

A young girl is standing on a plush red sofa. She is wearing a teal dress and white socks with large teal and yellow polka dots. Her feet are resting on a large teal pillow that has a small, round, dark object (possibly a coin or button) on it. The background is a solid yellow wall. The floor is made of light-colored wood.

In This House We Will *Giggle*

Making **VIRTUES,**
LOVE & LAUGHTER
a Daily Part of
YOUR FAMILY LIFE



Courtney DeFeo

Praise for
In This House, We Will Giggle

“Every parent needs this book! I love Courtney’s fun, practical ways to connect our kids with biblical truth while making family memories. This book is an amazing resource that will teach children how to have their own relationship with God.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, *New York Times* best-selling author
and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“Courtney DeFeo has written the book I wish I’d had while my kids were growing up! It’s full of creativity and fun for anchoring twelve key virtues into the hearts of children. I love how her ideas lay a vital foundation for spiritual growth and development—and help families have a blast while doing it.”

—SANDRA STANLEY, North Point Ministries

“If you’re looking for real-life ways to become a more proactive instead of reactive parent, you should read this book. Courtney DeFeo gives us personalized and practical ideas for building love and laughter into our children so we can actually develop an intentional plan for investing in them.”

—REGGIE JOINER, founder and CEO of Orange

“We laughed our way through this book with its honest snapshot of all that comes with being a parent. We also were seriously inspired to invite our kids into a life filled with virtues. Courtney takes the guesswork out of it by giving parents creative and practical ways to seize everyday moments and make following Jesus *fun!*”

—LAUREN TOMLIN, wife of Christian music artist Chris Tomlin
and on the journey with him to raising a family after the
heart of Jesus

“I love being a dad, but to be honest, I’m an insecure one. I want to be really good at this, but there are days when I wonder. This is one of the many reasons I love Courtney’s book. She reminds us that we should take parenting seriously, but not so much ourselves. Love, giggles, and virtues

are a lot more fun than perfection anyway. This is a practical and encouraging guide for parents who aren't perfect but who want to get this extraordinary opportunity right—and have fun along the way.”

—JEFF HENDERSON, lead pastor of Gwinnett Church,
dad to Jesse and Cole, and husband of Wendy

“As a counselor, I hear weary parents every day trying to figure out how to combat the entitlement of this generation, instill virtues in their children, and enjoy one another at the same time. I'm so grateful for this book, which contains encouragement and practical ideas to do just that! Your family will be inspired to grow, serve, love, and laugh together!”

—SISSY GOFF, director of child and adolescent counseling at
Daystar Counseling Ministries, Nashville, TN, and author
of several books, including *Intentional Parenting*

“Courtney DeFeo, in her typical style, offers us something refreshingly different, powerful, and creative: a secret weapon for parents. For me this book felt like the Swiss Army Knife of parenting, with a tool just waiting to be applied as needed to every occasion. . .with a dose of fun and giggles along the way!”

—DAVID SALYERS, vice president of marketing for Chick-fil-A Inc.
and coauthor of *Remarkable!*

“Every mother will be helped by this practical, inspirational, and down-to-earth book. Each page holds biblical truth, family-time suggestions, and a huge trunk full of plans to help you teach twelve beautiful virtues. If you choose to do as this book suggests, your family is in for a lovely journey.”

—ESTHER BURROUGHS, author and speaker with Esther
Burroughs Ministries, Greenville, SC

“Like Courtney, I want to create a home where our children experience Christ in a tangible way. The ideas in this book are practical, and the stories are relatable. You'll come away with fresh inspiration for nurturing a faith-filled, fun-loving family.”

—HOLLY FURTICK, author of *The Preacher's Wife* blog and wife
of Pastor Steven Furtick, Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC

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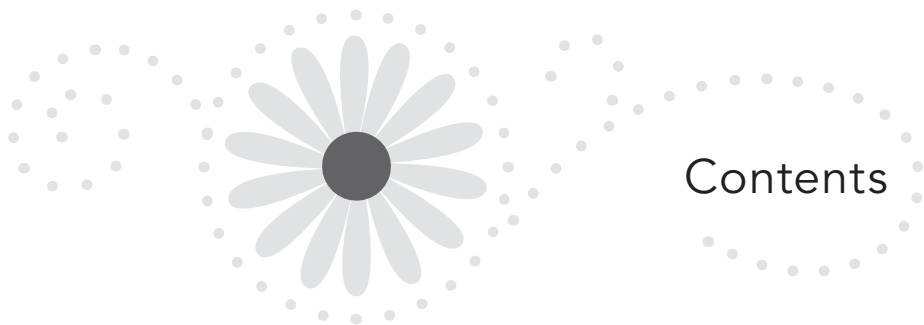
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*To Ron, Ella, and Larson:
You have shown me a love and laughter
that I never knew was possible.
In this house, I will treasure you.*





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The background of the page is decorated with various stylized geometric and organic shapes. There are several large, light gray flowers with dark gray centers. Interspersed among them are squares with rounded corners and circles, some of which are filled with horizontal lines. All these shapes are surrounded by a cloud of small, light gray dots, creating a whimsical and playful atmosphere.

Introduction

Why Giggle in This House?

Before my two girls came along, I had a vision for my home. I wanted it to look very similar to the home in which I grew up—full of life and joy. A house of love. A place where my children would feel welcome even when *every single toy* was not put away. Where they would feel free to be themselves and even to make a mistake or mess up.

In my ideal vision of home, each member of the family feels accepted no matter what. There's a lot of running and playing. You may hear an occasional word of correction or see a rule enforced, but all is covered with love and grace. If you peek inside those children's hearts, you see them yearning to be just like their mom and dad. They are excited to grow up but anxious to return home to make more memories. And the sound that rings throughout that crazy house? Giggles!

That's what I had planned for our family home: love and grace, memory making and giggles.

And then I had kids.

Some harsh reality came my way. Instead of giggles, critical words often echoed in our home. On some days, it felt more sterile than warm. Everything might be scheduled and organized, but smiles were fading.

Despite my early hopes, my home felt little like the one I'd envisioned—and a lot like the houses of fear I'd witnessed while growing up. In those homes, emotional tension and a lot of rules led to a sense of nervousness and fear. You could almost hear the Von Trapp family whistle calling everyone to scurry and line up for instructions. If you could peek inside these kids' minds and hearts, you might observe them counting the days until their release from that home.

What a heartbreaking situation, and certainly not what I wanted for my family. Over time, my husband and I realized we wanted to make some changes. We began to loosen up on the schedule and noticed that everyone's heart became lighter. We became less concerned about behavior enforcement and more interested in heart development—and we saw love and delight blossom in our home. And while we absolutely believe in the value of discipline and guidance, we started looking for fun, enjoyable ways to teach our children what matters most. As we daily make choices to lean toward love and giggles, our home is becoming much more like the one I dreamed of before I became a mom.

How about you? Which sort of home did you grow up in?

When you think about God and how you view Him, is He like the parents in the first home or the second?

Which home and view of Christ do you want for your kids?

Do you believe the joyful home is even possible?

I have to tell you, I'm convinced it is. And this book is all about taking steps to make that joyful home a reality for all of us.

The Toughest Job We'll Ever Love

The day I held my first baby girl in my arms, questions began swirling in my head. *What kind of home will we give her? Will she enjoy us? Will we hurt her? Will she always trust us?* My husband and I have made it our pursuit to create the first home, the fun and loving home. A home where grace and love flow. A home where kids see Christ's love in action. A home where giggles—not screams—erupt through the windows.

Pursuit means that our family has not arrived. In fact, we will never fully arrive. I am not a perfect mom. I am not a supermom. And as a recovering perfectionist, I know I am dependent on my Savior. I need Him desperately. Daily. This job of raising children is the toughest thing I have ever attempted. It is also the most exciting, the most liberating, and the most fulfilling call I have ever experienced.

My girls, Ella and Larson, are not my whole world, but they are worth giving my best effort for my whole life. If I do my part well, they could grow up to lead a nation, a small group, a church, a family, or a class of students. They could change another's heart for Christ, they could lend a helping hand, or they could start a movement. They could serve their husbands and raise precious children.

If I dwell on the huge responsibility of being a parent, it could freeze me with fear. However, I choose not to let worry stop me and I dive in, knowing that if I fail or mess up, I am always getting back up. Our best moments as a family can often be found in the mess of life, not in the planned or perfect.

In those moments when I begin to feel overwhelmed, I remember these children are not totally mine. They are held and loved by the God who created the universe. He knows them, and He knows best exactly what they are designed to do. He has a story, and they have a place in it. I have the massive privilege of opening their eyes to this

story and showing them options and possibilities for glorifying His name.

Trust me, I fight a daily battle between my natural self and the mom I want to be. All too often I lose sight of my true priorities. I am a controller and perfectionist to my core. There are days I simply want the calm, orderly peace of everyone quietly marching like ducks behind Mom. On those days, my girls are behaving just so Mom does not flip her lid, and they may resemble the robot children in the house of fear. Then, thankfully there is a nudge and a soft whisper: *Loosen up. Don't miss this.* I believe it is my heavenly Father working in me and growing me as a mom, reminding me that the house of love and grace includes mess.

I have seen these messy moments turn into priceless treasures. I see the spark in my children's eyes or the perfect spot to tickle, and we relish a moment and simply giggle. As my beautiful mentor told me, "You'll only pass this way once."

The challenge I face is in holding the right view of my tasks and challenges amid the daily grind. Can I break out of autopilot mode and see beyond my role as an enforcer? Can I seize the teachable moments in each day for the purpose of raising virtuous kids without raising fearful kids? Prompting obedience "because I said so" may pay off in the short term; however, I don't want my children to obey only because they fear consequences or worry that Mom will lose it. I want to know their hearts understand and grasp the joy to be found in doing the right thing. This requires parenting through the daily grind with a long-term mentality.

It's easy to lose perspective and sink into thinking of my job as a mom as nothing more than the relentless changing of dirty diapers, the wiping of snotty noses, and the making of lunches. Can you relate to this despair? But when I look at things from God's high and holy view of motherhood, I can choose to see it all as a thrilling call, a disciple-making job—teaching my kids to live out virtues like joy, love, gratitude, generos-

ity, and patience. My goal is that they feel the joy of Christ's love and learn to walk with Him from the earliest age. When I view my many tasks as a mother from this perspective, it makes the day pretty simple: let me show them Jesus in a very real, personal way. In a delightful way.

Getting Serious About Letting Loose

Did you know that dancing mends a wounded spirit? Did you know giggling and tickling teach love? Did you know a silly family game reminds our kids they have happily married parents? Did you know having family fun and sprinkling in virtues seal lessons into children's hearts for a lifetime?

In his heartwarming book *The Most Important Place on Earth*, Robert Wolgemuth describes all the pieces to the puzzle of a Christian home, and then he echoes my heart for home. "But with all these good things, there is something else I now believe is a vital piece of the Christian home puzzle. It's the serious business of laughter."¹

Our home, and the environment we create within our family, sets up the impression our kids will have of faith and God. Will they believe Jesus loves only well-behaved, model children, or will they know He loves them just as they are? Will they see the Christian life as a series of rules to be followed, or will they follow Jesus because they've learned from us what it means to love Him and find joy in being with Him?

I believe the Bible very simply describes the fullness of joy found in life with God:

You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

(Psalm 16:11, NASB)

The joy found in life with God is an “aha” moment for kids and adults alike. When together as a family we awaken to pleasures of loving and following Him, the experience bonds us. When we realize that—no matter our age, gifts, or limitations—we can be used to change others’ lives, we are inspired to create family moments that are fun and memorable. Such moments build on each other to create a home kids will want to run back to, not run away from, as soon as they are old enough to choose. This environment makes faith feel less like a burden and more like a privilege. A pleasure.

I’m convinced we can let loose and enjoy our family even as we’re teaching profound principles for life. This love-and-laughter approach to spiritual growth is a lot like how we encourage healthy physical growth. We want our kids to choose exercise and healthy foods, but if we constantly lecture them about the benefits of a healthy diet and yell at them for eating junk food, odds are they won’t be excited about following our suggestions.

Let’s apply this to faith. What if, just as we encourage a toddler to try a new flavor, we invited our kids to taste and see that God is good? that serving Him is actually fun? Instead of telling them to be more generous, let’s help them experience for themselves that giving to others feels good and it honors God. Once our kids’ perspective turns from “we have to do this” to “we want to do this,” they begin making their faith their own. It becomes *who* they are, not *what* they do. A choice over a mandate.

So, on one hand, let’s have fun and lighten up and get out the silly string and air guitars. Let’s be intentional about creating an environment of affection and joy in our home. Let’s close up our computers and ride bikes more often. And at the same time, let’s not waste a single opportunity to teach our kids to live out the virtues that can shape their hearts. They live in our homes for only a brief moment, but the lessons they learn

and the love they experience will travel with them all their lives. So let's lighten up and get serious. Both. And.

What Are Virtues, Anyway?

So are you ready to dive in and develop a household of love and grace, virtue and giggles? If so, you've probably got some questions like these: *Where do we start? How do we instill what matters most in an engaging way so that we shut the door on the robotic house and open the door to the fun house? What will we use to teach truth that transforms young minds and settles deep into their hearts?*

This book combines three key ingredients—virtues, love, and laughter—in a variety of recipes for creating memorable experiences in your home. Our goal is fewer lectures from us, less eyeball rolling from the kids, and more adventures, more giggles for everyone.



Virtues: what we are teaching

Love & Laughter: how we are teaching

According to *Oxford Dictionaries* online, a virtue is “a quality considered morally good or desirable in a person.” So our goal is to teach our children a core set of traits that we value most and desire to see them live out daily—traits you often find referenced on those clever “House Rules” signs, such as love, generosity, service, and responsibility. We want to instill these traits in the hearts of our kids so that their characters reflect the heart of their Savior by the time they leave our nest.

Each chapter focuses on one of twelve different virtues. My suggestion is that you center your efforts on each individual virtue for one full

month, implementing the suggested activities and tools to reinforce that concept. With this book and one year of commitment, I believe we can help our kids learn and treasure these virtues in their hearts.

Now, if “one year” just turned you off, let me explain. It’s not going to take you one full year to read this book or to implement the key ideas in the chapters ahead, but this timeframe gives you room to breathe and live your life. While I’ve written this with specific calendar months in mind for each virtue, you can do these activities anytime of the year. And it’s up to your family how much time to invest and how to adapt the ideas to your home.

Here are the suggested months for each corresponding virtue:

January: **Joy**

February: **Love**

March: **Forgiveness**

April: **Faith**

May: **Patience**

June: **Perseverance**

July: **Respect**

August: **Responsibility**

September: **Service**

October: **Humility**

November: **Gratitude**

December: **Generosity**

Imagine your little ones walking through life with these seeds of biblical truth planted deep in their hearts and budding out of their lives. Imagine them learning through fun activities and engaging conversations what it means to honor God so that they never even noticed it as “virtue lesson time.”

That’s why I’ve written this specifically with the goal of creating experiences for our kids. Think less talking and more doing. Each chapter

provides details for a family fun activity to reinforce the virtue of the month. In addition, you'll find catch phrases, discussion questions, Scripture memory verses, and virtue definitions to support your teaching efforts. I encourage you to customize all these resources to fit the style and needs of your family, discarding anything that doesn't work and mixing in your own creative ideas.

Throughout the book you'll also find "60 Ways to Bring Out the Giggles"—quick and easy activities for nurturing a sense of fun in your household. As mentioned earlier, I'm challenging us to simultaneously get serious about the virtues we're teaching and lighten up about how we teach them. I know that may sound confusing, but let me assure you the "what" of passing on our faith hasn't changed in thousands of years; we are teaching our kids the same timeless principles of what it looks like to follow Jesus. But just as churches continually look for ways to be more relevant so they can capture the attention and hearts of people, we can do the same for our families. Let's make our homes places where learning to do the right thing is fun and memorable, not a chore and a lecture.

I realize the idea of deliberately designing opportunities to teach virtues in a meaningful way can sound less like fun and more like yet another item for your never-ending to-do list. As a mom of two little girls, I understand where most parents are sitting today. We are wiped out yet yearning for more. The urgent is pushing out important things. What matters in the next ten minutes is pulling us away from what will matter in ten years. That's why I feel compelled to write this book and share my heart.

Things which matter most must never be at
the mercy of things which matter least.

Goethe

My heart is to empower parents and change little lives by sharing what I've discovered through my own efforts to help my family and others fall in love with Jesus. My passion is not to produce good little Christian kids but to help raise a generation of kids to light up the world for His glory. I believe God can use ordinary moms like you and me to reveal our extraordinary God to our children in a meaningful way.

This Book Is Not...

This book is not a compilation of my own insights. While many of the ideas I share in the following pages come from my own experiences as a mom, I pull core principles largely from God's Word and insights from my own childhood. I was raised by imperfect parents who remained dedicated to living out the perfect love of Christ. And they never let go. In our home they shared the goodness of Christ rather than threatening us with the fear of breaking His commands.

I also share illustrations from other parents who have inspired me to be a better mother. I pray that in reading about the struggles and successes of other families, you will find hope and encouragement that you are not alone in your efforts. I pray each chapter will leave you feeling more than capable and never "less than."

This book is not a list of twelve to-dos to heap on guilt. We don't need another book to do that. And it is not a formula: follow these twelve steps and *poof!* your child will be a pastor and save the world. This is a collection of ideas to make teaching virtues easy and fun. Please don't feel you must repeat exactly the ideas and examples you find throughout the book. Instead I encourage you to customize the concepts to fit the recipe of your precious, unique family. You know the DNA of your family, each

personality, each quirk, each tendency, and the best family fun idea is one created by you.

Lastly, this book is not solely for the silly families and crafters. I wrote this book for the working mom, the mom searching out her faith, the single mom, the creative mom, and the busy mom. Parents in all seasons are interested in bringing virtues, love, and laughter into their homes. While you may not choose to do everything, you absolutely will find something in these pages that works for you, especially when you make it your own.

Are you ready? I am! And I'll be doing it with you, every step of the way. Let's go forth and giggle. One virtue at a time. And for heaven's sake, do not tell them up front what we are sneaking into the adventure. Just as carrots sometimes make their way into brownies, we will wrap up these lessons in irresistible love and laughter.

Our Prayer as We Start

Dear Lord, this is my heart's desire: to have a home that overflows with Your love because You have loved us. I want my kids to remember a house full of laughter and fun. I want them to remember truth and the goodness of Your Word because they experienced it for themselves, not because they were forced to obey. Lord, I pray today for a teachable spirit for _____ [insert kids' names]. I pray that I will have patience when a teaching activity doesn't go according to the plan. I pray You will give me discernment and wisdom. Please guide me to Your way for our family. Please protect my schedule and nudge me to focus on the critical task of raising kids who know You rather than being distracted by the urgent tasks of daily life. Thank You for Your grace and forgiveness. When I mess up, give me the courage to get back up and trust You again the next day. I love You. I entrust You with my life and my family's lives. Amen.

Questions to Answer Now and Discuss Later

1. Which best describes your home—the house of giggles or the house of fear?
2. What behaviors could your family stop doing to help create a home of love and grace?
3. What behaviors could your family start doing to help create a home of love and grace?
4. Once your kids are grown, how do you want them to remember your home?
5. Describe the impression of Jesus you want your kids to have.
6. Name one or two homes you know that are fun but where the parents have a way of teaching values and virtues. Describe them. Make notes of what you'd like to replicate.

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

Joshua 24:15

Joy

When the Reality of Life Meets
a Heart of Gladness



Memory Verse for the Month

A happy heart makes the face
cheerful, but heartache crushes
the spirit. *Proverbs 15:13*

Four families with eight kids in one house can get very loud, very quickly. On this particular day, as giggles, squeals, and the occasional shouts of “*Mine!*” echoed through the rooms, I could see growing tension on the faces of the other moms. Our shallow breathing and tight voices suggested a tinge of panic. The house held a lot of tiny people to keep happy and entertained for a long weekend.

As the official hostess, chronic control freak, and

veteran people pleaser, I took charge of the situation and headed straight for the CD player. I caught the eyes of my best friend Katie as I moved through the sea of chaos and kids. She knew it was time to do what we do best: create joy. I pressed one finger on the magical triangle-shaped Play button, and familiar praise tunes blared through the house. Eight squabbling, wild kids joined together for one large dance party. Four sets of parents met in the kitchen to provide an approving audience.

Frowns turned to smiles. Stress vanished. Hands clapped. Hips and feet bebopped. Moods lifted. Giggles erupted. Families worshiped.

Joy had transformed the scene, as it always does.

Joy to You and Me

When I asked my Facebook friends “How do you infuse joy in your home?” I was not surprised that the most popular answer by far was



“music.” From the seven dwarves singing “Whistle While You Work” to Matt Redman’s lyrics “Though I walk through the wilderness, blessed be Your name,” music’s power to bring joy into challenging situations is something we’ve all experienced. I have the Pandora app (free version) playing on my phone every day for this very reason.

But true joy, the kind we want for our families, goes much deeper than singing and smiles. Kay Warren once observed, “Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in all things.”²

Her words describe exactly what I want to see in my household. They

remind me how the psalmist declared of God, “Let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you” (Psalm 5:11).

The joy you and I are aiming to instill in our families this month and for years to come is rooted in our firm belief in God’s protection, no matter our circumstances. Here’s a brief definition to use with your kids:



Joy: choosing to praise God in all things

I love that this definition covers three points I am trying to teach my kids about joy: (1) it is often a choice, (2) praising God recognizes that He is our source, and (3) “all things” means every circumstance—the good and the bad.

House of Joy

I am so thrilled to start this book with *joy* because I truly desire for my kids to fall in love with Jesus Christ. I am creating a home that shows them the pure joy of living in His love. I pray that memories of joy are etched deep in the hearts of my kids. There is certainly a place for fear of God and biblical correction, but does the Creator of the universe delight in His children? You’d better believe it! Is He the only one who can fill them with true joy? a greater joy than this world can ever offer them? Yes! And we, as parents, provide their earliest impression of His greater joy.

John Piper beautifully explains the source of greatest joy.

The greatest joy is joy in God... Fullness of joy and eternal joy cannot be improved. Nothing is fuller than full, and nothing is longer than eternal. And this joy is owing to the presence of God, not the accomplishments of man.³

We are the role models of this joy for our children. We greet them in the morning and tuck them into bed at night, and as we stand beside them through all the hours in between, we face the choice of whether or not we will demonstrate joy, along with the other virtues discussed in this book. While we're going to look at some fun activities for centering our families on true joy, I believe God most often works on our families by working first through our hearts, our marriages. Then as our kids see His priorities play out in real life, they absorb those lessons naturally. Our kids will catch this joyful bug by what they see in our homes each day. The choices we make when dad gets fired or when a friend gets the car we wanted. From the big to the small reactions, they are watching.

Of course our desires and intentions are one thing. But what happens when our kiddos wake up and need “milk and a waffle, Mom!” within thirty seconds of peeling their little lion heads off the pillow? How does a heart of joy meet the reality of life?

The Not-So-Joyful Reality

As a parent, you likely have experienced pure joy to the point of elation with your children. But you have also experienced the most frustrating days of your life. I suspect most of us find parenting far more stressful and harder than we ever imagined. This stress—and the daily, often hourly, need to correct and corral these busy young people—often undermines our desire to create a home full of joy and love. We don't expect perfection, but we'd prefer that peace and smiles and happiness outnumber the moments of arguing and complaints and pouting. We don't want to take the easy route to happiness, paved with brownies and bribes; we want our children to experience the fullness of joy found in the love of Jesus Christ.

So what's holding us back?

My brother, Drew, a pastor in Atlanta, recently challenged me in one

of his messages: “Don’t you think Christians should be the happiest, most joyful people around? Why are we so upset?”

Wow. I sat with this question for a while. We have so many reasons to be joyful, and we can start with the fact of eternal life. I believe joy is given by God and is something He wants our families to experience together. When I think of the never-ending list of blessings He has given me, joy fills my heart and I feel compelled to praise Him. Why can’t I operate from this place of gratitude every day?

The truth in Drew’s message matches the desires of my heart. I should be able to respond in all circumstances with joy simply because I am a child of God. That is something to celebrate. However, when milk spills on the floor for the third time or I find another smelly load in the washer I forgot to change or I hear “Mine!” and “She hit me!” echoing from the playroom, my reaction isn’t immediate joy and smiles as I contemplate my blessings. It is too often a huff, a puff, and a not-so-gentle response.

Both parents and kids struggle when it comes to choosing joy despite life’s little—and big—disappointments.

Just this morning, we had an all-out war at 7 a.m. because I said no to my youngest, Larson, about wearing flip-flops to school. Those are the rules, kid; no flip-flops. She wasn’t accepting that answer. Crying, screaming, falling on the floor. When I sent her back upstairs to find a pair of shoes, she resorted to comparing me with her sister, yelling, “You say no

2

Balloon Couch Volleyball.

Blow up a balloon for a game of volleyball, and use the couch as your net, with members of the family on each side.



to everything! Ella is the nicest person ever! And she says yes to everything!” Alrighty, then. I was highly annoyed. And the day had barely started.

In that moment I decided to make a choice for joy in our home. First, I simply started singing as loudly as I could, “‘I’ve got the JOY, JOY, JOY, JOY down in my heart.’ Where?!” My goal was to shock her out of a tantrum and release my anger in the form of a happy tune instead of yelling. Next, I challenged the girls to a funny-face contest. They had to pop



3

Best Costume Contest.

Let kids dress up in their parents' clothes and accessories.

out from behind the wall and make the funniest face they could dream up. We were all giggling in minutes. Larson definitely won the funny-face contest. That kid is hysterical. She forgot about the flip-flops until we got to the car. When she asked again, I stood my ground and gave her two options. She said, “Okay, Mooooommm” (drawn out to four syllables and delivered with teenager-like facial expressions). Off we went to school.

I’m not always this quick to shift the mood, but I am getting better at not allowing the waves of life to send me crashing. I want to stand firmly on the foundation of God’s love and my identity in Him. I am so thankful God has heard my pleas and is helping me learn to keep my perspective and choose gratitude. I do not want to leave a legacy of yelling and snapping. I want my kids to hear me giggle about spills and brush off bad days. I want them to see me have a frustrating moment, apologize, and keep moving forward. The not-so-joyful reality of life confronts us every day. Our kids face it too. Their shiny red balloon escapes into the air, or their favorite friend declares,

“No! I don’t want to play with you.” Life is tough, for our little ones and our teens, and those lips will sometimes poke out.

In these moments we can be their very best cheerleaders and guide them back to our source of joy. We can continue to remind them that the pursuit of happiness will leave them with an empty heart. The happiness promised by the things of this world is always fleeting. The pursuit of joy found in Christ fills our souls. It is eternal and everlasting.

Breaking the Cycle

I have to confess, I am not a naturally joyful person. My husband, Ron, on the other hand, exudes joy. I often wonder how the Queen of Moods managed to marry Santa Claus. Seriously, I wake up every day next to the jolliest man on earth. By 7 a.m., this man is skipping through the kitchen, hugging cranky children, and dancing to his own beat. Meanwhile, I’m scowling my way toward the coffeepot and groping for a mug. And this is not just an early morning thing. When we visit Walt Disney World (a happy bonus of being local residents), he is whistling and ready to close the park. I am melting down by noon. Every time.

The good news is, I’m learning to be aware of when I need to make an adjustment toward joy. I’ve come to realize that I am the CMO—Chief Mood Officer—in our home. When I am annoyed and uptight, the whole family is on edge. If I am stressed, everyone is stressed. Sure, the kids’ fighting or lack of sleep or something else may be at the root of my mood. But I’ve discovered it doesn’t really help to figure out who caused what. I just need to break the cycle.

As CMOs of the house, we moms have some amazing superpowers. We carry delight and joy in our very fingertips and eyes. Our children crave our love, touch, and approval. They want to know we see them and we love them even when things are going downhill. If the mood in the

house is tense, we can assess if it's because we ourselves are too busy, too stressed, too critical, or too tired. Often bringing in joy is as simple as scooping up a little one to give him a heartfelt hug or smile and word of affirmation. You can almost see the life come right back into his heart. As adults we get the same feeling of affirmation from our heavenly Father during our prayer time and time in His Word.

Have you seen true joy up close and personal? I will never forget the



4

Daddy Disco.

Play an old '80s tune, and pull out your craziest dance moves for the kids.

morning I saw true joy, and I wanted it. I had recently moved to Orlando from Atlanta, and this new friend came over for a play date. Nikki's two little kids were running around in the playroom with my girls. Ever attempted a mom conversation while kids run wild? I was basically watching and waiting to pounce on mine for a "bad friend" infraction or "don't embarrass your mother" moment. I don't think I had looked my girls in

the eyeballs that entire morning. I was probably making sure my house looked abnormally perfect for my guests.

And then I noticed Nikki do something incredible. Her daughter Madison came running from across the room, *so* excited to show her something. Nikki didn't rudely interrupt me, and she didn't do an arm block or wave her daughter away to play. She simply took a few seconds and literally beamed ear to ear with her child. She got face to face with her, grabbed her cheeks, and heard that angel's precious story. It froze me.

Here's what I saw: pure joy, simply because that child belonged to her and loved being in her presence. Don't you think that's how our Father probably looks at us? Isn't that the face we want our kids to remember?



Ten Ways to Break a Bad-Mood Cycle

Here are a few ways I've found to give our household an infusion of joy.

1. **Tickle Attack.** Chase down someone and tickle until belly laughter erupts.
 2. **Play Hide-and-Seek.** This old-school game works every time.
 3. **Cuddle Up and Read a Book.** Take turns with a timer if you have multiple kids.
 4. **Funny-Face Contest.** Have them start behind a wall and jump out.
 5. **Dance Party.** Burn a CD of your go-to tunes to have on call for when moods start to spiral down.
 6. **Encourage Someone.** Loving on others takes the focus off us and replaces crankiness with compassion.
 7. **Change Scenes.** We often jump in the car for a sweet-tea run for Mom or walk to a playground to get our smiles going.
 8. **Indoor Tag.** Let them chase you around the house. (Consider earplugs for high squealing.)
 9. **Play.** Crazy concept, but making time to play with them or style a crazy hairdo for them is a surefire joy starter.
 10. **Listen.** I take turns asking them questions from silly to insightful. (What made you happy? What would you do if...?)
- 
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I have to be brutally honest here. Sometimes the lack of joy in our home is only because I am dealing with a trial. If my jeans don't fit or I'm behind on a deadline, things are tense. That might just be life, but I



don't believe it is acceptable to carry on this way. I want to recognize when my own issues are trickling into the moods in the home and the way I handle my kids. They are just playing loudly or giggling like kids, and now suddenly they are in trouble because I cannot find an e-mail or I lost something again.

Some days I need sufficient caffeine to break the bad-mood cycle.

Sometimes I need to get honest about my busyness and create room to breathe and do only the things God actually called me to do. Sometimes I need that text from a friend reminding me to get in my Bible. Time with God always sets my mind straight on my many blessings and brings me back to a biblical perspective. Sometimes I just need to smile even in the midst of a hard day. Often, I need to literally count my blessings.

Joy Begins in Our Hearts

Have you ever met a kid who is always joyful? One who always smiles when told to set the table and who pleasantly heads to bed at the first gentle reminder? Me neither. Whether driven by hunger, the need for a nap, or the desperate desire to find the right color socks right now, most kids can go from mellow to meltdown in three seconds or less. Just seeing a sibling get attention or approval can set off a chain reaction of jealousy

and whining and decidedly unjoyful behavior. So we have to brace ourselves for reality. I have been claiming “she’s teething” for about seven years every time my oldest acts ugly in public.

Please note that you do not have to change who you are or try to alter the God-given personalities of your children in order to pursue the virtue of joy. Some of us are naturally melancholy rather than exploding extroverts. Your personality and your child’s were designed by the Creator of the universe in His image. But God also designed us to experience the deep joy that comes when we make the choice to rest in the assurance of His love. We need to know, and we need to teach our kids, that God is in control, no matter the circumstances. Security fuels joy, not bubbly personalities.

For adults, this means choosing joy when there still isn’t a raise or promotion, or when your best friend lost weight again and you gained, or when you face incredible loss. For our children, it’s choosing joy when your best friend is in the other class or your sister gets a big recognition or you didn’t make that team.

This may sound simple, but living with a greater joy takes practice. For me, the practice includes praying, spending time in God’s Word, and writing down His blessings in my prayer journal. I have to text with a friend and eventually get grounded in truth and biblical perspective. Sometimes I simply flip through family photos to remind myself of all that I have and shift my focus off all that I don’t have. For my kids, I have to lead by example. I have to walk them through the tiny frustrations to life’s biggest trials and keep pointing them back to our greater joy. I have to help them giggle after a quick fall and celebrate a friend with a card when the other person won that race or award they had hoped for.

I’m not suggesting we become plastic people with no negative emotions. It’s good to show our kids how to work through sadness or disappointment. The danger is when trials come and we continue complaining



Catch Phrases for Joy

The language we speak in our home helps underscore the truths our children will carry with them through life. In each chapter, I'll include some catch phrases you can weave into everyday conversation to reinforce the virtue you are focusing on with your family. Warning: if used often enough, these might be the very phrases your kids will repeat when they are old. Don't you sometimes catch yourself quoting your parents? "My mom always said..." Here are some catch phrases to redirect attitudes and highlight the virtue of joy.

- ☻ Joy is a choice every day.
- ☻ Jesus Christ is the source of our joy.
- ☻ I have delight in my soul because I am a child of God.
- ☻ Let's praise Him in all things, even when things don't go our way.
- ☻ Great friends do not steal joy; they celebrate others (even when life doesn't go our way).
- ☻ Your happy heart shows on your cheerful face.
- ☻ Joy spreads through our family and then out into our community.
- ☻ Yes, that is disappointing, but _____
(insert something to thank God for).



or arguing or whining or waiting in a season of anger. Instead we want to take the opportunity to choose joy.

Life is busy and life is hard, but I will fight the pull to be dragged down by my moods. I will pray the source of my joy carries me through and reminds me to praise Him in all things. I can do this; you can do this. If we try one month of infusing joy in the hearts of our kids and in each room of our home, cheerful faces are headed our way.



Memory Verse for the Month

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. *Proverbs 15:13*

Virtue Definition for Memorization

Joy: choosing to praise God in all things

Read in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

“Get ready!” page 170. God’s people return from being slaves, based on Ezra 7; Nehemiah 8–10; Malachi 1; 3–4. (For family Bible time, consider adding joy with a surprise location—an inside picnic, in a fantastic fort, or over a campfire eating s’mores.)

Questions for Discussion

- Is joy a choice or a feeling?
- Does joy have to do with your circumstances or surroundings?

- What is the ultimate source of joy?
- Share a story of a friend or family that has chosen joy during tough times.
- Name a joyful family that embodies this virtue.
- How could we share Christ through joy in the next month?
- Have you ever had someone steal your joy? How did that feel?
- Is there a special event coming up we can help celebrate for a friend?
- What happens when you don't feel joyful?
- What happens as a result of our joy?
- When do we have the most joy as a family?
- What is one thing we can do together as a family this month to choose joy?

Pray

Use our memory verse to pray over and with your family. For example,

Lord, I pray we will be a family of happy hearts. We want our faces to become cheerful because of the choices we make with our hearts. We want our joy to shine so that people know our joy comes from knowing and trusting You. Thank You for how much You do for our family; it gives us so much joy. We love You. Amen.



Activity: Joy Field Journal

For this month, you are a family of scientists. Your field journal has one goal: research joyful people. At school, at church, at the grocery store, and definitely at home. Your goal is to examine others closely to identify joy.

Supplies

- ☐ journals (one per family member)—make some at home, or pick any small notebooks or journals
- ☐ costumes—anything from detective gear to a scientist jacket and goggles; get geared up to closely examine those with joy



How This Works

You are on the lookout for joyful people.

- *Count them.* How many friends at school were joyful just because? Or during a tough day, they still had a smile? What about teachers? What about mom and dad? Did you see anyone at the grocery store? the park? How about the mail carrier?
- *Draw them.* Field journalists sketch their subjects. Draw these people, and add labels or conversation balloons. Did they have smiles? Or was there something else? Did they use hugs to show their joy? Did they speak words of encouragement to alert you that they were joyful? Did they sing songs? What did they look like? act like? Draw details in your journal to help you remember.

- *Analyze them.* Make notes and questions. Are they happy or joyful? Is joy contagious? Did you see it spread at school or at home from one person to another?

This is a family project. Ideally, family members will each keep their Joy Field Journal with them all month long so they can make notes as they notice joy happening around them. Then set aside a regular time to share and discuss your observations, perhaps every Sunday evening around the dinner table.

Additional Discussion Questions

1. How does a person's joy affect others around her?
2. Do all joyful people look and act alike?
3. Did you notice a friend who is facing a trial but is choosing joy?
4. How can you tell if someone is joyful by our definition of "choosing to praise God in all things"?
5. Were some of these people just happy people? Were you able to find some who had joy because of the Lord? What is the difference?

Further Instructions

Mom and Dad, be sure to immediately point out and affirm joy in your own kids on the spot! It can certainly come up in the weekly discussions, but immediate positive reinforcement is necessary for helping your children recognize the virtue of joy.

Don't forget to write the virtue definition and memory verse in your journal!




Optional Activities

PLAN one family activity or outing that makes your family joyful when you are together. Let each family member share some ideas.

READ & DISCUSS scriptures on joy: Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:22–23; James 1:2–3; 1 Peter 1:8–9.

ENCOURAGE Write a letter to one family or person who embodies this virtue.



Teaching Generosity

Memory Verse for the Month

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. *1 Timothy 6:18*

Virtue Definition for Memorization

Generosity: giving what we have so others feel God's love

Read in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

"The King of all kings," page 192. The story of the three wise men based on Matthew 2.

Questions for Discussion

- Who serves our family most often during our errands and day-to-day activities?
- Who are the most selfless workers in our community?
- Does our family have a passion for a particular ministry or group of people in our town?
- Which of our neighbors could use an extra hand?

- What are some big ways we could surprise some people with generosity?
- Today, to whom can we give, even in some small way?

 **Pray**

Lord, we want You to be known and Your will to be done. We want to give You glory through our giving. We have so much to offer others and our community—our time, our talents, our smiles, and our ideas. Let us be quick to hear and obey Your prompting. Help us give to Your children and let them feel Your love in a brand-new way. From the tiniest gifts to outrageous gifts, we are ready for whatever You have for our family. We ask You to use us to light up the lives of others, to light up our community in a way that brings You glory. Go before us and show us where to go. Amen.

**Activity:** Light 'Em Up

Brace yourselves for a beautiful transformation and a new tradition that honors our precious Savior born on Christmas Day. I can't think of better gift to give Him than giving generously each and every day. Shall we do this? Are you in? I am certainly excited for the people you will bless with your generosity, but I am most excited for the work Light 'Em Up will do in the hearts of your family as they experience the joy of serving others.

Supplies

You can accomplish the spirit of this task by simply buying a few boxes of candy canes or baking some cookies, and using the printable tags at courtneydefeo.com or making homemade cards. Small gestures go a long way toward lifting the spirits of others.

However, you may feel called to surprise some families and individuals in unique ways. If so, go for it! Big ideas range from paying off someone else's layaway gifts to paying another table's restaurant bill. Go as wild and crazy as God leads you!



How This Works

Little kids to teens can engage in and find meaningful moments with the family. This is certainly an appropriate activity during the month of December; it will keep your children focused on the reason for the season, on giving rather than getting. However, generosity is a part of loving others and following Christ all year long. So whenever you choose, dedicate one month to serving others in your community. Your family can choose how to customize the plan for age-specific activities. Anyone old enough to walk and talk can begin practicing generosity by making cards and handing out candy canes. This and other small random acts of kindness suggested below have worked well for many other families.

Here are some specific ideas to stir up creative acts of generosity:

- Pay someone's toll.
- Clean up an elderly neighbor's yard.
- Thank your local firefighters with a heartfelt note and treat.

- Leave an encouraging message using sidewalk chalk on your neighbor's driveway.
- Tape a *large* sign on top of your trash can with a little treat for your garbage collector.
- Tape money with a note to a vending machine.
- Tuck money in the toy section of any store with a little note for one happy boy or girl.
- Have your child write a note to a friend telling her why she is special.
- Take coffee or cocoa to someone who works in the cold.
- Feed someone who is hungry.
- Buy a bunch of flowers, and give them away one at a time, as prompted.
- Buy someone's meal at a restaurant.
- Thank your police officers with a heartfelt note and treat.
- Thank a librarian and hide some money in the books while you are there.
- Make a meal for a family that could use an extra hand.
- Find out what your local children's hospitals will allow and go spread love.
- Find an assisted-living home, and see how you can spread some cheer with your little ones.
- Set up a free hot-cocoa stand for a group that could really use it.
- Sweep a neighbor's porch and driveway.
- Wrap gifts for a neighbor or friend.
- Tape quarters to bubblegum machines.
- Take candy canes and simple notes to thank the mall employees working Christmas week.
- Sneak in a friend's house and clean it.

- Thank your church staff, teachers, volunteers, and pastor.
- Go on a scavenger hunt for change in your home, and drop it in the local Salvation Army bucket.
- Buy lunch for the car behind you in a drive-through.
- Take a few minutes to hold the door for everyone walking into an office or store.
- Take a treat to the janitors at your child's school or church.
- Bring a treat to your teacher with a note saying specifically why you appreciate him.

You'll find more resources at courtneydefeo.com, including gift tags to make it really easy to leave surprise treats and run! Strangers or loved ones—whomever you choose to light up—will be left with a touching message that explains your sweet act of generosity. The site also provides a planning document for organizing your family's Light 'Em Up campaign and more.

Optional Activities

PLAN a night to review all the Light 'Em Up printables and free materials, and plan your approach.

READ & DISCUSS Matthew 25:21; Acts 20:35; 1 Timothy 6:18–19; 1 John 3:17.

ENCOURAGE Buy a pack of Post-it notes, and leave a note on your child's mirror every time you notice him carry out a generous act. Affirm your family all month long!



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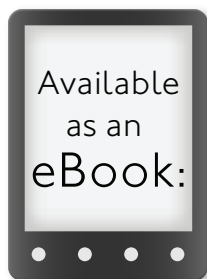
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