

5 Myths of Parenting Parent Traps

By Leslie Leyland Fields

IN MY MID-20S, I WATCHED A FRIEND'S TODDLER TOSS ALL THE POTS IN THE

kitchen cabinet out onto the floor while she was preparing dinner. The plastic containers came next. My friend not only allowed this behavior, but seemed to encourage these random acts of chaos. I was horrified. My kids will be much better behaved. I consulted my mental list — ah, there it was, #17, “My kids will not make messes or destroy my house.”

I was a perfect parent like this, with perfect children, for 10 years of my marriage — until I had them, six of them. They ransacked my cupboards, with my blessing and, as it turned out, it encouraged creativity and gave me time to make dinner. As the years passed, they entered far more than my cupboards, bringing the same level of chaos and creativity to most every other area of my life.

FINDING FREEDOM

Parenting is hardly an easy path. Most of us come to parenting with dreams that have little to do with the real work of parenting. Many of us get our ideas from



© Randy Rogers illustration

the media, famous for entertainment, not so good for parent training! Even within the church, we are often given expectations that are less than biblical. The results are bleak. After talking with parents all over the country, I have discovered that many feel as I did — locked in guilt and failure.

We need not remain trapped, however. Freedom is possible, not by making behavior changes, but by making belief changes. I am convinced that many parenting struggles come from the myths you may not even know

you believe — all of them unbiblical. Here are five key myths out of the nine that I detail in my book, *Parenting Is Your Highest Calling* And 8 Other Myths That Trap Us in Worry and Guilt.

MYTH 1

You always will feel unconditional love for your child. Before children — you know you always will love your children unconditionally. Then along comes your colicky baby or defiant toddler. Or one morning

Most of us come to parenting with dreams that have little to do with the real work of parenting.

the boy who went to bed as a reasonable 12-year-old wakes up as a glowering unreasonable 13-year-old. That beautiful reciprocity of the early years, the I-love-you/you-love-me-back arrangement is gone. If you were like me, you had something of a panic attack when you looked deep into your heart and realized you did not feel unconditional love for your child right then! Where did it go? The truth is, you may not feel it for a week or a month or even longer. You jump to this conclusion: *I don't feel loving toward my child, therefore I must not love my child.*

TRUTH: Look at God's experience as a parent. He is not only your parent — but He describes Himself so many times in the Old Testament as a father, and specifically as a father to Israel, whom He calls my "firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22). God had tremendous love for His children — but also expressed frustration, anger, sorrow, and heartbreak. "I have held my arms out to you all day long and you would not come," He says to Ephraim (Hosea 11:3). Even God's perfect love is not a single, feel-good emotion, as Hollywood often portrays. Love embraces a whole range of emotions. The question you need to ask of yourself is not, *Am I feeling loving toward my child* but *Am I being loving toward my child?* Examine your actions. If you are supporting your child, disciplining him when needed, praying for him, and taking good care of him, that is loving your child.

MYTH 2

If you find parenting difficult, you are not following the right plan. If you are feeling insecure as a parent, especially a new parent, there is an industry created just for you! While there are many helpful parenting books out there, some offer formulaic models that promise to simplify parenting and make it more convenient. These training manuals, some of which sell in the millions, provide not just helpful advice but comprehensive programs from the crib to college that often involve behavior modification techniques and rigid discipline. The underlying assumptions: You should be in control of your child at all times, and the child should not mess up your life.

TRUTH: Raising children is inherently messy, thrilling,

RECOMMENDED READING

For three more parenting myths and the truth behind them, do not miss Leslie's book "Parenting Is Your Highest Calling" And Eight Other Myths That Trap Us in Worry and Guilt (WaterBrook, 2008).



© Randy Rogers illustration

and unpredictable. One-size-fits-all parenting formulas and parenting experts cannot raise your child for you. When you depend on others, you can end up placing your faith in the program, the writer, or even in your own ability to follow the program instead of relying upon God. Your child is too complex and unique to be raised by recipes or formulas. You are free to raise your child with all the wisdom and creativity that God has given you!

MYTH 3

Good parenting produces happy children. Many parents think the best measurement of parenting is how happy the children are. If you are doing a good job, your child will be content. Toward this goal, you can engage in all kinds of questionable behavior. At least half of all American children have a TV in their bedrooms, for example, despite the growing evidence that it erodes health, study, and sleep habits. Many parents go into debt for their children, providing lavish birthday parties and exotic vacations. As obesity rates soar, parents fix the foods their children clamor for instead of what they need.

TRUTH: Your job as a parent is to follow God's own model of parenting. He parents His children not for their happiness, but for their holiness. Trying to procure your child's happiness here and now is like catching a river with a sieve. Do for your child what he cannot do for himself: distinguish between his short-term happiness and his long-term good. Ultimately, holiness leads to the greatest, most-lasting happiness.

MYTH 4

Successful parents produce godly children. All Christian parents want desperately for their children to grow up to be godly adults. This has become your primary goal

and the measure of your success. If your child becomes a faithful believer, you are successful. If he does not, you are a failure. You have somehow come to believe that you can determine the outcome of your child. If you do everything right, put in all the right ingredients — church, youth group, only PG-rated movies, etc. — then your child will become a faithful adult.

TRUTH: You have made far too much of yourself and too little of God. Raising children is a walk by faith from start to finish. Your child comes to you with his own God-given will, with a unique personality and distinct set of talents. He is going to make his own choices as he grows up. You get to love, raise, and influence your child, but you do not control who he becomes. Ultimately, that is between your child and God.

MYTH 5

Having children makes us happy and fulfilled. Many people were enticed into parenting by subtle and overt promises from their churches, their families, and their culture-at-large that children will bring fulfillment. The checkout-stand magazines, where babies and children are the newest celebrity accessory, deliver the same messages: Children complete you. Children will rescue a struggling marriage. Children will fill the holes in your life.

TRUTH: Children definitely bring times of happiness

and fulfillment, but your day-to-day life with your child is much more complex, often bringing as much hurt as happiness. There is good news in this. Your child is not here to fulfill you, to provide your identity and purpose. Your child is here to serve God's great purposes! There is so much freedom in this! You can release your child from a weight he was not intended to bear. And you can be released from the trap of constantly measuring the value of parenting by your fluctuating feelings.

CONTINUING THE ADVENTURE

I feel a greater sense of freedom these days in my parenting, not just because my children have grown out of ransacking my cupboards. More because I am discovering God's fuller truths about parenting. When you look at the entire Bible, and particularly God's role as a parent, you discover truths that do indeed set you free. Let go of the myths, and let the adventure continue!

Leslie Leyland Fields is a mother of six and the author of six books, including her latest — “Parenting Is Your Highest Calling” And 8 Other Myths That Trap Us in Worry and Guilt (Waterbrook, 2008). She lives in Kodiak, Alaska. Visit her online at www.leslie-leyland-fields.com.