,000 miles per hour, causing the seasons to change in a calculated manner.

The entire universe has a predictable rhythm.

What if understanding those rhythms could help you become more effective at making meaningful history with the people around you?

The cosmos works together like gears on a clock. If we study it, we can evaluate and predict how things grow, change, age.

It seems obvious that time exists for a purpose.

Have you ever stopped to think that maybe God established time as a platform so He could communicate something so complex that it needed to be presented strategically over time?

Why didn’t God send Jesus as soon as Adam and Eve ate the fruit? He could have resolved the issue then and there. But He waited.

He used time.

He gave Abraham a son.
He let Joseph sit in jail.
He sent Moses to deliver a nation.
He let a nation wander in the desert for decades.

Have you ever thought about why?
There are aspects of God’s nature, secrets about life, and codes to the universe that are so intricate they simply take time to decipher.

If a heavenly Father uses time to clarify and solidify certain values in our hearts over time, then maybe that’s the best way to cultivate what matters in the hearts of our own children and the children we serve as well.

The most significant gifts we can give the next generation are what we give them over time. That makes what you do this week, and next week, and the week after, strategic. As parents or leaders, it’s important that we realize there are certain things that can only be communicated, understood, and discovered over time.

Communicated
Understood
Discovered over time.

Remember . . .
We don’t experience worth because we are loved once, but because we are loved by someone over time.
We are not motivated to action by one phrase, but by words that move us over time.
We don’t understand the world through a single event, but through a collection of stories over time.
We don’t know we belong because of an invitation to something, but because we have been welcomed in a tribe over time.
We don’t discover how to live in a moment, but we live when we experience the joys of life over time.

That’s the way life works.

That’s why we hope you never see a week the same way again. The futures of the kids you love depend on what you give them over time.
6 THINGS EVERY KID NEEDS

There are certain things kids only get in a weekly relationship with a parent or adult leader. We don't claim to be experts on what every kid needs this week, but we do know at least a few things every kid needs over time. When you combine these things over time, it helps you make the right kind of history.

**TIME**
over time makes history worth repeating.

**LOVE**
over time helps them establish a healthy sense of worth.

**WORDS**
over time influence them to keep moving in a better direction.

**STORIES**
over time connect them to a bigger world and shape their perspectives.

**TRIBES**
over time establish a circle of relationships where they can experience belonging.

**FUN**
over time fuels quality friendships and personal resilience.

When you harness the collective power of your weeks, it has the potential to change how you see every week.
Evidently there is an advantage to putting a visual number to the time you have left. Sure it may seem a little morbid at first, but according to some, it can be smart. One shrewd leader prayed this prayer:

“TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS, THAT WE MAY GAIN A HEART OF WISDOM” (PSALM 90:12).

So, how does counting your days give you a heart of wisdom? I’m not sure.

But I can guess. Visualizing time may help you . . .

pace yourself, narrow your focus, guard your margin, value quality interaction, and become more intentional about what you do.

All of which probably gains points in the wisdom category. It just makes sense that if you count the days or weeks you have left with kids, you stand a better chance of making them count.

Do you realize you don’t usually watch a clock to see what time it is? Instead, you look at it to see how much time you have left. As a small group leader of high school girls, I (Kristen) typically make a commitment to stay with the same group for multiple years. Something happened a few years ago when one of my groups was halfway through their junior year. One Sunday night as I watched these girls worship, I was struck with this thought: We only have a year and a half left before graduation. I had already invested more time with them than the time we had remaining. I was past the halfway point, and it made me panic. There was so much I still wanted to do with them and for them. I literally stepped back from worship, found a piece of paper, and just started making a list:

Go on a mission trip.
Be a part of weekly service.
Offer a mid-week Bible study.
Have a party.
Connect with their parents.
Re-connect with . . . (some of the girls I hadn’t seen in awhile).

I remember praying over that list. I didn’t know if I could make it all happen. I wasn’t even sure why it felt so urgent. But I know that day was important for our group. Many of those things made the difference in how we spent our last year and a half together. We did have a party, and it became a tradition for years after they graduated. We did make it a point to serve together, and many of those girls are still serving in churches today. I honestly believe the simple act of visualizing the time we had left made our last year and a half more meaningful.
The point is each week will matter more when you see it in the context of how many weeks you have left with your kids before they move to whatever is next.

Visualizing time can help you emotionally, mentally, and practically prioritize what really matters. That’s why keeping a jar of marbles or something else in sight can make a difference.

THINK ABOUT IT. WHEN YOU ADD A COUNTDOWN CLOCK TO ANY GAME, COMPETITION, OR EXERCISE, IT AFFECTS BEHAVIOR. NEXT TIME YOU WATCH A BASKETBALL TEAM, SEE IF YOU NOTICE WHAT HAPPENS TO THEIR . . .

ENERGY • FOCUS • PASSION

AS THE CLOCK GETS CLOSER TO ZERO.

Go ahead and try it. Count down the number of weeks you have with a kid or teenager before they transition to what’s next.

Create a countdown clock and put it where you can see it on a consistent basis. You can fill a large jar or container with objects (marbles, paper clips, M&M’s®, Jelly Bellys®, gum balls, etc. Warning: Edible items may disappear faster than a week at a time.)

Or you can create a digital countdown clock on a smartphone or desktop. One free app designed specifically for this purpose is Legacy Countdown. Parents can count down how many weeks they have until a son or daughter graduates. Leaders can count down how many weeks they have until a kid transitions to another ministry.
Here are some general numbers to get you started. When a child is born, you have approximately 936 weeks before he or she graduates from high school. Then every year that follows will look similar to this chart.

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<td>2</td>
<td>832 weeks</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>780 weeks</td>
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<td>52 weeks</td>
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<td>0 weeks</td>
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Some families simply create a marble countdown to serve as a reminder. Some parents even design a weekly ritual (like a meal or prayer) around removing a marble each week.

A number of leaders keep a container of marbles on their desk to represent how many weeks they will have a kid or teenager in their ministry.

No matter how we, visualize time, it has a psychological effect on how we prioritize time.

**MEASURE IT OUT**

Sometimes it helps to visualize time as if it were a music score. A week is similar to a measure within a song. Every week has the same amount of time, yet every week can have a different emphasis. As parents and leaders, you have the potential to establish a rhythm within each week that sets up a pattern for your kids. Remember, just like it takes multiple measures to create a song, it takes multiple weeks to establish history together. So, if you want a better history, change what happens this week.

**PARENTS, START WATCHING THE FLOW OF YOUR WEEK AND IDENTIFY THE BEST TIMES TO . . .**

create breaks, plan activities, go to church, eat meals, do chores.

**LEADERS, START THINKING ABOUT THE BEST WEEKLY OPPORTUNITIES TO INVEST IN KIDS.**

Learn how to cooperate with the rhythms that exist in the average kid’s or teenager’s schedule this week so you can connect in relevant and practical ways. Think about the hours you spend with kids and teenagers in the context of their week.

Basically, learn to read and improve the rhythm of the week.
We use a unique Milestone Marble so it stands out in the collection of weeks along with a special marble that symbolizes birthday weeks. To celebrate milestones and birthdays, marbles are removed and put in a special container or bag to indicate they have happened.

**A DEDICATION MARBLE**
symbolizes a dedication service or first birthday

**A WISDOM MARBLE**
symbolizes the first day of school or the beginning of primary education

**A FAITH MARBLE**
symbolizes a decision to trust Christ, Baptism, or Confirmation

**A TRANSITION MARBLE**
symbolizes coming of age (Do I have to explain?)

**A FREEDOM MARBLE**
symbolizes getting a driver’s license and stepping toward independence

**A GRADUATION MARBLE**
symbolizes completion of secondary education

What if you mark up a calendar to highlight significant events and weeks? Build a routine in every week to preview what’s coming on the calendar and update it weekly. You may discover taking the time weekly to mark up your calendar can actually help you anticipate and celebrate important weeks. Two marbles in a jar can look similar, but no two weeks are created equal. Some weeks are . . .

**birthday weeks.**
**starting school weeks.**
**end of school weeks.**
**holiday weeks.**
**vacation weeks.**
**special event weeks.**

With a little initiative, you can highlight and anticipate some important weeks. Just giving those weeks a little extra attention can create a great collection of memories for your family or your group.

Oh, two more things.

**WEEKENDS WEREN’T MADE FOR MICHLOB**

Weekends were made for relationships. The number of weeks you have left in your jar, bucket or calendar before your kids transition also represents the number of weekends you have left. So, guard them. The next time someone asks, “Do you have plans for the weekend?”—have an answer. Weekends are very strategic in building a positive history together.
SUNDAYS AREN'T JUST FOR FOOTBALL

Okay. Sundays can be for football, too. But Sundays are also the first day of the week, which makes them a great time to unfocus and refocus. For leaders, this may be the time most suited to spend strategic time with the few kids or teenagers in your circle. Sundays can become the best time to zero in on your relationship with God. If not Sunday, then when is the most logical opportunity to fuel your faith together? Why not go ahead and circle it? Build some time into every week for a community of faith.

JUST REMEMBER WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE. BECAUSE WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK IS CONNECTED TO NEXT WEEK . . . AND THE NEXT . . . AND THE NEXT. AND THE WEEKS ADD UP. THEY HAVE THE POTENTIAL OVER TIME TO GIVE THE KIDS IN YOUR LIFE THE THEY WILL NEED TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE.

Ken leads a group of awkward, misfit zombies—that is, middle-school boys. He knows they need to be connected to a story bigger than themselves. He wants to help them have an authentic faith that stands the tests of time. That’s why he has chosen to be present during these transitional years. He could probably do something more exciting with his Sunday afternoon than film middle-schoolers in a cemetery. But Ken’s not expecting immediate results or instant change. He’s committed to being present in their lives for a critical season. He trusts what can happen to their character and faith over time.

She loves her son Eric. At this point in her teenage son’s life, she is feeling what a lot of parents feel. She blinked, and the kid who made her macaroni-covered valentines and went camping under a sheet in her living room has turned into a brooding teenager she hardly recognizes. She shows up at his concert not because late night riverside concerts are her thing, but because it’s what Eric loves. Whether she realizes it or not, her presence in his life matters. Eric may be growing up, but he will never grow out of the need for his parents and a relationship with someone who has known him over time.
**KNUCKLE DOWN:**

Like Ken and Lisa, you have chosen to invest time over time in the lives of a few. Write down their names. Next to each one, write the number of weeks you have left before they graduate or move on to the next phase of life. What are a few things you want to do with them in the time you have left?

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**TIME MATTERS**

It takes time over time to make a History worth repeating.

**VISUALIZE TIME**

- Count it down
- Measure it out
- Mark it up

**THE TIME YOU SPEND THIS WEEK WITH A KID OR TEENAGER MATTERS.**
LOVE over TIME is the one thing that matters most.
If you want to know what kids and teenagers need over time, love is definitely the best place to start.

Without love, the rest of this book wouldn’t make any sense at all. Actually a lot of things wouldn’t make any sense if it weren’t for love.

Just take music for example.

Without love . . .

There would be no Whitney, Aretha, Dolly, Madonna, or Lady Gaga.

There would be no Elvis, Elton, Eagles, Beatles, or Barry White.

Without love . . .

The Blues would be beige.
Country music would only be about beer and tractors.
Rock & Roll would need more guitar solos.
Rap . . . well, that would probably stay the same.

Let’s face it.

This world just wouldn’t be a good place without love. It may be the best idea that ever came along.

God is a pretty good innovator, and He originated the brand. It’s a good thing He didn’t copyright it. There would be a lot of people out of a job.

The Bachelor would lose millions of viewers.
No one would listen to Delilah.
Hallmark would go bankrupt.

If you believe love was God’s idea, then a lot of things make sense.

For example, maybe you can understand why . . . a newborn is so dependent on a mother’s touch.
a child craves approval from a father.
a teenager looks for belonging.
two people will hold hands
The point is if love is God’s idea, then every person you meet has been . . . created to need love. designed to pursue intimacy. wired to connect.

Although most of us would agree on that point, it’s interesting how we still have a tendency to go through life acting like love is not what matters most.

You’d think we’d know by now. Especially those of us who say we believe in God. But somehow we get so busy trying to matter, that we forget what actually matters. Or I should say we forget “Who” matters.

It’s kind of like the Pharisees. You remember them, right? They were religious leaders who believed in God. They actually spent a lot of time learning what they thought mattered to God.

But they were so busy doing important things they missed the most important thing. Maybe that’s why Jesus told them that one thing mattered more than anything else. He was just trying to keep everyone on track.

There’s a tendency for any of us to lose focus. Drift away. Major on what’s minor.
So, Jesus reprioritized in just a few sentences what matters most. He said it like this:

**The Greatest Commandment is to Love the Lord Your God with all of Your Mind, Soul, and Strength. But there’s a second part to this commandment that’s just as important as the first: Love your Neighbor as Yourself.**

There it is again. Let me sum it up:

**Love Matters.**

Loving God matters.  
Loving yourself matters.  
Loving people matters.

Actually, the Great Commandment makes several points at once about love.  
Loving God helps you love yourself.  
Loving God helps you love others.  
Loving yourself helps you love God.  
Loving yourself helps you love others.  
Loving others helps you love God.  
Loving others helps you love yourself.

And all are true at the same time.

What a genius idea.  
Of course it is.  
It came from the One who made you.

Before you get too opinionated about an overemphasis on love, remember who said it. Just be careful you don’t minimize what Jesus maximized.

Stay focused.

The Beatles may have sung about it, but Jesus had the idea first.  
**All you need is love.**

**Love is...**  
the summary for the rest of the commandments.  
the foundation for how we should treat others.  
the mission for every church.  
the filter for how we should see the world.  
the framework for what we say and teach.  
the blueprint for building our lives.  
the reason Jesus came to sacrifice His life for us.

Yep.

If you know the gospel story, you know God used time to prove something He could only prove over time: His love for us is unconditional and predictable. You and I can know we matter because we matter to God.

So, if love matters, the way you love others matters too—especially the way you love kids.
Have you ever stopped to think that love happens to be the best strategy to help kids know they matter?

Okay. Maybe that’s not an original thought. Let me try another one.

HAVE YOU EVER STOPPED TO THINK THAT

LOVE MATTERS MORE IN THE LIFE OF A KID THAN IT DOES IN THE LIFE OF AN ADULT?

Think about that for a few minutes.

This past year, I had two friends both take their own lives. One was 23. One was 48.

The first grew up in a strange cult that pushed her into sex trafficking. The second grew up in a “Christian home” and wrestled with anorexia.

They both shared a common dilemma:
They didn’t know how to love themselves.

They were both smart, attractive, determined people who tried really hard at life.

But something was broken when they were young that stacked the odds against them. I’m not qualified to explain how or why. And it’s much more complicated than this chapter can resolve. But here’s a point to consider:

KIDS NEED TO LEARN TO LOVE THEMSELVES WHILE THEY’RE KIDS.

Two things give you worth: You were created in God’s image. You were redeemed by His Son. Don’t get so good at seeing the bad, you forget how to see what someone is worth.

Kids desperately need adults who will love them in a way that will convince them they are worth something. If kids don’t feel loved when they are young, they may never love themselves in a healthy way. And if they never learn to love themselves, they may ultimately self-destruct.

So, the way you love kids while they’re kids can dramatically affect their futures.

That’s why we need more adults to step it up. It’s time to get serious about loving the children around you.

Most research suggests that when it comes to love, the younger the recipient, the more powerful the impact.

When do you actually start creating a sense of worth in a child? That’s simple: the day they are born.
Most counselors and psychologists agree we should start loving a child as soon as possible. Many of them cite research about brain development that indicates the systems that manage our emotional responses are fundamentally shaped by early experiences in our lives.

Sue Gerhardt is a British psychotherapist who does focused research on emotional health in children. In her book, *Why Love Matters*, she explains the brain systems that manage emotional responses are shaped by early events. Gerhardt says, “Just as the baby’s body adapts to a shortage of nutrition, so the brain adapts to inadequate emotional input.” Gerhardt builds a case for the importance of love by providing brain scans that show significant physical differences between the brains of children who have been neglected and those who have received normal amounts of affection. She concludes that, “The whole process of developing a social brain and developing a strong sense of self is based on the quality of social attention . . . Basically, humans have to pass on a social brain. The brain (of a child) is built up through actual experiences. What you put in is more or less what you get out.”

That’s why . . .

Love is like investing—it gains shares.

The sooner you start paying in, the greater the return will be later. The longer you wait, the less you earn.

**Simply put:**
Deposits in someone’s life as a child will earn more interest.
When you wait until they’re adults, the gains are slower.

My (Reggie) oldest daughter is an artist. When she was a child, she believed every flat surface was a canvas. That included every wall, table, book, door, and piece of paper.

She used pencils, pens, markers, chalk, crayons, and paint to leave her mark everywhere. There were constant reminders of her talent all around us, all the time. They were her priceless creations.

I have to be honest. Sometimes, it felt like her art was costing me a lot more than it was worth. I’m not sure I recognized the value of what was happening. If you had asked me then, I would have priced it sentimentally.

But slowly over time, her art evolved from uninteresting smears and scratches to sophisticated, emotional, and intricate paintings. During the past few years, people have paid thousands of dollars for what she creates. Her experiences in life as a child and teenager have begun paying off as an adult.

**When you start imagining the future of a child, you will start investing more in them now.**
If loving a child early begins to build a healthy sense of worth, rejecting a child early can do the opposite.

According to the World Health Organization,

“RESEARCH NOW SHOWS THAT MANY CHALLENGES IN ADULT SOCIETY—MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS, OBESITY/STUNTING, HEART DISEASE, CRIMINALITY, COMPETENCE IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY—HAVE THEIR ROOTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD.”

This is why children should be a priority in every home, school, and church. How we love them in their youth will affect how they live as adults.

There is a brief window of time—from birth through adolescence—when what we do in someone’s life can matter more than at any other time.

The time you spend every week with a child playing, reading, talking, laughing, and loving is worth it.

It’s worth it, because they are worth it. But again you know that because you are older and wiser.
So, if you want kids to grow up and know they are worth it, then look for ways to prove it over time.

Kids and teenagers need adults who will show up and be there Consistently Patiently Regardless

They need adults who care enough to discover who they really are and how they are wired.

If you want them to know that love is more than just a “second-hand emotion,” they need someone in their lives who will not bolt and run when things get messy.

They need to know that’s . . .

HOW LOVE WORKS.

WHAT LOVE DOES.

WHY LOVE MATTERS.
Kids will test you.
If you don’t believe that, you probably haven’t been around many.

You figure
since you know you love them,
and you tell them you love them,
you should understand you love them.

But instead, their subconscious reaction is:

Prove it.

That’s hardly fair.

But in a world where they are constantly being challenged, evaluated, and tested, they often get a mixed message about love and approval.

On the one hand, you might say, “I love you, no matter what.” But on the other, kids and teenagers constantly find themselves in experiences where worth is connected to performance.

It’s not that you shouldn’t affirm them when they . . .
go to the potty “all by myself.”
become a star student.
hit a homerun.
earn a paycheck.
get selected for a solo.

But there’s also a place for the kind of love that goes beyond performance.
The kind of love that . . .
takes them out for ice cream when they don’t make the team.
drives them to urgent care when they break an arm.
goes with them to the movies on a Friday evening “just because.”
listens sympathetically after their first break-up—and their second, and their third, and their fourth.

If you want kids and teenagers to . . .
have a healthy sense of self-worth,
believe in a Creator who loves them unconditionally,
discover the value of using their lives to love others,
then you may have to get in the business of actually proving that you love them—no matter what.

Author and artist C. JoyBell C. says it this way:

“They say you have to earn the right to be loved; no, love is unconditional. If you love someone, they don’t have to earn it. But, the right to tell someone that you love them? That has to be earned. You have to earn the right to be believed.”

As parents and leaders, maybe it’s time we start earning the right to be believed. It’s time that we start using the time we have to get serious about proving our love to the kids who matter most in our lives.
Okay. That sounds like an understatement. But really, the first way for you to prove to a kid or teenager that you love them is to show up. When we wrote the book *Lead Small* to create a kind of job description for small group leaders, we said the first principle for leading small is to Be Present. That means: you have to show up predictably, randomly, and mentally in the lives of kids. Really, the same is true for anyone who hopes to influence a kid or teenager.

You have to set predictable times when they know you will be present in their lives. If you’re a parent, maybe it’s every morning at breakfast or every night just before they go to bed. Maybe it’s every Tuesday or every Saturday, or just one day out of the week when you have a day off. If you’re a leader, maybe it’s at a weekly event. Whatever those times are, recognize them, and make every effort to guard them.

You also have to show up for the big events, the non-routine: the elementary talent show
the middle school band concert
the high school debate tournament

And when you show up for both the predictable and the non-routine—in order for them to count—you have to be fully present in them. The emails, texts, and Instagrams can wait. You are busy giving a child worth. You are proving it.

One more thing about showing up—

Have you ever thought about why you give kids and teenagers rules? Whether you’re a leader or a parent, chances are, you have given the kids you are really invested in a few rules. You probably didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to tell them to stop driving with one foot out the window—just because you wanted to make their lives boring.

No. You wanted to protect them.

Kids and teenagers need adults who will show up and care enough to give them rules, structure, parameters, to help keep them safe—emotionally as well as physically.

That’s what God did. Think about it. When you read the Old Testament, you don’t have to be a biblical scholar to figure out God was in the business of giving rules. I haven’t ever personally counted them, but I’m told there are over 600 rules.
It’s as if God, the One who created us and understands how we are wired, knew one of the best ways to begin proving His love for us was by showing up for thousands of years to say . . . Don’t eat that. Don’t go there. You might want to wash that first.

It wasn’t the only way He proved His love. But it was one of the first.

**KNOW THEM**

Knowing a kid or a teenager isn’t like knowing the quadratic formula. You learn it once, and it pretty much stays the same. Kids are growing, changing, evolving beings. In order to know them, you have to create spaces in your week to listen. Listen to what they are saying. Listen to what they’re not saying. Learn to look for changes in their moods or changes in their activities. If you want to prove to a kid or teenager you really care about them, you need to develop the practice of continually getting to know them.

I (Reggie) learned this the hard way as a parent when I made the mistake of saying to my then-fifth-grade daughter: “I’m your father. Of course I know you.” It was in the middle of a conversation, and I probably said it without really thinking. But I wasn’t prepared for her response: “No, you don’t. You don’t know anything about me.” She proceeded to give me a pop quiz on everything from her favorite actor to her favorite color. And I remember thinking, *She’s going to literally pass or fail me as a father based on my answers to this quiz.*
Most of you aren’t planning to pack up a duffle bag, walk out the door, and never turn around. But there are times, for many of us, when we (unintentionally) disengage emotionally.

There will come a time in every kid’s life when things get messy. Maybe they get sick. Maybe they become sad or hurt emotionally. Maybe they suffer a natural consequence to a decision they made. These aren’t the kind of circumstances you create, and you certainly can’t change them—even though you might want to. But how you respond in these critical moments will forever impact your relationship. And it will affect the way they respond to and interpret their situations.

Remember when we were talking about rules? It’s interesting when you read the Bible and watch how God interacted with the Israelites in the Old Testament. He showed up. He gave them rules. And then they broke the rules, over and over and over again.

Maybe rules were made knowing they would be broken. It’s not that rules weren’t made to be followed. I’m sure if we all followed every rule, there would be less anger, pain, and violence. When a rule is broken, it creates a unique opportunity to prove love.

In other words, you have an opportunity as a parent or as a leader to show up in the life of a kid or teenager to give them rules that will help keep them safe physically and emotionally. But when they break a rule (and at some point they will), and you show up anyway, you communicate unconditional love.

That’s what God did. He gave the rules. We broke them. He showed up anyway.

It doesn’t mean that there won’t be consequences. It doesn’t mean that there’s no place for correction or instruction. Of course, we want to help kids and teenagers learn from their experiences and make wise choices in the future. But it does mean that you should never punish them relationally. Regardless of what they’ve done, you still have the opportunity to show up to prove . . . you aren’t going anywhere. They still matter. You will see them through the mess.

It’s really pretty simple. When we show up and make rules, we prove to them we care. When they break the rules and we show up anyway, we prove to them we still care. We prove to them they have worth, and we are committed to them even when it’s difficult, inconvenient, and messy.
A few years ago, we had the privilege of meeting with education reformer Geoffrey Canada about children who grow up in disadvantaged environments. Canada is an education reformer who grew up in the South Bronx, went to Harvard graduate school, and came back to Harlem as the president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone. He has dedicated his life to giving kids a better chance by helping them graduate high school and get into college.

In a conversation with Geoffrey, he made an interesting observation about the kids in Harlem. He said the reason so many of these kids don’t believe in God is because they’ve never seen adults who are God-like.

What he was saying was simple. In order to believe in a good and creative God who loves them in spite of their mistakes and their mess, kids and teenagers need adults who will do the same. They need adults who can demonstrate to them over time that they matter and have a value far greater than what can be measured by their performance.

Simon’s a weird kid. He plays marbles, and for a twelve-year-old who has grown up without a father, he’s exceptionally levelheaded. Seriously, how many middle-schoolers do you know like Simon? Of course, this story only gives us a glimpse into one week of his life. There are probably a lot of other sides to Simon, too.

Nevertheless, Simon has gumption. He’s a spirited, gutsy, resourceful kid with enough confidence to take on the top dogs of his middle school single-handedly. Okay, maybe not single-handedly. But he takes them on nonetheless. Why?

Simon has a healthy sense of self-worth.
Simon may seem like a rare kid with a healthy perspective about what matters, but did you notice something? Simon wouldn’t be Simon if it weren’t for some other key people in his life. Without the influence and love of his mother, Diane, and his small group leader, Ken, and even his next-door neighbor and drum instructor, Eric, Simon probably wouldn’t be the heroic kid that he is.

In other words, Simon knows that he’s worth something because certain adults in his life have shown up consistently, over time, to prove to him that he’s worth loving. And because he knows that he’s worth loving, he is, in turn, able to demonstrate love to the people around him.

He is unsusceptible to Nick’s schemes.
He has the confidence to think clearly and not be pushed around.

He understands how to care for someone unselfishly. He goes to great lengths not only to keep Max out of trouble, but to help Max figure out a better way to fit in at a new school.

He has the courage to open up to Eric. Simon’s vulnerability with Eric helps Eric begin to discover what it really means to love other people.

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WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK TO LOVE A KID OR TEENAGER MATTERS.
WORDS OVER TIME CAN IMPACT SOMEONE’S DIRECTION IN LIFE

WORDS Matter
If you want to help kids and teenagers know they are loved over time, tell them, “I LOVE YOU.”

Okay. Now that we have gotten the most obvious, true, and predictable idea out of the way, let’s talk a little more about words. 1

We all have a tendency to underestimate the weight of our words—especially as it relates to the kids and teenagers we care about.

If you’ve ever traveled to a place with a language different from your own, you know that words matter.

Maybe you’ve accidently . . . confused jamon with jabon and ordered a soap sandwich. mistaken ocas for ojos and sought medical attention for your inflamed geese. forgotten the gender for busto and asked the post office clerk for a corset (busto).

But there’s more to a language than sorting out confusing homonyms.

In Pormpuraaw, a remote aboriginal community in Australia, words like “right,” “left,” “in front of,” or “behind” don’t exist. Instead, the people use cardinal directions:

“Please hand me the plate west of your cup.”
“You may sit in the seat to my east.”
“There’s an ant on your southwest leg.”

If you want to greet someone, you might ask, “Where are you going?” and they might answer, “A long way to the south-southwest. How about you?”

WHAT’S THE POINT?

In order to say anything in Kuuk Thaayore, you have to be spatially oriented. If you aren’t, you literally can’t even say “Hello” properly. That means speakers of Kuuk Thaayore are remarkably good at navigation, even in unfamiliar landscapes. 3

They are good at navigation because they constantly think about direction.

They think about direction because they use directional words.

SIMPLY PUT: THE WORDS THEY USE IMPACT THE WAY THEY THINK.
The same is true not only for different languages, but for any academic field of study. Whether you want to learn anthropology, psychology, herbology, theology, or mechanical engineering, you will have to learn some new words.

The way you see the world is shaped by the words you use to express what you see. You are able to see what you know how to say.

Research has actually shown, in order to... think a thought, paint a picture, work a math problem, you need words.

Without words—the simplest tools of communication—people are limited.

So, if words allow us to think, see, interpret, then they must be a big deal to God.

**AFTER ALL, EVERYTHING STARTED WITH A WORD.**

God spoke and it came into being.

God created with words.

The first words we know about were God’s: **“LET THERE BE LIGHT.”**

Maybe it’s no accident that words have been helping us see ever since.

God used words to create a world out of nothing. Theologians use the phrase ex *nihilo* to distinguish this kind of “creation” from anything else that is simply made using existing elements.
GOD’S WORDS HAVE POWER.

But God didn’t reserve the power of words only for Himself. Adam didn’t get to create ex nihilo, but he did get to name the animals.

Adam decided,
“This one is a slug.”
“That’s a butterfly.”

God gave Adam the creative power to name something. He shared with humanity the incredible ability to . . . give meaning, define attributes, and shape perceptions of the created world.

By sharing the power of words, by giving us the gift of communication, God gave us a tremendous responsibility.

It’s easy to take words for granted. We use them every day.

But the words we use not only affect what we see, they affect how we influence others to see.

As a parent or leader, you decide what words you will give to the kids and teenagers in your life. But remember, like all things with power, words have the potential to do as much damage as they do good.

They can be used to . . .
love or scorn,
encourage or tear down,
illuminate or shut out.

What you say probably has more of an impact than you think it does. Maybe that’s why James warns us words are like a bridle on a horse or a rudder on a ship.

Words are small things, but they have tremendous influence. They can impact someone’s direction.

That’s why the words you give to a kid or teenager this week matter. Your words aren’t just empty. overused. meaningless.

Every time you speak, you are reinforcing or expanding their vocabulary. You are giving them words. Words that will shape . . . how they see the world, how they see themselves, how they think about God.

Your words will help them imagine and understand the things they can’t see so they can keep moving in a good direction.

When you don’t know something, you usually don’t know you don’t know. Until recently I didn’t know I couldn’t navigate like the Aborigines. Everything in my world is left or right. That’s all I have. But I do get lost pretty easily.
In the same way, the kids and teenagers in your world probably don’t know the words they need from you. But you have a unique opportunity to give them words over time that will help them

Reason
Win
Believe

Words over time help kids **REASON**.

It’s really not complicated to understand.
You need words to think.

So, the more words you have, the more . . . ideas you can ideate.
intuition you can intuit.
thoughts you can think.

If you want kids to be able to reason, they need words.

**DID YOU KNOW ONE OF THE GREATEST INDICATORS OF A CHILD’S FUTURE SUCCESS IS VOCABULARY?**

MAYBE THAT’S WHY . . .

• “The U.S. Military’s Armed Forces Qualification Test gives twice as much weight to verbal scores as to math scores.”
• The SAT is weighted toward verbal abilities two to one.

They are acting on the belief that the greater your variety of words, the greater your scope of thinking.

How effective would you be if you were a . . . musician with only two notes?
chef with only three ingredients?
mechanic with only one tool?

The truth is kids need to increase their vocabulary in order to be more successful.

If you want to help a kid or teenager be an innovator, problem solver, learner, then give them words.

Because if they never expand their vocabulary, they will grow up to be limited, stuck, dependent.

Words over time help kids **WIN**.
If words in general help us think, problem-solve, and learn new concepts, a few select words have the ability to shape the way we feel. Hope. Dream.

When I (Kristen) was a high school English teacher, I had one of those experiences that makes teaching one of the greatest professions on the planet. (I may be biased.) In my third-period class, I had a student with some learning disabilities. He was quiet, unsocial, and on a number of medications. He always kept his head down and never participated. Then one day, he turned in a story I was sure he had plagiarized. This story was so good, so well-written, I just knew it couldn’t be his work.

After hours of investigating, I discovered that it was his writing.

So I did what any teacher would have done. I told him he was a good writer.

The next thing I knew, he was bringing me stories after school—unassigned—just to get feedback. He took the initiative to launch a writers’ club at the school. He started getting better grades. He smiled more. He became more socially connected. Now he’s a New York Times best-selling author.

Okay, he’s not a best-selling author . . . that I know of. But when he started writing, he discovered something about his potential. It changed the way he saw himself. It moved him in a better direction.

For my part, it was only a few simple words. They didn’t feel significant at the time. I assumed he already knew he was a good writer. I figured someone else must have told him.

But that one conversation, those few words, made a huge impact.

Or the words you use can unintentionally limit them, box them in, and make them feel trapped.
As a parent or leader, you might not get many of those stories. You rarely know the impact of your own words. You won’t often hear things like . . .
“Wow, I never thought about it that way.”
“Thanks, Mom. Your words made me feel so loved.”
“When you said that, it really changed how I think about . . .”

**Words over time help kids** **BELIEVE.**

Everything you know about God, you know through words. Okay, maybe that’s hyperbole—maybe. But our theology is expressed in words.

You have never seen
Redemption
Justification
Kenosis

Did you look it up? Good. See, even you can discover something about God by expanding your vocabulary.

**KIDS AND TEENAGERS NEED THEOLOGICAL WORDS IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND CERTAIN ASPECTS OF GOD’S NATURE. THAT’S WHY THE WORDS YOU GIVE THEM MATTER WHEN IT COMES TO FAITH.**

Your analogies, adjectives, and questions will shape what they think about when they think about God.
If you grew up without a concept of God, you may be tempted to shut down or feel defeated right now. Maybe you’re asking yourself, *How can I pass on a theological vocabulary if I don’t even know any theological words?*

Actually, you may be in a better place than the rest of us. For some of us, there are words that may have been overused or abused when we were forming our thoughts about God and faith.

As a leader or a parent, regardless of your background, you have an opportunity to rediscover old words and to look for new and relevant ways to explain ancient and timeless concepts.

If you want to pass on a spiritual history, give the kids and teenagers in your life spiritual words.

When you give a kid a word, you open them up to new possibilities.

*Maybe that’s why God gave us words. So we could share them over time to . . .*

*Communicate love.*

*Build each other up.*

*Move us in a better direction.*
When you hang around kids and teenagers, you will find yourself saying some pretty remarkable things.

“Don’t sit on your brother’s face.”
“You’re wrong, a gorilla would totally destroy a bear in a fight.”
“Can you use your big-kid voice, and ask nicely with a happy heart?”

If you say that last one to a group of eleventh-grade guys, you are likely to get some pretty interesting looks. That’s not because it’s a bad phrase. It’s just that it’s not a good phrase for that particular season of life.

Words are always changing.
The words you use with preschoolers aren’t the same words you will use with an elementary-school kid. And the words you use for a fifth-grader will look distinctly different than the words you use with an eleventh-grader.

There are new words for every season of life.

If you’re a leader who has worked with fifth-graders for fifteen years, maybe you think you have an out on this one. Think again. Words don’t only change as kids get older, they change with time. Culture changes. With the release of every new movie, every new music group, every new TV show, new words trickle through our conversations. Some stick around for longer than others. But language is always changing.

That means whether you’re a parent or a leader, you will never know all the words. Instead, you will constantly be learning.

You will always need to expand your vocabulary.

If you’re like me, the idea of learning another language is terrifying. Hands down, Spanish was the hardest class of my life. I’d rather do just about anything than parse another verb. But don’t worry. We aren’t suggesting you need to run out and buy Rosetta Stone. But, like we said—if you are going to expand your vocabulary so you can give kids the rational, emotional, and theological words they need, you will constantly be learning another language.

You need to learn a faith language to help them believe.
You need to learn an emotional language so you can help them win.
You need to learn more language so you can help them reason.

Here’s the good news: Just like when you learn to speak another language, you don’t have to do it alone. Find a teacher or a coach—someone who is fluent in the words you need. Look for someone who is an expert in what you need to know.

Learn another language
Maybe they are . . .
- an educator who works with a specific age group.
- a leader who has a way of describing concepts of faith.
- a parent of older kids who has had time to reflect on a particular season of life.

If you don’t personally know someone who would be a great language coach, that’s okay. People write books for a reason. Take a trip to your local bookstore or get online and do a little research. You can probably find:
- an author,
- a researcher,
- a blogger,
- or some other expert who can help you expand your vocabulary so you can have a lasting impact.

THE POINT IS DISCOVER WHO YOU WANT TO LISTEN TO, SO YOU WILL HAVE THE WORDS YOU REALLY NEED WHEN YOU NEED THEM MOST.

WEIGH WHAT YOU SAY

Did you know that, on average, people say 10,123 words per day? That’s a lot of words. If you are a parent or leader with teens, the number you hear from them may be slightly less.

- “Not much,”
- “Goin’ out,”
- “Sure,” only go so far in the daily total.

But within those 10,123 words, some words count more than others. And those are the words you weigh. Those are the ones to which you give special attention. They might be the words you say when a kid . . . asks you a question you weren’t expecting, experiences a significant milestone transition, opens up about a situation you didn’t see coming, makes a poor decision.

Or they might be words that just happen . . . over breakfast, standing in the hall, or in the car.

Whenever you happen to say them, here are four ways you can weigh the words that matter most.

WRITE IT OUT

If you aren’t sure what you want to say, take the time to write it. You think about your words differently when you write them down. You can pick the right words, arrange them in just the right order, and practice saying what you really want to say before you have to say it.

MAKE IT SPECIFIC

The words that count most are the words we know have been created specifically for us. The reason my conversation with the student I mentioned earlier was so meaningful for him wasn’t because I told him he was a good writer. It was because he is a good writer, and I told him. It was specific for him. Every kid, every teenager, needs to hear a specific compliment from someone who knows them best. They need
for you to use words that shine a light on the things they do well. They need for you to catch them doing something right.

If you are looking for a place to start making it specific, try completing the following phrases as they relate to the kids and teenagers in your life:

- **I REMEMBER WHEN . . .**
- **I HAVE NOTICED . . .**
- **I HOPE YOU KNOW . . .**
- **I’M REALLY GLAD . . .**
- **I’VE BEEN THINKING . . .**

Maybe you can even make it a practice to write short notes—two or three sentences—that begin with these phrases. If you’re a parent, put the note in a kid’s lunch, on the nightstand, under the wiper blades of your teenager’s car. If you’re a leader, send it through the mail, write it in a text, or use whatever social media platform they are on. Get creative about how you personalize it, so they will have regular reminders over time that you know and love them.

**REMEMBER THE BASICS**

This might be the easiest thing you can put into practice. It may even seem like a contradiction to everything else we have said so far. But there are some common phrases every kid and teenager needs to hear from the adults who know and love them. They don’t have to be learned from a teacher or a coach. They don’t change as a kid gets older. You don’t even have to do much to personalize them. Just use them. And use them more than once.

Are you wondering what the phrases are? Here’s an incomplete list to get you started:

- “THANK YOU.”
- “I LOVE YOU.”
- “I’M SORRY.”
- “I DON’T KNOW, BUT WE CAN FIND OUT.”
- “IT’S OKAY, I’VE MADE MISTAKES TOO.”
- “I’M HERE FOR YOU.”
- “I BELIEVE IN YOU.”
- “YOU DID IT!”
- “I’M PROUD OF YOU.”
- “I TRUST YOU.”
- “I’M LISTENING.”
- “I LOVE SPENDING TIME WITH YOU.”
- “KEEP TRYING.”
- “YOU CAN DO IT.”

You can add more as you think of them.

**LET THEM TALK**

The words you give a kid or teenager have the potential to welcome a conversation or shut one down. Don’t miss that. Your words matter when it comes to prompting them to share words with you—and they need to share words with you. Think about the people in your life to
whom you feel safe talking. Chances are, they have communicated to you over time that they enjoy hearing from you—even when it might be inconvenient, unplanned, informal.

Some of the best ways to weigh your words are to practice asking good questions, listening well, and developing conversation skills.

You’ll find that when you

**STAY FASCINATED, UNDER-REACT, VALUE WAIT TIME,**

*and WELCOME INTERRUPTIONS,*

you may begin to hear more from the kids and teenagers in your life. That’s good. Because as much as your words matter, you shouldn’t be the only one talking.

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**RECYCLE BIG IDEAS**

What are the phrases you remember most? When you were growing up, there were probably some core values that were transferred to you through words. But chances are, you don’t remember the things someone only said once. You remember the things someone said to you repeatedly over time.

So, as a parent or leader, what do you want those phrases to be? What are the core ideas you want the kids and teenagers in your life to walk away and remember?

Before you pull out your iPad and start writing down your list, let me stop you for a minute. What if I told you that you might not have to come up with all the phrases yourself? I’m not saying you can’t. You might have some genius phrases you know immediately need to become a part of your vocabulary.

But here’s something you might not have considered before:

There are people who have dedicated their professional career to creating phrases worth repeating in the life of a child. That’s why if you’re on a church staff, it’s a good idea to choose a curriculum that will give you a strong starting point. If you are a parent or volunteer leader, maybe you need to take the time to understand the curriculum and message your church has adopted.

What if all you had to do in order to recycle big ideas was to steal what some smart people around you are already saying?
Once you identify core values and ideas worth recycling, there are a few ways you can make those ideas stick:

**HAVE A MONTHLY FOCUS**

Choose one idea to repeat often over a short period of time.

**INCORPORATE IT INTO YOUR “EVERYDAY”**

Use the routine moments of life to highlight the ideas that are most significant.

**SAY IT THE SAME WAY**

When you say the same thing the same way, it makes it memorable. But over time, it can become white noise. So you should also . . .

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**SAY IT IN A NEW WAY**

When you hear something in a new way, sometimes it helps you reframe the thought and understand it at a deeper level.

**HAVE SOMEONE ELSE SAY IT**

Again, this is why we wrote the book to parents and leaders alike. When you get on the same page to say the same thing, you have the potential to make a greater impact in the life of a kid or teenager.

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**REMEMBER:**

YOU ARE MAKING HISTORY IN THE LIVES OF KIDS AND TEENAGERS. THIS WEEK, YOUR WORDS HAVE INCREDIBLE POTENTIAL TO . . .

**TURN ON A LIGHT. HELP SOMEONE SEE.**
That’s why you do what you do. You understand the importance of words over time. You know a few simple words can have a lasting influence.

So, when you say something this week, say it so it matters, and say it so someone knows they matter.

A few words can make a big difference in the direction of someone’s life.

Marcus works with words. He’s a writer who carries around a physical dictionary and thesaurus. Who does that anymore? And yet, when it comes to the words he really needs to communicate with his son, Eric, he has a hard time knowing what to say.

He believes his son is a good kid. He wants to inspire Eric to make something of himself. He’s proud of his son’s talent.

But Eric doesn’t keep a mental catalog of Marcus’ good intentions. Instead, Eric remembers his father’s words:

“You don’t have an ounce of motivation.”
“You’re irrational.”
“Idealistic.”
“You’re going nowhere.”
Like so many parents and leaders, Marcus struggles to turn his intentions into words that can help move Eric in a better direction. In his rush to complete a deadline at work, he absent-mindedly says things that don’t fully communicate what he wants to say.

But what if Marcus really understood the impact his words have on Eric? What if he began to view his words as a gift that, over time, could ultimately impact the direction of his son’s life?

Maybe then Marcus would give the words that he says to his son the kind of study and attention he gives the words he writes about Memphian real estate. Okay, maybe that’s harsh. But Marcus is a fictional character; he can handle the criticism.
EXPAND YOUR VOCABULARY

THE WORDS YOU GIVE A KID OR TEENAGER THIS WEEK MATTER.

WORDS

\[
\text{WORDS} \quad \frac{\text{TIME}}{} = \quad \text{DIRECTION}
\]

A FEW SELECT WORDS OVER TIME CAN IMPACT SOMEONE’S DIRECTION IN LIFE.

EXPAND YOUR VOCABULARY

LEARN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

WEIGH WHAT YOU SAY

RECYCLE BIG IDEAS
STORIES

over

TIME

MOVE US TO IMAGINE A WORLD BEYOND OURSELVES

STORIES

Matter
Ask any teacher, marketer, politician, journalist, or photographer.

And if your audience includes children or teenagers, stories are even more important.

Have you ever wondered what grandparents, fiction, and the Bible have in common? Probably not. Why would you? But if you think about it, they represent at least three different kinds of stories that shape a child’s perspective about the world.

Don’t get worried. We don’t think the Bible is fiction or that fiction is more important than the Bible.

We just believe kids and teenagers need stories from grandparents, fiction, and the Bible to build the kind of history they really need.

Okay. It may not be possible for every kid to have or know a biological grandparent. But children at least need figurative grandparents— influences in their lives who are older adults, guardians, aunts and uncles, or simply friends of the family who have been around long enough to connect kids to meaningful stories about their parents or heritage.

Without personal and family stories, kids miss out on having the kind of relational history that fuels a healthy perspective about their identity.

Some Christians may get nervous about this statement. But instead of having a Harry Potter, Hunger Games, or Santa Claus debate, let’s at least agree on one thing: God seems to like fiction.
On the one hand, the Bible is true. But at the same time, it also contains a lot of fiction. Fiction was the primary way Jesus amplified truth. He taught in parables because sometimes the best way to clarify a truth is to tell a story.

Without fiction, kids could miss part of the cultural history they need to connect with a wider community and develop values.

**KIDS NEED BIBLE STORIES.**

We decided to put this at the bottom of our list for a reason—Not because it’s less important, but actually because it is more important.

The Bible isn’t a book. It’s actually a library of 66 books, written by 40 different authors over 1,600 years. They were all very different people ranging from nomads to kings, from priests to fishermen. Yet all of its stories connect to tell one story about God and His love for us through time.

Without the Bible, kids and teenagers could grow up and fail to connect the great mysteries of the universe with a creative and loving God. They would miss out on the kind of spiritual history that is foundational to faith.

That’s why stories matter. They provide kids with the relational, cultural, and spiritual context to shape their perspectives about God, Faith, Values, Life.

So, what does that have to do with you? As leaders and parents, you are storytellers, producers, librarians, or maybe even photojournalists. You should always be looking for the next story to help them have a richer history, because . . .

If God created TIME as a platform to prove He LOVES us unconditionally, then maybe He designed STORIES so that collectively, over time, they could give us a deeper perspective about His universal principles and truths.
To put it another way, God fashioned the human brain so it would connect to story. Then, He crafted an original script that would continue to fascinate humans. Then, He designed humans with the creative talent to craft intriguing stories. (That has to be more than just coincidence.)

Experts have analyzed, theorized, and evangelized about the power of story. Everyone seems to agree. It’s as if our minds are hardwired to engage in the way information fits together in the context of a narrative.

One specialist in this area puts it this way:

“In the last 15 years we have developed the brain imaging technologies that help us shed light on what it means to ‘get lost’ in a good story. Studies are suggesting that, when reading, listening, or watching a good story, we activate brain regions used to process the experience as if it were our own. In other words, we are wired for stories.”

If you ever need a little more proof that God exists, consider the magical, mystical, imaginative, compelling way kids, teenagers—and everyone else for that matter—connect to stories.

Don’t underestimate the potential of your God-given imagination.

Have you ever considered that without imagination, you can’t . . .

see past what you already know?
care how someone else feels?
hope beyond your present situation?
J.K. Rowling says, "Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not . . . In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared. Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people’s places."²
That's what the gift of imagination and story does for a child or teenager.
It enables them to think their way into other people's lives.
It compels them to feel the sentiments of other people's emotions.
It invites them to venture into other people's places.

Maybe that's why research actually indicates the more stories you read to a child over time, the greater their empathy.³ Because stories have the potential to make you feel what someone else feels.

Stories can collectively work to build a child’s emotional, relational, and moral intelligence.

Think about what happens when a child imagines . . .
fighting Smaug, the dragon, with Bilbo on the Lonely Mountain.
joining Annemarie in the Danish Resistance during WWII.
traveling with Lucy through a mysterious wardrobe into a frozen land.

That’s what imagination does.
It affects our emotions and intuition.

That same imagination can also help a child embrace complex truths and realities related to stories of faith.

A child has to imagine . . .
the power of what happened when God created the world.
the voice of God to Moses from a burning bush.
the miracles Jesus performed as He traveled the ancient cities.
the majesty of a heavenly dwelling place.

It's as if God gave us an imagination so we could imagine the unimaginable. And stories become the spark that ignites our creative senses and emotions. Stories move us. And stories have the potential to stretch our perspectives about God. Maybe that's why Jesus was such a master at spinning parables to teach people about the character of God.

CAN YOU IMAGINE
THE ONE WHO FASHIONED YOUR IMAGINATION TO CONNECT TO STORY,

CRAFTING STORIES TO ACTUALLY TELL YOU?
True, He had an advantage over the average storyteller. I wonder if that’s why His stories are so
Timeless
Powerful
Life-changing

Jesus said, “Let me tell you a story so you can get a glimpse of God’s character. He’s like . . .
a father with a rebellious son.
a rich man who goes on a journey and leaves his estate in the hands of his servants.
a bridegroom throwing an incredible wedding party.”

Then Jesus put us in those stories, too.
He said we are like . . .
the casual hiker who stumbles across an incredible pearl in the middle of a field.
the woman who badgers and pleads with an unjust judge until he gives in.
the builder furrowing his brow as he decides between two plots of land: one rough and underlain with rock, the other idyllic and sandy.

**THE STORIES YOU TELL MATTER.**
YOU ARE INVITING KIDS AND TEENAGERS INTO A BIGGER NARRATIVE—ONE WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE.

**WHY DO YOU THINK . . .**

**Luke Skywalker** in *Star Wars,*  **Frodo** in *Lord of the Rings,*  **Aslan** in *The Chronicles of Narnia,* and a boy named **Harry** have such an appeal to the hearts of kids?

**BECAUSE THEY REMIND US OF . . .**

the **struggle** between good and evil.
the **existence** of a supernatural and miraculous power.
the **potential** to be personally restored and transformed.

Why do you think the same themes are recycled so many times?

**MAYBE IT’S SIMPLY BECAUSE THE IDEA OF STORY ORIGINATED WITH GOD.**
If every story was written by an author who is created in God’s image, maybe that’s the reason so many reflect His ancient narrative.

NO WONDER STORIES INSPIRE US.
NO WONDER STORIES INCITE FAITH.
NO WONDER STORIES GIVE US HOPE.

Isn’t that the kind of perspective you want kids and teenagers to have about this world? Don’t you want them to know life’s connected to a bigger story where God is the author?

A bigger story perspective . . . prepares them to face whatever happens. compels them to take risks and do something significant. moves them to keep believing that good will ultimately win.

Life will be hard. It will be harder for some than for others. The only guarantee in everyone’s story is there will be conflict.

That’s why everybody loves a good story. You latch onto someone who is going against the odds. You identify with their struggle to push through.

Did you know the script for Harry Potter was written during J.K. Rowling’s darkest hour?

Here’s how she describes that time in her life: “An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless . . . I was the biggest failure I knew. I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realized, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.”

So, Rowling captured the imagination of a generation with a story.

The story of a boy named Harry—an unusual boy, marked for a specific destiny from birth.

As he discovered his true identity and embraced his purpose, he grew in wisdom and strength. His closest friends followed him everywhere, facing grave opposition, but they could not always understand what he understood. They could not follow him into the very final battle against an evil enemy, where he entered into death itself . . . and defeated it.

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Regardless of what you think about Harry, you have to agree.

Stories are powerful. Especially when they reflect God’s story.

Stories over time matter. Especially when they come from parents and leaders who care.
So, do whatever you can to amplify the best stories around you.

**READ THEM.**
**WATCH THEM.**
**TELL THEM.**
**CREATE THEM.**
**WRITE THEM.**
**ILLUSTRATE THEM.**
**FILM THEM.**
**LIVE THEM.**
**COLLECT THEM.**

Stories can make history for a child.
Stories can transform his or her perspective.

They can make
life fuller,
faith deeper,
hope stronger.

**STORIES OVER TIME**
**MOVE US TO IMAGINE**
**A WORLD BEYOND**
**OURSELVES.**
So Why Do You Think We Wrote a Story About a Kid Named Simon?

We Needed a Creative Outlet
We wanted an excuse to go to Memphis
It was divinely inspired

No.
It may just be because we have a high view of fiction.
It’s okay if you don’t.

Maybe for you, the thought of reading about made-up people experiencing pretend realities seems trivial. You want the real world. You want someone to “give it to you straight.” That’s fine. We wrote this half of the book for you.

But we tend to think that with fiction we can . . .
say more through specific characters,
leave the necessary tensions unresolved,
brake down barriers of communication,
and invite you into something that’s more emotionally engaging.

So we amplified the story. We introduced you to Eric. Because we just figured he’s a guy you need to know.

Fiction isn’t the only way to tell a story.
And some of the best stories aren’t fiction.
But if you have a message to share, one of the best ways you can communicate that message is with a story.

That’s why you need stories if you want to influence someone’s perspective. As parents and leaders, maybe it’s time for you to start using the time you have to get serious about amplifying the story for the kids who matter most in your lives.

Discover the Arts

Yes, that’s what we mean. It’s pretty simple. If you want to shape the perspectives of the kids and teenagers you care about, you will always be looking for new stories.

Here’s the good news:
Stories are everywhere.
Experiencing them can be fun.

So this week, discover the arts together.
Experience them.
Participate in them.
Talk about them together.
**CAPTURE THE STORYLINE**

In a world where everyone with a smartphone has access to a high-def camera 24/7, we have all become photojournalists. We’re literally obsessed with telling our stories. That’s why we . . . post it on a blog, share it on Instagram, tag it on Facebook, upload it to Shutterfly.

You really don’t need to be told to take more pictures.

But capturing the storyline is about more than just taking pictures to share with your online community. When you capture the storyline for a kid or teenager, you look for ways to record and retell significant stories in their lives so you can give them a relational history that fuels a healthy perspective about their identity.
So, record it.

There are many parents and leaders who record key moments in a journal, baby book, shoe box, three-ring binder, or box of note cards.

Or maybe even with significant objects like . . .
- a Thanksgiving turkey made of multi-colored handprints.
- a plastic souvenir cup from your trip to Disney World.
- a third-place ribbon from the fourth-grade spelling bee.
- the playbill from Andersonville Middle School’s production of Wizard of Oz.
- the movie stubs from all three times you went to see Never Say Never.

You don’t have to make or keep everything on this list. Just do a few things. Figure out what fits your style and accomplishes the goal.

You also capture the storyline when you re-tell it.

You do this every time you begin a conversation with . . .
- “I remember when you . . . ”
- “That time when we all got together and . . .”
- “You have always been so good at . . .”

This is one place where parents may have more opportunities than leaders—because they tend to be connected to the storyline over a longer period of time. And let’s face it, if you are a leader who is too good at this, it could be a little creepy. But if you lead a group for any significant amount of time—from a few months to multiple years—you can find ways to record and re-tell the story of your group. You also have an opportunity to help parents record and re-tell the story for their kids.

If you’re a parent, you should also look for ways to record and re-tell your own story and the story of your family history. You might write it in a journal, build a photo-album, or record a video. No two families are alike. Your family stories have a significant role to play in giving your child the relational history they need.

Remember, whether you are a parent or leader, you don’t have to be the most creative, artistic, scrapbooking-Pinterest-expert to do this well. If you are, that’s fantastic. But know that whatever seemingly small things you’re already doing to capture the storyline will have a lasting impact on the perspectives of the kids and teenagers you love.

GET IN THE ACTION

Good stories don’t just happen. You have to create them. As a leader or parent, you are an author. Okay, never mind, we only wish we had that kind of control. We know that God is ultimately the author of the story. But you do have influence with a few characters; so think for a minute about your influence the way an author might think.
If you are influencing a leading character . . .

What qualities do you want your character to develop?
What lessons does your character need to learn?
What experiences does your character need to have?

Or maybe you could think about it this way:
As they begin their epic journey, every good hero needs

surmountable obstacles
sidekicks
super powers

If you figure out how to give them super powers, let us know. That would be impressive. We’ll talk more about sidekicks in the next chapter. What about surmountable obstacles? Every author knows if you want a leading character to develop the virtues necessary to triumph, you need to architect some character-building experiences along the way. As an “author,” or influencer, you have an opportunity to help kids discover challenges, face obstacles, and participate in the action.

You may want to add something to their storyline like . . .
volunteering at a food bank.
taking an annual mission trip.
packing a shoebox.
raising money for a non-profit.

As you look for opportunities to build their stories and get them into the action, remember two things:

THEY NEED TO EXPERIENCE FAILURE.
THEY NEED TO EXPERIENCE SUCCESS.

That may seem contradictory, but experts seem to agree on these two things. On the one hand, kids and teenagers need to be surrounded by adults who will resist the temptation to jump into situations to “solve it” for them. They need leaders and parents who will love them enough to let them navigate challenges early on while the stakes are lower, so they will be better equipped to face adulthood when the consequences may be more severe.

On the other hand, it’s important to involve kids and teenagers in experiences where they can succeed.

My (Reggie) oldest daughter grew up playing basketball. In the ninth grade, her coach made an unusual decision. He decided that since the team was especially young, he would only have them play scrimmages instead of playing in the normal league. Many of the players’ parents were upset.

He wasn’t pushing them.
He wasn’t stretching them.
He wasn’t challenging their ability as a team.

But here’s the reason he gave: he wanted the team to understand what it felt like to win. He knew that letting his team get overwhelmed by older, more seasoned players could potentially ingrain in them a sense of failure. It wasn’t that he never wanted them to lose; he just wanted the team to experience enough wins in order to understand their potential and get in the habit of being successful.
Remember, as parents and leaders, when you amplify the story, you are giving kids and teenagers a bigger story perspective.

You aren’t just teaching them lessons about life, faith, and love. You are connecting them to a story that’s bigger than themselves.

That’s what story does over time. It gives a child or teenager the kind of perspective that says, “God’s story moves me to a sense of wonder. I am amazed at how His story intersects with my story. And I realize that I matter in the stories of others—that we are living out our story together.”

It really is a story of love.

**So what you do to amplify the story this week matters.**

Connect kids and teenagers with cultural, relational, and spiritual stories. Help them imagine a world beyond themselves.

---

**Eric**

Eric is an authentic and independent high school senior—not to mention a ridiculously talented musician. It’s no wonder Simon likes to hang around him. He’s gutsy enough to be honest with himself and chase his own ambitions rather than simply satisfying the expectations of others.

Sure, he would probably swear more. We didn’t want to offend anyone, so we cleaned him up a bit.

But even though Eric is a generally likeable guy, he is still a self-centered kid whose primary focus is his own success. He has imagined a narrowly-focused story for himself—one centered on personal ambition and fame.

Until . . .

A kid named Simon invites him to church. A small group leader named Ken prompts him to consider his story.

Not knowing what to expect, Eric shows up for Simon and his group of
zombies. He is moved by the story he sees them living out together—especially as he tunes in to Simon’s story. He discovers there is more to Simon than he’s ever taken time to discover. And even though there is no apparent personal benefit, Eric begins to get more involved in Simon’s world.

With Ken’s inspiration, Eric realizes he has a role to play in the stories of others just as they have a role to play in his. Eric chooses to get in the action and help Simon in his elaborate plan to save Max. In the process, Eric finds meaning and purpose when his story becomes more connected to the stories of others. He is moved to imagine a world beyond himself.

**BETWEEN THE LINES**

From the Losing Your Marbles story

**KNUCKLE DOWN:**

Write down some of the stories that have redefined the way you see yourself and others—fictional or real. What are some new ways you can engage kids in stories that will move them beyond themselves?
WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK TO EXPERIENCE STORIES WITH A KID OR TEENAGER MATTERS.

STORIES MATTER

STORIES OVER TIME CAN MOVE US TO IMAGINE A WORLD BEYOND OURSELVES.

AMPLIFY THE STORY

DISCOVER THE ARTS

CAPTURE THE STORYLINE

GET IN THE ACTION
tribes tribe tribes tribes

tribes

over

Time

SHOW US HOW WE BELONG

TRIBES Matter
Our drive to belong is the reason . . . people take showers. Synchronized swimming has fans. Men stopped wearing leisure suits in the seventies. Tom Hanks apologized to a soccer ball named Wilson.

Everyone’s familiar with the way it feels. It can happen when you . . . walk into a room of strangers. Look for a seat in the school cafeteria. Wear your Tar Heels jersey to Cameron Stadium.

It’s just the way you feel when you are on the outside looking in. Something tells you this is not your family, friends, or tribe, and you obviously don’t belong.

It’s easy to feel
Awkward
Uncomfortable
Alone

Those feelings don’t have a long-term effect when they happen occasionally. We’re resilient. We’re optimistic. We believe we will find our seat at the table. So we keep moving until we land somewhere.

But not belonging can be devastating if . . .

The loneliness is consistent. The isolation is frequent. The rejection is recurrent.

If you grow up without a tribe, it can complicate things—and the complications of not belonging over time can seriously impair the future of a child.
If you meet someone from that last group, you will instantly know who they are. They will probably be wearing an eye patch, have a scruffy beard, bad breath, and if you make them mad you will hear them say, “aaarrr.” That probably goes for the next-to-last group, too.

Tribes give us opportunities to connect with a variety of people. It’s how humans find other humans.

Tribes give you a wide range of relational choices. They offer circles for you to move in and out of as you discover who you are and where you belong.

English novelist Jane Howard said it this way, “Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

According to Stanford Professor Gregory Walton, “Isolation, loneliness and low social status can harm a person’s subjective sense of well-being, as well as his or her intellectual achievement, immune function and health.”

**BASICALLY, PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE.**

**EVERYBODY NEEDS A CIRCLE, AND EVERY KID NEEDS A TRIBE.**

What exactly is a tribe?
It’s simply a group of people connected by something in common.

Ancestry
Ideas
Experiences
Politics
Theology
Sports

WE DEFINE OURSELVES BY TRIBES.

I AM A . . .

Musician       Foodie       Republican
Baptist        Conservative  Reader
Feminist        Mom          Artist
Braves fan      Student      Blogger
Photojournalist  Biker        Pirate

If you meet someone from that last group, you will instantly know who they are. They will probably be wearing an eye patch, have a scruffy beard, bad breath, and if you make them mad you will hear them say, “Aaarr.” That probably goes for the next-to-last group, too.
When God wanted to redeem His creation, He started with a tribe—okay, twelve tribes. He created a nation and set them apart. They had their own faith, customs, and traditions. Then, through that nation, God sent His Son. And something interesting began to happen. Ecclesiastes, small tribes, began to appear all around the Mediterranean. They ate together. They prayed together. They had their own values and distinctives.

Then Paul wrote letters to connect these smaller tribes with each other. He helped them understand what they had in common. He helped them navigate similar struggles. He wrote down customs, beliefs, theology, and instruction to help define the larger tribe to which they all belonged. It was a group of people connected by a common trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The idea began to spread. The tribe grew.

Just like love, words, and stories were God’s idea, so were tribes. Think back again to creation. God didn’t want Adam to be alone—so Eve came along. Then other people started showing up. (It’s really not complicated to figure out how that happened.) People were always part of God’s plan. Maybe that’s why tribes matter so much. They exist to remind us that we belong to God and we belong together.

When we think about families and about the church, there are some very good reasons why we give them a prominent place in our focus as leaders and as parents.

**WE ALL NEED A TRIBE—WHETHER IT’S LARGE OR SMALL.**

So, you might be thinking, “Is a small group a tribe?”—not really. “Is my family a tribe?”—kind of.

Small groups and families both help us understand the power of what happens in a tribe. They both give us a significant place to belong.

**AS A LEADER OR PARENT, YOU PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN CONNECTING KIDS TO TWO PRIMARY TRIBES.**

**THE CHURCH**

**THE FAMILY**

As a leader or parent, you play a critical role in connecting kids to two primary tribes.

The church                       the family

Just like love, words, and stories were God’s idea, so were tribes.

Think back again to creation. God didn’t want Adam to be alone—so Eve came along. Then other people started showing up. (It’s really not complicated to figure out how that happened.)

People were always part of God’s plan. Maybe that’s why tribes matter so much. They exist to remind us that we belong to God and we belong together.

It’s as if God designed us so we would naturally connect in tribes. Then He used tribes over time to reveal Himself to us, and to continue to spread His message of love.
Tribes are just another one of God’s genius ideas. So genius in fact, that leaders today are considered genius for using tribes to spread their ideas.

Consider Seth Godin’s explanation of how tribes work, “It’s tribes—not money, not factories—that can change our world . . . not because we force people to do something against their will, but because they want to connect.” Godin explains how leveraging our human longing for connection is the best vehicle for the spread of an idea. According to Godin, when you assemble tribes that assemble tribes, they spread the idea so that it becomes a movement.  

Isn’t it interesting that marketing experts are just discovering the same technique God has used to spread His message through generations since the beginning of time?

But the original purpose of tribes was not marketing. It was missional: to connect people to the message of a loving God who pursued a relationship with them over time.

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**SO JESUS CONFRONTED THEM ONE DAY. HE TOLD A STORY ABOUT A FAMILY WITH TWO SONS:**

The youngest left home prematurely. He took his father’s inheritance and went to the “far country.” It was his big chance. He hoped to build his own fortune, find new friends, and leave his mark on the world. Unfortunately, due to a series of wrong decisions—and the fact he had never taken any of Dave Ramsey’s courses—he lost everything.

Basically, he ended up working at a BBQ place in south Georgia. Even worse, he had to live out back with the pigs. I’m sure you’ve heard the story about how he finally said one day, “I wanna go home.” (I can almost hear Michael Bublé singing.)

I can imagine the prodigal son walking across the last field toward the big white house where he grew up. (At least in my mind, it’s a big white house.)

His loving father runs to meet him and gives him a hug, despite what had to be an awful odor.

Why?

Because according to his dad,

“My son was lost, now he is found.”

Translated:

My son lost his way, now he’s back where he belongs.

---

The Pharisees, as religious leaders, failed to understand that mission. They understood the value of keeping the practices and traditions of the tribe of faith. But they failed to understand the value of a tribe in making people feel welcomed, accepted, and loved by God. Instead, they had a reputation for judging and rejecting people who didn’t perform by their standards.
He was a smart dad who knew tribes matter.

So he did two things:
He gave his son a ring to remind him he still belonged in the family. He threw his son a party to assure him that he still had a community where he belonged.

He wanted to send a clear message, “There’s still a seat for you at our table. This is a place where . . . You are known. You are welcome. You are forgiven. YOU BELONG.”

That’s something only tribes can do.
And the tribes most strategically positioned to do that are
The family.
The church.

Kids and teenagers desperately need people who . . . know them, welcome them, and forgive them over time so they will know they belong.

Remember education reformer Geoffrey Canada? He says kids need to grow up with a certain level of failure so they can understand it’s possible to move beyond their mistakes. But they also need to know they can be forgiven, both by their parents and by other adults as well. Canada says this is where church leaders make a difference. This is actually what a tribe of faith should be best at doing—reminding kids they are forgiven by the people who know them best.4

We all want to be known by someone. We want to know: regardless of whatever failure we have in our life, we still have a place to belong and people who believe in us.

THIS IDEA OF BELONGING IS ACTUALLY WHAT MAKES OUR FAITH AS CHRISTIANS DISTINCTIVE.

OUR SENSE OF BELONGING IS ROOTED IN THE CONCEPT OF GRACE.
GRACE MEANS . . .

YOU DON’T BELONG BECAUSE YOU DESERVE TO BELONG.
YOU BELONG BECAUSE GOD HAS ACCEPTED AND FORGIVEN YOU.
YOU ARE KNOWN BY GOD IN A WAY YOU ARE NOT KNOWN BY ANYONE, (EVERY THOUGHT, EVERY DESIRE, EVERY ACTION), AND YET HE HAS WELCOMED YOU INTO HIS TRIBE FOREVER.

THAT’S BELONGING.

It’s important to introduce children and teenagers to the grace of God when they are young. It may be the greatest thing you can do for their sense of belonging.

At some point, most of us have experienced what happens when someone doesn’t feel like they belong.

When Debbie and I (Reggie) met Alyssa, she convinced us she needed a heart transplant—It wasn’t a scam for money, but it was a scam for attention.

She had played this game most of her young life.
To impress someone.
To belong somewhere.

Her history was filled with the fictions she told in an attempt to earn acceptance. But eventually . . .
she was caught,
her pretenses were exposed,
everyone knew the truth,
and she felt alone again.

Then, at twenty-two she failed at the first attempt to take her life.

Debbie and I waited at Elmhurst hospital for three days before she would agree to see us. When she did see us, she was angry.

Her first words were,
“I don’t want you here. Why did you come?
I really don’t want to talk about anything."

She was slow to warm up, but she did. Maybe it was the chocolate we brought or the fact that she was tired of the crowd in the psych ward.

After a few visits she asked this question:
“Why would you come back after knowing what I did?”

For me, it was simple: we knew her.
There was obviously a part we didn’t know.
But there was also a part of her we did know.
Beneath the façade and pretense there was a
Smart
Savvy
Creative
Ambitious
Daring
Lively
Sarcastic
girl who was the age of our own daughters.

I think that’s what we saw.
She was someone’s daughter who had been trapped in her life by a string of bad choices while she tried to figure out where and how to belong.

So I said, “Alyssa, the reason we came back is because we know what you did. Sometimes you just need someone in your life who knows what you did and who shows up anyway. I need that. I need to be loved by the people who have history with me. Otherwise, how can I really know I’m loved?”

Alyssa was not that different than you or me. She just needed tribes over time where she could be known and forgiven in spite of what she had done.

THAT’S WHY KIDS NEED TRIBES OVER TIME.

**KIDS NEED TO BE KNOWN**
before they can feel welcome.

**KIDS NEED TO BE KNOWN**
before they can feel forgiven.

**KIDS NEED TO BE KNOWN**
before they can feel like they belong.

So when they show up broken, lonely, and wounded, make sure they know they have a seat at your table.

JUST REMEMBER:

YOU CAN’T FEEL FORGIVEN BY PEOPLE WHO DON’T REALLY KNOW YOU.
Be the kind of parent or leader who will . . .
give them a ring.
throw them a party.

Because there are two things that will make your home and church attractive to kids and teenagers:
FORGIVENESS
JOY
(We’ll talk more about Joy in the next chapter.)

IF YOU WANT TO CREATE A PLACE WHERE KIDS WANT TO BE, OR MORE IMPORTANTLY WHERE THEY WILL RUN BACK TO WHEN LIFE HAS BROKEN THEM,

GIVE THEM A TRIBE OVER TIME.
Tribes are like circles—and everyone goes in different kinds of circles. You probably have an INNER CIRCLE made up of your closest friends and family. Then you have some SOCIAL CIRCLES based on your interests, hobbies, or profession. You have a SPIRITUAL CIRCLE made up of the people with whom you worship. And we all belong to a GLOBAL CIRCLE of people who are connected simply because we have all been made in the image of God.

The point is we all go in circles. And the circles we go in over time will give us a place where we can be Known Welcomed Forgiven

So, as leaders and parents, consider how you help a kid go in circles.

In other words, think about how they . . .
- eat in circles.
- travel in circles.
- play in circles.
- work in circles.
- learn in circles.

IF KIDS NEED TO CONNECT IN TRIBES OVER TIME IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY BELONG, WE AS PARENTS AND LEADERS NEED TO BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT HOW WE CREATE CIRCLES THAT WILL MAKE THEM FEEL LIKE THEY ARE A PART OF A TRIBE.
Nothing helps define a tribe like traditions. They are shared unique practices, and only insiders fully understand their significance to the group. If you want to create a feeling of solidarity for your tribe, you should have a few traditions.

You may keep some seasonal traditions. As a leader, maybe you . . . celebrate an end-of-the-school-year party. have an annual tithe plate discus competition. take a seniors-only retreat after graduation Sunday.

As a parent, maybe you . . . have a special birthday hat. take a fall camping trip. cut down your own Christmas tree. host a “summer Olympics” for the neighborhood in your backyard.

You probably have some weekly traditions. As a leader, maybe you . . . refer to your group by a special name. share highs and lows from the week. hold hands when you pray.

As a parent, maybe you . . . spend Saturday morning in bed. have a Friday movie night. eat breakfast for dinner every Wednesday. FaceTime with grandparents on the weekends.

It’s also important to have a few verbal traditions. What? You thought we already talked about words? Okay, we did. It’s just that some words really function more like traditions than anything else. They are like inside jokes. When you know them, you know you are a part of a tribe.

If you hang out with a tribe long enough, you will develop some common language. In his book, Talk the Talk, Luc Reid documents “the slang of 65 American subcultures.” In essence, he looks for way to articulate the verbal traditions of a group. In his introduction, he says, “Subcultural slang is more than a specialized vocabulary. Adopting slang is a way to invite people in or to keep casual onlookers out; . . . of confirming or denying relationships; of marking your particular territory in . . . [a tribe].”

So, what is your common language? What are the phrases you use on a regular basis that make your group or your family unique?
As believers, we are all part of a tribe that keeps spiritual traditions. These are the traditions that extend beyond our church, beyond our country, and beyond our generation in order to connect us to a tribe of believers that has existed since the first century.

We participate in
Baptism
Communion
Worship
As part of a spiritual heritage.

Depending on your denomination, you may apply a variety of meanings to these traditions, but regardless of how much water you use or how much alcohol is or isn’t in the cup, these traditions connect you to a tribe of faith.

Eat a meal

This “idea” is probably the most important one in the book. We actually thought about calling the book, Food Matters. That’s because without food, nothing else really matters, right?

If someone is in your tribe, you will probably eat together at some point.

No matter who you are, food plays a significant role in your life. After all, we eat every day. So if you want to do something over time that will give a kid a sense of belonging, it only makes sense that you will eat with them.

Not only is eating one of the most predictable and unchanging routines in our life, it also plays a role in our most significant moments.

I Bet You Can Tell Me What . . .

Mother’s Day  New Year’s Day  Birthdays
July Fourth  Thanksgiving  Christmas
Weddings  Valentine’s Day  Easter

. . . Taste Like.

The tastes and smells of food make an imprint on our memories. If you want someone to know they belong in your tribe, sit with them and share a meal.

If you’re a leader, you probably won’t be eating daily meals with the kids and teenagers you serve. And if you’re honest, sharing food weekly requires a lot more planning, introduces some tricky complications,
and ends up making a really big mess. But don’t let it stop you from experiencing the joy of eating together.

**HERE’S ANOTHER THING TO CONSIDER:**

**KIDS LISTEN BETTER WHEN THEY’RE NOT HUNGRY.**

That’s why some student ministries schedule their programming in the evening so leaders and teenagers have a weekly opportunity to share a meal together.

It’s also why one of the smartest high school small group leaders I know brings a “snack bucket” to group every week, and that bucket has become one of the hallmarks of their tribe.

If you’re a parent, you’ve probably already heard all the statistics about family mealtime. For the past decade, research has inundated us with the message that families who eat (especially dinner) together are happier, healthier, have kids who do better in school, and have teenagers who engage in fewer risky behaviors. Some recent studies now argue that the family meal is more a characteristic of healthy families than the root cause of family health.

Either way, “There is something about a shared meal . . . that anchors a family.” Meals provide families with a routine opportunity to connect relationally and share an experience together. Professor William Doherty, author of *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties,* reminds us, “Meals are where a family builds its identity and culture. Legends are passed down, jokes rendered, eventually the wider world examined through the lens of a family’s values.” It’s not the food that magically makes a kid belong. But since we all have to eat anyway, you have an opportunity to leverage eating as a time when you can routinely connect with each other over time.

**SO EAT TOGETHER. BUT REMEMBER:**

- It doesn’t have to be dinner.
- It doesn’t have to be every day.
- It doesn’t have to be gourmet.
- It doesn’t have to be at home.

**IT JUST HAS TO BE TOGETHER.**

As the leader of a tribe, you have a unique role: think like a host. If you are a host, you know one of your key responsibilities is to make sure everyone has a seat. You don’t want anyone left standing. You want them to know they have a place reserved just for them.

Remember Forrest Gump? As a kindergartner, he makes the long walk down the aisle of the school bus where kid after kid communicates the
same message: “Seat’s taken!” Then he hears “the sweetest voice in the wide world,” Jenny’s voice:
“You can sit here if you like.”

When I (Reggie) was a student pastor, I charged a group of students with the responsibility of hosting our environments. That meant they were constantly identifying anyone who was standing alone and connecting that person with a group. The task was simple: Make sure no one stays alone. Get them a seat in the circle. Don’t let this next statement minimize the need for adult leaders, but for this specific task, it was more effective for teenagers to act as the hosts of our environment. High school students will respond more when they feel included by their peers.

If you’re a parent, you are constantly looking for circles where you can give your kid a seat. You give them a seat in your own family circle. But you also give them a seat in spiritual circles when you make it a priority to take them to a church with consistent leaders. And you give them a seat in social circles when you take them to dance, soccer, drama, or anime club.

Helping kids connect in circles isn’t a science. You can’t manufacture chemistry, and you can’t force connection. But you can look for kids and adults who share a common interest with your child and make an introduction.
Then remember, they may need a little guidance. It may not be as spiritual as teaching them Psalm 23, as intellectual as helping them learn to read, or as physically rigorous as coaching them to hit a baseball, but kids also need parents and leaders who can help them learn to . . . make a new friend, resolve a conflict, deal with rejection, and include others, if you want them to belong in tribes over time.

What you do to connect kids and teenagers in tribes this week matters. Because every child needs a place to belong and people who believe in them over time.

You might not typically consider finding a seat at the lunch table a traumatic experience. But for Max, it’s terrifying. And it happens every day. Uprooted from his childhood friends, Max is alone in a new school. Everything is different in Memphis: The style is different; the accepted music is different; the slang is different; the jokes are different. Sure, he’s been around for almost a year now. But he can still walk from one end of the lunchroom to the other not knowing if someone will have thought to save him a seat. At twelve, every kid can feel out of place, but Max feels like even more of an outsider. He’s alone in a crowd, painfully self-aware, and looking to find a group.

Max’s need for a tribe makes him vulnerable. He will do whatever it takes to find a circle—even if it means jeopardizing the school and potentially hurting others in the process. He is positioned to make a
series of unwise choices, not because he is a bad kid, but because he isn’t connected.

With insight uncanny for a twelve-year-old, Simon understands what Max really needs is for someone to let him in. He needs a tribe.

He needs a group of people who . . .
know his name,
care if he shows up,
get his jokes,
and accept him.

He needs to belong somewhere so he can feel like he matters.

Max is caught off-guard by a group of eccentric zombies—not just because they thwart his kidnapping, but because they cheer him on and accept him without questions. It’s this spark of connection that gives Max the courage to face his father honestly. This may not be the answer to all of Max’s issues, but it certainly is a hopeful beginning.
TRIBES OVER TIME SHOW US HOW WE BELONG.

GO IN CIRCLES

KEEP A TRADITION
EAT A MEAL
SAVE A SEAT

TRIBES MATTER

TRIBES = BELONGING

WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK TO CONNECT KIDS AND TEENAGERS IN A TRIBE MATTERS.
fun
tiMe
o v e r
maKeS a FRIENDShIP
go deeper

FUN
over
TIME
MAKES A FRIENDSHIP
GO DEEPER

FUN
Matters
That’s why we want to remind you again to “play for keeps.” And we do mean that literally.

In other words, it’s important that you actually play.

And when we say play, we mean play in the context of

- **PLAY BALL**
- **PLAY GAMES**
- **PLAYROOM**
- **PLAY MAKE-BELIEVE**
- **PLAY HIDE-AND-SEEK**
- **PLAYSTATION**
- **PLAY CARDS**
- **PLAYACT**
- **PLAYGROUND**
- **PLAY-DOH**

What do we mean by fun? Pretty much anything that entertains them, makes them laugh, and helps them enjoy life.


You should probably leave out things like . . . skating in traffic, wrestling with alligators, sticking forks in electrical outlets, jumping ramps with baby strollers, launching bottle rockets from body parts.

You’re the adult, so we expect you to screen some things with a little common sense.
There are definitely some fun things that kids shouldn’t do because they’re . . .
not safe,
not age-appropriate,
or they break a major commandment.

But be careful your don’t list,
doesn’t overshadow your do list,
or you could lose your kids.

If you want to play for keeps, try to give kids a bigger list of do’s than don’ts.
Act like fun really matters—because it does to a kid.

Evidently fun matters so much to God, He decided to illustrate it everywhere in nature to remind us we need to play. If you don’t believe me, you should just get a dog and count how many times you get nudged to throw a ball.

You were made to have fun.

But if you’re like the average adult, one day you grew out of it.

It’s possible . . .
“You’ve lost that ‘playing’ feeling.
Now it’s gone, gone, gone.
Whoa whoa oh.”

Okay, maybe that’s cheesy.
But we’re just trying to stimulate you to have more fun.

Seriously?!
Yeah, seriously.

That’s actually part of the problem.
Too many people, especially Christians, take themselves too seriously.
Just read their responses to blogs and YouTube postings.

No wonder we can’t make fun the kind of priority it should really be in the home and church.

As were . . .
dolphins,
squirrels,
sparrows,
monkeys,
cats,
and unicorns.
(Okay, not that one, I’m just making sure you’re still reading.)
Let’s face it. Most of us are more worried about kids sinning than we are about them playing.

Here’s a thought I will let you argue about with someone else. It could be a healthy debate.

**MAYBE IT’S MORE OF A SIN NOT TO HAVE FUN THAN IT IS TO DO SOME FUN THINGS THAT ARE CONSIDERED SIN BY SOME PEOPLE.**

And no. I’m not talking about sex.

The point is we all realize this: *Sin can be fun.* Somewhere along the way, we get confused and start thinking, *It’s a sin to have fun.* But maybe the truth is *It’s a sin not to have fun.*

You need a **Fun Adjustment.**

You may need to . . .

**LAUGH A LITTLE MORE.**

**DANCE A LITTLE LONGER.**

**PLAY A LITTLE HARDER.**

That is—
if you want kids and teenagers to want to show up and be around more.
if you want to build a deeper relationship with them.

God certainly seems to take fun seriously—so seriously that most of the time when He wants us to focus on our relationship with Him, He tells us to . . .

sing,
dance,
celebrate,
eat
*drink (lemonade),*
and be joyful.
It’s more than just okay to have fun. It’s actually a command—or at least a strong suggestion. The word fun may not be in the Bible, but all its relatives are there.

“May the righteous be glad...”
“Rejoice in the Lord always...”
“and a time to dance...”
“Celebrate a festival to the Lord...”
“A cheerful heart is good medicine...”
“Worship the Lord with gladness...”
“The fruit of the Spirit is... joy...”
“They... ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”
“However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.”

Basically, we were created and told by God to enjoy ourselves, each other, and everything else God made.

It’s not unlike the way God enjoyed creation. He actually modeled the idea on the seventh day when He stopped and “rested.” If you think that means He was so worn out from six hard days of creating that He took a nap, you probably need to revisit the creation story.

He merely paused to enjoy what He had made. That’s what we’re invited to do as well. Every day. Every week.

Sometimes we just need to stop working our busy routine long enough to enjoy Him and what He has made.

EVIDENTLY, HE WANTS US TO THINK OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM KIND OF LIKE A PARTY.

AND EVERYBODY LIKES A GOOD PARTY—ESPECIALLY KIDS.

He also seems to want us to party frequently. Just remember all those feast days and holidays in the Old Testament.

No, fun doesn’t trivialize our mission. And yes, we are called to self-discipline, suffering, and sacrifice.

Just make sure you don’t leave out the joy. We are also called to celebrate, fellowship, live fully, and enjoy.

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Sometimes we just need to stop working our busy routine long enough to enjoy Him and what He has made.
Sunday should be the most fun day of our week. If it’s not, then maybe we should rethink what we are doing.

Just because Sunday is supposed to be holy or sacred doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be fun. If you think holy and fun are completely exclusive terms, then you should also re-examine your theology. You are missing a fundamental principle about fun.

Christians should be the first ones to value fun. But a lot of Christians act like fun is something we should add to our church program to evangelize non-Christians. Then we go to work trying to make them feel guilty about having so much fun.

In reality, fun should never be something we tack on. It should be woven into our everyday lifestyles.

Christians should be the most Joyful Positive Happy Playful Fun people on the planet.

Instead, too many get a rap for being negative, pessimistic, obnoxious, judgmental, and boring.

At the risk of oversimplifying— If we played, laughed, danced, and smiled a little more, at church and at home, kids and teenagers might grow up with a healthier perspective on their family and Christian community.

Research reinforces the idea that fun matters. Some experts even suggest people have a “play history” that holds the key to their emotional and relational health. One such expert, Stuart Brown, warns about the dangers of “play deprivation,” especially when kids are young. As a result of 30 years of research, he has concluded that it’s crucial for kids and adults to keep playing. According to Brown, “The opposite of play is not work, it’s depression.” He goes on to claim when you use neuroimaging techniques, “Nothing lights up the brain like play.”2

That’s just another reason to play. It adds a little energy to your relationship.
When you play with children and teenagers on their terms, you enter into their worlds. According to Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., a psychologist and play therapist, “Play is where children show us the inner feelings and experiences that they can’t or won’t talk about. We need to hear what they have to say, and they need to share it. That’s why we have to join children where they live, on their terms.” In other words, as parents and leaders, play actually opens the door so you can go deeper in your relationships with kids and teenagers.

**Fun Over Time**

**Convinces Kids You Actually Like Them.**

I’m sure your kids know you love them. But do they feel like you love them? Before they can feel loved, they may need a little evidence that you like them. And they may never be confident that you like them, until you start having fun with them.

Sure, there are a lot of different ways to prove love. We already said you should... show up. know them. never run away.

But we just need to add one more to the list: Have fun.

**Fun Over Time**

**Reconnects What Has Been Disconnected.**

Therapists have long known a secret that parents and leaders should learn: Playing with kids breaks down walls. It can repair damage in the relationship.

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Fun isn’t a waste of time. Fun over time can make your relationships go deeper.

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So start having more fun. And remember it’s okay to have fun—just for fun.

You were made to have fun. You were made to have fun together.
Fun over time

Fosters Resilience.

I know we already said it, but life is hard. If you want kids to grow up and push through heartbreak, tragedy, and disappointment, then they need a collection of fun memories to assure them... that life goes on, that the joys of living, loving, and laughing together far outweigh the pain that will also inevitably show up.

Having fun together helps us keep fighting for a relationship even when it’s difficult. Fun moves us to... keep growing, keep caring, keep loving—regardless.

Fun over time authenticates forgiveness.

Fun may actually be one of the best ways to prove forgiveness to someone.

Think about it: How easy is it to have fun with someone if you are still offended by what he or she did?

Remember, it’s hard to fake forgiveness with kids. They know better. They are smart. They will test you. And they may not believe you’ve really forgiven them until you take the initiative to have fun with them again.

Maybe that’s why the Book of Romans says, “Show mercy, cheerfully.”

How else can you prove it?

Sometimes we can learn a lot from kids. They seem to know how to make fun a priority, and they can also be quick to forgive and move on. They know intuitively that fun is more important than holding grudges.
In the movie *Hook*, Robin Williams plays Peter Pan—not the adventurous, daring, vivacious, playful Peter. He portrays Peter Pan as an adult who is pre-occupied with adult issues.

In this scenario, Peter Pan is a dad with kids, but he’s forgotten how to be a kid.

In one of the earlier scenes in the movie, Peter snaps at his children for interrupting a business call. His wife, while throwing his phone out the window, says,

“Your children love you, they want to play with you. How long do you think that lasts? Soon Jack may not even want you to come to his games. We have a few special years with our children, when they’re the ones that want us around. After that you’re going to be running after them for a bit of attention. It’s so fast Peter. It’s a few years, and it’s over. And you are not being careful. And you are missing it.”

HARRIET LERNER, Ph.D., ILLUSTRATES THIS IN A STORY OF TWO LITTLE KIDS PLAYING TOGETHER IN A SANDBOX.

“Suddenly a huge fight breaks out and one of the kids runs away screaming, ‘I hate you! I hate you!’ In no time at all they’re back in the sandbox playing together happily again.

“Two adults observe the interaction from a nearby bench. ‘Did you see that?’ one asks. ‘How do children do that? They were enemies five minutes ago.’

“‘It’s simple’ the other replies. ‘They choose happiness over righteousness.’”

As adult leaders and parents, we need to take our cue from kids and start acting like fun matters.
Peter has simply grown up and forgotten how to play. As a dad, he is missing out on the most critical years of his own children’s lives.

**WHAT’S THE SOLUTION?**
Peter has to . . .

- **rediscover** his potential to play.
- **re-learn** how to have fun with his kids.
- **reclaim** his relationships through an adventure.
- **start living** like fun matters again.

**THE POINT OF THE MOVIE TO EVERY ADULT IS SIMPLE:**
If it can happen to Peter Pan, it can happen to any of us.
I (Reggie) have a confession to make as a dad. If I could go back in time, I would play more with my kids when they were kids. It’s not that we didn’t spend a lot of time together—we did. And I am grateful that we were actively involved in church, sports, drama, and eating. I do remember a lot of eating.

There was a lot of laughter and fun in our home. It goes with the fact that most of us are sarcastically gifted.

But I do wish when it came to quality time in the evenings or weekends, we had just played together more. Looking back now, I realize I didn’t know how much fun mattered then—and I didn’t really know how to play that well.

I did have some cues. When my son was almost four, I remember leaving to go back to work on a busy weekend, and he asked me this question: “Daddy, when we get to heaven, will you have more time to play with me?”

He definitely made his point. Not long afterwards, I took another job so I could have more time together as a family. But learning how to play was still one of my greatest problems. I would have signed up for a class on “play” if I could have found one.

Personally, I have been extremely grateful for other adults who show up in my kids’ lives to have fun with them:

- grandparents
- aunts and uncles
- adult friends
- other kids’ parents
- church and school leaders

If you are one of those leaders who spends time with someone else’s kid, remember that fun matters. You are helping kids build a healthy play history. And, if you leverage your influence well, you may actually have an opportunity to help families have fun together.

**NOT EVERYTHING IN LIFE IS FUN. BUT YOU HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY EVERY WEEK TO MAKE SOMETHING FUN. HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE IDEAS I WISH SOMEONE HAD SHARED WITH ME WHEN I WAS YOUNGER.**
Again, some of us have a serious issue with taking ourselves too seriously. That’s why one of the first things you can do to make every week more fun is to let go of a few things like your Image, Ego, and Pride.

LOOSEN UP

YOU HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY EVERY WEEK TO SHOW KIDS AND TEENAGERS YOU CARE MORE ABOUT THEM THAN WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK ABOUT YOU. YOU SHOW THEM YOU CARE WHEN YOU ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE VULNERABLE ENOUGH TO JUST HAVE FUN. SO LOOSEN UP.

LOOSEN UP THIS WEEK BY MOVING MORE.

Literally. Move. Maybe one of the reasons adults have “lost that playing feeling” is because we spend too much time sitting still. According to Stuart Brown, “If you’re having a bad day, jump up and down—you will feel better.” Jumping activates your play drive. So, maybe you should make random jumping your go-to solution when you can’t think of anything else to do.

There’s also a lot to be said for dancing, running, riding a bike, and other activities that put your body in motion.
You can also loosen up by laughing more.

Laughter is the universal language. Everybody immediately knows what laughter means—it means somebody is having fun. When you laugh together, it means you enjoy being together. Some experts think laughter may actually be the quickest and most effective way to connect. According to Regina Barreca, Ph.D., “Laughing together is as close as you can get to a hug without touching.”

So how much laughter happens in your home or church?

Of course, one of the most obvious ways to loosen up is to play more.

Play will never feel urgent in your weekly schedule. If you are a leader, you’re probably more concerned with how you will communicate content than you are with how you will play. If you are a parent, you’re probably more concerned with things like laundry, dinner, homework, and discipline than play. That’s why you have to plan for it.

In his book Playful Parenting, Lawrence Cohen encourages parents to “Make a conscious transition from work—or whatever else you’re doing—to play: Change into play clothes. Set a timer for half an hour or an hour. During this time, give your child 100 percent of your attention—no phone calls, no preparing dinner.”

As leaders and parents, set aside time just to play.

One more thing about loosening up—

Sometimes you won’t feel like it. You may be tired, frustrated, or stressed, and the idea of laughing, moving, and playing will seem like the last thing you can imagine doing. Fun doesn’t have to be a feeling. But when you choose to have fun and loosen up in spite of your feelings, you may end up actually feeling a lot more fun than you thought.

Learn what they like

If you want to make something fun, it has to be fun for them. Okay, that’s pretty intuitive.

Sometimes as leaders and parents, we make the assumption that because they are younger, kids and teenagers are the ones who should be learning from us. But creating a playful and engaging atmosphere is critical for learning. So, if you really want them to learn, you need to learn what they like.

You need to . . .

Tune in to their laughter. If they are laughing, it’s a good clue about what they think is fun.

Let them choose. You don’t have to plan an extravagant “fun night” in order to have fun. Sometimes the best thing you can do is make yourself available. Then, let them lead you.

Listen to their stories. Kids and teenagers may not begin many conversations with “I like . . .” (if they do, that would be a pretty good
clue about what they like). But if you listen to the stories they tell, you can pick up some ideas about what they enjoy or don’t enjoy doing.

**JUST REMEMBER . . .**

**THEY MAY NOT KNOW WHAT THEY LIKE.**
This is especially true for younger kids. Five-year-olds may not know yet that they like Candy Land, baseball, or Marco Polo—until you play with them.

**WHAT YOU LIKE MAY NOT BE WHAT THEY LIKE.**
This is especially true if you’re trying to have fun with teenagers. They have already discovered their own style of fun. And what they are still discovering may be more fun for them if they discover it first. So, make sure you don’t force them to play on your terms.

**WHAT THEY LIKE MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU LIKE.**
Stretch a little. You’re the adult. Learning what they like may involve learning to do something you wouldn’t otherwise love to do. But you do it because you love them, and you want to make it fun.

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**LOSE THE AGENDA**

As parents and leaders, you will probably always have an agenda. You want them to . . .
be polite,
love God,
make good grades,
know their memory verse.

If you’re honest, the agenda list is a really long list. It gets shorter as they get older because you just start prioritizing for the big stuff . . .
Don’t smoke.
Don’t get pregnant.
Only drive when you’re sober.
(Of course your list will never look like that. You have good kids.)

**NO MATTER HOW LONG OR HOW URGENT THE AGENDA IS, THERE MAY BE A TIME WHEN YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE TO SET IT ASIDE FOR THE SAKE OF FUN.**
I (Kristen) remember a few years ago when I was leading a small group and one of the girls had stopped attending. I knew she was making some unwise choices related to drinking, and she was choosing not to come to church anymore because she didn’t want to feel judged for her decisions. But here’s the interesting thing: she still liked hanging out. She and I would meet from time to time, at Starbucks, at a school event, at a retreat—anywhere that she knew we would have fun. And in those moments, I didn’t talk about her decisions. She knew what I thought. Sometimes she would bring it up, and we would talk about it. But I knew at that juncture in her life, it was more important to have fun and stay connected than to continue reminding her of something she already knew.

We aren’t suggesting that fun is more important than rules, or that it outweighs instruction. Kids and teenagers need those things, too. (Remember, we talked about that in the Love Over Time chapter.) We are just saying there may also be times when it’s more important to value the relationship by having fun together.

If you’re a parent, you may need to set aside time with your kids when you agree not to discuss their issues. This can be especially true if they are in a tough season of life. When the tension is high, you need a scheduled break—just to have fun together.

**HINT**

**Most kids and teenagers shut down when you take the eye-to-eye, “Let’s talk about what’s going on” approach. They tend to talk more when they’re engaged in a fun activity, not making eye contact, and feel in control of the agenda.**

That’s just one reason we believe church should be fun—every week. If you’re a leader, it should be a part of every aspect of what you do. Because you are a Christian, right?

Howard Hendricks, a former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, said, “It’s a sin to bore a child with the Word of God.”

So . . .
Crank up the music.
Be creative with the video.
Find some engaging personalities to communicate.
Plan to laugh a lot in your circle.

Just get serious about having some fun, if you want kids and teenagers to get serious about what matters.

NEHEMIAH SAID,
“THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.”
IF THAT IS TRUE, HOW STRONG IS YOUR CHURCH? HOW STRONG IS YOUR HOME?10

It’s not that fun is the most important thing. But if you don’t have fun, little else matters. If you love kids, but you don’t play with them, they may not feel like you like them.
If you give teenagers words and stories that are boring, they may not care. If you belong to a tribe that never laughs, they won’t want to be a part of it.

So whatever you do this week, make it fun.

If you want to build trust . . . have lasting influence . . . establish a deeper connection . . . you have to make fun a priority.

Diane leads a full life. As a nurse practitioner and the single mother of a middle-schooler, it’s admirable that she is able to keep the bills paid, the laundry done, and food on the table. She works long hours and could easily come home too tired for fun—but she doesn’t.

Diane makes life fun.

In fact, Diane compromises on some of the non-essentials in order to make fun essential. Her house isn’t spotless. Her laundry is folded—on the kitchen chair. And you might have to move a stack of magazines and pre-approved credit card mailers if you want to sit on the sofa.
But when Diane sits down to a dinner of Simon’s favorite take-out, she is ready for fun. She incorporates games into everyday routines. She doesn’t take herself too seriously. She is attentive to her son’s emotions and stays interested. And she even lets Simon choose what and how they will play—most of the time.

Maybe that’s why Simon trusts, respects, and enjoys being around her.

Diane has a deeper connection with her son because she has made fun one of her family values. Over time, she has leveraged fun to make home the kind of place Simon wants to be now, and the kind of place he will want to come back to after he leaves.
WHAT YOU DO TO MAKE THIS WEEK FUN FOR A KID OR TEENAGER MATTERS.
Whatever matters will matter even more over time.
We wrote this book for one simple reason: what you do for kids over time matters. We could have written several chapters about what happens when children and teenagers don’t get Over Time.

The absence of those things in someone’s life can have powerfully negative consequences. Our culture is full of people who struggle because they were rejected, abused, isolated, neglected, or abandoned.

That’s why what you do every week can actually give kids a better sense of worth, belonging, connection, direction, and perspective.

If it takes time over time to make history, then it takes love, words, stories, tribes, and fun over time to make a history that’s worth repeating.

Just remember...

Time

Love

Words

Stories

Tribes

Fun

Will never mean much without time.

Love without time is just infatuation. Words without time are just nouns and verbs. Tribes without time are just familiar faces. Fun without time is just a game. Stories without time are just incidental.
But when you give these things to a kid or teenager over time, they do something transformational.

**THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY.**

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**LOVE IS JUST LOVE.**

It’s a second-hand emotion—
until you put it over time.

Then it does something amazing.
It gives a kid **WORTH**.

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**WORDS ARE JUST SOMETHING TO HELP YOU WIN AT SCRABBLE®.**

They’re something you tweet to get more followers—
until you put them over time.

Then, they become a collection of messages
that moves someone in a better **DIRECTION.**

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**STORIES ARE JUST EXPERIENCES THAT HAPPEN TO HAVE HAPPENED**

unless Spielberg produces one, and it gets an Oscar.

But when you collect stories over time,
they expand a child’s imagination
in a way that can shape his or her **PERSPECTIVE.**

---

**TRIBES ARE JUST PEOPLE LINKED TOGETHER BY COMMON INTERESTS.**

They’re clubs you can sign up to attend—
until you put them over time.

Then they become a family or community
where a child can experience **BELONGING.**

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**FUN IS JUST A GOOD TIME.**

It’s fun, period, just an Indie pop band—
until you put it over time.

Then it creates a powerful **CONNECTION.**
It takes your friendship with a teenager deeper.

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What you are doing every week will matter more in someone’s life
when you do it ... week after week,
month after month,
year after year.

And when you combine love, words, stories, fun, and tribes together
over time ... they gain collective momentum.
they make history.
they build a legacy.
Sure, there are nearly a thousand weeks between birth and graduation. But they go by fast.

So remember:
You will only know a child as a six-year-old once—then he or she will be seven.

That may not seem like a very profound statement now, but one day it will.

This week is a moment in time when you can step into their world and know them for who they are right now.

Next year at this time, they will have changed.
And you will have played a role in that change.

You’re playing for keeps.
So visit their world as many times as you can this week, and keep doing what you do.

DON’T MISS THIS:
WHATEVER MATTERS WILL MATTER EVEN MORE OVER TIME.

It pays to keep doing what you do.

That’s why . . .

. . . pastors who stay at a church for several years encounter a different kind of response from people.

. . . leaders who work with the same kid or teenager for multiple seasons experience a different kind of influence.

. . . parents who engage with sons and daughters through every stage of life enjoy a different kind of relationship.

That’s also why some wine, steak, and cheese just tastes better.

Some things can only happen over time.

So, what you do this week matters.
It matters because every week is one in a number of weeks.
And the weeks add up.

PLAY A GAME.
TELL THEM A STORY.
GIVE THEM A TRIBE.
SAY IT AGAIN.
AND PROVE YOU LOVE THEM.
AGAIN AND AGAIN.

BECAUSE OVER TIME,
IT MATTERS.
WORKS CITED

Time Over Time
2 Matt 22:37-39. RJLT (Reggie Joiner’s Loose Translation.)

Love Over Time
3 Gerhardt, Why Love Matters, 89

Word Over Time
1 A quick note about “Words” for those of you who are thorough enough to read the footnotes: For the purpose of simplifying this chapter, we didn’t define what we mean by words. However, it’s important to mention that a word in its simplest sense doesn’t have to be spoken or heard to exist. There are countless individuals who have extensive unspoken vocabularies. It’s our opinion that these words are as significant as those we speak and hear.
3 Ibid.

Stories over Time

Tribes Over Time
2 Jane Howard, ThinkExist, http://thinkexist.com/quotations/call_it_a_clan-call_it_a_network-call_it_a_tribe/323634.html
5 Luc Reid, Talk the Talk (New York: Fall River Press, 2006), 1.
7 Ibid.
10 Neh. 8:10

Fun Over Time
1 Ps. 68:3, Phil. 4:4, Eccl. 3:4, Ex 10:9, Prov. 17:22, Ps. 100:2, Gal. 5:22, Acts 2:46, Eccl. 11:8.
4 Ibid.
5 Rom 12:8
10 Neh. 8:10
MORE RESOURCES

Legacy Marbles Resources
www.LosingYourMarblesBook.com

Parenting Beyond Your Capacity:
Connect Your Family to a Wider Community
By Reggie Joiner, Carey Nieuwhof (David C Cook, 2010)

Orange Parents Blog
www.OrangeParents.org

Lead Small:
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Lead Small Blog
www.LeadSmall.org

Parent CUE App
Legacy Countdown App
available for iPhone and android

Orange
www.ThinkOrange.com

Studio 252
www.Studio252.tv

Follow the conversation
#losingyourmarbles

WHO WE ARE

REGGIE JOINER
Reggie is the founder and CEO of The reThink Group, a nonprofit organization providing resources and training to help churches maximize their influence on the spiritual growth of the next generation. He is one of the founding pastors of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga. In his role as the executive director of Family Ministry, Reggie led a team to develop concepts of ministry for preschoolers, children, students, and married adults over the course of his 11 years with the church. He is the author of Think Orange and his latest books include Parenting Beyond Your Capacity; Slow Fade; Lead Small; and Zombies, Football and the Gospel. Reggie and Debbie live in Cumming, Ga., and have four grown children: Reggie Paul, Hannah, Sarah, and Rebekah.

ELIZABETH HANSEN
Elizabeth Hansen is a writer and story developer for Orange with a graduate degree in script and screenwriting. She and her husband, David, produce promotional and narrative films through their production company, Arclight Studios. Like Diane, she is a Scrabble® fiend. And like Simon, she is fond of hatching plots.

KRISTEN IVY
Kristen Ivy combines her degree in secondary education with a Master of Divinity to help churches re-think the way they practice spiritual formation, education, and discipleship for the next generation. She is the director of messaging for Orange and has played a role in launching XP3 Students, CUE Box, and Studio 252. Kristen lives out the full Orange spectrum as the wife of XP3 Students Orange Specialist Matt Ivy, and the mother of two First-Look (preschool) children, Sawyer and Hensley.

ABBY JARTOS
Abby Jartos picked up the crayons early and never looked back, and now loves to draw pictures all day at her home outside Atlanta. Her work helps tell stories in a variety of formats and media. Visit her online at www.abbyjartos.com.
FLIP ME OVER
TO READ
LOSING YOUR
MARBLES

this side up