

29 Ways to Affirm Your Children



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Introduction - The Power of Affirmation

I used to view the New Testament as basically a how-to manual for living the Christian life. But I have since come to realize the message is much deeper. It is less a to-do list and more an explanation and affirmation of who we are in Christ. The New Testament writers consistently explain who we are and then launch into, "This is how we are to live in light of our new identity."

So, how does knowing our new identity affect the life we live? Let's start with who we are. As a believer in Christ, we are citizens of God's kingdom, children of God, joint-heirs with Christ, the dwelling place of God the Holy Spirit, a new creation, holy and beloved, blessed with every spiritual blessing, adopted as sons, God's own possession, partakers of the divine nature, forgiven our trespasses, the very seed of God, freed from sin's dominion, and raised up with resurrection power; just to name a few of our New Testament identifiers. And each of these phrases are direct quotes from Scripture.

With all this identity affirmation, we are exhorted on the basis of our new identity to live into the new self; all that became new about us at our conversion. This understanding brings a new power to both our own daily walk and how we serve and teach each other. Gone are the days of, "Now, I know you are not going to want to do this, and you will most likely fail at it because you are still basically a sinner covered by Christ's blood, and it is going to be extremely hard, but put your head down, grit your teeth, and go give this Christian life your best shot." Why is this approach to ministry so severely outdated? Because it is not the New Testament model of serving, loving, and teaching each other.

What is the New Testament model of how we are to see ourselves and each other? It is centered around the affirmation of who you are in Christ. You were created for good works (Eph 2:10). You are empowered for moral goodness (II Pet 1:3). You were rescued to follow Christ's commands with joy (I Jn 5:3). His commands are not burdensome because, as a new creation, they fit who you are. How many of us work in vocations where we say, "Hey, this fits who I am!"? I enjoy my job because it fits my interests, talents, and bent. Similarly, if you are a believer, the Christian life fits your interests, talents, and bent. *The Christian life is all about unfolding who you are in Christ, not a list of qualities to aspire to.*

This approach brings so much joy and affirmation to our ministry. Instead of feeling like we are pulling teeth (my apologies to dentists), we are inviting our fellow believers to join us in the adventure of faith.

The message of affirmation is also a powerful force for good in your family. I believe the affirmation approach to parenting is not some pop psychology gibberish, but is built on the foundation of the New Testament model of affirmation. With that biblical model in mind and based on our own child training ups and downs, we have put together a fun exploration of 29 ways to affirm your children.

Let me introduce our family as a way to begin because you will meet all of them again somewhere along the line in this book. Rhonda and I have been married for 41 years. We have five grown children. We have oldest and youngest bookend sons, Josh and Joe, and three girls in the middle; Elizabeth, Annie, and Bethany.

When Rhonda and I set out to discover our family identity, we had no desire to elevate ourselves. Our desire was to elevate Christ. In elevating Christ and His Word, our family identity of loyalty, service, giftedness, character, and affirmation found us. When we embraced our relationship with Christ and His Word as our guide for faith and practice, as our guide for marriage and parenting, as our guide for who we wanted to become as a family, these attributes found us. It was not perfection. It was God actively leading us even in our failures.

So let's turn to God's Word and start our affirmation adventure in the book of Proverbs. "By *wisdom* a house is built, and by *understanding* it is established; and by *knowledge* the rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures" (Prov 24:3-4). The *wisdom* part of building a spiritually healthy home is learning from and teaching God's Word to our children. It is developing a faith focus in our family through reading the Bible together and serving Christ together. It is teaching and demonstrating to our kids biblical principles about obedience and character quality.

But it is about much more than principles. It is literally putting the grace message of the New Testament into action. It is teaching our children how God's grace intersects our lives. It is not creating little moralists. It is understanding our security in God's grace, not because of what we bring to the table, but fully because of what Christ has done for us and in us and through us. God's grace is an affirming message.

The *understanding* component of building our homes comes from paying attention; knowing our children. It is observing, thinking, being alert to danger, discovering your child's personality, gifts, and inclinations. Putting the wisdom and understanding together leads to knowledge that brings the reward of "rare and beautiful treasures." These treasures are not measured by financial or academic success, or any worldly benchmark. These riches are not based on IQ, money, physical strength, or beauty. These treasures are loving relationships and spiritual growth in our families as we grow up in the Lord together.

And the understanding piece of the parenting challenge thrives best in the soil of an affirming environment in your home. So let's take off on our advertised title of 29 ways to affirm your children.

Affirmation 1 Create a positive, loving, and secure environment in your home.

This may seem as obvious, generic, and general as Mom, baseball, and apple pie, but there is a specific intentionality to this goal. It starts with the two important messages we need to convey to our children. The first is the simple message, "I love you." Simple to say; a challenge it put into action. Your message to your kids needs to be: "I love you. I love you more than you will ever know. You can never lose my love. You can't do anything to make me withhold my love. I would choose you above all others. If all of the 8-year-olds in the city were lined up around the playground, I would choose you. I love you."

Why is this message so critical? When your children are assured of your love, they have the confidence to give themselves away in service to others; the confidence to reach out to the lives around them. Think about your own love experience. My assurance of God's love and acceptance frees me from being a prisoner to others thoughts and opinions about me. It frees me to give myself away in loving relationships. It allows me to unwrap and practice my spiritual gift without being timid. One of the many ministries of the indwelling Holy Spirit is to assure me of God's love. "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom 5:5). When our children are assured of our love and assured of God's love, they have a confidence to serve others without looking for love in all the wrong places.

The second message, wrapped in the first, that we need to convey is, "I am in charge." Your message: "I am in charge. I demonstrate my love by taking charge. God has put me in charge. I am in charge because I am the mature one. I see the big picture, and I am learning from and leaning on the God who sees the eternal picture." Children generally focus on the needs and wants of the moment. They want their desires met now. They need to know, beyond any doubt, that Mom and Dad are in charge.

Putting it all together, we have two messages we need to convey to our kids: I love you and I am in charge. These messages provide the balance between love and control in your home. And when these messages are lived out, you provide a **positive** (the power of affirmation), **loving** (I love you), and **secure** (I am in charge for your good) environment for relationships to grow.

Affirmation 2 Be sensitive to your child's thoughts and feelings.

How many times have you tried to enter a conversation and were abruptly ignored or passed over as if you weren't even there? How did it make you feel? Hurt or insignificant with nothing to contribute? A steady diet of this would clearly influence our opinion of ourselves.

It is the same way with kids. And in a busy household of overbooked schedules and homework and meals to prepare, it takes an intentional effort to take the time required to treat your child's thoughts and feelings with respect. Remember, the long term goal here is to build a relationship; to stay connected with our children in a caring way that keeps us influential in their lives.

Our children feel validated as a person when their thoughts and opinions are heard by the ones they desire to please the most; their parents. A child's view of himself, especially in the early years, is largely dependent on how he thinks you, his parents, really feel about him. No matter how many words of affirmation we say - and we should say them often - our sensitive response to our child's thoughts and feelings will be the loudest voice speaking to their hearts.

One of the easiest things to say to a child when they express fear, sadness, or disappointment is, "You shouldn't feel that way." We think we are teaching them to be tough or to grow up, but this dismissive response from us is really saying, "I don't want to hear about your feelings." A child cannot help how they feel. The feelings just come natural to them. They can't control how they feel. The only thing they can control is how they respond to their feelings. And when we listen graciously to their thoughts and feelings, we open the door to the teaching moments of instructing them how to respond to those feelings in ways that are God-pleasing.

A lot of frustration in our children's lives can be avoided if we take time to listen. When we see the lack of logic in their little minds, there is such a strong temptation in our adult minds to immediately correct their thoughts and feelings. And while over time we need to teach and correct, we need to balance that responsibility with a sensitivity to what is going on in their child mind and heart. When we find that balance, the reward at the end of the day will be "rare and beautiful treasures."

Affirmation 3 Give your children choices.

Children are empowered by the opportunity to choose. Children are affirmed by the choices we give them. And the power to choose often eliminates those showdowns over what really start as insignificant issues. For example, Junior says he does not want to get dressed in the morning. After some prodding from Mom, Junior digs in his heels and the ensuing meltdown has us chasing Junior around the house in his diaper. Why is he laughing when I am about to boil over? Or what about the other end of the day when Junior announces he does not want to take his bath and you find yourself trying to pry a three-year-old's fingers off of the bathroom door jamb?

We have found that these encounters can be minimized by empowering our kids with some choices. We ask Junior before announcing it is time to get dressed, "Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the red shirt today?" Before getting into the tub, we suggest, "What bath time toy do you want to bring with you into the tub?" Distracted by the power to choose, they move forward to the task at hand.

And these choices are not just for little kids. We found increased cooperation in the kitchen when we assigned one night a week for one of the kids to help Mom prepare dinner with the understanding that they could choose the meal. Or we took turns letting our kids decide which game we were going to play for our family evening together. Cooperation increases when children experience the power to choose.

Now on the surface, some parents may object to this approach as a diversion tactic instead of tackling obedience / disobedience issues straight on. Not to worry. There are plenty of opportunities, if we are paying attention, to discipline and instruct on willful disobedience issues throughout their growing up years and we need to stand strong when necessary. But we have found the peace, security, and joy level go up when we don't take every issue to the level of a confrontation. Diversion at the appropriate time is not a cop-out. It is finding the balance between love and control in our homes. Remember, we [the adults] have the wisdom and observation from our mature point of reference on our side.

Think about the power to choose in our adult world. Many of us have worked for companies whose attitude was, "You should feel lucky to have a job here. The economy is not doing too well. We can treat you poorly because you really have no other choice of where to work." Contrast that with, "We know you are a top-notch accountant. There are twenty companies you could be working for. We want to have you here. We know you have choices and we want this to be the company of choice for quality people like you." Which company will have the most enthusiastic employees?

It is the same way with children. They are affirmed by having choices. This does not mean we coddle our kids, cater to our kids, or spoil our kids. Having little ones in the house makes it a natural for your home to be child-focused. But it is not child-centered. There is a difference. And giving children appropriate choices in one of the ways we affirm and empower our kids.

Affirmation 4 Give everyone an opportunity to speak.

It is natural for the conversation at your house to be dominated by the talkative types. Depending on the age range and personality of your children, it may take a purposeful effort on your part to get everyone in on the discussion. Children need to know that their thoughts are a contribution and be encouraged to join in.

One of the ways we drew our children into the dialogue at our house was to ask specific questions around the dinner table. One of our favorites was, "What was the high point of your day?" Or, "What was the low point of your day?" These conversation starters were a direct window into the hearts of our children. We often took time at dinner for all the kids to share their highs and lows, but we also had the flexibility to focus on one child if the seriousness of what they shared warranted a longer discussion. This approach also encouraged siblings to respond to these ups and downs in ways that lifted up their brother or sister.

Another opportunity to join the conversation was when we read the Bible together in the evenings before bed. One year, we read selected chapters in the Old and New Testaments to get an overview of Scripture's message. When we finished reading the chapter, we would ask, "How would you summarize this chapter in ten words or less?" Sometimes we opened the question to the whole family and sometimes we asked it of one child that we knew needed to be heard. Our family worship time became a time of discovery around God's Word, not just a lecture from Dad.

Giving everyone an opportunity to speak; it opens a door to understand, pray with, and teach your children.

Affirmation 5 Nip the self-criticism.

Words have power, even our own words to ourselves. And it is important to teach our children not to talk poorly about themselves. But wait a minute. Don't we also want to instill a little humility into our kids? We don't want them thinking too highly of themselves, do we? Welcome to the balancing act called parenting.

Yes, we want to teach humility to our children. And this is where - by knowing your child - you know which extreme they tend toward. But remember, humility is not a talented person thinking themselves unskilled, or a smart person thinking themselves foolish, or any other way we depreciate what God has given us. It is a false humility to deny God's good gifts to us. True humility is that we do not take the credit for these talents and gifts. True humility is not thinking ourselves inherently better than those around us. True humility is recognizing that all we have is a gift from God, not a product of any superiority on our part.

Our concern here is the Eeyore personality who wakes up in the morning immediately focused on the negative, including themselves. We must encourage cheerfulness, gratitude, and a healthy self-image. And one of the ways we build these qualities is to discourage negative self-talk. We also help that process along in our dinnertime chats by pointing out the positives we see in our children in front of the whole family.

Does this approach immediately change their personality? No, but seeing themselves as God's "good design" sets the stage for receiving His affirming messages for the rest of their lives.

Affirmation 6 Minimize sibling rivalry.

One of the values in our home when the kids were young was to go beyond just teaching our children to "get along". We wanted to stretch them to the next level of actually enjoying and being an encouragement to each other. We did this through a variety of approaches; all designed with the goal of minimizing sibling rivalry.

First, we emphasized generosity over fairness in our home. We had a set of VCR tapes of a kids show called Quigley Village. We wore out the episode about the parable of the landowner who hired laborers at different times of the day and then paid them each the same amount. The parable ends with the landowner saying, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (Mt 20:15). This emphasis on generosity over fairness took the wind out of so many situations where kids are apt to complain, "That's not fair!"

Now, of course, we were not arbitrary or willy-nilly about dealing out privileges. At least once a Christmas season we spent a late night with all the children's gifts laid out on the bed asking each other, "Do things look equal?" But at the same time, we had many situations that required flexibility. And because we were not locked into a fairness mindset these issues could be addressed with what was appropriate at the moment. For example, all of our kids did not receive their driver's license on their sixteenth birthday as there were many individual aspects of that decision that came into play each time it was approached.

This emphasis on generosity over fairness removed some of the natural drivers that promote sibling rivalry. But don't forget the generosity piece. It is the practice of generosity in our homes that makes our child's natural concern about fairness diminish in importance. There is great joy in seeing another's joyful experience and celebrating them.

Another thing we did to slow down the arguing or strife among our kids was a money exchange when it became age appropriate. Each child had a cup of coins ranging from quarters for the oldest to nickels for the youngest. When some argument between the kids escalated to complaining to Mom, she calmly listened. Then, because most cases don't have a clear guilty party, she asked them to exchange coins from their cups. This put the larger incentive on the older child to resolve their differences which makes sense since they are expected to be the more mature sibling. It also strengthened the idea of the older children being an example for the younger.

The goal here is the lifelong potential of siblings really knowing, appreciating, and understanding each other. And what evolved out of these efforts and God's blessing was true friendship between our children. When it comes to sibling rivalry, the bottom line for us was to be forward thinking and find creative ways to stop it early. Being on top of this challenge in your home does not mean being the rivalry cop who comes down on every situation. In fact, as you can see from the money exchange, we encouraged our kids to resolve their differences without us policing every issue. By God's gift, the result for us has been a "rare and beautiful treasure" of family friendship.

Affirmation 7 Discover the gift in your child.

One of the most affirming things we can do for our children is to help them discover their gifts. Again, as with almost every one of these suggestions, we would all nod in agreement that this is a good idea. But will we also agree to take the time and effort to make it happen?

Discovering your child's gifts takes the time and desire to know and study your child. This may take getting "outside" your own personality. We often view our children and our expectations for them through the grid of our own gifts, talents, and bent. In short, through the lens of how our personality sees the world. Discovery may take some flexibility on our part.

For example, if the number one rule at your house is, "Don't make a mess", you may miss the artist in your family. If you grow weary of your child's "why" questions, you may miss the scientist or explorer in your family. You may be shutting down an inquisitive mind. If you are too busy to play catch with your son, you may be missing the athlete in your home. Yes, if we limit our children's rabbit trails and ideas we may create a more orderly home, but take heed to the proverb, "Where no oxen are, the manger is clean; but much increase comes by the strength of the ox" (Prov 14:4).

We found that extra-curricular activities were a good avenue to discover our children's gifts and talents. Choir, piano lessons, baseball, drama camp, volunteer work, gymnastics, figure skating, drum lessons, tennis, and a garage band or two uncovered a variety of interests and skills in our kids. I'm not suggesting that all of these should be pursued at once or for every child. Be discerning. Take it slowly enough to hear and observe how your child responds to these things. But overall, a variety of opportunities is a plus.

Jobs are also a good way to discover interests and skills in our kids. Our son, Joe, took over the yard duties at our house in his teenage years. Over time, he developed a pride of ownership in doing a good job. He soon was wielding a weed-eater like a sculptor with a chisel and the finished product was a combination of his artistry and his precision engineering bent.

Charles Swindoll, in his book, [Growing Wise in Family Life](#) shares this story about the impact of an affirming mother. "Benjamin West, a British artist, tells how he first became aware of his artistic skills. One day his mother went out, leaving him in charge of his little sister Sally. In his mother's absence, he discovered some bottles of colored ink and to amuse her, he began to paint Sally's portrait. In doing so, he made quite a mess of things...spilled numerous ink splotches here and there. When his mother returned, she saw the mess, but said nothing about it. She deliberately looked beyond all that as she picked up the piece of paper. Smiling, she exclaimed, 'Why, it's Sally!' She then stooped and kissed her son. From that time on, Benjamin West would say, 'My mother's kiss made me a painter.' "

Dr. Swindoll concludes, "God gave the talent, but a very secure and wise mother gave the gift wings."

Affirmation 8 Develop your child's gift.

As a follow-up to discovering your child's gift, the next goal in the affirmation process is to help them develop their interests, talents, and skills. If your child has the gift of service, find a place for them to serve. If your child is the mechanical type, find something for them to build. If your child likes to read, find material that teaches and challenges.

For our family, some of these situations looked like this. Our oldest son, Josh, had an early interest in computers. He took a class in junior high where he built a 386 computer from scratch. (Do you remember the 386?). He soon had a business designing websites while still in high school. This interest led to a four-year degree in graphic design, steady employment in designing mobile apps, and eventually running his own IT and design company.

Similarly, our daughter, Elizabeth, enjoyed babysitting in her teenage years. But babysitting seems such a lame word for what she really did. She was more like a cruise director taking her young charges through hundreds of cool planned activities and hours of random fun. She was very skilled and comfortable in these teenage responsibilities. In her adult life, those talents have been put to good use as a personal trainer, a professional nanny, and now as an executive assistant; all people skill positions.

This interest-to-life's work progression became a common theme at our house. Annie's service gift and creative skills led to the mission field in West Africa and now a full time wife and mom serving her family, her neighborhood, and her church. Bethany volunteered at Cy-Fair hospital during her high school years and followed that interest all the way to becoming a registered nurse. Joe's design skills with Legos and longboards and understanding the complexities of math translated to a Civil Engineering degree.

Can I encourage you? Don't try to force your interests and talents onto your children as a way to recreate your life through them. They are each unique. And a parent who helps them discover and develop all that God gave them will experience the joy of discovery alongside their steadily maturing young people.

Affirmation 9 Teach your child to compensate.

As children grow up, their view of themselves is the product of two important influences. First, the quality of life at home. Second, their social experiences outside of the family setting. Influence number one is something we can generally control ourselves, but what strategies can we implement for influence number two?

The world judges us by three primary standards; beauty, brains, and brawn. That the world judges by outward beauty needs no explanation. It is woven into the fabric of our culture. As for brains, despite being sometimes ridiculed as nerds or geeks, intellectual acumen is a highly-valued talent. And every bully knows the value of physical strength. We also value strength of personality and are attracted to the magnetic types who command attention wherever they go.

As children grow up and move more and more into social interactions outside the home, they soon learn where they stand in the beauty, brains, and brawn pecking order. We want to attack the feelings of inferiority that rise out of this pecking order on two fronts. First, we need to teach our kids from a biblical perspective the value of the attributes that God deems important. Second, we need to teach our children to compensate.

What do I mean by compensate? Simply put, we are not going to be unduly influenced by the world's standards of value and we will compensate for how our kids are judged in the beauty, brains, and brawn department by helping them develop unique skills that they can excel in. We teach our children to compensate by building confidence in their strengths.

Let me give you an example. Your child is a kinesthetic learner. She struggles with the standard academic approach. However, she excels in figure skating. She puts all her kinesthetic ability into a graceful routine that has her literally floating across the ice. Encouraging and developing that skill helps her recognize with confidence that she has a special skill despite being challenged in other areas. She has compensated.

Ellen Ripstein won the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 2001. When her boyfriend later dismissed her interest in crossword puzzles as nerdy, her comeback was golden, "Well, what are you the best in the country at?" This line really stuck with me. I or my kids or you or your kids may never be "the best in the country" at anything. But there is something we are very good at. And encouraging your child to develop what they are very good at is a great affirmation weapon against inferiority and low self-worth.

Affirmation 10 Help your child compete.

Even though we recognize the injustice of the beauty, brains, and brawn value system, it is the world our children are growing up in. As parents, I believe we have a responsibility to help our children compete. What do I mean by compete?

If your child's crooked teeth are a beauty distraction, get them braces. If your child struggles with some foundational school subject, search out some tutoring options. If your child suffers with a severe acne problem, seek helpful advice. If your son wants to increase his strength, buy him some weights and teach him how to use them. In short, take action to help your child compete.

Now, two reasonable objections to this approach must be addressed. The first objection is, "By teaching our children to compete are we actually training them to value the world's system?" and secondly, "All these suggestions cost money and we cannot afford braces, tutoring, etc." Let me take the second objection first.

What about the money? I realize we all have different financial limitations and I want to be careful not to come across too crass. My encouragement would be to think outside the box as far as you can. Here is just one example, do you have some 401K savings money you could use for a serious family need? This goes against traditional financial advice to never touch this kind of money, and we should never be flippant or casual about using retirement funds early. But I am trying to stretch your thinking about the idea that "save, save, save" for retirement has been drilled into our heads when pressing family needs may require "spend". There is only a short time to meet the needs of your family and then they are grown. Again, not a decision to be made lightly, but worth some thought.

Back now to the first objection about the message we convey to our kids when we help them compete. When one of our children had a severe case of acne, we did not think it appropriate to just say outward beauty is not important so you have to carry this burden knowing the self-conscious feelings of inferiority it caused. Some physical challenges we do have to teach our children to just accept if they can't be changed. But it is an affirming parent who helps relieve these self-conscious fears whenever possible. I don't believe this is glamorizing beauty; I believe it is showing our children how much we care about them.

We walk a fine line between wanting our children to look their best while saying outward beauty is not all-important. We want our kids to do well in school while saying academic achievement is not our #1 goal. How we accomplish this is a question of balance. Even as we help our children compete, we recognize these efforts are secondary to instructing them in the things that matter most; love, kindness, integrity, loyalty, honesty, and most of all, a devotion to and trust in God.

Affirmation 11 Develop a healthy self-confidence.

Teach your children that other's opinions of you do not determine who you are. I made a career out of embarrassing my kids at the Olive Garden restaurant to make a point about self-confidence. When the waiter did not return with the pepper grinder as promised to top our salads (an ongoing problem it seems), I would roll over in those great chairs they had with the casters to the nearest pepper grinder and roll back with the goods. My point was, "Don't worry what people are thinking of you if you are doing something that needs to be done." (Of course, as Rhonda points out, I enhanced the embarrassment with my showmanship.)

The kind of self-confidence we wish to instill is not some boastful or arrogant attitude. It is instead a firm determination to follow the agenda, both big and small, that God has placed in front of us no matter what others may think. Jesus gave an example of this in John 7:1-6. After the feeding of the five thousand on a hillside in Galilee, Jesus' brothers said, "Hey, Jesus, you should go up to the feast in Jerusalem and do your thing. Anyone who wants to be well known needs to be doing these miracles on the big stage." Jesus replied, "My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune" (vs 6).

In our lives, we have people and institutions that would be happy to set the agenda for our family. And while we want to learn and practice biblical principles in a community setting, we are the ones responsible for following the path God has laid out for us and our family. As you set the identity for your family, following God's direction, you instill a sense of self-confidence in your children that says, "This is what the _____ (fill in your family name) do. This is who we are."

Does this kind of self-confidence befit a Christ-follower? I believe it does and when we do this, we emulate a trait in Jesus that even his enemies recognized. "You teach the truth without catering to man's opinion" (Matt 22:16). Teach your children the balance between living and cooperating in a community but at the same time having the self-confidence to move forward in life "without catering to man's opinion."

Affirmation 12 Discipline in a manner that is emotionally healthy for you and your kids.

Children do not feel good about themselves when they "get away with things." At the same time, discipline that is arbitrary or angry is unhealthy and frustrates our children. We encourage our kids when our discipline instructs and teaches rather than serves as an avenue to "get even" with our disobedient child.

In the early years, children are motivated by discovery and feeling, not by reason. As they develop their understanding of right and wrong, we need to make our few rules abundantly clear as well as the consequences or punishment if the rules are broken. One of the areas we need clarity is recognizing the distinction between childish irresponsibility and willful defiance.

Things like leaving their baseball glove out in the rain or spilling their milk at the dinner table are examples of childish irresponsibility. These things happen because children are forgetful, clumsy, immature, etc. Children should not be disciplined for being children.

Willful defiance, on the other hand, needs to be addressed with immediate, purposeful, controlled, and appropriate discipline. What do I mean by willful defiance? Let me give you an example from our household without identification to protect the miscreant. We had a gymnast toddler who somehow managed to stand up in her high chair no matter how secure we made the seat restraint. On one of the occasions when Houdini stood up in her chair, I calmly said, "_____, please sit back down in your chair." Her response was classic toddler. Rather than sitting down, she put her tiny foot up on the tray in a Captain Morgan pose and looked at me with the clearest, "NO and what are you going to do about it, Dad?" expression you have ever seen. This is willful defiance. The child clearly knows and understands what is expected and goes in the opposite direction. So, I did something about it. I administered an age-appropriate discipline in a controlled manner and gave her another opportunity to obey. We celebrated her new choice to obey her parents.

An expanded version of Ephesians 6:4 might read, "Fathers, do not provoke, antagonize, or exasperate your children to the point of harming your relationship. Instead, nourish them by establishing a training program that puts into their minds the ways and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ." When we discipline in an emotionally healthy manner, we encourage - not frustrate - our children. And a training program that follows this path will nourish your kids.

I would just like to add a word about the tremendous strides we are making in understanding the genetic variances in our children. We continue to learn more about autism with its varying functional levels, oppositional defiant disorder, sensory processing disorder, and other physiological conditions. Seek help and understanding if you suspect these types of challenges fit your child. Taking this aspect of your child's make-up into account in your discipline decisions is another way to affirm the unique "you" that is your child.

Affirmation 13 Teach self-control.

One of the fruits of healthy discipline is self-control. Children are generally motivated by a desire to have their needs and wants met right away. They want their desires attended to pronto. Self-control, on the other hand, brings some patience and thoughtfulness into the equation.

There are at least two aspects of self-control we want to teach our children. First, we want to teach the concept of delayed gratification. Not everything has to happen right now. Sometimes the desired activity or reward needs to wait. One way we taught this concept to our kids was in how we let them spend their money. We encouraged and guided them in how to save their spending money for something they really wanted but required more than their cash on hand; rather than running to the store to spend all their money every time they earned some pay.

Another aspect of self-control we want to take root in our child is the idea that we cannot and should not satisfy every physical desire. Just because they can conceive it, does not mean we have to achieve it. We need to teach them the priority of legitimate needs over wants. We need to teach them how self-control becomes a godly weapon in the fight against our sinful desires and irresponsible behavior. These lessons, learned early, set an incredible foundation for a lifelong walking in the Spirit.

Second, we want to teach our children the important role self-control plays in controlling our tempers, speaking without complaining, not giving in to anger, and defeating other negative actions. We need to teach our kids how self-control becomes a godly weapon in the fight against our sinful desires and irresponsible behavior. For the believers in your house, self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. And as such, walking in the Spirit is to be controlled by the Spirit, not by the flesh.

Can self-control be taught to children before they have the Holy Spirit to empower them to live it? I believe it can. Your children live in a sanctified home by virtue of your allegiance to Christ. And lessons learned about self-control can set a foundation for their own lifelong walk with Christ. In our homes, we have many opportunities to practice this lesson, and you are the ones to teach them how. The practice of “how to” prepares them to understand God’s ways.

Affirmation 14 Encourage positive character qualities.

While we may be challenged to compete or excel in the beauty, brains, and brawn pageant, we all have the ability to be honest, courteous, cheerful, loyal, enthusiastic, faithful, and much more. The ability to develop these qualities is totally separate from what anyone thinks of us. And the affirmation aspect of this goal is the great value these qualities will be to your children in the workplace, their future marriage, the mission God calls them to, etc.

When I visit with high school students on the topic of dating, I like to ask what makes a girl or boy popular with the "in" crowd. Good looks and a confident personality usually top the list. When I ask a group of guys if they sit around and talk about a girl's loyalty, honesty, and integrity as an attraction for dating, they were Rolling On the Floor Laughing. Our culture glorifies the superficial, yet the character qualities we are emphasizing here are the very things that contribute to a tremendous marriage; the ultimate goal of dating. We encouraged our children to look at the character of a potential dating partner when entering a relationship that may lead to marriage as opposed to being swayed by someone who is good-looking and makes you laugh.

How do we instill these positive character qualities into our kids? We teach and we model. Ages 1 to 7 are known as the "age of regulation". We make the rules and consequences clear. On the negative side, we punish for willful defiance. On the positive side, we teach healthy character traits through charts, stickers, rewards, and other motivational methods. By ages 8 to 12, children enter the "age of imitation". If we have developed a relationship with our kids, they now take on the positive character traits they observe in us. We are not just the authority figure; we are the inspirational figure as well. And it behooves us to walk in a worthy manner as an example to our children.

Regulation, imitation, and teaching these things to your children will help those positive character qualities to blossom and grow.

Affirmation 15 Teach your children to work.

Another way we spur our children forward on the path of becoming productive and independent adults is to teach them how to work. The irony is that despite its value, most kids are not too interested in developing this skill. The best way to get them started is to work alongside your children. We tried, in our family, to make working together as natural as playing together. Our kids helping us clean the garage or raking the leaves became just as much a part of family life as playing children's games or building Lego cities. Your influence in the "work alongside Daddy" increases when you, the adult, "play alongside" as well. Having your kids work alongside you teaches them the necessary specific skill of that job as well as the overall value of work.

Persistence and consistency on your part is an important part of teaching children to work. After the "newness" of mowing the lawn or spraying the windows with Windex wore off, our kids' reactions to these jobs was generally not too positive. But consistent expectation from Mom and Dad and praise for a job well done usually led to the child taking pride in their work.

While diligence in its own right is a virtue, it also translates to value in the job market. We taught our children to pursue careers that God had gifted them to enjoy without too much focus on the ups and downs in the economy or perceived demand for a particular field of study. Hard workers will always be in demand.

A subpoint of teaching children to work is teaching "life skills" to our kids. We have included a list of Life Skills adapted from The Teaching Home magazine in the appendix to this book. This list of goals for training children is a great starting point for the things we would like our children to learn throughout their growing-up years. Don't fear another "list". These are not meant to be overwhelming. They are just things to teach our children in the ordinary flow of life, not a new task to complete.

Affirmation 16 Teach children to complete their chores.

As a follow-up to teaching children to work, we want to emphasize teaching them to finish the job. This became an important issue at our house because Rhonda and I recognized how our own personalities sometimes interfered with that effort. Rhonda is an artist and an idea machine. As such, she easily moves to the next big idea before the previous endeavor is complete. It is not a laziness issue, but just the opposite. It is driven by a love to tackle the next big thing.

As for me, I have an uncanny knack for completing jobs to the 80% level. I mow the yard, but don't quite get to the edging. I do the hand dishes, but always leave a dish or two soaking in the dishwasher. I clean and organize the garage, and inevitably leave a corner of junk I can't quite decide what to do with. The scary part that has Rhonda rolling her eyes is how much I credit myself for making a "dent" in the work load when the job is half done. I also like to talk about what I am going to accomplish much more than actually doing it. Do our kids have any hope of finishing the job?

Yes, they do; because we have recognized the inherent challenges in our make up and have worked hard (and continue to work hard) to overcome them. One of the things we learned early on was to give our kids jobs that are age-appropriate. That is, jobs they can complete and complete well. It started with simple "helping Mommy" jobs when they were young and progressed through the typical childhood chores and high school jobs. In addition, we used verses from the book of Proverbs to encourage diligence in finishing the job. The affirming part of this instruction is the satisfaction our children enjoy when they complete the task at hand; and the great asset it becomes for their adult lives in regard to marriage, careers, and faithful service!

Well here we are, over half way there on our journey to 29 ways to affirm your children. As we pause here, let me stress that these ideas are not a new "to-do" list to add to your busy schedule. Depending on your stage of life, we are all at varying points of busyness in our families. And our goal is not to add any more stress to that busyness. The point of these ideas and suggestions is to work this affirming approach to parenting into your normal activities. It is about making intentional choices in our actions and attitudes to relate as a family in affirming ways.

Affirmation 17 Make sure they keep up with their schoolwork.

Just as in completing their chores, kids feel best about themselves when they have done the schoolwork that is required. Start early in the school year to check up on how your children are tracking with what is expected of them in their classes. Teach them not to procrastinate on their homework. Teach them to get started on those special projects that to them have a due date way into the future. We often stressed to our kids that the time they spend in school was their "work" just like Mom and Dad have workday responsibilities.

We did not expect academic perfection from our kids. But we did want their grades to be a true reflection of their God-given ability in academic areas not diminished by a lazy approach to their schoolwork. We wanted to see their best effort.

One way this translated to college was this idea of starting early in the semester on keeping up with the homework. Under the new freedom and social opportunities of being on your own, college homework can not only take a back seat; it can end up way in the trunk. And procrastinating to the end of the semester is as common as empty pizza boxes surrounding dormitory trash cans. But our kids did learn as they went along that getting off to a good start in seeking explanation for difficult concepts, keeping up with the reading, etc. did lead to some stress reduction when finals rolled around. Another important lesson for life in the adult world.

Affirmation 18 Teach your children to communicate with adults.

One of the best ways you can prepare your kids for a confident adult life is to teach them to communicate with adults. This ability is not valued and is desperately lacking in their peer-influenced world. Somehow conversing with adults is not cool and we have come to expect rudeness as typical adolescent behavior. It doesn't have to be this way.

Here is an illustration we used to help our children in this area. One evening I went to the garage and came back with a tennis ball. With the kids gathered around, I asked for a partner to play a game of "catch" with me. I let the volunteer go first and she threw me the tennis ball. I then held on to the ball, not returning her volley. Soon everyone complained that by keeping the ball, I was failing at the game. And they were right. For a game of catch to be fun and successful, both parties must do the throwing and the catching.

I explained to our kids that conversing with adults is like playing a game of catch. When an adult asks you a question, they are throwing you the tennis ball. You can hold on to the ball with a stare, a mumble, or just an uninterested look. But just like a game of catch, a conversation without the back and forth is not much fun. Your response when spoken to - i.e. when the ball is thrown to you - should be to throw the ball back. You do this by answering the adult's question and then throwing the ball back by asking a question of your own.

Of course, we "practiced" what kind of questions would be good to ask an adult by throwing the ball back and forth, asking each other questions as we did. It was great preparation for those times our children were in the company of adults. And it became a code word to use when our family was going out. All I had to say on our way to another family's home for a visit was, "Remember to pass the tennis ball" and our kids got the message.

One last thought on this topic. When children learn how to continue a conversation by asking questions, they are showing a maturity that many adults don't exhibit. In a USA Today column, titled ["One question: Why aren't you asking me any?"](#) the author laments how common it has become in casual settings to have people telling him all about themselves and answering his questions without seeking to learn anything about him or being even interested enough to ask him some questions of their own. It is an interesting observation. Asking questions is not just good conversation starter material, it shows a genuine interest in the people we meet. A good social skill, a good business skill, and a good friendship skill. Throw the ball!

Affirmation 19 Encourage friendships of high character.

"He who walks with wise men will be wise. But the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Prov 13:20). One of our continuing prayers for our children is that they would find and connect with quality friends. We were created for community and friendships are community in action.

We stressed several ideas in teaching our children about making friends. We first explained that they already had a network of close relationships in their siblings. Getting along with their brothers and sisters became a defining criteria if they were going to be allowed to invite more friends over. Developing affirming relationships within your family teaches what true friendship is - loyalty in good times and bad.

We also emphasized the importance of reaching out to be a friend, rather than assuming friendships would just naturally come our way. Sometimes we assume that just by showing up, friendships will be developed. We taught our children to recognize and make the effort necessary to invest in the people they were getting to know.

On the warning side, we taught our kids to beware of fickle friends and to recognize sincerity in potential friendships. We also talked about the balance between being friendly, but also being wary of character issues. The Bible says, "Do not associate with a man given to anger, or go with a hot-tempered man. Or you will learn his ways, and find a snare for yourself" (Prov 22:24-25).

As with most things parenting, the book of Proverbs became an invaluable resource for teaching our children about friendships. [Proverbs for Parenting](#) by Barbara Decker is a book we used often in evaluating friendships as well as other wisdom issues with our kids. In addition, we also explored the "one another" commands of the New Testament for real life encouragement on how to treat our friends in light of what God has done for us.

Affirmation 20 Follow a family schedule that reduces fatigue and time pressure.

On the printed page, margin is the space between the print and the edge of the paper. In life, margin is the space between our activity level and our limits. When our activities and responsibilities exceed our time, energy, and financial limits, life suffers. In particular, the relational life that God intended suffers the most.

A constant diet of busyness and entertainment limits the development of self-confidence and imagination in our kids. It also squeezes out the margin we need to help our children interpret life. When they hear something confusing from a teacher, a friend, or whomever, we need to have the time on hand to help them process these thoughts and make sense of what they are learning.

At our house, we found the evening meal was a good time to put some margin back into our lives. We jealously guarded this time to spend together. This included time to talk about the day in ways that built up our relationship with our kids. And we fought the temptation to just squeeze dinner in before rushing off to the next event. In a family setting, we need time to take advantage of the "teachable moments" we have with our kids. And time for just being there.

Having margin in our lives is also a lesson to our kids about living the broader Christian life. Margin equals availability to serve, to love those God brings into our lives. Because God's commands are generally not schedulable, we must have time availability to carry them out. Think about some of the things God has asked us to do. Go with someone the second mile. Carry one another's burdens. Give witness to the truth at any opportunity. Practice the "one anothers" that make us a vibrant community of faith. They can only happen when we have time to make a difference.

Affirmation 21 A healthy amount of sleep and a healthy diet.

This was a specific issue at our house because both Rhonda and I are night people. But our night owl approach was not a good fit for our kids. We became more sensitive to sleep issues when we made the connection between lack of sleep and some of the negative attitudes in our home.

Children often see bedtime as a rights issue, arguing to stay up longer as a function of their age. Or parents sometimes use bedtime as a punishment platform sending ornery kids to bed early. We tried to focus on bedtime as a health issue. We stressed that we all feel better physically and emotionally when we get enough sleep.

And this applies to older kids as well. I like to remind parents in regard to the health side of good sleep, that adolescents need to get their sleep. Just when teenagers feel like they can burn the candle at both ends, in reality, they need an appropriate amount of sleep to fuel their growth spurt. Making sleep a health issue instead of a rights or punishment issue can take some of the wind out of their argumentative sails.

Besides the health benefits, a proper bedtime for your kids has the added plus of time for you as an alone couple to connect and communicate and ultimately preserve your sanity as a mom and dad. In short, we will parent best and our children will handle their many stages of growth best when we value our sleep.

While we are on the topic of health, let me join the bandwagon for healthy eating. You know it is the right thing to do. Rhonda and I were both raised on a midwestern diet of meat and potatoes with ample sides of sugar and butter. Nothing nefarious on the part of our parents. It just came naturally in a farming community in the 1960s. A particular feature of our diet was a breakfast of donuts or cereal. (I still can't believe that I put 2 tablespoons of sugar on my Cheerios as a kid. Again, just a sign of the times.)

By the time our own kids came along, books like [Feed Me, I'm Yours!](#) began to open doors to healthy eating for children. Along the way, we made the correlation between large doses of cereal for breakfast, for example, and sluggishness in the morning's school work. We noticed a connection between irritability and too much sugar consumption. These were not hypothetical situations or some author's opinion; we lived it!

It is not always convenient to make the healthy choices. But let me encourage you. Take the time to feed your kids and yourself properly. A poor diet can lead to an overall grumpy feeling. And no one feels good about themselves when they are grumpy. The type of fuel we choose to put into our body makes a difference. Make it a family goal to up the fruit and vegetable content of your day's food intake and see if you all feel the benefits.

Affirmation 22 Keep your promises.

A promise is a powerful thing. I hate to break a promise. I have and it hurts. Why is breaking a promise so painful? When you make a promise, you give away a part of yourself. Something as simple as "I will be there at 3 o'clock to pick you up" gives a part of yourself to another person. And something as serious as "I promise to love you for the rest of our lives" gives yourself completely to another person. That is why divorce is so painful. In marriage, you are giving yourself to another person. In divorce, you have lost something you will never get back. You have lost a part of yourself. God's intention in marriage is to give yourselves away to each other and to never get it back. Inasmuch as it is in your power, keep your promise.

In a family setting, our words are powerful instruments for good or evil, hurt or encouragement. We make promises with our words. Promises carry a power with children that must be handled carefully. We don't make flippant promises. We don't casually change the conditions of a promise. Children don't understand the work pressures or fatigue that tempt you to break a promise. A promise kept builds trust and respect.

Our house is not a democracy and neither is yours. Rhonda and I are in charge and the kids have to listen. But we will never be effective teachers and role models in the lives of our children based on the authoritarian approach alone. We can make them listen; but we can't make them accept and understand. Our effectiveness as a teacher with our children is based on a trust relationship that takes huge strides forward when we keep our promises.

Affirmation 23 Laugh with your children.

"A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Prov 17:22). One of the ways to keep a joyful heart in your home is to look for joy in the journey, not just in reaching the destination. Yes, there is satisfaction in reaching the destination, in achieving our goals. But we also need to learn to be of good cheer along the way.

Laughter really is good medicine. Being able to laugh together is a great way to lift the mood at your house. One of the important distinctions to making laughter an affirming action in your home is to recognize the balance between laughing at ourselves and our situations while not laughing at other's shortcomings or embarrassments.

Our children understood how to treat people's challenges with compassion. As a result, our laughter was never directed at other's mistakes, foolish words, or physical features. We reserved our laughter for funny situations that did not embarrass or belittle others. We laughed out of joy and good cheer, not over the cleverness of a smart insult. We tried to keep our laughter Mr. Rogers approved. That's a laughter you can feel good about!

We all have been gifted by God with various personality types. Some of us are naturally more serious than others. If you are a serious adult, it may take an extra effort to laugh with your kids. For example, a mom shared with us how over time she realized that when she is thinking intently her face just naturally goes to a frown, something she has no control over. But her children assumed this thinking expression meant Mom was angry. Two things improved the situation. Her kids needed to give Mom some grace and accept her thinking look for what it was, a thoughtful expression, not a communication of anger. And Mom, for her part, needed to work on putting on an affirming expression during her thoughtful conversations with her kids. An affirming kiss on the forehead also helps as we will see in the next section.

Affirmation 24 The importance of physical touch.

We know, both instinctively and through child development research, that babies who are held, hugged, and kissed are generally more emotionally healthy than those left for long periods of time without physical contact. And long before a child understands anything about the meaning of love, they experience and feel love through our physical touch. A hug, a kiss, a touch all communicate an affirming love to your child, a feeling that is only accentuated if physical touch is also their primary love language.

But with or without the love language impact, the value of touch cannot be overstated. As children get older the forms of touch change, but the basic message of love continues to be communicated through our touch. That teenage boy who backs away from a hug may just need a touch on the arm, a pat on the back, or a good old-fashioned head lock. As with our laughter topic, if you were raised in a household where physical touch was not a common expression of love, you may need to work harder to break the chain and bring the value of touch into your home.

And I hope it goes without saying that Dad needs to be sensitive to appropriate touch as their daughters grow up and develop. A hug, a kiss on the forehead, a squeeze on the arm all say, "I am there for you." They never reach an age when touch is not needed. Just make sure your daughters are affirmed by your touch, not alarmed by it.

Jesus' healing ministry was constantly accompanied by physical touch. "Jesus took [Jairus' daughter] by the hand and called, saying, 'Child, arise!' And her spirit returned, and she got up immediately" (Lk 8:54-55). "Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him" (Mt 20:34). "And moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'Be cleansed.' And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed" (Mk 1:41-42).

Jesus' touch was also a way to experience His blessing. "And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them ... And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them" (Mk 10:13,16). We bless and affirm our children through physical touch.

Affirmation 25 Reward effort, not results.

Early in his navy career, former President Jimmy Carter applied for service in the U. S. Navy's nuclear submarine program. Here is his account of his interview with Admiral Hyman Rickover, head of the program at the time:

It was the first time I met Admiral Rickover, and we sat in a large room by ourselves for more than two hours, and he let me choose any subjects I wished to discuss. Very carefully, I chose those about which I knew most at the time - current events, seamanship, music, literature, naval tactics, electronics, gunnery - and he began to ask me a series of questions of increasing difficulty. In each instance, he soon proved that I knew relatively little about the subject I had chosen. He always looked right into my eyes, and he never smiled. I was saturated with cold sweat. Finally, he asked a question and I thought I could redeem myself. He said, "How did you stand in your class at the Naval Academy?" Since I had completed my sophomore year at Georgia Tech before entering Annapolis as a plebe, I had done very well, and I swelled my chest with pride and answered, "Sir, I stood fifty-ninth in a class of 820!" I sat back to wait for the congratulations - which never came. Instead the question: "Did you do your best?" I started to say, "Yes, sir," but I remembered who this was and recalled several of the many times at the Academy when I could have learned more about our allies, our enemies, weapons, strategy, and so forth. I was just human. I finally gulped and said, "No, sir, I didn't always do my best." He looked at me for a long time, and then turned his chair around to end the interview. He asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget - or to answer. He said, "Why not?" I sat there for awhile, shaken, and then slowly left the room.

That question became the thought-starter for President Carter's autobiography, *Why Not the Best?*, and is a question I have asked myself many times. I have also posed its positive form to our kids on several occasions, "Did you do your best?" Not every child is a straight A student, but every child can give their best effort. Not every child is a stellar athlete or musician, but they all can give their best. Reward them for their effort.

One of the reasons we rewarded effort over results at our house was because the results are often outside our control. This is a lesson I have learned in life many times over. When I worked for a large oil company, I had a particular good year and received a top level performance review. It also happened to be a year when the oil industry in general was in a downturn and my excellent performance translated into a minimal pay raise, not the results I had hoped for based on my efforts. But the macro-economics of the situation were outside my control.

Our children face the same challenge. Our son, Joseph, was a pitcher on his high school baseball team. He was very accurate and did a good job of keeping the ball down in the strike zone. But every once in awhile, a good hitter would drive one of his pitches over the fence. I told Joe many times, "Your job is to keep the ball low or on the corners which you do extremely well. The pitch location is all you can control. You have no control over how good the hitter is or how hard they hit the ball."

Reward your children for what they can control, for what they give their best effort to. This fits the reward we will each receive from our heavenly Father. "Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor 3:8).

Affirmation 26 Love the current version of your child ... and let them know it!

In our effort to train and teach our children, we can send an unintended message their way. Focusing on ways our children can improve as part of our training program (a completely legitimate effort), it can appear that we are looking forward to loving a future, new and improved, version of our children. We have to squelch that impression any way we can.

Balance is always such an important concept to practice in training our children. It is only natural, on the path to adulthood, to show our kids where they can improve themselves. When we are actively teaching things to our kids, it suggests that there is a lot they do not know. And this is true. But we can never let them think that a future version of themselves; a more talented version, a more self-controlled version, a smarter version, a harder working version, a more righteous version is the “them” that we are waiting to love.

Love the current version of your child in immense ways just as they are. And let them know it! Let them hear, see, and feel your love. Let the love of your heavenly Father overflow in loving your kids. God’s approval and acceptance of you has nothing to do with your performance and all to do with His love for you as His child. May our children receive the same thing from us. May we love as Jesus loves.

There are always ups and downs, victories and disappointments, along the way in raising our children. It is never a straight-line path. But don’t let the frustrations that inevitably come up cause you to withhold love from your child.

It is worth repeating from Affirmation 1, when your children are assured of your love, they have the confidence to give themselves away in service to others; the confidence to reach out to the lives around them. Think about your own love experience. My assurance of God's love and acceptance frees me from being a prisoner to others thoughts and opinions about me. It frees me to give myself away in loving relationships. It allows me to unwrap and practice my spiritual gift without being timid. One of the many ministries of the indwelling Holy Spirit is to assure me of God's love. "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). When our children are assured of our love and assured of God's love, they have a confidence to serve others without looking for love in all the wrong places.

Affirmation 27 Teach your children to serve others.

One of the inherent dangers of all these affirming efforts is an unhealthy pride that can infiltrate your family. How do we tell our children they are special without puffing them up? How do we affirm our kids, but not spoil or coddle them? How do we teach "everyone makes mistakes" while at the same time expecting them to improve and do their best in every endeavor? Welcome to the balancing act called parenting.

So much of our parenting wisdom goes into finding the balance between love and control, between fairness and generosity, between reward and punishment, between activity and margin, between giving an allowance and making our children to earn their money. And finally, today's topic: the balance between affirmation and an attitude of humility.

The answer is not to lessen the affirmation. The answer is to raise the humility. And we do this by teaching our children the importance of love and the service that flows from it. Love one another is the greatest commandment of the New Testament. In the book of I Corinthians - specifically chapter 13 - we learn that love trumps knowledge, love supersedes our gifts and giftedness, and love is even greater than faith itself. Love is the answer to pride, strife, envy, and disharmony in both the home and the church.

Teaching our children that love trumps knowledge, gifts, and faith is not only biblical, but practical as well in preparing them for the mission in life that God has for them. Our son, Josh, was not taken aback by the decadence in the residence halls of the secular university he attended known for its art and music programs. He had been taught that all people are worthy of our love and this helped him overcome the fear of such an in-your-face experience. He and his wife, Erica, are now teaching their children what serving out of love looks like. Our daughter, Elizabeth, befriended her manager at her first job in Boston. He is a gay man who is curious why Elizabeth is the first professing Christian he has known who was not mad at him. Our daughter, Annie, and son-in-law, Matthew, moved their family to Burkina Faso, West Africa to follow a specific mission God had for them. Their desire to serve their new neighbors, motivated by love, was stronger than their fear of sickness and loneliness. Our daughter, Bethany, walked through the contaminated and flooded streets of India aware of her natural phobia of germs, but overcame her fear by the love she had for the destitute, dying, and demented she was going to serve. Our son, Joe, served as a counselor to incoming freshmen at Texas A&M, overcoming his inclination to shyness by love for the new students and a desire to give back as he had been blessed by his Impact experience.

I am not sharing these things to build up our own family. I am trying to make the point that when you teach your children that all people are loved by God and worthy of our love, it prepares them for the path God has for them in their adult life. "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

Affirmation 28 Celebrate life.

When we celebrate life, our Christian experience becomes characterized by joy, not by the disappointments this earthly life has to offer. Financial stress, physical setbacks, fickle friends, difficult schoolwork, etc. bring plenty of challenges to adults and children alike. In short, left to itself, this world is not an affirming place. We need to be the affirmers. Our children may reject that affirmation. But, in general, people run to where they are affirmed.

One of the keys to raising the joy factor in our homes is to celebrate the small victories. This is particularly true in the area of training our children. Our joy as a family is centered on the relationships God has given us with our children, not only on the outcomes and results. If we wait to celebrate until our kids are perfect, we will miss so much. (And we will never get to the celebration!) If we wait to celebrate until the final goal is accomplished, we will miss the small victories along the way. Celebrate early and often the steps to maturity you see in your children.

We made a commitment early in our home life to not let "little victories go by with no applause". We made a commitment in our marriage, in our ministry, in our friendships, and in our family life to find joy in the journey, celebration in the pathway. When all our focus is on the finish line, we spend a lot of time waiting, worrying, longing for change to come. When our focus is on the journey, we not only find joy along the way, but we are also tuned into how to make the path straighter and harness the lessons learned along the way.

One evening, several years ago, we announced to our children that Mom and Dad had come up with a motto for the summer. "Every day a holiday, every meal a banquet, and every night a party!" The kids looked at each other in shock and so as not to miss this golden opportunity, they quickly asked, "Are you sure?" I said it sounded great to me with school out for the summer and as long as we got our chores done, I think it would be fun. There is always a way to add intrigue to daily life.

So what did we do that summer? We probably added some unusual touches to our meals; an appetizer or a special dessert. Rhonda and the kids did more spontaneous activities during the day. We might have bought a season family pass to Astroworld amusement park. We probably went to TCBY for a treat a few more evenings than usual. And a party is pretty easy to create as long as any size party will do. In short, we did some special things that summer, but nothing outlandish and we didn't let the expectations go beyond reasonable. I will say the general attitude around the house made it seem like a three month long celebration and the "hype" left a mark of joy that our kids still talk about today.

Affirmation 29 Develop a healthy pride in being part of something bigger than themselves.

A group of tourists went to visit a marble quarry in western Vermont. As their tour progressed around the quarry, one of the visitors called out to a jack hammer-wielding worker below, "What are you doing down there?" The worker snarled back, "I'm cutting this stupid rock into a square!" Seeing another worker who appeared to be doing the same thing, the visitor called out to him, "What are you doing?" The second worker, obviously happy in his work, called back, "I'm on a team building a cathedral!"

When we view family life through the eyes of the first worker, we are just a group of people living under the same roof. Your contribution to the effort may go unnoticed in the busyness of day to day activities. Conversely, you may not acknowledge the contribution of others to the family's well-being. In short, we are just cutting rocks into squares.

But when we embrace family life through the eyes of the second worker, our family becomes a team that is building a cathedral. Each one in the family has a contribution to make. Our job as Mom and Dad is to require a contribution, recognize the contribution, and celebrate the contribution. Part of developing an affirming family is getting your kids on your team. If we require them to join the team with all responsibility and no celebration, family life becomes defined by rules; cold and rigid. When we celebrate and reward without responsibility, we fail our kids. We haven't taught them the value of self-discipline, loyalty, and service.

Building a family team requires balance. A balance of responsibility and celebration. A balance of love and control. A balance of truth and grace. And as we live into that balance, we prepare our children to join an even bigger team than just our family. We prepare them to join God's team, to explore God's work in this world, and to discover the mission He has for them. And they become part of something bigger than themselves; the greatest mission in the world.

So we made it to number 29 and surprise!...We came up with a number 30. It not only gets us to a nice round number, but is also ties things up with an appropriate last thought. Enjoy and thanks for joining us on the journey through 29 30 ways to affirm your children.

Affirmation 30 Build family unity.

I am not so sure if this is another affirmation suggestion or actually more the result of practicing the previous twenty-nine. Here are some practical steps to build family unity. Pray together. Practice good communication. Teach your kids to share. Stay involved. Say "yes" as often as you can. Have a plan. (We are more likely to say "no" out of convenience when we don't have a plan.) Have everyone contribute to mundane jobs. Affirm, affirm, affirm. Agree on a schedule that reduces fatigue and time pressure. Nip sibling rivalry. Ask the older kids to sacrifice for the younger ones. Assign your older kids the role of pacesetter, setting the example of behavior for their younger siblings. Read the Bible together. Eat your meals together - great conversation opportunities. Share the experience of carrying out life's duties together. Teach your children how to compensate and compete. Celebrate life.

As I have said before, these affirmation ideas are not just another "to-do" list to add to your already overworked schedule. They are a way of doing life together. They are a way of relating to each other in your home. They are not an added burden, but a natural flow of intentional choices to relate to each other in affirming ways.

As the movie *Toy Story 2* opens, Rex the toy dinosaur is once again defeated by the evil Zurg in a video game (due to the fact that his arms are too short to jump and fire at the same time). However, Rex eventually gets his revenge when, later in the movie, he accidentally knocks the real Zurg and his ion blaster down an elevator shaft with his tail, saving Buzz Lightyear from certain ruin. Rex proudly proclaims, "I did it! I finally defeated Zurg!" Later, back at Andy's house, Hamm requests Rex's assistance with the video game. Rex, fresh off his defeat of Zurg, responds, "I don't need to play the game, I LIVED IT!"

May that be your family's exclamation as well. These ideas were not just good theory. These ideas were not put on the shelf waiting for the kids to get older. These ideas were not lost to laziness or procrastination or busyness. One of your greatest antidotes to being left with a house full of regret when your children move on is to take action now. Then your whole family can look back together and say, "WE LIVED IT!"