

“This is the kind of book you will want to read over and over as you approach each new season of raising kids.”

—Mandy Arioto, president and CEO, MOPS International

“Without question, *The Messy Life of Parenting* is one of the best parenting books ever. Seriously. I laughed. I cried. I fist-pumped on a regular basis while reading this fantastic book. Lori brings wisdom, wit, and wonder to every parenting scenario.”

—Kurt W. Bubna, pastor and author

“Do you want to interact with your kids in a way that deepens your relationship, encourages responsibility, draws grace into the family fold, and molds a humble countenance? Then devour these pages now. Family connections matter to everyone now and into the future. They’re worth the investment. Lori will show you how.”

—Dr. Kathy Koch, founder and president of Celebrate Kids Inc. and the author of *8 Great Smarts* and *Screens and Teens*

“There is no underlying message of: ‘If you had just tried harder, you would have amazing kids!’ No. This book, with every shred of Lori’s wisdom and grace wrapped up inside, gives you real-life, loving strategies to strengthen the family you have, no matter where you are starting from today.”

—Kathi Lipp, bestselling author of *The Husband Project*, *Overwhelmed*, and *Clutter Free*

“Crud happens. Heartbreaks and hassles are an inevitable hazard of family life. Parents need a plan for seeing the big picture, and *The Messy Life of Parenting* delivers that plan.”

—Jay Payleitner, national speaker and best-selling author of *52 Things Kids Need from a Dad* and *What If God Wrote Your Bucket List?*

“*The Messy Life of Parenting* is not only a powerful parenting book, but it’s a grace-filled, common sense manual for life.”

—Mary DeMuth, author of *Building the Christian Family You Never Had*

“*The Messy Life of Parenting* encourages, challenges, and equips parents to intentionally develop a family culture of loving interdependence in order to raise respectful, responsible children who receive and give the grace-filled truth that ‘everybody spills.’”

—cohosts of the Grit ‘n Grace podcast, Amy Carroll, Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker and author of *Breaking Up with Perfect*, and Cheri Gregory, author of *Overwhelmed*

“Lori Wildenberg offers practical ways to connect with your children, grow them in godliness, and steer them from isolated independence toward unified interdependence and lifelong relationships with one another. Treasure her help on your parenting journey, regardless of your children’s ages.”

—Cindi McMenamin, national speaker and award-winning author of *When Women Walk Alone*, *Drama Free*, *When a Mom Inspires Her Daughter*, and *10 Secrets to Becoming a Worry-Free Mom*

“*The Messy Life of Parenting* perfectly describes every parent’s journey—messy! Life gets messy and days get long and hard. Thank you, Lori, for stepping out in faith to bring wisdom to all the mothers of the world. We needed to know we weren’t in this thing alone!”

—Jennifer Maggio, chief executive officer, The Life of a Single Mom ministries

“Lori’s book is full of encouragement to never lose hope, always pursue the hearts of your children, and no matter what—keep your eyes on Jesus!”

—Dr. Rob Rienow, Visionary Family Ministries

“Life is messy and complicated. The challenges facing our children are diverse and daunting. What we desperately need today is connection and commitment to relationships in the family. *The Messy Life of Parenting* brings this timely message to us.”

—Ed Miller, director of development, National Center for Biblical Parenting

“Life is better when family relationships are close, and Lori is a trusted guide to walk with you on that journey.”

—Josh Mulvihill, PhD, executive director of church and family ministry at Renewanation and founder of GospelShapedFamily.com

“We all have messes in our lives. *The Messy Life of Parenting* is written with you and me in mind. It is filled with practical insights but, more importantly, biblical wisdom that will allow God to turn our messes into miracles.”

—Cavin Harper, founder and president, Christian Grandparenting Network

*The* M E S S Y *Life*  
*of*  
parenting

Powerful and Practical Ways to  
Strengthen Family Connections

by

LORI WILDENBERG



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This book is dedicated to  
all parents who hope  
for a relationship with their kids  
that reaches beyond the  
home and stretches into eternity.

Love endures forever,

*Lori*

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# Introduction

## THE DECEPTION ABOUT CONNECTION

*Be devoted to one another in love. —Romans 12:10*

Life is filled with messes. We know it, yet we don't raise our kids like we believe it. Parents, we have been duped. And as a culture we have collectively savored and swallowed it. It is the lie regarding the virtue of independence. We have heard and even bought into the philosophy that our kids must learn to be, strive to be, independent. But what does that look like when life gets messy?

I can tell you that throughout my life I have had more than I can handle. You have too, haven't you? It is a certainty my kids and yours will also experience challenges and struggles along the way as well.

Eighteen straight months of more than I could manage replays in my mind. In January my dad died. In February I was in a ski accident and blew out my ACL. A few days later my middle daughter, Samantha, separated the bones in her foot while going over the hurdles in track. The two of us had surgery in March. And in June Murphy, the family labradoodle, was bitten by a rattlesnake. By August Samantha and I both needed a second surgery. In November Samantha, yes, the same kid, was in a snowboarding accident and experienced a concussion. In December our little Shih Tzu Bailey died, and in the same month, my son Jake and his college roommate were in a rollover car accident. The New Year started with Kendra, the youngest, rupturing her spleen in a near fatal snowboarding accident. Only hours after arriving home from the ICU, we visited Urgent Care when Samantha cut her hand and needed to be stitched up. By March Jake was diagnosed with an irregular heartbeat. Three of my four kids went to the hospital in an ambulance in a span of six weeks.

## INTRODUCTION

My nephew, Sam, told his mom he was going to quit telling his friends Wildenberg family stories because he was afraid they would think he was making it all up. And . . . I didn't even mention my oldest, Courtney, in this suffering synopsis because her story took a whole book (*Messy Journey: How Grace and Truth Offer the Prodigal a Way Home*).

Accidents, kids who wander, illness, and death all are a part of life. The life our kids will live will be similar; it won't always be happy and pain free. During those tough eighteen months, my husband Tom and I needed our family and friends. We depended on God. We would not have survived if we operated in an independent mode.

As Americans, independence surges through our veins. It speaks to our collective red, white, and blue blood. Old and young, liberals and conservatives, we all celebrate and believe in independence. We fight and die for it.

Naturally, the value of independence has seeped into family life. Parenting philosophies that support this idea are easy to spot. They teach strategies that focus on desirable behavior using logical and natural consequences: grab a rag and clean up the spill. They reward or punish acceptable or unacceptable behavior: if you don't spill you can have dessert but no dessert if you spill. The two basic premises are: if it's your problem, you fix it or do it right and get a reward; do it wrong and get a punishment. If a specific behavior, like potty-training or curfew abiding, is the only goal, these approaches work well.

But parenting is more than teaching obedience and appropriate behavior. A lot more.

While it isn't wrong or bad to parent this way, there is a better style, one that satisfies the longing for relationship in our parenting heart. Most of us moms and dads hope for more than simply good behavior. We want to grow our children's character while strengthening the family bond. In my opinion, a great and godly parenting strategy is relational. I want to interact with my kids in a way that deepens our relationship, encourages responsibility, draws grace into the family fold, and molds a humble countenance.

The natural consequence approach and rewards-punishment practice train the child to deal with life messes independent of their family. This misses the boat when it comes to building relationships, developing grace and mercy, and fostering empathy and compassion. Independence pushes relational intimacy aside. It ignores the support a family offers.

Is raising your child to be independent a paradigm you really want to practice? I think not. Most of us want a relationship with our kids that lasts a lifetime, one in which we are woven together throughout our lives and not just for the eighteen years of sharing the same living space.

I'm not talking about raising entitled, needy, and dependent kids. Sometimes we have trouble separating empowering from enabling. We want to raise our children to become responsible adults, to be people who can earn a living and support themselves. As a culture, perhaps we have commingled responsibility and independence, thereby getting an end result of independent children rather than simply responsible ones.

Life is to be experienced together—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I pray my children know they can come to their dad and me when they mess up, when they need a shoulder, an ear, or a hand (and a little less likely . . . some really great advice). Whether they are in the littles stage or the adulting phase, I want them to be confident in the knowledge that our family sticks together in the life spills because we are better together. Rather than raise a number of little islands, I prefer to grow a family more like a peninsula, where when grown, children are still connected by family interdependence based on a God dependence.

Two main lies fan the flames of the independent deception: “God helps those who help themselves” and “God doesn't give us more than we can handle.” The other commonly held philosophy that adds fuel to the fire is, “I just want my kids to be happy.” These two principles, plus the happy hope, are based on and give life to the independence lie and foster entitlement. None of these commonly uttered and sincerely believed statements are biblical.

The world can be a lonely place. God beckons us to call on Him and bids us to encourage and support one another. We are not meant to be solo souls. We are beings created for relationship with one another and with our Heavenly Father.

I want to live in a home where a family resides, one where people rely on one another, laugh with each other, share tears, and do life together. I want my kids to know, no matter what, they are part of a family that helps one another.

“It’s your problem, you fix it,” may promote personal responsibility, but it reinforces a go-it-alone mentality. Perhaps we don’t use those exact crass words, but I bet most of us have said, “You spilled. You clean it up.” or “You forgot your homework? Oh, so sad. I guess you’ll have to figure out a way to solve your problem.” (I am not talking about the habitual forgetter. That little rascal may need a dose of natural consequences.)

What if instead we responded to a life spill with, “That’s OK. Everybody spills. I’ll help you clean it up”? This phrase was heard at least three times a day in the Wildenberg household when our four kids were ages five and under. It wasn’t a meal until somebody knocked over a glass of milk.

I’d like to appear noble and say the spillage statement came from thoughtful prayer and meditation. It didn’t. It was strictly survival—mine. The spills were constant; no matter the preventive hoops I jumped through, the loosed liquid still splatted and spread. Those three lines helped me get through the potentially maddening moment.

This spillage parenting approach is our family philosophy. It communicates to our kids the three critical beliefs Tom and I hold: “That’s OK—mom or dad won’t freak out at life’s spills. Everybody spills—normal life is filled with mess and mistakes. I’ll help you clean it up.” We want them to know no matter what, their dad and I are by their side.

Life is lived out in the unexpected—a statement that moves me to nurture the qualities of humility, empathy, responsibility, and compassion

in my family. “That’s OK. Everybody spills. I’ll help you clean it up,” sends the underlying message of grace and truth, “Our family is a grace-filled group of people who help each other out when life gets messy.”

When kiddos are older, life spills make a bigger splash. It may look like a forgotten homework assignment or, like in my family, a car accident. “The car can be fixed. I’m glad you weren’t hurt. Let’s figure this out together.”

It is music to a parent’s ear to hear one sibling say to another, “That’s OK, everybody spills. I’ll help you clean it up.” Independence frays family ties. An interdependent spirit knits our families closer as we deal with the unpredicted spills and wrecks together.

Throughout this book, we will discuss God’s big idea for families and how we can strengthen and grow our kids by using a connected interdependent approach. We will examine God’s design for loving others and loving Him. We will discover how to build up relationships in our families and how to encourage leadership skills in our kids. We will learn how to train our kids to be God chasers rather than people pleasers.

We will define the line in the sand between helping and enabling and identify the difference between empowerment and entitlement. We will learn to avoid the pitfall of poisonous praise and instead develop a mindset of challenge and perseverance. We will gain the tools necessary to discuss without division, correct without criticism, and maintain both convictions and relationship when in conflict.

And most importantly we will learn the secret of how to model God dependence to our kids.

I’m done falling for the independence lie. My goal isn’t to raise independent children. My measure of success is to have responsible and caring kids who are able to rely on one another, ask for help and give help when needed, and trust the Lord throughout their lives. I don’t want my young adults to become the Lone Ranger. I hope they will be more like the all for one and one for all Musketeers.

My intense eighteen months of constant challenge pales in comparison to the devastating experiences of other families. Just take

the experience of one couple who gave their riveting testimony at my church. In just one year, they'd been through two bad vehicle accidents, a near drowning incident, a job loss, and a cancer diagnosis. Yet as they tell it, their story is more like Paul's in 2 Corinthians 11:16–33; they boast in their own weakness and God's strength. They glorify God for what He has done in the midst of their struggles and how fellow believers and family members support them.

Here's my boast. My dad is in Jesus' presence. Our little dog, Bailey, lived longer than expected. Samantha, Murphy (our labradoodle), and I healed. Miraculously, Jake was unscathed from the rollover and his roommate only sustained a broken finger. My son's heart rate returned to normal. Kendra not only survived her traumatic injury but has thrived and continues to snowboard. As my family walked through that time, God showed up big, family members stepped up for one another, and our friends were available with meals, kind words, and prayers. God used that season to illustrate the need for a committed family, strong friendships, and an unshakeable faith.

So it's no surprise I subscribe to the Spillage Parenting Philosophy—because it is OK when we spill. Spills happen to everyone, and it is very good when we help each other clean up the mess. Real life is not neat and tidy. The parenting adventure is a messy one.

Oh, and on a final note, all of the stories shared here and in the following chapters have each person's blessing and seal of approval.

On to the challenge of the messy life of parenting.

*Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic,  
love one another, be compassionate and humble.*

—1 Peter 3:8

# CHAPTER 1

## THE ATTACHMENT TRUTH

*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. —1 John 4:11*

“Do you love me like I love my baby?” Maureen, a first time mom, was blown away by the love she had for her newborn. In an epiphany explosion, she realized her very own parents must love her the way she loves her infant. How can it be?

“I love you, babe.” “I love you more,” is my oldest child’s go-to response. Courtney, my first baby, now a young adult, thinks she loves me more. I just laugh, “Yeah, sure.”

The love of a parent for a child is beyond measure. The love equation is more of a love mystery. Moms, pregnant with their second baby, are often concerned they won’t love the second as much as the first. One mom, ready to deliver any day, approached me after I spoke to her Moms of Preschoolers group. Her big brown eyes were brimming with tears.

“I’m afraid I won’t love this baby like I love my first. I have been so busy with my toddler I’ve hardly even thought about this second one.”

“The cool thing about love is that God always multiplies it; He never divides it,” was my response. “God has already equipped you to love beyond what you imagine is even possible or logical.”

Her fear is typical, but she can rest assured it will not be realized. She is doing old school human math, believing in the theorem that a finite amount of love is doled out at creation. Yet our loving God created love to mysteriously and supernaturally multiply and expand, never to divide and reduce.

We are able to give love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). Our Creator shows us how. He gave us life, He gave us His Son. God

first gives love and then we receive. That is how we know how to love. And that is why love has no limits. God and His love are limitless.

In the beginning, God created the heavens, the earth, and breathed life into dust, and the result was man, created in God's own image. Even though Adam fellowshiped with God, worked, and took care of Eden, Adam was not complete. "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18). God waited a bit before He created Eve. First Adam had the task of naming the animals. Perhaps he had to realize his need for a more suitable companion before God created Eve. Adam, his humanity, his potential, his purpose, even his ability to reproduce could not be fully realized until Eve was made. God did not want Adam to be alone.

Being in relationship—loving God, and loving others—has been in our DNA since the beginning of time. We are created for connection. Helpers do life together and assist one another in spill reconnaissance.

Despite the fact that man was created for relationship, the great deceiver, dressed in snakeskin, crashed what God created as good and perfect. He led Adam and Eve to sin against God. Ever since then, work, relationships, childbirth, and the earth have suffered the consequences of Adam and Eve partaking in the forbidden fruit. The original perfect connection Adam and Eve had with each other and to God was forever tainted by the original sin (Genesis 3). Today we see that played out in our less than perfect relationships.

There are five types of connections family members may experience. Only one of the five fulfills Jesus' command to love one another. When Jesus speaks to His disciples, He also speaks to us. He said in John 13:34–35 that as He has loved us, so we must love one another. Christ's relational, sacrificial, and unconditional love is our example.

### ZERO CONNECTION

The Lone Ranger sweeps in, saves the day, and rides off on Silver into the sunset. He completes his mission, exits the scene, and has no further connection with those he saved. Some families live like this: help when



absolutely necessary and then remove oneself. The members live under the same roof yet live independent of the other individuals, and they only interact when absolutely necessary. The family is disconnected, and there is no long-term emotional investment. Compassion is replaced with callousness. The result of such an environment is withdrawal and resentment. Lived at its extreme, this is neglect.

Neglect is the most common type of abuse children suffer. Statistics show 62.8 percent of maltreatment cases are those who have experienced neglect. Neglect impacts relationships and attachment. It causes changes in the brain's wiring and can lead to attachment disorder, ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), language delay, poor emotional development, and panic disorder. (These maladies are caused by other factors too. Just because a child has a diagnosis of ADHD does not mean he or she has been neglected.) Those results are from extreme cases. Although these disorders often manifest without neglect being present, the warning is there.

Human connection through nurturing is critical to brain development. Professor Allan Schore of UCLA emphasizes that brain cell development is a "consequence of an infant's interaction with the main caregiver (usually the mother)" and that brain growth "literally requires positive interaction between mother and infant. The development of cerebral circuits depends on it." The results of nurture are profound. Within the first two years of life, without the nurture of a primary caregiver, a child will not develop several aspects of brain function, including intelligence. We need to—we must—interact in order to grow and function.

Zero connection is something none of us want but many of us unintentionally encourage. We set up a lack of connection through distraction, inattention, and a chaotic schedule. Following church one Sunday, Tom and I went out for brunch. While we waited to be seated, I pulled out my iPhone and checked my email. Tom did the same. The other folks waiting were shoulder-to-shoulder with their companions,

but no eyes met. Instead everyone was glued to the little screens on their handheld devices. Attention was diverted away from the real live person and given to scrolling and texting. Some were even on the phone talking to another person who wasn't even in their presence. I scanned the restaurant. Every booth, almost every table, had at least one if not more individuals distracted by their phone and not engaged with the people around them. Tom and I were as guilty as the rest.

Our devices can draw us away from being present. And we are getting closer and closer to ground zero of no connection and finding ourselves coasting on autopilot. We must be intentional about connecting face-to-face not just phone-to-phone. In order to flourish we need to be *with* each other when we are actually with one another.

One Sunday a month, Delaine's family gathers for dinner. Her family is made up of her husband, three adult daughters, their spouses, and the grandkids.

"When we started our once-a-month Sunday dinner tradition, I put a basket near the doorway. All iPhones, iPads, and electronic games are to be left in the basket as each person crosses the threshold. The devices safely reside in the basket until our evening concludes. At first my family grumbled a bit. But now if I forget the basket, they remind me."

Dinner at her house is a distraction- and phone-free zone. Delaine set up an expectation of how the evening would go, which is now appreciated and embraced by her family.

Disconnection or no connection occurs when we don't care, seek isolation, act like a victim, or rely on another person to maintain the relationship. As Delaine demonstrates, connection requires intention and investment.

### TOXIC CONNECTION

Some may say something is better than nothing, but a toxic something is laced with poison. Think of Samson and his obsession with Delilah (Judges 16) or David and his fixation on Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Toxic connections function in the realm of extremes. And when that happens,

somebody's going to get hurt. Sinful relationships always have a victim. Whether consenting or nonconsenting, intended or unintended, harm occurs in a toxic connection.

Carmen shares a story about her difficult relationship with her mom and dad.

"My relationship with my parents has been the most painful experience of my life. I was raised in a home where I was one of four kids. I was tucked right in between my siblings—an older sister, older brother, and a younger brother. We were very close.

"As a family we attended church every Sunday, but we did not talk about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. Nice meals were on the table, consistent discipline provided, and material needs were met. I felt safe and loved. I am forever grateful for my early experiences.

"When my older brother was in high school he began to fight with my parents. As each of us grew and left home, it became increasingly difficult to get along with our parents. They made unkind remarks, criticized, and cracked jokes at our expense. If we brought our grievances to them they denied, justified, or passed them off as a joke. If we pressed the issue further we were disowned.

"After a while, the disowned adult child involved in the conflict would eventually show up at a family function. Everyone would pretend as though nothing had happened. The pattern continued for decades. A great deal of unresolved hurt piled up in our hearts.

"Years later, my beloved older brother died from heart complications. My parents made numerous hurtful remarks about the funeral and my brother. All the pain and frustration that simmered beneath the surface boiled up. It could no longer be contained.

"At a time when we needed each other the most, my family fell apart at the seams. My younger brother confronted my parents. They immediately disowned him. I followed suit and had the same result. I was so broken. I could not return to the unhealthy pattern of pretending nothing was wrong. I faced judgment and criticism from my sister because I was unable to let it go. My dad told me, 'You have

failed me. I'm ashamed of you. You will suffer eternal punishment.' My mom refused to discuss anything at all.

"I was tormented by my decision and overwhelmed with guilt. I met with two different Christian couples, all older and wiser than me. I also sought a Christian counselor. I wanted so badly to follow Jesus yet I was unsure what that looked like in this situation. I desperately needed their wisdom, advice, and their prayers. Independently, all five of them spoke the same truths to my soul."

Carmen received a confirmation of healthy separation from the five wise souls she consulted. This was part of the remedy to move forward. Forgiveness was the main ingredient. She grieves the fact that reconciliation is not yet a part of her story. Sadly, her attempt to restore the relationship has met with resistance.

It is difficult to imagine parents pushing their child away. Toxic relationships, including parent-child relationships, drip with venom. The poison will make one sick if the antidote of forgiveness is not administered. Part of Carmen's healing has included a way to honor her estranged parents. She chooses to honor them through prayer and by living a godly life. While separated from her earthly parents, Carmen diligently seeks the Lord daily, "Even though my offer to reconcile was rejected, it opened the door for the Lord's love to fill the spaces in my heart. I'm not mad or sad as often. I put a stop to losing my life over my situation. My energy is invested in the good things the Lord has placed in front of me: my husband, kids, good friends, and my ministry. To the best of my ability I make sure my life and actions honor Him. Through this, I have come to know God better and recognize His voice more clearly. Although my earthly father rejects me, I am a beloved daughter of the King."

The pattern of Carmen's family of origin was control through verbal and emotional abuse and then abandonment. God can restore and renew all things when we are receptive. Her parents' hearts have hardened. They pridefully maintain their stand. Miraculously, God has broken the cycle in Carmen's nuclear family. Carmen's past and her

wounding has not dictated her present or her future. She has been transformed to be the mom and wife God created her to be, breaking the generational chain of abuse.

It is easier for an outsider to identify physical abuse than it is to spot emotional or verbal abuse like Carmen has suffered. Most parents do not want to harm their children. Unintentionally, we do and say things that have the power to break our kids' hearts. Here are fifteen common ways we spit a little arsenic from our lips. These typically spouted words don't create the same interdependent effect "That's OK. Everybody spills. I'll help you clean it up" does.

Poison is spewed when we:

Discipline in anger: "You are grounded for life."

Criticize rather than correct: "That's a stupid way to solve that problem."

Lecture rather than discuss: "Blah, blah, blah . . ."

Express unreasonable expectations: "You are two, and you need to sit perfectly still during church."

Compare one sibling to another: "Your sister was able to [fill in the blank]."

Bring up past failures: "Remember when you [fill in the blank]."

Use sarcasm: Yeah, right, you are so smart."

Kill joy: "You could have done even better if you had [fill in the blank]."

Shame: "You are so clumsy."

Broadcast failures: "You won't believe what my son did."

Blame: "It's your fault I ran the red light."

Present ourselves as perfect: "When I was your age I never [fill in the blank]."

Steal success: "You got your talent from my side of the family."

Don't admit wrongdoing: "I'm the parent. I'm always right."

Never ask for forgiveness. (Ditto above.)

As we hold our child's heart in our hands, let's have a firm and gentle grip so he or she can thrive and become the person God created him or her to be. Even when we, as moms and dads, mess up or spill, it isn't too late—we can always adjust our approach, ask for forgiveness, and begin anew.

### CONDITIONAL CONNECTION

Do you deserve my love? Have you earned my love? These are words a conditional connector says. I like to think I don't have conditions on my love. Yet as I examine myself I realize I have been guilty of verbalizing conditional love statements.

"You don't deserve a hug."

"You were so bad we are not going to [fill in the blank]."

"Because you misbehaved you will not get [fill in the blank]."

Conditional connections are all about performance rather than being. What a person does dictates acceptance, rather than who a person is.

Some families who appear very close are actually conditional connectors. These families are enmeshed and entangled. Emotional entwinement is not interdependency, it is codependency.

An enmeshed relationship is emotionally dependent. The members are constantly and highly involved in each other's lives. They feel threatened by another's personal growth, relationships, or independent choices. Emotional blackmail is used to keep the unhealthy relationship intact. Typically those involved in a codependent relationship have few outside friends. They discuss every decision and conversation with the other. Privacy is nonexistent. When one lives in an enmeshed family each individual feels as though he or she has to prove love for and loyalty to the family unit.

Sadly, if a family member of an enmeshed family unit challenges the status quo, often he is cut off and shunned by the rest of the members. Conformity is the name of the game. Control is the major player. The rules of the game are usually the parents' expectations.

To combat enmeshed parenting it is wise for moms and dads to also have their own interests and hobbies. It is easy to make idols of our children. But when we do, they have taken God's place in our hearts.

We desire to raise our kids to be successful, to own their values and ethics (even faith), and to develop their own personality and style. We want our kiddos to manage both their success and failure. As parents, we are not defined by either result. We hope our kids know our love and our relationship are not dictated by their performance. God lets us know He is not a conditional connector when He tells us He will never leave or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6). And that "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). (Thank You, God, for grace.) The message of grace is one our kids need to hear and believe.

When my son Jake was around eight years old, he asked me, "If I went to jail, would you stop loving me?" His question knocked me off balance.

"I'd love you no matter what." (A smarter mom would have followed up with a question or two.) Anyway, his inquiry was a heads up that I needed to deliberately communicate my unconditional love to my kids.

Conditional connectors remain in relationship only when everyone falls in line. Those relationships fall apart when belief and behavior collide. Parents who practice a conditional love approach might say, "Cut 'em loose," if what their child lives or believes is out of step with the parents' faith, morals, or values. Yet God says to never forsake. Differing beliefs can coexist. Our relationships don't have to be collateral damage.

### SURFACE CONNECTION

Surface connections can be hard to spot, yet they reveal themselves when circumstances change. My dad and his brother, both now deceased, sadly had a surface connection. Once their parents died, the brother relationship dissipated. They had little to do with one another and only communicated as needed.

Typically one of the two in a surface relationship is more invested and is left hurt by the other's indifference. I have had relationships like this where I thought the bond was true friendship and then realized it was one-sided. That realization of a shallow connection can be heartbreaking.

Recently I observed a surface connection go under. This often occurs when the relationships are built on convenience, proximity, or perceived need. There were two friends, let's call them Christine and Hannah, with a group of four peripheral friends who were all in ministry together. You know, sort of friend-in-laws where the relationships come about by default. The group was Christine-centric. Once Hannah fell from Christine's favor and subsequently left the ministry, the others in the group dropped her too.

Hannah and I chatted about this painful dynamic. While we talked we recognized a pattern. This was not the first time Christine had ousted a person from the group. Hannah was most likely roadkill number five or six. Surface connections and relationships that are situationally based are devastating to those who thought they were deeper. We can spot people with the pattern of habitual surface relationships by noting how easily they discard and replace others. There is no movement toward restoration.

I don't want my kids to only connect because they share the same parents and grew up in the same home. As a mom it would break my heart, as I'm sure it did my grandparents, to have adult children who have no relationship with one another. Aside from parents, siblings are the only ones who share the same history.

A few years back I got some really bad counsel. It was advice I crumpled up and tossed right after I received it. During a very painful six-month time, my oldest Courtney was estranged from our family. She happened to be in a toxic relationship with a highly controlling partner.

Courtney withdrew from the family. One of the recommendations I received and rejected was, "Well, you raised her and now your job is done. You don't have to be in relationship with her anymore." This



advice was not for me. I did the opposite. I continued to pursue my daughter so she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she was loved, and her dad and I wanted her back in our lives. (By the way, Courtney did return to the family fold and ended that toxic relationship. Praise the Lord.)

“I don’t know where I would be if my mom hadn’t pursued me. Because she sought me out, I knew I could always come home.” Courtney confirms that my continued pursuit was the thing that made returning home possible. (Thank You, Jesus.)

Judas had a surface connection to Jesus and the disciples. Even though Judas was a part of the twelve for three years, he was not truly connected or committed. When he realized his personal objective for power or wealth was not going to come to fruition, the surface connection showed itself in betrayal (Luke 22), a common result of this type of connection. Loyalty is only loyalty when there is commitment. Love, when it comes to counterfeit surface relationships, is not sincere.

### INTERDEPENDENT CONNECTION

Dr. Barton Goldsmith in *Psychology Today* describes interdependent relationships as healthy and balanced. “The healthiest way we can interact with those close to us is by being truly interdependent. This is where two people, both strong individuals, are involved with each other, but without sacrificing themselves or compromising their values. What they have is a balanced relationship, and unfortunately it is not all that common. But it is attainable with just a little awareness and understanding.”

Mostly I agree with Dr. Goldsmith with the exception that I believe love is sacrificial. I define sincere love as giving, loyal, and honest. Love blossoms where each party sacrifices for the other. Jesus said in John 13:34, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

God is love. Jesus embodies what that looks like. The Lord loves us no matter our response to Him. His heavenly love is pure, complete,

and unconditional. Our fleshly bodies will never be able to fully and completely love unconditionally like Jesus.

The most satisfying human love isn't a one-way path; it is best when it is reciprocal, though not to the point where who did what is recorded on some sort of imaginary conditional love ledger. We give and receive because we want to—not out of obligation. An interdependent home is a place where the inhabitants can be real and transparent with one another because they know everybody spills. It's a safe place to fail and succeed, to discuss topics of substance and perhaps even disagree, to be accepted (even in the midst of disagreement), to be accountable to each other, and to be responsible for personal actions.

Just as Adam needed a suitable helper, we need helpers and companions in our lives. The psalmist refers to the Lord as a helper in Psalm 118:7: "The LORD is with me; he is my helper." Being a helper is an honorable and godly quality, not a lowly role. Think of what *helper* means: advocate, ally, comforter, companion, colaborer, coworker, participator, sustainer, and supporter. The word *savior* is even used as a synonym. There is honor in being a helper.

So yes, we really do get by with a little help from our friends—and from our family and from the Lord. Interdependency and a God dependency are threads I pray are knit into my family.

*If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*  
—Ecclesiastes 4:10–12