

# Unison Parenting

**The Comprehensive Guide to Navigating Christian Parenthood with  
One Voice**

Cecil Taylor

**NOTE TO MEDIA:**

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The Table of Contents does not show page numbers but does include all chapters and  
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# Contents

## **In Unison**

- The Parenting Context
- The Christian Context
- The Practical Faith Context
- What You Can Expect

## **PART ONE: THE FUNDAMENTALS**

### **Proactive Parenting**

- Meditation: Proverbs 22:6
- A Proactive Framework
- From Framework to Policies
- The Choices Chart—A Model for Compliance, Reward, and Discipline
- The Taylor Version of the Choices Chart
- A Positive Enhancement to the Choices Chart
- Practical Pointers
- Introducing the Choices Concept to Teens
- Avoid Manipulation
- Singing from the Same Sheet of Music
- Summary of Proactive Parenting

### **Reactive Parenting**

- Meditation: Psalm 127: 1,3
- A Reactive Framework
- Identify, Question, and Communicate
- Fighting Divide-and-Conquer
- Giving Permission in New Situations
- Assigning Consequences in New Situations
- Huddle Now
- Summary of Reactive Parenting

### **Adaptive Parenting**

- Meditation: Proverbs 3:12
- Adapting to Keep Up with Your Child
- A Unison View of Every Age
- The Dilemma of Freedom vs. Control
- Incremental Decision-Making
- Your Child Does Not Come with a Remote Control
- Your Child Is Not a Mirror
- Peace in the Outcome
- Summary of Adaptive Parenting

### **Supportive Parenting**

- Meditation: Ephesians 6:4
- The Four Types of Parents
- The Dominant Parent
- The Neglectful Parent
- The Permissive Parent

The Loving and Firm Parent  
No Magic, No Guarantees  
Holding Each Other Accountable  
Reviewing Your Parents  
Reviewing Yourself  
Summary of Supportive Parenting

### **Collective Parenting**

Meditation: 2 Timothy 1:5  
The Rise of Nontraditional Families  
Divorced/Step Situations  
Single Moms  
Grandparents as Parents  
Same-Sex-Led Families

### **Summary of Collective Parenting**

### **INTERMISSION: “PROUD” PARENTING MOMENTS**

Filming Austin Is Apparently like Filming Bigfoot  
Left Behind  
Dad Sighs and Twitchy Eyes

### **PART TWO: PARENTING TEENS**

Welcome to the Teen Years  
The Amoeba in Your House  
Respond with Collaboration  
Ready, Set, Goodbye

### **Collaborative Parenting**

Meditation: Colossians 1:10–11  
How to Bring Yourself to Collaboration  
How to Bring Your Teen into Collaboration  
Adaptive Parenting Model to Grow Decision-Making  
Solutions Orientation  
Stuck or Streaming  
Unison Parenting Pointers on the Model  
The Resistant Teen  
Summary of Collaborative Parenting

### **Formative Parenting**

Meditation: Deuteronomy 6:6–9  
Driver Training, Disciple Training  
The Decision to Train  
Hesitations about Training  
Are They Ready?  
An Impassioned Plea from Me to You  
Summary of Formative Parenting

### **Preventative Parenting**

Meditation: Ephesians 6:1–3  
The Genesis of This Lesson  
Eleven Tips for Preventative Parenting  
Summary of Preventative Parenting

## **Attentive Parenting**

Meditation: Psalm 119:9

Attentive Does Not Mean Oppressive

Paying Attention to Yourself

Paying Attention to Your Teen

Paying Attention to Other Parents

What If You Don't Like What You Find

Summary of Attentive Parenting

## **A Final Thought**

## **Gratitude**

## **Please Review This Book**

## **About the Author**

## **Free Offers and Additional Resources**

Choices Chart

Unison Parenting Workbook E-book

Mini-Book on Fundamentals of Discipleship

Unison Parenting Monthly Newsletter

Cecil Taylor Ministries Monthly Newsletter

Books and Videos by Cecil Taylor

## **Useful Links and QR Codes**

## **Endnotes**

# PART ONE: THE FUNDAMENTALS

## Proactive Parenting

### Meditation: Proverbs 22:6

“Start children off on the way they should go,  
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”

The father was constantly telling the son to be organized. The son seemingly couldn't grasp this idea. He would misplace homework assignments. He would have to search for his car keys before he could leave the house.

One day, the son misplaced his wallet. The father had had enough. “Son, you don't know where your wallet is. Do you know where my wallet is?” The son wasn't sure. The father continued, “There are only three possible places for my wallet: in my pocket, in the end pocket of my gym bag, or on my nightstand. When I come home, I do not take my wallet from my pocket or gym bag until I am standing in front of my nightstand.”

The advice didn't seem to take. However, a few years later, after the son had left home and had returned to visit, the father overheard the young man's exasperated phone conversation with his girlfriend. “You don't know where your wallet is? You have to get organized! Do you know where *my* wallet is? There are only three possible places for my wallet . . .”

The father went to the mother and said, “I can die happy now. My son listened to me and did what I said!”

There are so many times as a parent that you feel like a failure. You feel like your messages aren't sinking in. You feel like you're raising an alien being.

Yet there is hope. That's not to say that you will create a “mini-me” with your child (and that might not even be desirable). But I can assure you, lessons do start to sink in. Life reinforces what you're saying. Kids grow up to become adults and perceive their parents and their wisdom differently.

I can't tell you how often I have clung to Proverbs 22:6 when parenting. According to Proverbs, your job is to train the child. How they receive the training is largely up to them. But if you parent the right way, they will come around eventually. Be encouraged, believe in the proverb's wisdom and fulfillment, and maintain hope that your teaching will stick.

### A Proactive Framework

Merriam-Webster defines *proactive* as “acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes.”<sup>1</sup> To be proactive parents, you must act in anticipation of what could happen in the future.

Now, you won't be able to anticipate everything. That's why the next chapter is entitled **Reactive Parenting**. But you need to plan for the future as best as possible.

What you need is a framework and the policies that go with it. You might think of the framework as the big picture, and the policies as the details. By creating a framework and policies, you have a model from which to proactively manage your family and your children.

The details of the framework will be unique to your family. I will propose a framework for you to use, but you will customize it for your own personalities, background, family situation, ethnic or national culture, and values.

Your family framework should define what you stand for—what your core values are. I don't think you need to write the Constitution here. As parents, you can agree to a basic list of principles. Be open to modification; you may not think of everything at first. I wouldn't say you want to remove anything important to you, but you might later add qualities or principles you wish you had considered from the beginning.

Just to get you going, here are some keywords and phrases to get you thinking. These are in no particular order, and some of them are not strong values for me, while others are.

- Respect for others
- Valuing beauty and nature
- Priority on family and community
- Importance of church and a spiritual life
- Creativity and curiosity
- Being able to think for yourself
- Belief in and support of traditions and institutions, such as the country and church, or obeying community leaders, such as teachers or police officers
- Love for all; kindness for all
- Be helpful to others; be generous to others
- Fairness and justice
- Developing and maintaining self-control
- Importance of status and success
- Education and the development of knowledge and wisdom
- Loyalty at all costs

Of course, recognize that some of these have to do with your personal qualities, and your child may not possess the same qualities and interests. At the same time, you want to create a culture or context in which the child is brought up. Even if they depart from it as they make their own decisions, you will have provided a clear foundation for them.

Let me share the framework or paradigm in which Sara and I parented. I could probably list ninety things, but these stood out as supreme:

- Develop our children into productive, moral, contributing adults to society and good decision-makers grounded and educated in Christian principles.
- Place Jesus at the center of our family and emphasize that church participation is what we do.
- Treat education seriously since education gives you options.
- Model these qualities as their adult role models.
- Treat each child as an individual with their own gifts and interests.

Here is an example of this last point. Our oldest son, Anthony, played kids baseball and eventually school football. When he was about nine or so, he wanted to try roller hockey. I was against it, mainly because I didn't know anything about it. Also, at his first practice, Anthony could

barely stand on his roller blades, while other players whizzed around him. I was afraid he was going to have a bad experience. Yet I let him go forward.

After watching him play his first game, and not too well, I asked Anthony how he liked it. “That’s the most fun I’ve ever had!” he exclaimed. OK, I was on board! Whatever the outcome, I was glad he had found an activity he thoroughly enjoyed, even if I knew little about it and couldn’t skate myself.

Though he was never the best skater, Anthony did well enough to eventually make the all-star team as the best defenseman in his league. I’m grateful that he experienced success to pair with the enjoyment that he derived from roller hockey, which he moved on from when he reached middle school.

Frameworks might evolve over time as you and your family change. Let me also show one way in which our framework evolved. When we decided to adopt Rebecca from China, we thought about what message we were sending to our boys. Clearly, as we became an interracial family, we were demonstrating that someone’s race didn’t matter to us. But we still had to check ourselves. In such an atmosphere, it was possible, even likely, that someday, our boys might bring home a girlfriend of another race (by the way, one did). Were we OK with that possibility? We decided we were, and we were determined that our children would be raised without prejudice as much as possible.

Whatever your framework, let me share one more concept that is a bedrock of everything I will teach and was also a part of our framework for our kids. It’s a subset of the first principle in our framework of developing productive, moral adults contributing to society.

To become such an adult, a child needs to develop sound decision-making. We used a model that I will present in the **Adaptive Parenting** chapter for developing decision-making, and I’ll talk further about how to grow a teen’s decision-making in the **Collaborative Parenting** chapter. For now, I simply want to highlight this principle and encourage you to make it an integral part of your framework because you’re going to hear me talk about it **a lot!**

I feel like I need to add one item to everyone’s framework: expressions of unconditional love. You’re going to hear later in the book about the crippling effect of not expressing love to children. Use all five love languages available.<sup>2</sup>

- Use physical touch, hugging your kids.
- Speak your love aloud regularly. And when they’re at their lowest, don’t kick them for their mistakes; show them your tender, loving care and support.
- Give them a gift now and then. It doesn’t have to be big or expensive. In fact, it’s better if it’s a gift that demonstrates that you see them and know their preferences.
- Carve out room in your life to spend time with them; as much as possible, make it one-on-one time.
- Serve your children in loving ways—not to coddle them, not to make life easy on them, but as an expression of love. (You’ll learn in this book that there’s a difference.)

## **From Framework to Policies**

A framework then translates into policies, which govern:

- Behavior of the children.



- Behavior of the family as a whole—how the family interacts together and what each individual’s responsibilities and contributions are (including the parents).
- A model for discipline and reward.

Why should you proactively set policy together as parents?

- It is the essence of unison parenting. You want to be united in how the lofty goals of your framework are implemented.
- Policies greatly reduce making up things as you go along.
- You want to achieve consistency in your own parenting behavior.
- You can work out policy details in private, then show unity in front of your children. Policies also help you as parents keep each other in line when one strays, and that can ideally be handled privately as well.

All sorts of examples from our parenting spring to mind. I’ll pick just a few to share, the first having to do with the last bullet.

Regarding unity of policy, there was a time as our children got older that Sara felt like they should be able to take on much more in the way of chores. She firmly believed that by sixth grade, each child should do their own laundry. I countered that I thought that was too young, and perhaps ninth grade would be better. We went back and forth on this for a while. I finally relented, not utterly convinced, but willing to get on board.

It’s a good thing I was because when the kids saw how firmly Sara was entrenched, they came to me, asking for relief. My message was that this was family policy, I supported it, and they needed to follow the rules. As it turns out, Sara was right: each was quite capable of handling their own laundry in sixth grade, although, of course, there was a learning curve!

Policies helped each of us as parents. Sara tended to be more emotional and was more likely to, say, ground a two-year-old for life than I was! Clearly defined policies for discipline and reward gave her a structure that limited emotional effects.

As for me, I didn’t recognize that I was struggling with consistency. A parenting friend pointed out that I was inconsistent, and as a result, I was receiving undesirable child behavior. I realized that when I came home tired from work, I was much more lenient than in other situations because I was too worn out to stick to the policies. Or if I was feeling really good and generous, I might again be lax about the rules. It was teaching our children how to game me to get what they wanted. I had to learn to be consistent and stick to our policies, no matter how I felt that day.

There is scientific backing to this idea of consistency in attachment theory. Krista Cantell writes:

*When parents are inconsistent in their caregiving, it sends mixed signals to infants about whether or not they can rely on their caregivers to meet their needs. This inconsistency can lead to anxious attachment, which can negatively impact children in the short term and long term . . . During childhood . . . if [parents] told you there could be certain consequences for not following rules, they would only enforce the consequences occasionally. Or maybe your parents would make promises but not come through on them. Although these actions seem minor to us as adults now, they play a strong role in the developing minds of children.<sup>3</sup>*

It's impossible for a human to be consistent all the time. But clearly, as parents, we must make consistency a priority. I'll talk more about this in the **Supportive Parenting** chapter.

## **The Choices Chart—A Model for Compliance, Reward, and Discipline**

Let me suggest to you a proven policy for managing your child's behavior. Sara and I used it, and I recommend it highly.

I call it the Choices Chart. I don't take credit for the concept; I read about it in *The Key to Your Child's Heart* by the late Gary Smalley, whose teaching was foundational to our parenting. Smalley himself credited its underlying principles to his family pediatrician, Dr. Charles Shellenberger.

Smalley was a big believer in contracts within the family. I'll talk much more extensively about literal written, signed contracts in the teenager section.

The Choices Chart is a contract of a different sort. It governs the behaviors of everyone in the family. Everyone helps define the contract, and everyone helps govern the contract.

Let me start by describing how Smalley and his family initiated the idea, then I'll show you how our family did it.

There are three parts to the management of family behavior via contract:

1. Set clearly defined limits by writing a contract.
2. Supervise the living of these limits regularly.
3. Consistently handle resistance through lost privileges.

On their first pass, Smalley's family wrote a lot of verbiage to describe each family limit and what it meant. Then the family decided together what lost privileges each member would have when a limit was violated. Some of the lost privileges were much harsher than the parents would've submitted. (We found the same thing with our kids and watered down the discipline.) Eventually they settled on lost privileges with a twenty-four-hour limit.

Then Smalley's family changed the five limits to start with the letter C. They called their scheme The Five Cs. Those were:

1. **Conforming:** Obey Mom and Dad—not complain, argue, or nag. (Lost privilege: All toys)
2. **Cleaning:** Clean room every morning; clean up after using toys or other items. (Lost privilege: TV)
3. **Chores:** Mow lawn once a week; remove trash every evening; practice piano by 5:30 p.m. (Lost privilege: After-school snack)
4. **Courteous:** Show courtesy at meals, at church, and during outings. (Lost privileges: Joining the family the next time they eat out)
5. **Caring:** Care for people and things. Go to bed on time; brush teeth; be kind to people and things; don't tease, hit, or argue. (Lost privilege: Seeing friends)

The Smalleys would meet for a brief time after dinner to review every child's compliance and assign any lost privileges.<sup>4</sup>

A key point for every family contract situation in the Smalley household was that they used a management proverb, "People do what you inspect, not what you expect."<sup>5</sup> It's an important thought for parents; we tend to set expectations for our children. This method outlines the agreed behaviors, and then parents inspect whether those agreed behaviors were accomplished.

## The Taylor Version of the Choices Chart

I should point out that the phrase Choices Chart actually comes from our family; the Smalleys called it Family Limits. We wanted to emphasize that each child was responsible for their decisions, hence the title Choices Chart.

In addition, we felt like a couple of important behaviors that aligned with our family framework had been missed regarding church and schoolwork. So we modified the Choices Chart to contain seven Cs of behavior (notice the Cs in the title and in the behaviors):

1. Chores
2. Cleanliness
3. Courtesy
4. Caring
5. Conforming
6. Classwork
7. Church

Here is the common understanding we developed as a family of what each meant.

1. **Chores:** Everyone had chores. Some were weekly, some were daily, and some rotated (such as who takes out the trash this week). They were assigned in age-appropriate ways since we had a spread of ages. A key message to our children was that in any household in which they might find themselves (family, college roommates, marriage, etc.), there are expectations of every member of the household.
2. **Cleanliness:** This involved several aspects. First, you had to keep your room clean. We tried several ways of inspecting; usually there was a weekly inspection, but we sometimes inspected more frequently. Second, you had to pick up after yourself in common areas—your toys or other possessions couldn't be everywhere, you don't leave your dishes out, etc. Third, as mentioned before, starting in sixth grade, you had to do your own laundry. Cleanliness could, of course, extend to other areas as needed, such as keeping the car clean once driving commenced.
3. **Courtesy:** The expectation was that you would be courteous to others, starting with parents, extending to siblings, and then to others out in the world. Our phrase when they were young was, "If you talk back to us, then you'll talk back to a teacher. If you'll talk back to a teacher, then you'll talk back to a police officer. And if you talk back to a police officer, you'll find yourself in all sorts of trouble!"
4. **Caring:** This had some similarities to the prior two. You had to show you were caring for people and things. For example, if you have an argument with someone, you need to do it in a respectful way. As for things, you respect possessions and don't break them or treat them badly. Caring also was a catch-all for several forms of misbehavior and was applied as needed.
5. **Conforming:** The child was expected to be obedient to parents and to obey immediately. In practice, we gave some leniency for initial balking or reasonable questions. But it only took a couple of stalling tactics or rebellious actions to earn a nonconformance.
6. **Classwork:** Students had to attend class and behave while there. They needed to keep up with their assignments. Passing grades were required, but basically, we pushed them to do as well as they were capable. (If you are only capable of a C, then bring home a C. But if

you're capable of an A, then bring home an A.) We tracked their work via the school's online parent portal. Thursday evening was the weekly accounting for progress. It was not the children's favorite night of the week, I can tell you that! Of course, if they were on point, it went smoothly and reasonably.

7. **Church:** Church and Sunday school attendance were mandatory, aside from parental permission for exceptions like a gymnastics meet or visiting another church with a friend. A sleepover was not an excuse. You had to end it early enough to attend; we frequently picked up our child on the way to church. If we hosted a sleepover, parents had to pick up their children fifteen minutes before we left for church or else the child was coming to church with us. (Parents used both options and adapted very well to this rule.) Children were expected to remain in the classroom or sanctuary and to behave while there.

Let me add a side comment on worship attendance. My preacher father believed that a child has to go to church for ten years before they figure out what's going on. So you can start the clock when they're age two, and they'll start to get it at age twelve. Or you can start training them in worship at age twelve, and they'll catch on by age twenty-two. His advice was to start the clock early.

So we did. We were front-row Christians. The kids and I sat in the front row, or close to it, while Sara sang in the choir. Years later, people in our church would tell me how they watched our kids in the front row, watched them behave and watched them grow. Our kids can't say they didn't get exposed to the full worship experience as early as possible!

Back to the Choices Chart: As the children were younger (ranging from late elementary to preschool) when we started the Choices Chart, we parents defined the disciplines. Let me take a moment to note that for preschoolers, you may have to simplify or water down everything even more. The Choices Chart works better as they get into elementary school. But even a preschooler can perform simple chores and can learn to care about others!

For an idea of what chores children are capable of doing at each age, please refer to the **Useful Links and QR Codes** section.

As our children aged and got used to the chart, we revisited the disciplines, and children were included in the discussion of associated discipline. The power of this model is ownership; as Jane Nelson affirms, "Together we will decide on rules for our mutual benefit. We will also decide together on solutions that will be helpful to all concerned when we have problems."<sup>6</sup>

A beautiful result of this participatory system was that there were no arguments over consequences. A parent would identify a nonconformance. The child would say, "What's my consequence?" We would say, "I don't know. Go look on the chart and tell me." The child would go to the posted chart in the main hallway and return with the answer. This really defused any emotion over discipline on the part of parent or child.

The only argument, which rarely happened, was whether there was a nonconformance. Occasionally the child would win that argument because we were reasonable parents willing to hear their viewpoint (actually a good quality to develop in your children: to argue for themselves reasonably), but usually they did not win.

I realize there has been some criticism of the reward and punishment model. But I feel that the implementation I've described is a more positive, collaborative way to approach it, especially when you consider the next section.

## **A Positive Enhancement to the Choices Chart**

Over time, we felt like the Choices Chart did not encourage anything beyond the seven Cs. We wanted to instill positive spiritual behaviors without making it a competition, so we came up with something that worked well, based on the fruits of the Spirit.

From Galatians 5:22–23, the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The scriptural understanding is that these fruits are cultivated in us by the Holy Spirit and to improve on them means that we are to draw closer to the Spirit, listen to the Spirit, and obey the Spirit.

That's a little much for children to understand, so we simply defined what each meant and encouraged them to follow them. Not only that, but we encouraged them to see the fruits developing in their siblings.

Once a week, usually on Sundays, we would hold a family meeting. Part of the agenda was to review whether anyone had done a great job of exhibiting a fruit of the Spirit during the week. We would also praise and reward exceptional adherence to the seven Cs, such as above-and-beyond caring for another or doing a splendid job with chores. A parent or another child could nominate a child. When we all agreed that the quality had been exhibited, the family got a star on the Choices Chart (not the individual).

Stars were also awarded for As on the report card. Since the family got a star for each A, it was not seen as a competition as much as a contribution.

However, I'm not going to kid you: If you have a C student and an A student in the house, it's going to be difficult for the C student. You might think of alternatives such as B or above or individual targets for each child based on maximizing their own capability.

As the stars accumulated, the children could choose when to cash them in for family outing rewards. For example, ten stars might be going to a favorite fast-food place, thirty stars might be mini golf, and sixty stars might be the amusement park.

As you can see, the Choices Chart was instrumental in:

- Defining and agreeing on acceptable behaviors.
- Inspecting compliance to agreed behaviors.
- Identifying discipline and punishment in advance and without emotion.
- Recognizing demonstration of positive biblical attributes, family values, and educational accomplishments, all vital in our family framework.
- Verbally praising positive behaviors.
- Rewarding the family as a whole for good behavior and celebrating together.

## **Practical Pointers**

The Choices Chart is one implementation of a framework into policies, and I highly recommend it. But there are other ways you can approach the same problem.

What you're ultimately looking for is a consistent framework that adheres to your principles and allows for flexible decisions.

Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

## **Transitioning to the Choices Chart**

When you first introduce the Choices Chart, you may receive some opposition. The children may think this is just a new way for you to be mean. Just like employees that are skeptical when a company asks them to adapt to a new management strategy, children will be skeptical until they see positive change in action.

To try to convince them that you're not simply being mean:

- Start by pointing out advantages such as clarity of expectations and consequences and the possibility for rewards.
- Depending on their age, they may be able to take part in its creation, and that helps give them ownership.
- Be consistent from the outset with your inspection and assignment of consequences. They will start to get the message.

### **When to Bend Your Own Rules**

The rules are the rules, yes, but in some situations, common sense should prevail.

For example, if a child has a school activity that runs late, it may not be reasonable for them to complete all their chores before bed. It's a practical issue of best use of time, not that the child was goofing off. Hence, a parent might make the decision that chores are waived for tonight, or perhaps there is some way to trade chores with another child or to make good later in the week in some fashion.

### **Safety Concerns**

One thing I haven't mentioned is safety. Safety policies must be established and followed, even before the youngsters know what safety means. During our kids' preschool years, for instance, wandering out in the street drew a harsh rebuke and action to imprint that the kid didn't need to be in the street.

From a Choices Chart perspective, safety would fit into the Conforming section because there are rules of the household that must be followed.

As our children grew, we had safety policies when visiting friends or playing outside. Most of these still applied (though perhaps in a different fashion) when they were in high school. Policies included:

- If a gun is visible or accessible, you must return home immediately.
- A parent must be present in the home you are visiting. If not, you are to contact us and/or return home immediately (depending on age, location, etc.)
  - This got extremely difficult to enforce during the teen years. More on that in another chapter.
- When playing outside, you must always be able to see our front porch or back porch, depending on where you were. You are not allowed to run around the neighborhood at will. If there is somewhere else you want to go, return and ask for permission.
- You are allowed to visit a friend, but you do not have the right to go wherever you please while you are out of the house. You're expected to be in that house and nowhere else.

That last point led to a rewarding, humorous moment. Our son Austin was about seven years old, visiting a neighboring family a few houses away. We received a call from the mother, saying that the family wanted to go out for ice cream and take Austin with them, but he refused to budge

unless he had permission from his parents. We allowed the trip, thankful that he had followed our rule so precisely.

## **Building Internal Motivation**

As I've said before and will reinforce in the **Adaptive Parenting** and **Collaborative Parenting** chapters, our goal is to produce a functioning adult who makes good decisions. That goal is partially achieved by the child being internally motivated rather than being externally motivated. Put another way, if they are only motivated to perform in order to receive something, the model is not as effective as one where the child assumes responsibility for their motivation.

According to the American Psychological Association, there are two ideas to motivate your child. You can emphasize the value of doing the activity while rewarding compliance with positive verbal feedback. You can also assign tasks that are just beyond the child's current abilities.<sup>7</sup> I believe our implementation of the Choices Chart followed these two guidelines.

First, holding the family meeting and recognizing exceptional implementation of the seven Cs and exemplification of the fruits of the Spirit provided positive verbal feedback. As parents, we also tried to thank children as they completed a task. That didn't always happen, but I feel like it happened often enough to be encouraging.

Second, introducing tasks just above children's current abilities reflects how the Choices Chart should evolve as children age. The task of doing laundry in sixth grade is just one example of adjusting their responsibilities, but it's a good one. Believe me, our kids didn't get it right the first time! Perhaps not the second, either. At first, they needed advisory assistance, the ability to ask questions, and permission to experiment without punishment. For example, parents should bite their tongues and give their young launderers some grace on how well or even if they fold clothes after cleaning. After a while, children begin to realize the value of making clothes look nicer once they've made the effort to clean them. But they will likely walk out the door in wrinkled clothes before then!

I know some of you are shaking your heads, but remember, we're trying to instill internal motivation. Experience is sometimes a better teacher than you.

## **Introducing the Choices Concept to Teens**

If you're the parent of a teen, you may already be anticipating the eye rolls over attaching gold stars to a chart. You'll be happy to know that I would suggest something different.

Undoubtedly, if a child grows up with the Choices Chart concept, it is much easier to adapt it as they grow out of the details that work for younger kids. By the way, this adaptation is tricky in a multichild family because of different age ranges, but still possible; four quarters and a dollar bill are very different but equal.<sup>8</sup> You'll have to essentially manage different systems for different children, with some unification on things like contributions toward the rewards program.

In the **Teen** section, I'll offer two age-appropriate techniques: contracts and collaboration. Contracts are a different implementation of the Choices Chart; collaboration is a separate approach for gaining alignment with your teen. But neither means that you are straying from the framework and principles you establish.

If you deconstruct the Choices Chart, the elements are still there that you want to reinforce and utilize:

- Positive behaviors based on family values and rules

- Rewards and bonuses for above-and-beyond good behavior
- Compliance and inspection techniques

When introducing this freshly to a teen, you may want to zero in on their particular issues of rebellion or negative behavior, especially if you have been a parent that has frankly fallen short in the ideal characteristics described in the upcoming **Supportive Parenting** chapter. (You have some remedial parenting to do with yourself if you examine yourself honestly and then truly want to improve your parenting for the sake of your teen.)

For example, if your teen has fallen into a habit of foul language, that may be an area of special attention. While the goal might be to never use foul language, adults understand there are times to never use it and times you might get away with it. So it is partially a moral issue and partially an issue of the fruit of self-control.

Here's a story about converting to a new structure with teens and what not to do.

Sara attended a church retreat where a single mother complained to her about how terrible her middle school children were. They wouldn't do their chores, and they said horrible, disrespectful things to her.

Sara started talking to her about the Choices Chart concept, then suggested she start with the biggest argument they were having: who was to do the laundry. The mother wanted them to be responsible for their own laundry, but the children threw it back on the mom. And she kept accepting that.

We suggested that the mother establish new laundry rules and implement the concept of agreed consequences. In this case, she would not get the buy-in immediately, but she could start with laundry and later expand the rules and the children's participation in the agreement.

The mother did set up the laundry agreement and gained some positive traction on that, despite the grumbling. But she did not follow through with the entire Choices Chart concept, and as a result, she continued having a lot of problems with her children's behavior overall, leading to a ton of bad behavior during the teen years.

Let's park the details of contracts and collaboration until the **Teen** section.

## **Avoid Manipulation**

As I was finishing this chapter, I came across a question to an advice columnist. A mother complained that her children refused to do chores around the house. Readers weighed in, giving parental advice that went completely against what I've presented in this chapter. It ranged from completely giving up hope that the children would comply to making odd threats like, "I'm going to embarrass you by talking to your friends about current events!"

I hope you see the advantage of not making up stuff like that as you go along. Instead, proactively set a course, inspect compliance, and assess agreed consequences. Stick to the plan, execute, and repeat. Parenting doesn't have to use manipulation or smack of desperation.

Laine Lawson Craft writes in her book *The Parent's Battle Plan*:

*We often feel forced to manipulate our children in ways that are meant to have them act or behave better. The more our children act up or disobey, the more we try to manage and control their actions and bad decisions. This merry-go-round parenting can spiral into an endless stream of push and be pushed. . . . The remedy for my miserable merry-go-round parenting cycle started when I realized that I had never been in control in the first place.*



*My manipulation could never produce anything other than losing a battle. I had to give to God any perceived control that I thought I had over my children.<sup>9</sup>*

As I'll talk about in the opening meditation of the next chapter, we have a parenting partner in God. We need to realize that our children are in His hands, even if they seem to be slipping from ours. Because of this, we can yield our manipulation and making stuff up as we go along.

Even with God as your partner, you will experience your child's battles and arguments and weaseling and even open defiance at times. But you will eventually see the fruits of your labor, even if it's not at the present moment. (Remember Proverbs 22:6!)

So much of your parenting results show up later. I'm happy to say that when my kids went off to college and became members of new households, they were the ones doing the housework and coaxing others to comply. They knew how to do chores—cleaning the dishes, scrubbing the toilets. They expected other household members to perform their responsibilities. Although they generally complied well growing up, I was still a little surprised to see that they became the organized ones. They revealed themselves as well-functioning adults. So there's hope!

## **Singing from the Same Sheet of Music**

I can suggest principles, frameworks, and policies, but what ultimately drives proactive parenting is the unity of the parents creating and implementing those constructs.

Now that you have information on proactive parenting, and before you go any further, I recommend a serious discussion between parenting partners of what you have read so far. Nothing in this book will work smoothly without buy-in from each parenting partner.

I used a musical analogy in the introduction of this book. Parenting partners have to perform in unison, singing from the same sheet of music, producing the same note at the same time. Wrangle privately together over your proactive parenting measures. Ultimately, just like when my wife and I disagreed on laundry policies, it's critical that you emerge from the room united on the policies, speaking with one voice, backing each other up, remaining consistent, and talking frequently as you go forward about what is working, what isn't, and how to adjust. Because that conversation will happen too—believe me!

In addition, you must agree that as parents, you will monitor each other. There'll be sections in this book that will confront your idea of what a good parent is. You'll need to agree on what good parenting looks like and privately call each other out when the requirement isn't met. This is hard but fair, and it ultimately best serves your child, which is the real goal.

It is impossible to think of everything that could be covered by a parenting policy, and kids will present new circumstances that you never imagined, especially as they get older, and life gets more complicated. You will definitely have to react to situations that your framework does not specifically cover. How do you address those? How do you prevent getting caught off guard? How do you stay vigilant and avoid giving sloppy, ill-thought decisions and responses to your kids? These are the questions addressed in the next chapter, **Reactive Parenting**.

## **Summary of Proactive Parenting**

### **Key Points**

- Establish core values and principles for your family.
- Create policies that match these core values and principles.
- Policies address behavior of the children, behavior of the family as a whole, and the model for discipline and reward.
- The Choices Chart is a recommended way to reflect policies, expectations, consequences, and rewards.
- The Choices Chart will evolve in the teen years to the techniques of contracts and collaboration.
- Setting well-defined expectations and outcomes, then inspecting them regularly, will give consistency, unity, and calm to your family.

### **Unison Parenting Foundation**

- Parents agree on framework and policies.
- Parents work out their differences in private, then publicly unite in implementation and in backing each other up.
- Parents monitor each other to ensure parenting policies and techniques are adhered to, for the sake of the children.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/proactive>

<sup>2</sup> Chapman, Gary, et al. *The 5 Love Languages of Children: The Secret to Loving Children Effectively*. Woodmere, NY: Northfield Publishing, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Cantell, Krista. *Free Yourself from Anxious Attachment: A 3-Step System to Eliminate Insecure Thoughts, Doubts, and Jealousy to Get the Love You Deserve*. Independently published, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Smalley, Gary. *The Key to Your Child's Heart*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Gerstner, Louis. *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance*. New York: Harper Business, 2003 reprint.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, Jane. *Positive Discipline: The Classic Guide to Helping Children Develop Self-Discipline, Responsibility, Cooperation, and Problem-Solving Skills*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> "Motivation: Top Twenty Principles for Early Childhood Education," American Psychological Association, October, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty/early-childhood/motivation>.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson, *Positive Discipline*.

<sup>9</sup> Craft, Laine Lawson. *The Parent's Battle Plan*. Ada, MI: Chosen Books, 2023.