

How Emotional Safety  
Is the Key to Raising Kids  
Who Live, Love,  
and Lead Well

# safe house

JOSHUA STRAUB PHD

## Praise for *Safe House*

“There’s no greater joy than raising children. There’s also no greater sorrow than when you don’t feel like you have what it takes to do it. Using the transparency of his own story, as well as his experience as a family counselor and dad himself, Josh provides a road map for making our homes the emotionally safest places in the world for our kids. Most importantly, you walk away with a true sense of encouragement that you really do have what it takes to write beautiful stories for your kids!”

—CANDACE CAMERON BURE, actress, author, producer, and mom

“‘Home, sweet home’ is much more than a cliché; it’s a critically important goal toward which we should all strive as parents. Making your home a safe house is one of the best investments of time and energy you can possibly make. Joshua Straub shows how in this insightful book.”

—JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

“*Safe House* is a must-read and a humbling reminder that there’s no safety outside of God’s sovereignty. Thank you, Joshua, for reminding us that it’s never too late to raise kids who live, love, and lead well.”

—SHELENE BRYAN, founder of Skip1.org and author of *Love Skip Jump*

“In a humorous but candid approach, Joshua Straub uses scholarship and his own emotional pain to help us face and deal with our own stories. As a product of six broken homes and a lot of abuse, I know the urgency and the desperation to rewrite my story for my children’s sake, and for heaven’s sake. Many of us are familiar with panicked efforts to child-proof our homes, but after decades of training students, I often wondered if it was possible to parent-proof our children. This timely book, *Safe House*, is full of wisdom, examples, and appreciations of, most of all, hope for our most cherishable possessions—our children.”

—DR. JAY STRACK, president and founder of StudentLeadership.net

“I wish I could’ve read *Safe House* before I raised my daughters. I’m sure it would’ve saved them many dollars spent on therapy. Thanks to Josh and this amazing book, I

have a second chance. I am now embracing the principles in this book and applying them to my relationship with six beautiful grandchildren.”

—KEN DAVIS, author of *Fully Alive* and speaker and communications trainer

“To the exhausted parent, these pages are filled with hope. To the insecure parent, these pages are filled with confidence. To the parent trying to win your child’s heart before the culture does, these pages are empowering. Josh has created an insightful work-of-heart that will truly impact families for generations to come!”

—SHANNON ETHRIDGE, MA, life/relationship coach and author of twenty-two books, including the million-copy, best-selling *Every Woman’s Battle* series

“Parenting is hard. No doubt about it. We deal with insecurity and great frustration as we work through motives, parenting styles, and discipline strategies. Joshua Straub does a fantastic job in *Safe House* encouraging parents to stay focused on what’s most important: the heart of the child. This book will help eradicate insecurity and insanity from your home.”

—TED CUNNINGHAM, founding pastor of Woodland Hills Family Church and author of *Fun Loving You* and *The Power of Home*

JOSHUA STRAUB, PhD

FOREWORD BY DR. MEG MEEKER

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How Emotional Safety Is the Key to Raising Kids  
Who Live, Love, and Lead Well



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To Dad, who's still sitting in the stands cheering me on,  
and to Mom, who shows me to this day I have what it takes.

I love you both more than you know.

*Dear Fellow Parent,*

*My beautiful Canadian wife, Christi, and I have two strong-willed kids: our son, Landon, and daughter, Kennedy. Christi and I had no idea how much a little line on a tiny stick would change our lives. My work life is no exception. Kennedy lived her first six sleepless months of life while I wrote this book—in a fog. When Landon became a toddler, he discovered that daddy worked from a comfortable, well-decorated home office overlooking the Ozark Mountains. From then on he wanted to “go to wook” too, which meant I had to go into hiding.*

*That’s why most of this book was written in our frigid garage in the middle of winter with a screaming infant and a whiny toddler as background music. I complemented keyboard time with bouncing our newborn in an Ergobaby carrier while speaking into Dragon Dictation, occasionally interrupted midsentence to help Christi wrangle Landon into submission.*

*And you thought writers frolicked in cozy coffee shops to consoling downtempo?*

*Not this guy. At least not for this book.*

*I think that’s God’s sense of humor. To humble us in the very task we’re called to do so as to make sure we don’t pull our britches up too high, thinking we’ve got it all figured out. I often found myself writing on topics Christi and I were struggling with in the moment. I’m convinced nothing has the power to simultaneously enliven and exhaust a person more than parenthood. Becoming a dad is the most rewarding task I ever signed up for, but it’s also the most difficult.*

*And if you’re like us, you don’t need outside help to question yourselves as parents. The mainstream media, the so-called experts, and, yes, even family have that covered, shaming our every parenting move.*

*So as you read the pages that follow, know that my heart is to remove the judgment and instead for us to come together as parents in our local coffee shops, communities, and churches to encourage and support one another as we all strive toward the same goal: raising kids who live, love, and lead well. I think you’ll be surprised that achieving this goal, though not easy, is much simpler than we might think.*

*I’m glad we’re on this journey together.*

*—Josh*

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## foreword

After practicing pediatric and adolescent medicine for thirty years, I have come to consider myself a professional listener, if you will. I have tuned my ear to the hearts of five-year-olds who don't want to go to school, divorced husbands who feel pushed out of their children's lives by angry ex-wives, and seventeen-year-olds who feel they can't stand being alive for one more day. I can honestly say that I have never met a child or teen that I don't like, and believe me, I've worked with a lot of angry, hurting kids. Early in my career, I worked in a teen and tot clinic (yep, teen girls with toddlers) in the inner city. Then I moved to a wealthy area outside of Springfield, Massachusetts and took care of children whose parents were doctors or other professionals. I have visited parents, living in dire poverty in the most remote parts of the Andes, who struggle to succeed at the most elementary of parenting tasks—to feed their children.

I have learned one thing: a parent's heart is a parent's heart. Whether a parent is a struggling, single teen mother or a wealthy professional, parents ache for their kids. They want their children to be healthy, safe, and most of all, happy. And they want them to live a better life than they did, even if those parents grew up in healthy homes. The altruism of parents' hearts drives them to want their children to have more of the good stuff in life. They don't necessarily want their kids to make more money or travel the world; they just want their children to experience greater peace and greater joy. That's it. So simple but so terribly elusive.

There's another thing that I learned early in my career, and it is this: if I want to help a child, I must help his parents. Why? *Because one parent—better yet two—holds all the power in a child's life.* If I want to help a sixteen-year-old girl stop cutting her arms, I talk to her father. If I want an anxious second-grader to feel safer going to school, I work with his mother on ways to calm him and retrain his thinking. If I could scream anything from the rooftops that parents simply don't get, it's this: *YOU make or break your children!* Not Madonna, Miley Cyrus, pornography on the Internet, teachers, coaches, or peers. Conscientious parents who read many parenting books have been

duped into believing that when a son or daughter turns thirteen, they must loose them into their peer culture because that's what kids want, even need. We plan to pick them up again when they're eighteen or so and they've "become less like aliens." Then we wonder why our teenagers are so rebellious and filled with confusion and angst. But why wouldn't they be? We create a self-fulfilling prophesy by communicating to them that they *will* be hard to manage, love, and live with when they are teens. So why shouldn't they be?

This, friends, is an American cultural phenomenon. It is not normal and doesn't need to be part of the experience of growing up in America. This is something that we have created because we buy into peer pressures of our own. This brings me to my point. In the cacophony of voices—friends, experts, grandparents, and culture—telling us how to parent, we need an infusion of sanity. *Safe House* brings this sanity.

The truth is, great parenting is quite simple. But it's hard. It requires that we love well so that our children learn to do so. It means that, as Dr. Straub eloquently elucidates, "in order to be understood, we must first understand." And, most important, it requires that we focus on parenting our children's hearts. That's really what this book is all about. It teaches us to keep our parenting focus where we really want it to be but don't know how—on the emotional health of our children.

We parents get so wrapped up in working hard to create great portfolios for our children so that we can "launch" them to mighty places that we fail to see them. Countless times I have talked to parents (Christian and secular) about the importance of making sure that their children mature into adults who have strong character, which, I tell them, trumps academic, musical, or athletic achievements. The irony is that 99 percent of the parents I tell this too nod their heads in agreement and leave the conversation with a strong conviction that they, unlike their friends, are succeeding at doing exactly what I said.

But sadly, they aren't. Why? *Because no one is teaching them.* Their hearts are in the right place, but their own friends are so entrenched in portfolio building that they too, fall into line lest their friends' children turn out "better" than theirs. Here's a case in point. I was recently talking with a friend whose son has a huge heart for God. He is nine years old and asks his parents to pray with him. After talking with my friends for a while and applauding them for encouraging their son's faith so well, they thanked me. They agreed that it was sad how many parents (unlike them) focus on making their children feel valued through sports, academics, and so on.

Not long after that statement, the father launched into a diatribe about how talented this same boy was at baseball. Really talented. In fact, this father boasted (he didn't really mean to but knew I would handle it as a friend) that the boy might have a shot at Major League baseball one day. He talked about the fact that his child liked to pray, but he bragged about his baseball talents. If I picked up on where his true pride in his son lay, how much more would his son? Was this father a bad dad? No, but he did do exactly what he had just denounced in other parents. Why? Because he had been trained to focus on helping his son be outstanding at something. The problem was, he simply didn't know how to deviate from the parenting paradigm that his friends used. He didn't know how to find a different, healthier direction in parenting.

My plea to you, friends, as you read through this remarkable work, is that you ask yourself hard questions. Dr. Straub will make you look inside yourself as you read, and that is a great thing. You need to. We all need to. Because it is only by serious introspection that we can better ourselves as parents. And isn't that what each of us parents really wants?

You will learn in these pages what *emotional safety* means. Then, you will learn how to provide emotional safety for your children. I am convinced that once you are successful at that—and any parent *can* be successful at it—then you will begin to sink deep roots for your child from which he can grow. Finally, learning how to provide emotional safety for your children helps you begin to parent the way you really want to parent. You will be positively anchoring the heart and soul of your child.

I am confident that as you apply the principles herein, you will change not only your child's life but also *your life*. I know this because Dr. Straub is a stickler for backing up his theories with excellent data. You won't just hear his opinions; you will see the rock solid research behind everything he says. There are hundreds of voices from "experts" clamoring for your attention, but there are only a handful who can honestly impact your parenting in a profound and positive way.

I am proud to say that *Safe House* is one of them.

—DR. MEG MEEKER, best-selling author of *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters* and the co-host of *Family Talk* with Dr. James Dobson



# acknowledgments

A book is only as powerful on the life of a reader as the stories it tells.

I'm indebted to my parents, wife, and children for permitting me the freedom of vulnerability with our own story, with the hope that it can help others.

Christi, words cannot describe how grateful I am for your allowing me to escape to the frigid garage or a warm coffee shop during some of the most difficult days of our lives to write this book. There's nobody else I'd rather be on this journey with than you. I love you.

From conception to completion, there's no one who invested more time and energy into this book than my mother-in-love, Lora Lee Wood. Mum, without you, I'm not sure it would be a reality. Equally so are the constant prayers, encouragement, and support from my father-in-love, Ray Wood. Dad, I hope I can be half the anchor you are for my own family.

Mom and Mike, Dad and Deb, thank you all for loving our family unconditionally and leading by example.

Landon and Kennedy, you show mommy and me a joy we didn't know existed. The fun is just beginning.

And to those who helped me conceptualize, write, and edit . . .

Bryan Norman, it's a privilege to call you not just an agent but a friend.

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Paul Staup, Frank MacArthur, Tim Clinton, Dave Brower, my clinical supervisors through the years, and to all of the counseling leaders who have invested in me, I am paying it forward.



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Linda Purvis, thank you for helping Christi with the kiddos to allow me time to write, and especially for loving our family like your own. We love you.



PART 1

**Why  
Emotional  
Safety  
—and Your Story—  
Matter**



# Can Parenting Really Be This Simple?

Safe House: (n): a dwelling that is a safe place for taking refuge.

—Dictionary.com

The world can be very unsafe. Our homes shouldn't be. Especially for our kids.

I have fond memories of my childhood. I'm sure there were unsafe moments, but nothing I vividly remember. My foundation for safety was pretty well set.

Until Monday, July 9, 1990. That's when the cracks in our home's foundation were exposed and our Safe House began to crumble.

We had just returned home from our annual family vacation in Wildwood, New Jersey. From my ten-year-old perspective, all seemed normal on the trip. Ice cream on the boardwalk. Football with my dad on the beach. Hours of riding in waves with my eight-year-old sister. I didn't want to go home.

As the next morning came, I was groggily awakened to the sounds of crying outside my bedroom. I felt my body sink further into the mattress as my mom entered the room and sat on the bed next to me. My weeping little sister followed right behind her. I lifted my head to check the time. With my glasses on the nightstand beside me, I squinted through my extremely poor vision to see a blurry 6:04 a.m. lit dimly on the clock.

Breaking me out of my foggy half-sleep, my mom looked at me and said, "I'm moving out today. Do you want to go along with me or stay here with your dad?"

I felt immediately numb. Even in my stupor I knew exactly what was happening.

The tears welled up. With a shaky voice I asked, "What's Jenna doing?"

"She's going with me."

Through the sniffles, I quickly made up my mind. "Then I want to stay here with Dad."

I didn't know how to process what had just happened. What child would? Rarely had I seen my parents fight. For goodness sake, we just returned home from a wonderful vacation—or so I'd thought.

## WAKING UP TO A NEW STORY

Denial can be such a wonderful thing—until you're awakened from it. For another thirteen years, 20/2000 vision didn't describe just my eyesight; it unknowingly became a metaphor for my emotional insight as well.

I failed to face the pain of my parents' divorce. I was the fixer in the family, and everybody came to me for answers. So as far as I was concerned, I had it together.

Besides, I didn't see my parents fight. My stepfather became one of the biggest influences in my faith journey. My dad, stepfather, and I would even hang out together occasionally. If anybody had reason to believe their situation was an exception, it was me. I honestly believed I came out unscathed.

Then it all came crashing down. The emotional wounds from my parents' divorce began to surface in my own relationships. Two years of counseling ensued. In that time I learned one principle—the past is not your past if it's affecting your present. I began to realize that one of the greatest dangers to my future family was my own unresolved baggage. That's when I made the decision to begin rewriting my story—and rewiring my brain without even knowing it.

## WRITING OUR PARENTING SCRIPT

Our homes reflect our story. For some, that story is defined by brokenness. For others, it's defined by love, laughter, and joy. For most, it's a blend of the two.

The beauty of it all is that no matter our story or family background—good, bad, or ugly—we have 100 percent control in writing a new script. And it's a good thing too. Research shows that as parents we're the ones writing our children's story—and wiring their brains as well. That's both a powerful and scary realization. Especially considering that most of us parent the way our parents raised us, for better or for worse, oftentimes without even realizing it.

Have you ever considered what kind of story you're writing for your children? Or

what effect *your* story is having on those little ones you love most? It's a story you'll want to begin writing down. (We'll do this together in the next chapter.)

In spite of my parents' divorce, I have a dad who loves me unconditionally. Whether I went four-for-four at the plate or zero-for-four at the plate, whether I pinned my opponent in thirty seconds or got pinned in thirty seconds, I knew my dad was there for me. I can count on one hand the number of wrestling matches my dad missed throughout my seven years of wrestling, most because he couldn't get off work on time.

Because my dad chose to rewrite his story.

My grandfather (his dad) left my grandmother when my dad was twelve. His dad wasn't there for him very much. As a truck driver he was always on the road. Though he loved my dad, he was generally unavailable to him. My dad recognized it enough to rewrite his own story and intentionally become emotionally and physically available to my sister and me growing up. Today, my dad's rewritten story impacts our own parenting journeys.

## BUILDING YOUR SAFE HOUSE

Thankfully, you're a parent who's passionate about the emotional and relational dangers coming against our children. Being aware now of these dangers makes it possible to be proactive about building a Safe House so that years later we're not fighting against the tide of rebellion, distance, and irreversibly poor choices. This doesn't mean they won't rebel or make mistakes, but it does mean we're setting ourselves up—biblically and scientifically—for a better chance of raising them to live, love, and lead well.

If you're an expectant parent or the parent of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers and you're reading this book, you're well on your way to laying a solid foundation for your kids by building a Safe House now. As we'll learn, the first year of life is critical.

If you're the parents of elementary school children, you're on your way to solidifying or intentionally adjusting the relational foundation you've already set. If you feel behind the eightball a bit, thinking you may have made a few mistakes along the way, don't beat yourself up. You'll be able to begin training your child's brain for empathy, self-confidence, respect, and love with the safety principles and tips in this book.

If you're the parents of middle school kids, well there's no better time for your



home to be a Safe House. This is often the hardest and most confusing time developmentally and socially for kids. (Think acne, first kisses, school dances, changing voices, late bloomers, and on and on.) This season of their lives gives you an incredible opportunity to teach them the process of learning how to problem solve, make wise decisions, and relate with you as their parent through the process. What a great way to build the emotional and relational foundation for heading to the often tumultuous teenage years.

And for parents of teenagers, a Safe House will help you interact with your teens in a way that wires their brain to prepare them for romantic relationships, difficult moral decisions, and self-control through their young adult years. If you feel like a failure in this category already, please give yourself grace. In my fifteen years of counseling teens (many of them juvenile delinquents) and their families, I have helped many parents learn new ways of communicating with their teenagers in a way that establishes safety without giving up parental authority.

For grandparents either raising grandchildren or watching your children and wondering how you can be of better help, you, too, can establish a Safe House in a way that truly makes a difference in their lives. These are years you cannot afford to spoil your grandchildren, as most grandparents decidedly vow to do. Not to rain on your spoiling parade, but the definition of the word *spoil* is “to diminish or destroy the value or quality of; to harm the character of a child.” When you seek to spoil your grandkids, you’re not only teaching them that it’s okay to disrespect their parents but you’re also teaching them ways to do that. Grandparents, my prayer is that as you read this book, you value the relational, spiritual, and emotional health of the next generation by partnering with your adult children to offer a Safe House for your grandchildren.

Throughout the book you’ll see charts and strategies for each stage of your child’s development. You can apply these to make the most of your child’s developmental level to make her feel safe, build her brain, and write her story.

Will we make mistakes? Absolutely. But realize this, *you* have what it takes to write a story full of beauty and joy for your kids. And it’s a good thing, too, because nobody has the power to write (and rewrite) our children’s life story more than we do.

Writing great stories for our kids is a matter of becoming aware of, first, what’s really going on inside our own heart—that is, the threats coming from our own story—and, second, inside our home—the dangers influencing our children from outside our four walls.

## WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

I'd like to think our four-walled brick home is like Fort Knox. When I go to sleep at night, I'd like to think that my family is safe inside, protected from unwanted intruders and the elements. But we aren't. And unfortunately your family isn't either.

Our four-walled homes are more like cheap nylon tents. Though we try to protect our children and our families as best we can, the culture around us is creeping in through the holes. And as parents, many of us are either too busy or unaware of what threats may already be inside our homes by the way *we* relate.

There are threats in our homes that didn't exist a generation ago. We're navigating a whole new world of raising children in the twenty-first century. New cultural norms, devices, social media, and an overabundance of information and conflicting messages have created a confusing and convoluted world for our kids and us. And the speed with which the culture is changing can make our heads spin.

That's why building a Safe House has never been more critical for a generation of parents and the kids we love and raise. Let's start from a thirty-thousand-foot view and consider what kind of story the broader culture is trying to write for our kids.

We're all products of arguably the most individualistic culture in the history of the world. We live in a society today termed by Dale Kuehne as the iWorld, a society that believes "an expansion of individual rights will lead to increased happiness and fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> Such a society prides itself on one value: *feeling better*.

Whether we admit it or not, everything we do, the people we spend time with, the things we spend our money on, what we give our time to, all of it is colored by the lens of this individualistic philosophy. We raise our kids through this lens. And our kids are experiencing the consequences.

Why? Because the ethos of individualism is hostile to relationships. The result of an individualistic society that values *feeling better* over *loving better* is relational bankruptcy.

In fact, a Harvard study published just last year showed that nearly 80 percent of kids stated that the primary message they receive from their parents is that personal

When we don't believe we have what it takes as parents, it's too easy to reach for the outward affirmation that'll prove to us, and everyone else, otherwise. So we end up valuing success over character. Feeling better over loving better.

achievement and happiness matters more than care and concern for other people. The kids in the study were also three times more likely to agree with the following statement: “My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I’m a caring community member in class and school.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems we’re sending our kids the message that outward success matters more than inward character.

But why, you might ask? I think it’s because we’re giving in to parental peer pressure more than we’re willing to admit.

A good report card is a more visible measure of my parenting skills to teachers than my son’s random act of sharing a toy with another child in the corner—an act that nobody ever sees.

When we don’t believe we have what it takes as parents, it’s too easy to reach for the outward affirmation that’ll prove to us, and everyone else, otherwise. So we end up valuing success over character. Feeling better over loving better.

I mean, heaven forbid one of my friends thinks I’m a bad parent because I don’t send my three-year-old to a preschool prep program supposedly giving him an advantage for higher education. Or that I’m a bad parent because I, at the expense of my son’s “happiness” (that is, feeling better), didn’t cave in to him when he threw his wooden train as hard as he could at my face.

If asked, I would say, yes, I care more about how my kids treat others than I do their personal happiness.

But I have to wonder, *Do I live that? Do my own actions and how I respond to my kids relay this message?*

I believe we’re facing two problems with the feeling-better culture we live in: we’re raising a generation that’s relationally bankrupt and we’re blind to how it’s happening. Here’s a snippet of recent outcome research to help paint the picture. Today’s generation of kids is

- more narcissistic and self-centered<sup>3</sup>
- less empathetic<sup>4</sup>
- more disconnected and lonely<sup>5</sup>
- scoring lower on achievement scores<sup>6</sup>
- displaying a poor work ethic<sup>7</sup>
- less able to reason (that is, getting dumber)<sup>8</sup>
- more depressed<sup>9</sup>

- more anxious<sup>10</sup>
- more stressed<sup>11</sup>
- more medicated<sup>12</sup>

Some people may argue with this. But the direction of the data is overwhelmingly consistent. That these traits are true *of a generation* gives cause for great concern. These relational effects are the by-products of a culture that values *feeling better* over *loving better*, and all of them are antithetical to raising kids who live, love, and lead well.

A Safe House is a place where parents keep the end goal of raising emotionally safe kids in mind. The more intentional we are at *creating values* in our homes, the more aware we'll be to the opposing, unsafe values our culture tries to project into our homes.

Can you imagine the legacy and society we could leave behind if a generation of parents like ourselves became passionate, bold, and unapologetic about raising kids against this cultural tide of *feeling better* and were committed to doing what they could to raising kids who *loved better*?

For some of us, it begins by grabbing a pen, reminiscing on our own story, and re-writing. For others, it begins by dreaming—dreaming about our kids and the outcome we envision for them—and writing. Whether you're writing or rewriting your parenting story, if it's done in a Safe House, the coherent narrative you weave will be beautiful. But I must warn you: it won't be easy.

Simple? Yes. Easy? Not so much. Anybody who tells you parenting is easy, run the other way. Their kids are probably in jail.

## THE BEAUTY IN BEING SAFE

Speaking of jail, I had a few shocking revelations when I first became a parent.

First, as ill-prepared as we were for the chaos about to invade our home, I couldn't believe my wife, Christi, and I were allowed to walk out of the hospital with a living, breathing, screaming, hungry, sleepless, restless, 100-percent-dependent-upon-us human being. Second, I was overwhelmed by all the books written on sleeping techniques, discipline strategies, parenting styles, and on and on, many of them contradicting one another. Last, I was amazed that no matter what kind of parent someone was or how successfully they raised their own kids, everybody, including those who never tried it, had an opinion.

One day, after receiving unsolicited advice from a woman whose kids were either in

jail or having affairs, I asked my mother-in-law what the deal was with all of the advice. She said, “Well, it’s the one thing nearly everybody has actually done. So they believe their way was the best way, even if it wasn’t.”

I guess that’s one of the side effects of free speech.

As I continued to read and research techniques and consider everyone’s advice, I needed a filter. It was becoming all too complicated for me. I’m sure you can relate.

Parenting in the twenty-first century is filled with choices. I counsel with and talk to parents all the time who are trying to negotiate different points of view about raising kids.

- “Should our baby sleep in bed with us?”
- “Should we let our baby cry it out?”
- “Should we spank our kids, and if so, when?”
- “How do I respond to a temper tantrum?”
- “Should I stay home with the kids or put them in day care?”
- “Should we home school or send our kids to a private or public school?”
- “How much screen time do I let my kids have?”

How many of these questions have you wrestled with? If you’re like us, probably most of them. That’s because parenting in the real world is about the countless choices we make to give our kids the best chance to develop and grow.

But there’s a problem.

We live in a culture where the latest sermon, data, research results, and trends present themselves as *the* way (and often the *only* way, if you really love your kids) to raise them right. As guilt-prone parents who genuinely want what’s best for our kids, it’s easy to fall prey to the latest marketing ploys, product biases, and contradicting messages that cloud our journey to finding the beauty in our parenting story.

Currently the parenting fads include gluten-free diets, essential oils, using only green products in our homes, and trying to feed kids all-organic foods. If you’re a parent on a budget, good luck trying to keep the balance with this one—buying the healthy items we can and not feeling guilty for what we can’t afford.

The same debates hold true for immunizations, the kinds of toys we buy our kids, the schools they attend, the rigid schedules we beat ourselves up over to get them to sleep, eat, wake, play, and learn.

I’m stressed just listing all of these issues. No wonder we’re uptight and overwhelmed as parents. These debates are ongoing and will never quit.

Add to this the pressure of the choices we see our parenting friends make. A quick glance at Facebook or Pinterest, and you see their picture-perfect kids, DIY family activities, unrealistically joyful vacations, and gluten-free gourmet dinners. No wonder parenting insecurity is at an all-time high.

There's absolutely no beauty in striving for perfection or keeping up with the Joneses. I love what Anne Lamott says about this in her book on writing, *Bird by Bird*:

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life. . . . I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun doing it.<sup>13</sup>

Let me encourage you, we don't have to struggle over all of these choices. What we need is an approach to parenting that's much less complicated and passes the test of trusted research. As a person of faith, I also value that how I parent is filtered through the timeless lens of the Bible. Where scientific research and biblical wisdom sync together, we can find confidence, not perfection, in how we parent.

Thankfully, in spite of all of the other parenting debates, there is one primary factor across all the domains of research (psychology, sociology, neuroscience) necessary for raising kids who thrive: *emotional safety*.

We're all very aware that physical safety is important for kids. But have you considered the importance of *emotional safety*?

If you're like a lot of parents, that's probably not a term you've even heard before.

It's not hard to see why: physical safety is a multibillion-dollar industry that can be resolved with products. In media and advertising we see an exorbitant focus on the physical safety of our children: electrical outlet plugs, childproof locks, stairway gates, BPA-free products, child safety seats, "no-touch" playground rules, green cleaning products, organic food diets, and all-natural toys. Emotional safety, on the other hand, is more elusive and requires just one thing: *parents*. No product on a shelf can create emotional safety in a child the way we—as her parents—can. Perhaps that's why the industry remains quiet on it. Though I appreciate the reasoning behind all of the physical safety measures, the time and attention spent on them is out of balance.



Emotional safety is related to outcomes in the following areas (all specifically listed in chapter 3):

- children's academic scores
- behaviors
- brain development
- social skills
- problem-solving skills
- relationship formation
- adult-relationship satisfaction
- healthy identity formation
- self-esteem
- athletic and extracurricular success
- a sense of morality
- established values
- a faith that sticks

You won't find either the breadth or depth of outcome research for kids in any other parenting philosophy or strategy. Simply put, emotional safety is the key to raising kids who thrive in all areas of life. Kids less likely to rebel, lie, and use drugs in their teenage years. Most important, we can raise kids who love God, love others, and lead others to do the same. All it takes is a place of emotional safety—or a Safe House.

What good is it if we have a child who never gets a scratch, bump, or bruise, was fully breast-fed, and is as healthy as they come, never being sick and always eating organic vegetables, if he's a narcissistic, self-centered, irrational, and perhaps impulsive and addicted brat who blames, criticizes, and is otherwise unloving? if he's a child who becomes an adult unable to engage in or know the joy of sharing in intimate relationships?

**It is the posture from which we parent, not the technique, that matters most.**

Okay, that analogy may sound dramatic, but if my kids possess any of those traits, I'll be very sad. I'll take broken bones any day over a broken soul.

In order to raise children who love God and love others, do well in school, excel in extracurricular activities, handle anger and frustration, develop self-control, resolve conflict, establish a good career, give back to the community in which they live, and marry and raise their own families to do

the same, we need to begin emphasizing more debate and added discussion in securing our homes emotionally.

That's because emotionally safe homes are the breeding ground for kids who live, love, and lead well.

Emotional safety becomes the filter for all other parenting decisions. If there's any one phrase you take away from this book, remember this: It is the posture from which we parent, not the technique, that matters most.

It really is that simple.

## DO YOU REALLY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A PARENT?

Parenting in the twenty-first century is ripe with challenges, many the result of the happiness culture we find ourselves in. If you question this idea of happiness in our culture, just listen to Pharrell Williams's hit song "Happy": a message proclaiming "happiness is the truth." Chances are you're singing it right now in your head. I am.

I love to be happy. We actually hold little family dance parties some evenings in our living room with our kiddos dancing around to this song. But when we allow happiness to be placed as the highest order of truth in a culture, and it becomes our ultimate pursuit, what happens when we're not happy? The marketplace capitalizes on it. For parents, the formula works something like this: create more choices for parents to enhance their quality of parenting and raise happy kids. When the natural frustrations that come along with parenting turn to exhaustion, and the initial offering of choices overwhelms them all the more, offer more products to help them feel less overwhelmed by the choices they already have. As journalist Eric Sevareid wrote in 1964, "The biggest big business in America is not steel, automobiles or television. It is the manufacture, refinement and distribution of anxiety."

Mom and Dad, stop exhausting yourself trying to give your kids an advantage. You are the advantage.

Nowhere is this more true than in the marketplace of modern-day parenting.

If our pursuit of happiness or our children's pursuit of happiness is our highest truth, we will not raise kids who live, love, and lead well. Happiness is a shallow truth that defies the most basic parenting principle: sacrifice. Caring about our child's life

story means there are times (though not all of the time) we sacrifice happiness. If we don't, we'll sacrifice our kids' ability to live, love, and lead well.

That's because on the other side of sacrifice is joy, and joy is a much higher level of truth than happiness.

In fact, if we, as parents, focus on character, then higher achievement *and* happiness will follow. And there's nothing more powerful in instilling these values than *your* loving and safe presence. Especially *your* spending time with your children in face-to-face eye contact (particularly infants and preschoolers under the age of five). Will it be easy? Not always.

That's why it's important to remind ourselves that we have what it takes.

Research shows *you* build the brain and character of your children more than any electronic device or educational video on the market by simply

- reading to your kids (and infants)
- singing to and with your kids (and infants)
- talking to your kids about their day
- laughing and joking with your kids (creating a positive environment has an amazing impact on brain development)
- playing outside in the dirt with your kids
- eating dinner regularly with your kids
- roughhousing with your kids (especially dads)

Do we want our kids to get good grades? Of course we do. Do we want them to be happy? I most definitely do.

But I also realize that true happiness and joy stem not from personal success or feeling good but from the sacrifice of loving and caring for other people.

And the most powerful way for that to grow in our kids is to simply be with them.

Mom and Dad, stop exhausting yourself trying to give your kids an advantage.

You are the advantage.

## THE STORY BEHIND YOUR SAFE HOUSE

Whenever I visit my parents, I often reminisce on places I frequented as a kid. On a recent trip, I was driving through my hometown late at night and couldn't help but notice the lights on in the house where I was raised until I was seven years old. As I drove past our old home, I noticed other houses I had spent time in with friends. I slowed down

enough to take it all in. The farther I drove, the more I pondered the stories behind every window in each house I passed.

Some houses were dark and cold. Others were well-lit—curtains and decorations adding to their inviting warmth.

*Where are the kids today that grew up in those houses? I wondered. Do they have kids? What are their stories?*

*What about the kids in those houses today? Are they safe? Or is the darkened house reminiscent of the emotional coldness they live in?*

There's a story in every home. The quality of that story is a reflection of how secure we are as parents. The more secure we are, the stronger our Safe House will be. That's because the foundation of a Safe House is a secure parent, which is the focus of the next chapter. The more secure we are, the better we'll be at erecting the four walls of a Safe House—the walls of exploration, protection, grace, and truth.

To be a sturdy and secure Safe House, these walls must be balanced over time. If any one wall becomes bigger to the neglect of another, it could very well be a reflection of the insecurity of the foundation. The more insecure we are as parents, the more likely our walls will be out of balance and the less safe our home may be.

That's why we'll start with a story—your story.

## ———— Writing Your Story ————

1. Describe or write down in your own words what *emotional safety* means to you.
2. What parenting fads, products, or issues have been or are most stressful for you?
3. When do you feel most insecure as a parent?



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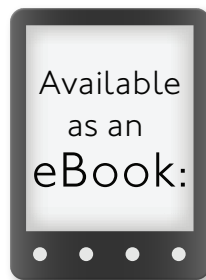
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