



Parenting Families

Practical Strategies For Family Life

By Dr. David J. Ludwig

Introduction

So you have a child. What a gift! Oh, how these little ones change our life ... and, in the end, help *us* grow up! Your child is awesome. Cute, yes ... but consider this: children come with a God-given spirit. It's part of what makes them unique — different from you; different from brothers or sisters; different, unique.

Your child was born curious, eager to explore and understand the new world. And here's a scary thought — have you noticed that your child's full-time job is to watch you? Oh, yes ... and she's very familiar with you. She knows your every facial expression. You can't fool her. She knows when you're serious and when you'll give in. In fact, her spirit quickly organizes her world, developing strategies as to how to interact ... especially with family!

She discovered early on that a piercing scream when her brother annoyed her got you coming fast and got her brother in trouble. She has that down. She also found more recently that if she defies you, you look at Dad angrily, expecting him to step in. Then when he doesn't, the two of you get into an argument.

She has found power that can shift the mood ... and she'll use it again, I promise.

What Makes for a Healthy Spirit?

Your child's spirit grows out of the atmosphere of your home. When there is a happy home, your child feels secure and loved; he develops a positive outlook on life. Your child feels on the inside what the family relationships are like. He breathes in the atmosphere of the home. His spirit is affected by the weather patterns — you know, the frontal systems within your home: the stagnant air; the turbulence; the cold, tense times; and the warm, uplifting atmosphere of love and kindness.

So, how can you make sure your home has good weather patterns? Actually the "WE" controls the mood! When each member of the family is looking out for the good of everyone else, there is a strong sense of WE — like a good high-pressure system keeping the day beautiful. But when the WE breaks down, then it's everyone for him or herself. Power struggles break out and the weather changes.

When there is a good atmosphere, the child feels safe and secure and can happily go about the day, looking for new things to explore and new ways to annoy. You can tell he is developing a healthy spirit by his eyes and face ... he is full of himself and knows he is loved!

Which of the following two children would you rather have as your child?

Self-centered
"Me" first
Rebellious
No respect
Complaining
Deceitful
Self-indulgent

Concern for others
Willing to share
Obedient
Respectful
Loving
Honest
Self-controlled

The answer seems rather obvious, doesn't it? At least I would have no problem in selecting the second box very quickly!

The first box describes a "ME"-oriented child. This is a child raised to believe that happiness is based on fulfilling one's own needs. From early in life, she is encouraged to make decisions so she'll be able to look out after her rights. The concept of "fairness" rules and building a good self-esteem in the child is considered most important. This child is a product of a "ME" family culture.

The second box is a "WE"-oriented child. Such a child is raised to believe that happiness comes from helping others and from forming good relationships. A good self-image flows from being a part of a loving, caring family. Caring for others is carefully molded into the character of this child. This child is a product of a "WE" family culture.

What do you as parents have to do with the WE?

As your family moves from "adults only" to including children, it is your job to build the sense of WE. You model placing the needs of the family unit (WE) above one's own needs (ME). You do this by forming a united front as parents and setting healthy boundaries.

Rules that help the family live together are called WE boundaries. The first step in setting such boundaries is for you, as parents, to decide on them together. Talk about the best ways your family can interact with each other and discuss what would be best for the child and for the whole family. For example, you could decide that disrespect will not be allowed since it damages family relationships. You could also decide that it's healthy for your child to help out around the house.

You then set and enforce the boundaries by looking at each other, smiling, and saying, "We all agree that disrespect is not good for our home, so we will not allow you to talk that way to your brother." The boundary is enforced without a power struggle and without force. You smile at each other to control the mood. In this way, boundaries are set and enforced in love.

Of added benefit is that as your child matures, he will internalize these loving, yet firm boundaries. They will become the basis for healthy self-control when he begins to function outside the sphere of your parental influence. This internal sense of WE will lead him in making his own life decisions. Without such boundaries (or boundaries that are too rigid), your child will find it difficult to handle situations later in life. He will give in to impulse, and then regret it later. There will be a constant internal struggle between what he wants to do (ME) and what he feels he should do (WE).

What's your child's job?

Your child was born with internal radar. Not only does your child use her radar to spot what “buttons” to push, she also uses it to look for cracks in the WE. Simply put, your child's job is to challenge the WE and to spot the weak places, allowing you, as parents, to fix them! What a gift children are!

Watch what happens when your child defies you — if she finds a way to cause a power struggle, she'll keep pushing at this weak spot until the mood shifts. This is her job. It is now your job to fix the crack in the united front. You look at each other and say, “Now, how are ‘we’ going to handle this?” The moment the two of you say WE you have control of the mood.

And guess what? Your child was hoping you would fix it. Deep down your child wants the security of the WE. She will push, looking for cracks, but ultimately will not rebel against the WE, since she feels the benefit of the good atmosphere.

Feel the shift from ME to WE

1. Imagine that your daughter has just defied you.
2. Picture yourself getting angry and starting to yell: “I told you to stop playing Nintendo.”
3. STOP — take a breath and shift to the WE, feel the shift to concern for the child and for the family
4. Smile and from this different place imagine saying in a firm, calm voice: “We agreed that it's not good for you to play so much Nintendo, so you will stop.”
5. Feel the difference from a power struggle to concern for the WE.

How About Family Conflict?

Conflict, especially between siblings, is healthy and good. After all, it provides a lot of ground for learning. The conflict itself is not the problem — how you handle it is what's important.

First and foremost, conflict needs to be handled face-to-face with all parties present. Look at each other and smile (to control the mood), then say, “WE will talk this through so we can understand each other better.” (Your children will quickly learn that they cannot invoke your support against the other child.) Should one of your children start to tattle, stop him mid-sentence and call the other child in. Then hold a face-to-face discussion having each one tell what happened.

The object is not to prove who is right, but to teach your children a positive model for handling conflict. Remember, you are interested in the WE. You want your family to have good, healthy relationships. When you think this way, there is no winning or losing in conflict!

What happens if your child manipulates the situation?

Whenever your child is in control of the mood, everyone suffers. You feel a power struggle and try to regain control using your natural authority as a parent. Your child gets over-focused on the struggle itself. She'll begin to throw temper tantrums, get whiney, argue endlessly, or look sad and dejected. She knows your buttons and she'll do all she can to make you feel guilty, frustrated, angry, or overwhelmed!

Your relationship is now in danger of getting stuck, with the same patterns occurring over and over again. One, three, five, or 10 years can go by and your child will continue to use the same strategy over and over again.

Your child is now stuck and is not growing up. In fact, when the WE of the family unit breaks down, the child gets stuck emotionally at that age. That's why you can have a 12-year-old who whines like a three-year-old. Or you can have a 17-year-old still telling lies and hiding things like a 10-year-old.

But you are also stuck. You instinctively treat your 17-year-old like he's still 10, checking up on him, not trusting what he says, and feeling the same frustration you had seven years earlier! Your relationship is stuck and is now producing dangerous consequences!

How do you know if your child is "stuck"?

Listen to the tone of your child's voice and watch his body language. And don't dismiss the nonverbal clues — you can tell that your child is not growing up when you can hear the whine of a three-year-old or see the "worry wart" of a seven-year-old in your teenager.

Quick guide to knowing if your child is "stuck" at an earlier age:

- **Age 1-3:** Child reverts to being dependent, clingy, and wants your attention constantly. Voice tone is whiney with lots of baby talk. Body language shows helpless affect.
- **Age 4-6:** Child reverts to an immature opposition to everything you want him to do, often with a temper tantrum. Voice tone is demanding, constantly asking "Why?" Body language shows an immature defiance.
- **Age 7-9:** Child reverts to a "worry-wart," constantly anxious about situations and wanting reassurance. Voice tone is anxious and high-pitched. Body language shows too much seriousness.
- **Age 10-12:** Child reverts to telling lies, hiding both feelings and actions. There are definite passive-aggressive tendencies — and undercover defiance. Voice tone is guarded and phony. Body language is closed, trying to reveal nothing.
- **Age 13-16:** Child reverts to immature rebellion, getting upset at any attempt to enforce the rules. There is a general over-reaction to parental authority. Voice tone is often dramatic with explosions of anger. Body language is defiant and challenging.

It's natural to blame your child for not "growing up." You'll start thinking that he's lazy, self-centered, unrealistic, or even sneaky. But the more you continue in this frame of mind, the more your relationship will stay stuck. You'll find yourself using your parental power to make something happen, but that won't solve anything because you'll only run into more rebellion. It will be like spinning wheels while stuck in the mud.

All in all, the problem is always the relationship. The WE of the family unit has broken down into individual "ME's" and the inevitable power struggle has taken over. Your child is just as frustrated as you are. Your child doesn't like to be stuck, but feels like he has no choice. After all, he's in middle school and you still treat him like a seven-year-old.

How do you "un-stick" my child?

Once the WE of the family unit is restored, the child will automatically get "unstuck." Let's use this situation to illustrate: Your child found that throwing a temper tantrum at age four could control the mood and get her what she wanted. She's now eight and still throwing tantrums.

The problem becomes even greater because as parents you disagree about how to handle the situation. One of you gets upset and engages in a power struggle with your child, angry that the other parent doesn't back you up. The other parent wants to handle things more calmly. The child now knows that the WE has broken down and will continue the tantrums.

But you want to restore the WE. That happens the moment you smile and say, "Your tantrum is not good for our family, so we will not allow you to act that way. In fact, if you choose to act like this, you have just chosen not to have TV privileges today." Should the child continue with the tantrum, you could say, "I guess you've made your choice. We're sad for you and hope you choose better next time."

You see, as long as the child cannot control the mood, she will grow up! When you can keep the WE from breaking down, you have given your child an incredible gift. Your child can now grow up and not stay focused on manipulating you.

How About Behavior Outside the Boundaries?

If you noticed, the previous illustration included a consequence. Believe it or not, your child needs to experience consequences in order to grow up and learn to develop healthy self-control. At first, he relies on you for external boundaries — that's certainly appropriate because such boundaries offer security and allow your child to internalize them and gradually set her own boundaries. But what if your child is able to shift the mood so that there are no consequences? Or what if consequences are doled out as punishment within a power struggle? What will happen — he will not develop appropriate self-control.

The reason consequences are so important is that healthy development happens through a gradual shift from external to internal control — in other words, from only reacting to external boundaries (the ones you set) to internalizing them so that living by them becomes part of her internal thinking process. That way, when your child is ready to move out of the family, he has developed good internal boundaries.

In order to develop these internal boundaries, your child needs to have choices and automatic consequences for his choices; helping him more clearly understand how his choices affect both himself and others. You can start this when the child is younger and gradually let the child help set boundaries as he gets older.

How do you set healthy boundaries and give automatic consequences?

First you must form the WE. Shift internally from focusing on your own feelings or your own need to “get your child to obey” to thinking about the “good of the family.” If you are there together with the other parent, look at each other, smile, and say, “We have talked things over and have considered what is best for you and for all of us. Throwing a temper tantrum is not good for any of us to do. It hurts our family, so we will not allow it.”

Then you can talk together and agree on automatic consequences if the child throws such a tantrum. When all agree that this is not good for the family and the automatic consequence will be loss of phone privileges, then the WE boundaries are set and there need not be a power struggle.

When the child displays a lack of internal boundary by throwing the next temper tantrum, you can smile and calmly say, “You know that it is not good for our family when you react that way. If you choose to continue, you have just chosen to lose your phone privileges for the day. This is your choice and we really do hope you can keep your phone tonight since I know how much it means to you to be able to stay in touch with your friends.”

The mood does not shift and you are actually becoming an ally with the child’s mature side. Setting boundaries and following through in this manner allows the child to grow up.

You might think you need to wait until your child is older. But if you start setting this in motion already in preadolescence, then when the child develops an “attitude” (which is also what she is supposed to do), you will have laid the groundwork for a healthy spiritual growth spurt for the child. You can pretty well expect that your 11-year-old is going to refuse to go along with the usual expected behavior and will demand to be treated differently. But instead of taking this as a power struggle and driving the child underground by squashing her attitude, you will have set the tone for forming the WE and listening.

This does not mean that the child who exhibits “attitude” wins. You listen and say, “How are WE going to handle this situation?” You can sense that the child wants more freedom, so you say, “Let’s work together so that we can trust you more to make good decisions for yourself. As you show us you are more responsible, we can let you have more freedom.”

When your child tests the boundaries and misuses the freedom (and, yes, it’s bound to happen), then you say, “You just broke our trust, so we have to go back to limiting your freedom. You can earn the trust back by showing us that you can be more mature. Your whiney voice right now does not give us much confidence that you are grown up.” So you go back to tighter boundaries and give the child the choices to show more evidence of growth.

How Is Listening Critical to Forming the WE?

In addition to needing the security of the WE that will keep your child from internal struggle and anxiety, he also needs to feel understood to develop confidence and a healthy spirit. By getting to know your child, you let him know that he is a gift to the family. If you allow a power struggle to develop, your child will feel as if no one cares and will not sense that he is a gift. He will then search for that acceptance elsewhere, with sometimes dangerous consequences.

The beauty of the WE is that after you as parents form it, then everyone’s input is valued. The child is actually heard and feels understood, even though the decision as to what is best for everyone may not be exactly what the child wanted.

Every child is naturally self-centered. Concern for the WE is something you teach. If you indulge your child or allow him to make decisions without the benefit of the WE, he will stay self-centered and will not grow into a mature concern for the good of the family.

How do you make it safe for the child to open up?

Your child wants you to get to know her. She will automatically feel like she is a gift to the family if you get to know her soul. She will feel valued and important. She will not be plagued with self-image problems or struggles of worth as she grows up.

But since you are the parent and feel the responsibility for your child, it is quite natural to spend most, if not all, of your time with the child trying to correct, teach, or influence the child in some way. So you have to work at taking time to really listen.

What NOT to do when listening:

1. **Teach** – this is not the time to explain something.
2. **Criticize** – this is not the time to point out something wrong.
3. **Blame** – this is not the time to look for fault.
4. **Remind** – this is not the time to bring up past or future.
5. **Solve** – this is not the time to give advice.
6. **Minimize** – this is not the time to give your perspective.

The Two Styles of Parenting

Often it happens that two people who find themselves being parents, actually have opposite styles in parenting. As you can imagine, differing styles can lead to disagreements, getting annoyed at each other's style of parenting. One of you is more the "policeman," concerned that the child obeys and that there is follow-through with discipline. The other is more the "friend," concerned that the child is happy and loves being part of the family.

When conflict develops, the child senses a glitch in the relationship and manipulates these two styles. The child will disobey the "policeman" and watch the fun. The "policeman" will react and try to get the child to obey, frustrated that the other parent will not back her up or get upset with the child. The "friend" will get upset with the harshness of the other parent and will give signals to the child (often behind the other parent's back) that she is loved. This causes a WE to form between the parent and child against the other parent.

Can the two styles of parenting work together?

There is no reason that these two styles of parenting cannot work well together! The "policeman" will notice what needs to be addressed, but will often address the issue in a way that brings about a power struggle. The "friend" will give the child more slack and will often give in to the child's wishes. But when the "friend" addresses an issue, there is usually no power struggle in getting the child to obey. The child senses that the parent has the child's best interests at heart.

When these two styles form a WE, there are good boundaries and healthy follow-through, but both accomplished in a style that does not produce a power struggle. The child knows the parents are a “friend” by the tone of voice, but knows they are serious by the firmness of the WE. Blending these two styles allows the child to internalize good, loving, yet firm boundaries. Later in life, she will listen to her impulses and not dismiss them (friend). And she will also be aware that acting out the impulse would not be healthy for her (policeman).

This builds the internal WE so that the child does not have to struggle with internal rebellion, then guilt. Actually the healthy child learns how to give her impulses a healthy direction. In other words, she begins to want to do what she should do.

What if we disagree on a particular issue?

Often one parent will sense that a particular friend is not good for the child, but the other parent will see no problem. The discussion can easily turn into a power struggle between parents. The policeman parent gets frustrated over not being heard. The other parent is frustrated over what seems to be an over-reaction. The parents can easily get stuck in the clash in opinion and get upset with each other. Whatever happens after that usually will be a source of resentment for the parent who gave in.

But consider this: The WE is made up of both parents in agreement, not one parent giving in. To form such a healthy WE, often deeper conversation needs to happen. In this case, the policeman parent must detail everything observed and give the other parent the benefit of all she has picked up that is of concern.

Then the policeman parent must listen to the other parent’s insight. She must be open to a new set of eyes. It could be that some of the concern comes from background issues — from the policeman parent’s bad experiences as a child. This could result in an oversensitive reaction. But the other parent must also listen. Perhaps this parent never experienced such things as a child and is oblivious of the danger. With both parents seeing the other’s insights as a gift, there is no reason for a power struggle. The WE is formed with both sets of eyes!

Too many parents either get into a power struggle or simply give in. Neither of these outcomes will work and both will be damaging to the child’s spirit. The blending of these two styles into the WE is what works!

The WE in Action!

Family Scene

Tiffany was upset. Her brother had teased her and she came running to her parents. “Brian laughed at me again,” she began with tears in her eyes. What happened next was disaster. Dad scooped Tiffany up in his arms and yelled at his son, “Brian, get in here!” Mom looked away in disgust, knowing he would blame Brian again. “She’s got him wrapped around her little finger,” she thought in anger. As the four gathered in the den, Mom and Dad did not look at each other. Dad directed his words at his son, “I told you never to tease your sister again,” he threatened with anger barely under control. Brian remained silent during the tongue lashing, infuriated by the smug smile of his sister who was safe in her dad’s arms. The scene ended as Brian stomped out of the room and Mom gave Dad an angry look. They were obviously not a team when it came to raising their children!

Power Struggle

Such interaction only breeds more anger and upset. Mom may even go behind Dad's back to comfort Brian, since she feels he was unjustly criticized. Dad will feel his authority undermined. There will likely be war in the household once Brian became a teenager! This home is not a safe place!

The Power of WE

Take another look at the family scene. What would happen in the same situation if there were a united front? What would happen if the parents formed a WE?

Tiffany was upset. Her brother had teased her and she came running to her parents. "Brian laughed at me again," she began with tears in her eyes. What happened next almost seemed like a well-rehearsed sequence of events. Mom and Dad looked at each other with a knowing smile. Dad scooped Tiffany up in his arms and gave her a big hug. Mom called out to Brian, "Would you come here please? WE would like to talk to you." As the four gathered in the den, Mom and Dad looked at each other again and smiled. Dad began, "WE want the two of you to get along." Mom picked up the same idea and added, "So let's talk this over so WE can learn from what just happened." In the next few minutes, the truth came out and both admitted doing things to the other to escalate the situation. With peace restored, Brian and Tiffany went back to what they were doing. Mom and Dad smiled as their eyes met, obviously a team when it came to raising their children!

Family Scene

It was almost 10:00 p.m. Duane was up pacing the floor. His 14-year-old son was supposed to be in at 9:00. "Why don't you come to bed?" his wife called out. "He'll be here soon. Something probably happened to make him late." She got an immediate reaction: "Why do you always stand up for him? He knows you'll understand ... boy does he manipulate you." "So you think blowing up at him is the right way to handle this?" his wife shot back, "Some loving father you turned out to be!"

Duane felt his anger escalate, but before he could say another word, the door opened and there stood a defiant son. "Where have you been?" Duane demanded, dangerously close to the edge. "You are an hour late." "What's the big deal?" came the defiant answer. "You act as if I committed a crime!" Hearing the disrespect, Duane could hardly control his anger and hissed between his teeth, "You are grounded for the next month." "There, that will teach him a lesson," Duane rationalized to himself. "It's about time he knew who's boss around here."

Power Struggle

The father used his parental authority, not done out of loving concern for the son, but out of the need of the father to reassert control. The son chose an "I don't care" attitude to defy his father. He had plenty of resentment, since he felt like a 10-year-old when his father lectured him. The wife chose a "zinger" to express her frustration, implying that Duane was not a good father.

The Power of WE

Imagine the difference if the family functioned more out of concern for the WE!

It was almost 10:00 p.m. Duane was up pacing the floor. His 14-year-old son was supposed to be in at 9:00. "Why don't you come to bed," his wife called out. "He'll be here soon. Something probably happened to make him late." She got an immediate reaction: "I think WE should deal with this right when he comes home," Duane offered. "I don't think WE want him to get into a pattern of missing his curfew." "Thanks for your concern," his wife replied, "I'll come down and join you!"

The two of them started talking about how best to help their son mature, realizing that they needed to give him more freedom as he showed evidence of growing up. Right in the middle of their conversation, the door opened and there stood a defiant son. His two parents looked at each other and smiled. "You are an hour late," Duane observed, and then looked back at his wife. She added, "It was not very mature of you to stay out without letting us know." "I did make a bad choice," came the humble answer. "I'm sorry I didn't ask first!" Hearing the apology, Duane looked back at his wife and said, "You remember that WE agreed that if you did this ..." "I know," his son broke in, "I've just chosen to be grounded the rest of the week." "That's right," his mother said, smiling, "and maybe next week WE can talk over your curfew again since you are starting to grow up."

There is hope, no matter what is going on in your family right now.

Creating new patterns of family interaction is not easy; it requires intentional effort. Old habits won't change overnight, but it all begins with making WE more important than ME. This removes the power struggle and brings health to your family system.

Embarking on this type of journey may seem intimidating and difficult, even hopeless. But it is well worth the effort. Yes, you will face mistakes along the way, but even your mistakes become an opportunity for modeling the most powerful WE of all: the power of forgiveness.

Take a step back and look at this through a spiritual lens. Think about the incredible gift of having a child (after all, if you didn't think she was an incredible gift, you wouldn't be reading this book for insight). She was given to you by God the Father, the Creator of the world. He placed each of you into this world, but the world is far from perfect. Imperfection was not part of His design, as He created the world to be perfect (and if it had stayed that way, there would never be a conflict between you and your child).

The once-perfect world that God created became fractured and broken by hurt and sin. And our relationship to God our Father is also fractured. But because He loves us more than any parent ever could, He sent His Son to restore this relationship. Jesus Christ, God's very own Son, became the Savior of the world when He took the punishment for every hurt to the cross, died and was buried, then rose in victory three days later.

Now what might seem impossible becomes possible, because Christ is there to give you strength and hope. Christ is there to forgive you (and your child) for every wrong move. Christ is there to be at the center of your WE.

With Christ's presence to help form the WE, amazing things can happen to family relationships ... even those that have been dysfunctional for a long, long time. That is God's gift to your family!

About the Concept

The ME to WE concept created by Dr. Ludwig can make an immediate impact on your family life. This fresh approach will challenge you to shift your thinking from ME, or, “How am I going to fix this?” to WE, or “How can WE work this out as a family?” This strategy can apply to the big or small issues that families face and will prove especially helpful with the day-to-day challenges of parenting children.

The ME to WE concept as outlined in this booklet by Dr. Ludwig, is also the basis of a parenting workshop series offered by Lutheran Hour Ministries. The six engaging sessions combine video and interaction between participants to fully reveal the concept.

Whether you have learned about the ME to WE concept through this booklet or through the Parenting Families Workshop, the important thing is to put it into practice within your family today. Approaching everyday situations from a unified standpoint will help your family form a solid “WE” foundation that will follow your children into adulthood.

Visit **www.parentingfamilies.com** to get more information about the video personalities, and obtain additional resources on parenting.

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