

PROLOGUE

Do you ever wonder why families can't get along? Why do they bicker, argue and fight with one another?

It seems like husbands constantly disagree with their wives. Wives incessantly complain their husbands are uninvolved or controlling. Parents scream at their children, and children scowl at their parents. It's as if there's no end to this domestic turbulence in sight. Every once in a while you get a solemn reminder of how serious family problems can get when someone you know picks up the phone and calls you for help. No, you're not a professional counselor, but they want someone to talk to or maybe even a shoulder to cry on. What do you say? What do you do?

For sure, they want you to help them sort through their latest disagreements. They want some assurance and hope that things will calm down. But where do you go from there?

Well, I can tell you that if it wasn't for some of *our* good friends who weren't afraid to get involved, God only knows the predicament AJ, Jenny and their three children would be in. Frankly, if it weren't for the loving intervention of these Christian friends, their family would have been torn to shreds. It's an amazing story of determined Christian love, honesty, confrontation, commitment and discovery. So, here we go!

It all started December 29th, a couple of days before New Year's Eve. Like any other holiday, AJ spent it fighting with my sister Jenny and their kids Troy, Carrie and Tyler. They couldn't agree on anything, let alone on how to raise the kids. So the New Year's Eve school dance gave them something to disagree about like fresh meat to a hungry lion.

TO: CARTER
FROM: STU – THE NEW PARENT
SUBJECT: Time! When is there time?

Greetings to you, Mr. Carter! Is it true that confession is good for the soul? I sure hope so because I'm going to try it! I appreciate your willingness to email me back, but be sure to pass your reply on to everyone in the Parenting Co-op. I don't think my problem is that unique.

Carter, this parenting thing really has me spooked. Your last email helped me understand the huge responsibility of being an involved father for Tanya and Rusty. But frankly, I'm at a loss about how to do that effectively. I know Stacy and the children are counting on me. However, *knowing* something is quite different than *doing* something about it.

Right now, I know I don't give the children the time or the attention they deserve or need. Yesterday was a perfect example. I came home from work to a wife that was frustrated out of her mind because our son, Rusty, had spent the entire day discovering new ways to annoy her. The minute I walked in the door I could tell that she was about to wring somebody's neck, and I could only hope it wasn't mine.

I asked, "Is there anything I can do to help you?" Then I ducked behind the kitchen table. Without missing a beat, Stacy demanded that I take Rusty off her hands and do something with him before she taped his mouth shut and tied him to the lawn mower. Basically, I think she just wanted me to get him out of her hair for a while so

she could comb it. I was all right with that, so Rusty and I went outside and threw the ball around.

Can I confess something? I really didn't want to. I'll have to admit that it was fun for a while, but I was tired after a tough day at work. I was ready for dinner, if you know what I mean. As if that wasn't enough, after dinner Rusty wanted to play trucks, read a story and on and on it went for the entire evening. I was thrilled when Stacy said, "Tanya and Rusty, it's time for bed!"

Carter, it's like this almost every evening. For the first time in my life, I understand *why* men work late at the office and play a lot of golf. I've made this huge jump from basically being a self-centered, unbelieving single guy to being a self-centered, believing, married father of two. What an unbelievable leap! Now, most of my free time is taken up with my marriage and the rest of my free time the children suck up. I *do* have to work, you know. Plus, I like to relax a little before another day at the office.

I want to be a good husband and father but I realize now what a huge sacrifice that is. Please pray for me as I try to figure this mess out.

I bet you don't know about the latest development in our lives, but I'm not finished complaining yet. Don't misunderstand, I love Stacy. She's a wonderful mother. But I do feel that she has unrealistic expectations of me as a father. When I walk in the door, I think she wants me to stop everything else and give my total and undivided attention to her and the children. Has she forgotten how self-centered I am? It stresses me out just thinking about it.

I'd like to go somewhere sometime without the children. Have you ever felt like that? I've heard it said that parenting is a 100% fulltime job. Is that correct? I've also heard it said that marriage is a

100% fulltime job. Is that correct? My boss wants about $33^{1/3}\%$ of my days and I sleep another $33^{1/3}\%$. You do the math!

How can I be all things to all people who are making these unreasonable demands upon my day? Everyone is sucking the life right out of me, and I don't have enough time to brush my teeth. I'm sounding pretty self-centered, aren't I? Sorry about that, but I need to get it out of my system. Honestly, I want to be a good husband and father—as long as I can continue to be self-centered. I'm just kidding. I wouldn't hurt Stacy and the children for anything in the world. So, some of your hardcore advice would be helpful.

Now, to make matters worse, here's the latest development in our lives. Ever since I became a Christian, I've wanted to put my Christianity into shoe leather. You know, to do some kind of ministry. There's a side of me that really wants to help others. Since my life was such a mess before, now I'd like to help others avoid the same mess. So, I've changed professions. I'm no longer in the health fitness business. I took a job in the family fitness business. I'm now serving as part of a ministry team that works with broken families.

My job description classifies me as a “resident assistant” in a foster child care facility within the Social Services system. While it's mainly an office position, I have a lot of contact with children and parents of many dysfunctional homes. It's a great opportunity for me to learn about family life through the mistakes of others. My family has already benefited from some of my experiences.

While I'm trying to put into practice what I tell others, I'm constantly confronted with my lack of willingness to work on my own family. I feel like such a hypocrite! That's what makes matters even worse. Here I am at my job, trying to help others work through their family problems and at the same time, suffering from all the

guilt feelings because I'm failing to deal with my own family. As you can see, I NEED YOUR PRAYERS AND COUNSEL!

Stacy says, "Hi!" And I look forward to your next email.

Stu (Mr. Self-centered)

P.S. I had a question about the mother of Hophni and Phinehas. Now I know that these two sons were trouble from the beginning, but is their mother responsible for her behavior and her neglect of disciplining the children? Another question: Is it all right with you if I pass along your emails to my co-workers? They're very interested in our Parenting Co-op idea.

TO: STU and THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: The advantage of early detection

Well, Stu, it's true that confession is good for the soul. I appreciate your honesty. You've pinpointed the grass root problem for dads and moms in general. It's the problem of self-centeredness. Unless parents get their eyes off of themselves and onto the children, their parenting will surely suffer.

Being convicted about your lack of involvement with the children isn't comfortable, but it's certainly necessary. Every parent (I mean **every** parent) could do some serious soul searching on this important subject. Then, as you have done, get some help from someone and commit to making some fundamental changes in their family life.

Let me give you a few tips. Stu, here's Tip Number One: I like to recommend that parents establish "goal setting" as a regular way of measuring their parenting progress. It never hurts for any parent to set up goals or objectives to serve as a rudder or a compass to guide the family. How about setting a goal to develop better consistency in discipline, or a goal to throttle an angry voice, or one to limit the amount of personal TV time? Use your imagination.

There are plenty of other goals that can help grow your family. In fact, why not get the kids involved in the process? Maybe the children would like to help set some goals, and hold you accountable to your new commitments. As your accountability partners,

they'll be better at catching you slipping back into old habit patterns than *you* will.

I try to remind myself how easy it is to deceive myself. I can easily believe that I'm doing a better job in my family than I actually am. Can you relate? My kids always held my feet pretty close to the fire. That made it hard for self-deception to creep in.

Tip Number Two: After leaving work, learn how to put it behind you and train yourself to relax and focus on your family. When you first arrive home, spend some quality time with Stacy. Let her know how much you love her. Share a little "party" together, like something to drink and a little snack, while you talk about each other's day.

Then it's off to the children. Demonstrate your affection to each of them and be sure to make good eye contact. Find out what they've been up to. Listen carefully, then share something with them about your day—maybe some lessons learned and what God's doing in your life. After a couple of weeks, everyone will enjoy your arrival.

Tip Number Three: Be creative! Remember to not just spend time with the children, but the *right kind* of time. Spend time teaching, training, having fun, laughing, joking, teasing, wrestling, playing catch, washing the car, changing the oil, mowing the grass, picking up after the dog, fishing, hunting, shoveling out the garage, disinfecting their rooms, cooking and having popcorn together.

Something surprising happens when you spend the right kind of time with kids. You're able to do a lot of other things by yourself without feeling guilty because their need for attention has been satisfied. Furthermore, kids need to learn to be alone, be creative and develop their own entertainment without demanding so much

from their parents. They need the challenge of personal creativity and concentration without distraction. In our frazzle dazzle world, children need to learn to entertain themselves without outside stimulation and I'm not suggesting that computer games are the answer. It's unnecessary for parents to always drop everything and care for their every need. Plan your quiet times and times alone well in advance. The Bible tells us there is a time for silence. How does that fit with your family?

So at the end of the day, take a little time for yourself. Relax with just Stacy. Hmmmmm! Good! Recycle and renew, as they say! Learn to maximize those moments. Don't just get caught in the recliner with the remote in hand (unless, of course, there's a good sporting event or a cooking show for sissies you can watch. Don't worry, Stacy, I'm just teasing the old boy.) Recharge your batteries by reading, meditating or playing a game with Stacy.

Now let me try to answer your question about the responsibility of mothers in the task of parenting. Yes, mothers *are* responsible for their role in the family, as was the mother of Hophni and Phinehas. If a mother abuses her child, of course, she's responsible for that unacceptable behavior. If a mother screams and yells at her children, if she fails to properly discipline and train them, she *is* responsible for her personal actions. If she becomes a perpetrator of negative attitudes and actions in the family by nagging, complaining or having fits of anger, you bet she's one responsible woman.

But remember the Bible tells us the father is the head of the family, and the primary responsibility for the family rests on *his* shoulders. As a spiritual leader, he needs to protect the family from all abusive speech and actions, including those from the mother.

You understand there's a great deal of disagreement about the subject of male leadership today. Regardless of what some women say, it's by default that they provide leadership to the family—not

by desire or choice. This is true. Mothers are taking up the slack because the fathers are simply more and more uninvolved. So often dads are guilty of family neglect and absenteeism. They've delegated the vast majority of the parenting responsibility to their wives. Over time they've gradually slipped out of their leadership position. But it was never meant to be this way.

Frankly, I've never heard a mother complain that the father of her children is spending far too much time loving and being involved with the children. Have you? Quite to the contrary! They don't want their husbands to just come in the house screaming and yelling, barking orders, demanding obedience and flipping on the TV. No, their desire is for fathers to get involved. Not just playing trucks, but getting involved in the tasks of discipline, training and teaching the children. Enough said!

Now let's go on to this subject of "early detection." I'll explain it this way. I believe I can safely say that most families have internal problems of one sort or another. These internal problems range from minor marital disagreements and parenting problems to much more severe issues. We live in a pretty sick and sinful world, and we're pretty sick and sinful people. It's no wonder our families struggle to get along. What do we expect? We put a sinful man, a sinful woman and sinful children in the same house and tell them to stay together and live happily ever after. It's just not that simple. I don't care what Hollywood says.

We all share the same tendency to ignore the initial signs and symptoms of problems. We lie to ourselves and to others (when in fact we are hurting inside) and delay getting the necessary help. We do a major cover-up by grinning on the outside, padding our successes and denying our failures.

From a counselor's perspective, I can tell you that most families who end up in my office arrive there far too late. Stu, it's like the

families that will come to your foster care center for help. They've needed help for a long time but have continued to ignore the problem. They've missed the opportunity for early detection. They just go along telling everyone that all is well when, in fact, they're fast approaching marital and family bankruptcy. While couples know that the day of reckoning is right around the corner, they just keep putting up a good front as if everything is hunky dory. *Next* year, they'll worry about the problems.

Living like this causes us to focus more on covering up the problems than dealing with them. We become more concerned about what others think than what God is attempting to correct in our lives.

Go talk to your doctor. He'll tell you that early detection is of supreme importance when it comes to medical illnesses. It can be the difference between life and death. The same is true with the family. Early detection of problems in a family can be the difference between happiness, divorce and delinquency. I have a physical examination every year for this very reason. If I have a problem, I can get immediate treatment.

Men are good at avoiding annual medical examinations as well as ignoring family problems. When my loving wife calls some family failure to my masculine attention (ha!), I'm tempted to just dismiss the problem, grab my racquet and head for the gym. Men, we're guilty of not paying attention to the problems that are eating away at our wife and kids. How many of us put family matters off to another day? Maybe tomorrow we'll tackle the discipline problem with Junior, or next month we'll deal with our lack of communication. Until then, just keep a positive attitude and no one will ever know the difference.

You wanna bet? God knows. Just ask Eli's pallbearers. Eli knew early on that things were not right with his sons, but did nothing. He ignored the signs of early detection. Shame on him!

Say what? Shame on me! I know for a fact that I don't pay attention to Minnie and my children as I should, either. I think it's time to start paying attention. Our children need us to get involved in the discipline, the teaching and the training. Parenting is a fulltime assignment and one heck of a lot of work. It deserves your undivided attention. So shut off the TV and get with it, you rascal!

Speaking of early detection systems, my stomach's growling. I'm a bit hungry. I think there may be signs of prime rib in the kitchen. I'll check with Minnie, if you don't mind.

Carter

TO: STU and THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Training parents vs. digging postholes

Thanks for the phone call, Stu! So Stacy likes the idea of early detection. Most women do. This whole matter of dads getting involved with the everyday matters at home is a hot button for the mothers of our children.

By the way, have you ever heard the joke about how many city-slackers it takes to drill a posthole? The answer is “a whole bunch.” It takes one city-slacker to hold the drill and a whole bunch of others to spin the tractor! Well, let me tell you this was not far from the truth the other day. I basically lived out this little joke. I needed to dig a few postholes, so I decided to invite some teenagers out to the ranch for a workday.

Even though they didn’t know a lot about fencing, I figured I could teach them how to dig a posthole in about four minutes. “It’s so simple,” I thought. “Dig the hole, take all the dirt out of the hole, put the post in the hole, put the dirt back in the hole and finally, tamp the hole tight.”

About three minutes into my explanation of the game plan to my city friends, I realized that I had, in fact, miscalculated their ability to comprehend the details of posthole digging. (They’d probably never seen anything like it on a computer game.)

Well, I thought, first things first. I’ll introduce them to the tools necessary for digging a posthole, and then demonstrate how to use them. The first item on the list was a posthole digger, or “dirt twee-

zers,” as it’s referred to at the ranch. (A posthole digger actually looks like a very large tweezers used by the Jolly Green Giant to pull his nose hairs.)

You don’t need to be very smart to use these dirt tweezers. You simply put your hands high up on the handles and drive the diggers into the ground. Then you spread the handles outward, lift the dirt tweezers out of the hole and move it to the right or left away from the hole. Then you bring the handles back together. This allows the dirt to dump out of the dirt tweezers. Then you repeat the process, with the objective that you hit the same hole you started.

This was a problem for my new friends. Ideally, the same guy digs away at the hole for the first couple of minutes then someone relieves him and takes over. I say ideally! As it worked out, these city-slackers were good for just one or two attempts at hitting the hole. After about 30 minutes, our hole was 27 inches wide and about nine inches deep. One teenage slacker was repairing his shoe with some duct tape after slamming the dirt tweezers down on his foot. I thought that only one near-amputation in that group was a pretty good statistic.

After lunch, we reached the proper depth of 2 ½ feet. Sadly, I had a hole wide enough to park my stock trailer in. For a post, I wanted to use an eight-foot railroad tie. These railroad ties weigh upwards of 100 pounds. It takes one man, or five city-slackers, to handle a tie. So I went ahead and dropped the post into the hole, hoping we could maybe finish before suppertime.

Getting the post to stand straight up would have been a lot easier if they would have listened to the kid with the purple hair. He didn’t think that the level should be set on top of the post, but rather placed lengthwise down the side of the post. Pooling their IQ’s, they decided that he was right. Since there are three bubbles on my level, the problem then was in deciding which bubble on the

level should be used. They figured they'd use the bubble at the bottom of the level because it's closer to the ground. Just as well. They were sitting down most of the time anyway, and the lower bubble is easier to read when you're sitting down.

Now it was time to put the dirt back into the hole and tamp the dirt tight. One thing for sure, they didn't like my tamp bar. I don't know why! It's a collector's item. I made it out of an old drive shaft from my broken down pickup. Since it weighs a ton, it really pounds the dirt tight in the hole. This assumes, of course, that the user of the tamp bar can hit the hole and has enough muscle attached to his arm to lift it.

These city-slackers God gave me for the day didn't have a muscle attached to their arms. What actually moved the tamp bar up and down was their excessive complaining, combined with obscene gestures with their tongues. Kneeling next to the hole is the best position for using this type of tamp bar, but my young friends didn't want to get their knees dirty. Besides, it was too uncomfortable to bend down that far. Even I could understand that dilemma. Since they wear jeans about 14 sizes too big, and since the crotches of those jeans hang clear down to their kneecaps, kneeling was next to impossible. However, I found that a little cold water down the canyon that appeared at the rear of their jeans was helpful in getting them to pull their pants up where they belonged.

We finished putting in four posts that day. My city-slacker friends were sure glad to sit down at the dinner table for some steak that night. You should have heard the talk around the table. You'd think they were fence post professionals and A-1 ranch hands. I gotta hand it to them, though. They didn't know the first thing about dirt tweezers, or how to tamp dirt around a post but they were sure willing to learn. I was proud of their determination and perseverance. Not only had I made some new friends, but I also learned some new vocabulary: "Dude!" "Awesome, Dude!"

They were pretty excited about their new battle scars (blisters on their hands, slivers in their knees and new little tiny muscles dangling from their biceps) because apparently those will impress their girlfriends. I think I'll try that technique on Minnie.

Hey Minnie! Minnie! Minnie! Do you want to feel my new muscles dangling from my biceps? Say what?.....Go where?..... Do what?.....

For some reason, Minnie doesn't seem that impressed with my new muscles. Well, I guess that's marriage for ya!

Now down to business. I want to use this little story to teach everyone a little lesson. Our wives may not want to feel our tiny little bicep muscles, but one thing is for sure. They're very impressed when their men dig into the challenge of being the best dads and husbands in the world. You see, becoming a father is a very frightening thing

How many of us knew a thing about parenting when our first baby arrived? I didn't know the first thing about being a daddy, feeding the baby (which I wasn't good at), changing the diapers (which I refused to do), unfolding the stroller (which required more IQ than I could muster up), operating the car seats (which drove me crazy), dealing with barfing—"hurling" according to my new friends (which generally made me nauseated), winding up the automatic swing (which made me seasick) and getting up several times in the middle of the night to nurse the baby (which I didn't have the right plumbing for). Now I'm numb to all these things (except changing diapers) because I am a seasoned dad and grandpa.

As I look back on my parenting, it was one lesson after another. Learning, growing and expanding my parenting skills. None of it came naturally for me, but I learned just like my city-slacker friends had to learn about postholes.

Whether you are digging a posthole for the first time or parenting your first child, there are tools that make the job much easier. Over the next several emails, I'd like to introduce you to some of the tools that make the parenting process an exciting adventure for both Mother and Father.

Before I sign off, the Bible gives us a word of wisdom right at the get-go of parenting. In the Book of Proverbs 22:6, the wise man tells parents to “train up a child.” In other words, kids don't raise themselves as much as lazy parents might think so. Children need to be *trained* by their parents in order to grow up successfully. Training is methodical, intentional, continual and time-consuming. This is where so many parents fail. They often think that training a child is a part-time occupation or one you do when you feel like it. Wrong!! Unsuccessful parents generally don't have a strategy to their parenting, but rather attempt to train their children using any method that makes sense at the moment. This *really* doesn't work, nor is this training! You need tools for this job of training and I hope to give you some suggestions. Are you ready to go to work?

I'll send out another email next week. In the meantime, get some gloves and pull up your pants. There's a lot of hard work ahead for the growing parent. By the way, parenting, like tamping a posthole, works better if you're on your knees—God *does* answer prayer.

Later “Awesome Dudes”!
Carter

TO: CARTER
FROM: AJ
SUBJECT: Fishing isn't real fishing
until you bring Carter along!

After reading your last couple of emails, I thought you might just want to play horse. What do you think? I'll be the front end, and you just be yourself!

I couldn't believe it. How do you get off ripping on dads that way? The ladies are more involved, but they sure don't know how to handle kids. They let the kids get away with everything. Maybe you should spend some time ragging on them. (I can hardly wait for your next email.) Well, enough of that discussion.

I haven't contacted you since your vacation to Texas but wanted to remind you to practice shooting your gun before you come to hunt pigs again. Your aim is awful! You couldn't hit a wild pig in the barn, let alone one on a dead run across the Texas desert. Good thing your bullet hit that cactus, or it probably would have drilled my ATV. Are you this good at elk hunting? Maybe in October we can find out.

By the way, why didn't you tell me you might get seasick out on the open water? Just wanted you to know that I felt sorry for you, but I was having so much fun catching fish I couldn't stop to loosen your belt. Look at it this way: at least what you were doing had some positive effect—chumming the fish. Sorry!

Did you enjoy your bath in the ocean, by the way? When you got off the boat you were as white as a sheet, and your clothes were spic and span. You looked perfectly DEAD!

Carter, I'm just getting even for all the razzing you gave me over the menu. I happen to like hot dogs when fishing and hunting. I'll say one thing: steak and mashed potatoes mixed with hot coffee and ice cream did sound pretty good at your hunting camp.

On a more serious note, you asked me a very pointed question after we left the marina and wanted me to wait at least a week before answering. It's been ten days now and you've probably forgotten the question. Anyway, the question was, and I quote, "Do you want me (Carter) to help you and Jenny with your marriage and family problems?" Well Carter, you're fun to hunt and fish with but the answer to your question is "NO." Especially after your last two very biased emails about the men.

Really, I don't want counseling from you or anybody else. I have to do the anger management counseling through the court order but when that's finished, I'm done with counseling. I'm already getting plenty of counsel from Jenny that I don't want or need as well as from her nosy sister, Sue, who needs to mind her own business. Carter, I don't want to be a hard nose but this is my personal stuff, not community stuff. OK?

What makes me angry is that everyone's blaming me for the problems around here. Remember that kids will be kids and they suffer the consequences for being stupid and rebellious, not me. To make matters worse, Jenny even wants a separation as if I'm the problem instead of the kids. She's pretty likely to get it because I'm tired of screwing around with this mess.

From now on let's talk fishing, NOT FAMILY. Is that a deal? And take care of your aim. It sucks!

AJ

TO: AJ
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Go ahead and paddle your own boat

AJ, thanks for the wonderful trip to the gulf. I'll never forget the fishing and throwing up. Hunting pigs by ATV was a total blast. Is that legal? When I lay quietly on my bed, I still get the sensation of being at sea, bending over the rail feeding fish—or bouncing around on the handlebars of an ATV. I don't know which it is, but it's real. I've recovered now, no thanks to you, my slacker friend. Seriously, thanks again for the fun!

So you think I've been picking on the guys. You haven't seen anything yet. The only reason you're bristling over my email is because I hit the nail right on the head. Your head! Sorry if I offended you, but I figure God gave you those broad shoulders for something more than just supporting your oversized head. Relax, man, and know that I love you a lot. (By the way, I like it when you bark at me! It lets me know you're alive deep down in your soul.)

I appreciate your honesty about counseling with you and Jenny. If you want to “paddle your own boat” then it's your call, and it's OK with me. You're right! It's your family, your kids, your wife, your problems, your mess and if you're not careful it'll be your LOSS! I'll be available if you want to talk, but in the meantime I'll respect your wishes.

I'd like to continue sending Jenny my emails about parenting if that's OK. She seems discouraged about parenting, and possibly my emails will encourage her in the future. If it's not OK let me know, and I'll send them anyway.

Now AJ, I'm not counseling you but wanted to pass along one parting observation about our pig hunt. Those pigs were running as fast as they could because we posed a life or death threat to them. If they slowed down too much, we were going to kill them. They did everything possible to avoid us. Right?

So why are *you* running, AJ? Nobody's out to shoot you! From what I can see, we all just want to be friends and do what friends do—help each other. None of us wants to highlight your problems as if you're the only one with a corner on problems. We've all got some. If you'll remember correctly, I let you help me when I was barfing all over everywhere. Didn't I? You put a cold washcloth on my forehead, didn't you? It was OK with me, right? You kept checking in on me to make sure I wasn't dead, and even cleaned up after me when I didn't get to the rail fast enough. Right? Furthermore, you told me where to fish and what to fish with, when I was able to walk.

What makes it OK for you to help me when I'm suffering or needing guidance, but wrong for me to help you when you're suffering and in need of guidance? I'll tell you what makes it wrong. Your ego, that's what! You're of the opinion that you don't need the help of others because you can take care of yourself. Isn't that right, AJ? Just remember, dear friend, that you put your pants on one leg at a time just like the rest of us egocentric males.

If you really want to help your family, then you'll throw your pride overboard, humble yourself and admit that you could use some help from a pretty lousy fisherman. In fact, I understand he's got some steak and taters to give you if you'd just quit running. It's worth considering!

Next time we go fishing bring a bucket, will ya?

Carter

TO: GERRY, SUE and THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Before we get the tools,
let's understand the job better

Sue, I got your phone message. Thanks, and I'm sorry about AJ and Jenny. It seems appropriate that we sit back and respect AJ's wishes, and trust God with the results. Always remember that God can get AJ's attention in a heartbeat and God's Word "...will not return to Him empty without accomplishing what He desires and without succeeding in the matter for which He sent it." We have a great God!!

Jenny must put first things first, and her spiritual condition is first. Unless she grows in her spiritual understanding and becomes more acquainted with what God is doing, we're almost at a standstill. I share your concern, and it's possible she will leave AJ and the kids and won't return. I've seen it happen before. But let's pray that God will intervene and change her heart.

In the meantime, we need to be proactive. Let's give her some options besides bailing out. The next time you talk with her, you could go over some Bible verses that will give her some hope. Show her Hebrews 13:5,6, that says, "...I will never desert you nor will I ever forsake you" and "the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid." Remind her of her vows "to love and cherish, for better or for worse" even though these times are certainly on the for worse side of the equation. Tell her how God has changed your life and marriage. This just might give her a reason to hang around a little more.

Tell her how difficult life becomes for those who reject God's plan to salvage broken marriages and hurting families. The Bible

does tell us that the “way of the transgressor is hard.” I suppose it’s hard because it’s so crowded with unbelievers. Let’s pray that the Lord will bring both of these friends to salvation.

Gerry and Sue, you gave me an important reminder that shows me how insightful you are: *nobody would go into the tool shed and grab a whole bunch of tools before they knew what job was going to be done.* In my last email to the Parenting Co-op, I told you I was going to provide some tools but failed to help you understand the extent of the job we’ve all agreed to tackle. That makes about as much sense as telling my sons to get up at 5:30 AM, go down to the barn and load up on tools before telling them what the job was for the day. If we’re working calves, they’d need to get the branding irons, hair clippers, de-horning equipment, vaccination syringes, and the scalpel for castrating the bull calves. They’d also need some cooking oil, a fry pan and flour for cooking the Rocky Mountain Oysters, which make a real nice snack after wrestling calves all day. But if we’re fixing fence, totally different tools are called for. They’d need the dirt tweezers, shovel, fence stretcher, tamp bar, fence pliers, staples. Gloves would help protect their hands but they always forget those.

For our purposes in this co-op, the job ahead is parenting. Let me repeat that. The job is PARENTING! In my last email, I shared Proverbs 22:6. It says to “train up a child in the way he should go.”

Now let’s review those words. Who is to do the training here anyway? Grandma? No! How about the baby sitter? No! Well, what about the staff of Sunday school teachers? No! How about the school? No! What about a child’s friends? No! Maybe the sheriff’s department? No! Well then, *who in the world is to train the children?*

Let’s get one thing straight, right here and now. *A father and a mother are responsible for training their children. Nobody else!* Parenting

is a combined effort of a concerned, loving, involved and determined dad and mom. These days, so many other sources compete against parents for the opportunity to train and care for their children. From day care centers to extended family members, many parents are guilty of shifting their parental responsibility onto the backs of others while they carry on with their own self-centered, personal interests. Even our government thinks it's a surrogate parent, for crying out loud!

There's no question that others occasionally assist parents in the upbringing of our children. Everyone benefits from friends and family who reinforce Mom and Dad's role with the kids. It's great for these dear people to give Mom and Dad a break. But make no mistake. The job description says it's the parents who are to train their children, not others.

Is it time to go and get some parenting tools? Not yet!!! Well then, what's still missing at this point? Come on and think! What's still missing before we go and get some equipment?

Here's the point. "Parenting" is a very broad job description. It's a lot like the term "ranching." Within the term ranching there are many different types of ranches. Ours is a cow/calf operation. Others are yearling operations. Ours is a Hereford ranch. Others have Angus, Limousine or Longhorn cattle. Some ranches run buffalo, and other ranches have elk herds. I've even heard of emu or ostrich ranches.

Each ranch is very different and very specialized. Each one needs careful management in order to maximize profits. Some raise alfalfa hay, others grass hay, and still others harvest grains. You couldn't manage these different ranches using the very same method, could you? Obviously not! They're all very different and need to be individually understood.

If you build a barbed wire fence at a quarter horse operation, chances are you'll cut the heck out of a bunch of horses before you can say "jackrabbit." On the other hand, if you use smooth wire to hold in a herd of Angus cows, you'll be chasing them all over your neighbor's garden. Building a nice four-foot-high barbed wire fence might be the ticket for keeping your yearling steers at home, but it won't do a thing to stop elk. If you feed the same food to ostriches, pigs and buffaloes, you could end up with big birds that oink and buffaloes that lay jumbo-sized eggs! Whoa!

As there are different types of ranches, there are also different elements that must be considered when it comes to parenting. One size *doesn't* fit all in ranching or parenting. We must begin to think in terms of the specific needs of a child or family. What works for our family may not work for your family and vice versa. Families are all different.

Minnie and I have four children, one of each kind. In other words, all our children are different and have very different needs. What works with one of our children doesn't necessarily work with all of them. While one of our children might easily be held in with a four-foot fence, another one might need a ten-foot fence. One might benefit from barbed wire, whereas another child might need smooth wire. The discipline that we dish out to one of our children might be highly inappropriate for another. Every one of our children is different and needs very specialized attention. This is one of the mistakes parents make. They apply the same procedures of training and discipline to all their children, regardless of how different they are from one another. This is the wrong approach, and results in frustrated and disobedient kids. If you don't believe me, just try putting a square peg in a round hole.

In the Proverbs 22:6 passage, the words "should go" direct us to this important principle. The words "should go" speak of a child's

individual makeup. In other words, a parent is to “train up a child” in the way he “should go” or *according to that child’s individual gift or bent*.

Do you know that your child came into your family with a pre-determined bent? You bet! Just notice Psalm 139:13-17. The psalmist reminds his readers that (I’m going to paraphrase a bit), “God formed your child’s inward parts like a tapestry while that child was still in the mother’s womb. God formed your child’s skeleton in that protected place. God’s eyes watched over the embryo, and in His book, all of your child’s days were written and ordained when there were none of them.”

You see, our children are delivered to us by God after He has established their individuality and uniqueness. God does this before they’re even born. It follows then that as parents, we’re to apply the tools of training and discipline to our children *understanding their individual makeup and uniqueness*. That means *every child is entitled to his or her individualized parenting*.

It would be wrong for me to discipline my oldest son the exact same way that I do my younger son. My oldest daughter is a totally different personality than my younger daughter. It would be frustrating to both of them if I trained them in exactly the same fashion. From the moment they were born, they were very different. Let me illustrate it to you this way from a hospital delivery room:

- Our first son made his entrance as a very amiable baby boy. He emerged slowly into the doctor’s warm hands, looked pleasantly at Minnie and me, and smiled at the doctors and nurses. “Hi, everyone,” he said. “I love you all. I’m going to be a good baby. You all are going to like living with me. Is there anything I can do for you, Mom?”

- Now our second child was an exceptionally conscientious and observant child. As she peeked into her new world in the delivery room, she noted every detail. After a few moments, with a serious look on her face she said, “I’m a little concerned about the quality control in this delivery room. I notice some of the instruments haven’t been put back in their proper places. And was it really necessary to use those forceps? Doctor, how long has it been since you received your medical degree? What was your specialty? And by the way, who tied my umbilical cord? It needs to be a little tighter, and it’s a little off center.”
- In contrast, our third child was an emotionally dominant baby boy. He was barely over his anger about being slapped on his behind when he scanned the delivery room and said, “What’s the deal here? Who’s in charge? Where are my bags? I’ve got places to go and things to do. Let’s get moving! By the way, which one of you slapped me? Dad, get the attorney on the phone!”
- Our last baby was a little girl who reveled in being relational. She entered the delivery room and excitedly said, “Isn’t this great? Look at all the people who are here for my birthday! Where’s the cake? Let’s have a party! Don’t worry about cleaning up the delivery room, let’s just have some fun together!”

Can you see how different they are? It’s been that way since Bible times. From way back, God has been making siblings different from each other. The first known brothers were Cain and Abel. They had the same parents, but it seems Abel was much more sensitive to God, whereas Cain was more self-willed. And what about Jacob and Esau? The Bible tells us that Jacob was a bit of a sissy,

while Esau was a hunter and a man of the field. David's two boys, Solomon and Absalom, were marked with differences. Absalom lived by his looks; Solomon lived by his brains.

My point is simply this: some kids are born with a happy disposition and others are negative. Some are optimistic and others pessimistic; some angry, some easygoing. So don't try to make your children all the same. Do your level best NOT to compare them to each other, but parent them as individuals. Comparing one child against another is so destructive. Your child is an individual, and wants to be treated like one.

As parents, we are responsible to understand the differences between each of our children and parent accordingly. We need to know who they are and what makes them different from everyone else. We must discover how they individually learn, what frustrates them, what unique kind of discipline fits them and what angers them.

So, how do you begin the process of studying or learning more about your children? Proverbs 20:11-12 says, "It is by his deeds that a lad distinguishes himself if his conduct is pure and right. The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made both of them." In other words, *talk* with them, *listen* to them and *observe* their attitudes.

Take them to the library or places of special interest to learn what they like to read about. Ask yourself if your child is more emotional or thoughtful than other kids. Also, if "water seeks its own level," then what kind of friends does your child like to be around? If one of your kids relates better to you than to his mother, then what does that tell you about the individual needs of that child? Does your child like to read books or goof around? Does your child work well alone, or are friendships very important to him?

Learn what's unique about your child. That's the assignment before you pick up the first tool and start the job of parenting. Yes, some of this we learn as we go along but we must not forget its importance as we go. KNOW YOUR CHILD is the first step in successful parenting. We'll discuss this more in future emails.

Bottom line: don't try to make your kids be like you. **They're individuals!** Allow them to be themselves and train them accordingly. If one of your children is sensitive, you'd better be careful that he doesn't interpret being sent to the corner as your personal rejection of him. Before you have a child write "I won't cuss out Mom" 10,000 times or send the child to his room to act out his anger, you'd better make sure what you're doing is in the best interest of the child in the long run. For some children, an ice cream cone or a trip to the park is a better way to discipline. Think about it!

Let's review what we have in place. Parenting is the job we've signed up for, and **knowing our children** is the first step in that process. I call this *individualized parenting*. Maybe now we can talk about some tools that will help in the process of getting our kids out of the house in good shape "so that when they are mature, they will not depart from their training."

Till a later date!

Carter

P.S. By the way, what's for dinner? I'm hoping for a high cholesterol, high protein and high calorie meal. My wife has been on this diet thing and it's like living in a refugee camp. Pray for me.

TO: CARTER
FROM: JENNY
SUBJECT: Where did we jump track?

Carter, it was terrific to get to know you and Minnie while you were visiting the state of Texas!

Having dinner together at Stu and Stacy's was a lot of fun. Thanks for including us! AJ doesn't care much about getting together with other couples, but he told me later that it was a hoot. Of course, he enjoyed making fun of your fishing and hunting experiences, and good old Stu just chimed right in with his own teasing. I must say you were a pretty good sport about the whole thing. Frankly, AJ doesn't have a lot of friends but he seems to connect with you and Stu. That's encouraging to me.

However, it hasn't helped our marriage one bit. As I sit here alone tonight reading your latest email, I'm trying to figure out where we went wrong. I want to get my children back home! But Social Services tell us we need to get some better parenting skills before any of that can happen. I don't see how that's even possible, because AJ refuses to talk with me. He thinks only of himself. Why else would he be withdrawing more and more, instead of facing the problem?

But what else can I expect? That's who he is! He's not been a husband or a father for a long time. Of course, my nagging and constant complaining haven't helped the situation either. Stacy's been showing me in the Bible how Israel was such a nagging and complaining nation, and how much God hated their complaining. They were never content and she says I'm somewhat the same. But Carter,

I've just wanted so much more from our home life and thought that enough nagging and complaining might eventually convince AJ to change. I guess I wanted a family that lived in harmony instead of a family like my parents'. I wanted to laugh and grow old together with AJ. I was hoping to take fun family vacations without all the screaming and arguing. Oh well. Another dream down the drain!

You emailed everyone about "early detection." Since the early part of detection is gone for us, I'll try to come up with some later detection ideas. Since we do need a better understanding of our parenting, I'm making a list of parenting patterns that might be helpful so you can better understand us. Maybe our detection is better late than never.

Here goes:

1. Both of us are easily frustrated with our disobedient and disrespectful children. Actually, we're frustrated *period*! Since our kids are older, discipline always seems to be a battle of the wills. It usually leads to screaming and outbursts of anger.
2. AJ and I never discuss our parenting. In fact, we don't discuss anything. We take our marriage problems out on the children.
3. AJ is very strict and I'm more lenient. The children are afraid of AJ, but he feels that I'm a pushover. Maybe I feel sorry for the children because he's so hard on them. Sometimes it seems I need their affirmation, since I don't get any from AJ.
4. We discipline by time-outs, taking away privileges and grounding. Neither of us is very consistent with any discipline. We ground one of the kids for a month, then cave in three days later. It's just too much of a hassle.
5. AJ is gone a lot, and the parenting falls on me. I resent it and get angry over his absence.

6. Even when we do things together, we aren't together. Can you understand this? Nobody is happy with anybody!
7. We discipline for the moment, without considering what to do for the long haul. *Getting control of the situation was always more important than figuring out how we could prevent the situation from happening in the first place.*

I guess every parent can relate to some of the things on my list, but I feel we've missed the boat on all of them. I wonder if it's even realistic to think that, at this stage, we can turn this mess around. Carter, can AJ learn to be a better dad? Is it even possible for me to be a better mother and wife? Remember, I'm no spring chicken!

Maybe all this later detection has just confirmed how mortally wounded our family is. Is it better to just bury it and move on? Why not just put this family out of its misery?

One other thing, as I read your email, God seems to be a very big part of your parenting. Where has He been in my family? Does He even care about what's going on down here in Texas? Gerry and Sue are Christians. Do they have guarantees that their children will turn out fine? What about Stu and Stacy? How does God fit into parenting anyway? That's my question.

Carter, I know you can't answer all my questions at once. Nor do I think there are even answers to all my questions. But I do look forward to receiving your emails, because they are a speck of light in a very dark tunnel. I think they're even more helpful than phone calls because I can read them over and over again. I also set them on the coffee table so AJ can read them as well. Maybe God will give him some new eyeglasses.

Love to you and Minnie,
Jenny

TO: JENNY and THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Think Sacrifice and Relationship

Jenny, thanks for being so vulnerable. I know it will encourage all the others in our little group. I can assure you that we all love you. We've experienced failure with our children as well. So hang in there! As I read through your list, I could relate to all of them. My personal parenting history is marked with regret and failure as well. I'm glad you're in the Parenting Co-op since it's made up of a bunch of struggling parents. What makes our group special is that we all want to be better parents, and are not embarrassed to face our failings. That's pretty rare.

Let's first discuss your list in a very **general way** because in the future I'll be sending emails that deal more specifically with it. When you look at the seven points on your list, it tells me two very specific things about your parenting style. The first is that your parenting is driven by self-centeredness. Secondly, your parenting lacks sound relationships. The first you can't do with, and the second you can't do without.

Self-centeredness kills everything that is good and necessary about parenting. It must be done away with. You can't parent successfully if your focus is on self-interest. Simply put, if a mom and dad can eliminate their self-centeredness and sacrificially build healthy relationships with their children, then parenting becomes a piece of cake. It might be upside-down cake, but it's cake nonetheless.

Generally speaking, parents are very self-centered and lack meaningful relationships with their children. Often parents know very little about personal sacrifice and selfless relationship building with their children. I want to be careful here because you might misunderstand my point. I know parents who would say, “We sacrifice all the time. We’re not self-centered! Look at all the money we spend on these lousy kids. We buy their food, wash their clothes and put a roof over their heads! If that isn’t sacrifice, then what is?”

Let me remind you of something. Some of the most abusive homes I encounter have all these material things, and often more. What I’m talking about is selfless relationship building. I’m talking about relationships that are carved out of selflessness, not self-centeredness. There’s a big difference. I’m describing a mom and dad who are willing to give up *what* they want to do, *the way* they want to do it and *when* they want it done in order to give time and energy to building meaningful relationships with their children on their children’s terms. These are the kinds of relationships that draw your children to you so they want to be with you, love you and follow in your steps. Do you and AJ have this kind of relationship with your children? It doesn’t sound like it to me. How about Gerry and Sue? What about Stacy and Stu? If you don’t, then *that’s precisely where you need to begin.*

We’ve already talked about the importance of knowing your child in good parenting. Step #2 is changing your relationships. Folks, the backbone of successful parenting is relationships—selfless, sacrificial relationships. The families whose children are doing well are families with good relationships between the parents and children. I don’t care if they’re Christian or non-Christian families. Those children who are struggling generally have poor relationships with their parents. It’s as simple as that!

There's nothing novel about this. It's just as true with God's kids and our relationship with Him. People who are living for God generally have a good relationship with Jesus Christ. On the other hand, people who are living in sin generally have a very poor relationship with Jesus Christ. The more I witness His loving sacrifice, the more I want to follow His teachings in obedience.

Jesus Christ demonstrated how you go about building loving relationships through sacrifice and selflessness. The results of His sacrificial love are summed up in the Bible in two verses. The first is, "We love him [Jesus], because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19, KJV) The second is, "If you love Me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

As with a Christian's relationship with Christ, children generally respond to a parent who sacrificially loves them. Along with the child's love comes a willingness to obey. When children love their parents, they will more naturally strive to please them. Obedience comes much easier. The reverse is true as well. When children dislike or disrespect their parents, then disobedience and rebellion are not far behind.

Jenny, I want to briefly answer your questions about God's presence in our families. Where is He? Does He care? Are Christian parents guaranteed their children will be OK? Jenny, there are no guarantees—other than the fact that God is our loving and caring Heavenly Father. Right now God is demonstrating that He does care a great deal about you and AJ by bringing friends like Stu and Stacy, Gerry and Sue and Minnie and me alongside to love you. From eternity past, God has been orchestrating our Parenting Cop knowing the needs of your family.

The issue is simply this. God occasionally allows us to go our own way. We reap great consequences from our disobedience and self-centeredness. God gets our attention through suffering. When

things are going well, we ignore God's call upon our lives. But when distress comes calling, we have an unusual opportunity to get more acquainted with the Creator of the Universe. Has He got your attention yet?

I hope that's helpful. There'll be plenty more to follow on this subject. In the meantime, I want you to go back over your list. Look for self-centeredness in the way you parent. Then evaluate your relationship with each child. In doing this simple exercise, maybe you can identify where you got off track.

We'll be considering in the future how you can rebuild your relationship with God and your family.

Later, Gator,
Carter

TO: CARTER
FROM: GERRY and SUE
SUBJECT: "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" Amos 3:3

Well, you'll probably be thrilled to learn that Sue and I had quite the discussion (maybe an argument) over your last email.

Jenny's not the only one that went back over her list of parenting problems! Sue and I did the same thing. After we finished, our conclusions were very different. I think I have a great relationship with Clayton (he's nine now, can you believe it?) and Jessica, our six-year-old sweetie. But catch this: Sue feels I'm more like an *employer* rather than a *father*. I WAS SHOCKED!! It seemed so unfair, after all I do with the children. We wash the car, watch football on TV and always go to church together. I wonder at times what she expects?

Anyway, it's not like I don't want to be a better father so I told Sue I'd follow up with you. Carter, I see what's happening to AJ and Jenny and it scares the life right out of me. What a sad thing to realize that your children want nothing to do with you. After meditating on your email, I notice that so many of the children at our church are disrespectful of, and distant toward, their parents. Let me give you an example.

We were invited to have Sunday lunch with a family from our church. Good people, committed to church life. The meal was fabulous! Roast beef, smashed potatoes, and I even had some cherry pie for dessert. Very nice! But I couldn't help but notice the not-so-nice relationship between our hosts and their children. While the

children had perfect table manners (controlled by angry looks from Mom and Dad), there wasn't one bit of laughing or casual touching between them. In fact, they acted as if they were perfect strangers. They didn't speak to each other, tease each other or communicate with each other the entire meal. Rather, there were looks of disgust and frustration from both parents and children. I sensed that all of them could hardly wait to get away from each other.

When I talked with Sue that night to double-check my observation, we agreed that something very important was missing in that family. They didn't have healthy relationships. Carter, could you help us get a better grip on this relationship thing?

Gerry

P.S. How does a slacker like me have a relationship with a dirt bag like you, anyway? Well, we play together, talk together, work on our spiritual lives together, we are growing fat together, fish together (sometimes) and grow old together. Do we have a good relationship? Seems like relationship is based on a lot of "togethers," huh? (Am I answering my own question here?)

TO: CARTER
FROM: JENNY
SUBJECT: Rebuilding a Humpty Dumpty relationship

Carter, as you know, our relationships around here are pretty pathetic. AJ's mad at me, I'm sick of him and the kids have had enough of both of us. Like the old nursery rhyme says,

“Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

This is how I view our relationships. The question for Humpty Dumpty Relationships is, can they be put back together again when “all the King's horses and all the King's men” (the Parenting Co-op) are trying but nothing seems to be happening?

On a more positive note, your email made perfect sense to (guess who?) AJ! I caught him reading it after the five o'clock news. I kidded him, “Couldn't stand it, could you?”

AJ shot back, “It's comments like that that have ruined our relationship. I want to have better relationships with you and the kids but frankly, I can get along better with my horses and even rattlesnakes than you guys. Horses don't smart off and even rattlesnakes show me some respect. You and the kids never do what I say without complaining, and none of you have one ounce of respect for me.”

I responded, “That’s all pretty apparent. Why do you think the kids are gone and I don’t care anymore? You spend more time with your horses than you do with us. When you go fishing, you always go alone. What do you expect? Why would any of us respect a man who just barks orders and snuggles up to his remote every night anyway? Why don’t you go *live* with the horses for a while?”

Well, that ended that. Carter, I couldn’t help myself. I’m emotionally shot and don’t have the strength to massage his frail ego. I just want out!

There’s something else about that email. It slices through all the external problems, right to the heart of our broken family. It’s become apparent that our family turmoil is merely an expression of our fractured family relationships. We’re all filled with self-centered thoughts and actions. Our relationships have become self-serving, self-righteousness, self-loving, self-willed, self-absorbing and you name it. Is it any wonder we can’t get along?

I’m beginning to understand something very important. If we want to turn our family around, our relationships must change. You may not believe it, Carter, but AJ and I were once very happy. We even enjoyed the children, but our relationship has disintegrated over time. Now we focus more on external matters—do the dishes, mow the grass, clean up your room, take out the trash—and we’ve lost our love for one another. Isn’t that pathetic?

AJ is meeting with the kids later this week. It’s a supervised visit at Social Services, and I’m hoping that your email will have an effect on the way he conducts himself. Anyway, we ended up going to the dinner playhouse with the tickets you and Minnie sent. Thanks so much! You and Minnie are so thoughtful. It’s been months since the two of us were together alone. Frankly, it was very uncomfortable for both of us, but at the same time it wasn’t too bad either.

I'm trying to think "relationship, relationship, relationship." But where do we go from here knowing that Humpty Dumpty is broken into a million pieces? Who can put Humpty Dumpty back together again?

Looking forward to more emails,
Jenny

TO: THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Relationship Building #101

Children aren't horses, so don't misunderstand this email.

Most people are more successful at training a dog to roll over, a gerbil to eat carrots, a cat to use the litter box, a seal to jump through a hoop, a pig to open a door, a horse to stand on its back legs and a llama to spit straight than training their own children.

Why is that? Isn't it because they often have better relationships with their animals than with their own children? Training an animal actually has its similarities to parenting, especially when it comes to building a relationship. Like with training animals, if you don't parent correctly, you're likely to get kicked, bucked off or find kitty litter all over your pillowcase.

Take a horse for example. Here are some important principals to follow when working with a young colt (or filly).

1. Remember, it's hands-on work. Lots of brushing and combing—touch is very important!
2. Keep track of the colt's head. You want him to follow you.
3. Eye-to-eye contact is a key to your success.
4. Validate his gradual progress. Let him know you're proud of his performance, even when it's been a tough day.
5. Jerk his halter if he acts up. He needs to feel your leadership.
6. Go slowly with his training. It doesn't happen in one day.
7. Train every day. Consistency is the goal.

8. Never yell, scream or act ugly or mean. He'll fear you instead of respect you.
9. "Feed him some parties." Give him little treats that say, "You and I are buds."
10. Spend a lot of time with him by your side, so he learns to trust your every move.
11. Make sure his equipment fits him, and not one of the other horses in the field. Personalization optimizes performance!
12. Don't overfeed him. Too much grain will make him sick or fat.
13. Be very clear with your expectations. Follow through until the colt performs properly.
14. Learning to wear a saddle is a process that doesn't happen overnight. Remember, your colt is an adolescent at two years old.
15. Clean up after them gladly.

Now Gerry, in like manner, building a relationship with your children requires

1. Hands-on work. Lots of hugs and kisses.
2. Understanding what the child is thinking.
3. Eye-to-eye contact.
4. Validating their performance. Tell your children you're proud of them!
5. Jerking their chain (healthy discipline) when they act up.
6. Going slowly with training. Patience is a virtue in parenting.
7. Enjoying each other every day by spending time together.
8. Never yelling, screaming or acting ugly or mean. It only scares children, and you want your child to respect you for who you are—not for how loud you yell.
9. Having lots of special, fun times together that say, "You and I are buds."

10. Walking together, playing and working together, laughing together. (See, Gerry, you were right about all those “togethers”!)
11. Accepting your children for who they are as individuals, and responding with personalized parenting.
12. Eating together.
13. Communicating your expectations clearly so they understand how to stay on task—and doing that with consistency.
14. Building a relationship today in light of the needs of tomorrow.
15. Cleaning up after them gladly.

But here’s the big difference between horses and children: *unlike horses, children are spiritual people*. Children need to learn about spiritual things as well. You must learn to build a spiritual relationship that impacts the *hearts* of your children, not just their behavior. Throwing a lot of Bible verses at them or forcing them to sit still in church while the good reverend gets his weekly vocal exercise doesn’t necessarily build a spiritual relationship. Part of our spiritual relationship building with our children is similar to the process we outlined above. Here are some more comparisons:

1. It’s hands-on work. Serve the child, and let him see Christ in you.
2. Understand the spiritual needs of the child, and personalize spiritual education to fit your child.
3. Exercise eye-to-eye contact about spiritual matters. Don’t just expect the church to do it.
4. Validate spiritual performance.
5. Encourage spiritual interest. Expose the child to the needs of others through your personal involvement with others.
6. Be proactive about promoting a biblical worldview. Help them deal with postmodern thinking, and how to bring it to accountability with the Scripture.

7. Go slowly with spiritual things. Be patient, and allow your children to formulate their own beliefs. It's OK if they don't always agree.
8. Involve your children in spiritual things (mission trips, hospitality, serving seniors, etc.). They need to experience the mission of the church of Jesus Christ.
9. Never yell, scream or act ugly or mean. That's hypocrisy.
10. Fellowship with other Christian people. Kids are influenced by passion-driven Christians.
11. Enjoy your relationship at all times. The early part of Deuteronomy 6 says we need to keep God and His agenda in front of our families as we go through each moment of everyday life. That doesn't mean every minute is a Bible study. But it does mean every experience is an opportunity to show how God connects with us.
12. Define your child's unique spiritual giftedness. He wants to know how he fits into God's family.
13. Read spiritually-centered things together. Stories, biographies, devotionals, and the Scriptures come alive when you read them together.
14. Communicate God's expectations for your family.
15. Build consistency into your spiritual relationship.
16. Pray for your children. Pray with them, too.

Okay, I'm on a roll now. So here are some questions you might ask yourselves as you evaluate your relationship with your children. You can use these as a means of grading your relationships. Just be honest and answer each question with a number from 1 (absolutely not) to 10 (absolutely so). After you answer all 15 questions, add up all the numbers and divide by 15. That will give you an average "grade" for your relationship. The higher the number, the better your grade. Also, these questions will help you work specifically on certain areas of relational weakness. So here we go!

1. Do the children like to work alongside of you?
2. Do you have consistent fun together? (How consistent? Daily? Weekly? Monthly?)
3. Do the children want you to meet their friends? In other words, are they proud of you?
4. Do the children feel relaxed with you?
5. Do they respect your parenting and respond to your discipline?
6. Do they seek your opinion?
7. Do you allow them to make some of their own decisions?
8. Are you generally congenial?
9. Are you generally flexible?
10. Do your children feel emotionally safe around you?
11. Are you connecting with your children?
12. Do your children want what you have spiritually?
13. Do you and your spouse operate as a team?
14. Do you foster individuality in your children?
15. Is your home a fun place for your children *and* their friends?

Now wasn't that fun? What's your average? If it's below 8.0, then you've got a New Year's resolution in the making.

Explore this question with me: Why is it that when I get bucked off a horse I always blame the horse? Shouldn't I ask why he doesn't want me up there? (Maybe he doesn't want anything to do with me.) Isn't this a training issue? Maybe I should go back to Items 1-15 on raising a colt.

Carter

TO: STU
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Let's go hunting for an opportunity

Howdy Stu, you no good slacker! How in the heck are you and Stacy doing anyway?

Your hands gotta be pretty full with those little rugrats running all over the house. Remember, God gave children to young parents rather than waiting until you're old and gray because it takes more *energy* than *brains* to raise children. I think back on those days of hide and go seek, reading books over and over again, playing catch, going on imaginary hikes, playing dolls, dressing up funny, going fishing for ten minutes and throwing rocks in the lake for the next six hours. It wears me out just thinking about it. I'll pray more for all of you when I get up from my nap.

Stu, you know I like to hunt. Right? There's nothing like stalking a nice bull elk and having it end up as meat in the freezer. Well, I've got a hunting proposition for you. How about you go hunting for an "opportunity" instead of an elk? This will be a real hunting challenge!

Here's the deal. We both know that God uses us humans to accomplish His divine purposes down here on Planet Earth. We pray, and often God chooses us to reach out to others. Right? While I've been praying for AJ and Jenny, something keeps popping up in my mind and heart. It's simply a ministry opportunity, and it concerns you.

Stu, what are the possibilities of you reaching out to AJ and his children through your connections at Social Services? I understand that AJ is having a supervised visit with his children shortly, possibly even this week. Could you pull some strings through your work to get involved with AJ and the kids? Here's what I've been thinking:

1. Do you know if you could take over the supervised visits or maybe just be involved in those visits?
2. Could you do the anger management assessment for AJ?
3. What about counseling the children?
4. Could you find a way to build a relationship with this family through your work, or is that even legal?

Stu, I feel there's an "opportunity" out there somewhere. Do you want to go hunting for that opportunity? What do you say, Bwana? Let's ask God to arrange things for you.

Carter

TO: THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: When does the black dog quit biting?

Does anyone like biting dogs? I sure don't. Nevertheless, I ended up with one at the ranch. It was a black dog that wanted nothing to do with humans, especially a Carter human.

I milk three cows by hand, like clockwork, every morning at 5 AM and every evening at 5 PM. At those times you'll find me straddling a one-legged milking stool with a stainless steel milk pail between my knees. I often remind old Bossy about her disposition, and how it would be easier for both of us if she'd hold still and quit kicking me. Right alongside of me are three crying barn cats and one Australian Shepherd cow dog named Panda wanting a squirt of warm milk from good old Bossy.

One morning I noticed this mangy looking black dog hanging out down by our creek. I tried to get a little closer to this straggly ball of knotted black fur, but he wanted absolutely nothing to do with me. He'd run off down into the creek and hide when I got too close. For better than a week, Cowboy Carter tried to build a relationship with Black Dog. He obviously was a victim of an abusive owner (not Carter but the black dog), and wasn't the least bit interested in making my acquaintance.

I felt sorry for this distant pooch. I started exploring ways to build a little relationship with this scrawny rascal. Being a little smarter than a dog (I don't think Minnie would agree with such an outrageous statement), I started putting a bowl of warm milk down by the creek after each milking. It was the natural thing to do when

you combine a cold morning, warm milk, a hungry mutt and a smart cowboy. Next step was to move the bowl a little closer to the barn each morning and evening. We were falling in love!

It wasn't but a couple of weeks, and the black dog was sitting at the barn door waiting for breakfast. But I couldn't touch Black Dog, or he'd be gone like a shot and I'd be down to nine fingers. So I thought to myself, "Why not squirt milk on my hand and on my boot?" Sure enough, this mangy black hound started licking my outstretched hand and it wasn't very long after that the mutt was joining the rest of the critters, waiting for a warm squirt from Miss Bossy.

After much consideration, we gave the mutt a name: Black Dog. He lived with us for another eight years before becoming a highway fatality. By then, that scraggly dog had become one of my good friends.

I learned a few things from that experience.

First, *broken relationships can be rebuilt*. You must have the desire and make the commitment of time and energy to make it happen, but they *can* be rebuilt.

Second, *it takes creativity, courage, and the discipline of time and patience to restore hurting relationships*. You need a good strategy. Incidentally, it doesn't hurt to have a cow and some warm milk (if you get my drift). You need to stick it out if you get bitten or fail along the way. Don't be slackers here—it takes a lot of work to build a new relationship!

Third, *you have to consistently and proactively reach out with personal touches to rebuild relationships*. Black Dog needed the personal touch of a squirt of warm milk. He needed it twice a day like clock-

work. If I was to have any relationship at all with that pooch, I needed to reach out to him—**not the other way around**.

Fourth, *you need to seek understanding, and risk vulnerability, to rebuild relationships*. It *does* help to understand why a relationship is broken. Then you have a better idea of how you must act, and what you must do, to make it better. It's crucial that you take the risk and make yourself vulnerable if your relationships are to improve. It's a stretch for all of us to risk being insulted or injured while working on relationships. But the risk is worth it, especially in our families.

See, black dogs usually don't bite unless you give them a reason. It's the same with your children. Watch some other parents handle their children. You'll understand why their children bite, growl or run away. Those children are more respected at the neighbor's house than in their own. It shouldn't be a great surprise that our children often enjoy spending more time at the neighbor's house, should it? They get **MILK** there! (Hint, HINT!!!)

I want to add this very important note: the Bible reminds us that God has fixed our broken relationship with Him. Romans 5:8 says that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Don't miss the point! *God wanted a relationship with us so badly that He sent his very own Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us*. If you want to understand how to fix broken relationships, read the Book of Romans. There we read that we are sinners separated from God and under the penalty of death, but God redeemed our relationship through His personal sacrifice.

Human relationships demand personal sacrifice, too. But here's the dilemma. You cannot expect to rebuild relationships without personal sacrifice, and you can't be personally sacrificial until you deal with your self-centeredness. *And* you can't deal effectively with your self-centeredness without the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, and

the Holy Spirit cannot come into your heart unless you receive Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

So what's next? Maybe receiving Christ as your Savior is next for some of you. On the other hand, if you're already a Christian, maybe it's time to apply the Word of God to your life and stop serving yourself.

I wonder if I could put a personal comment to AJ and Jenny here. AJ and Jenny, all of us in the Parenting Co-op love you both and desire the best for your family. Jenny, you remind me of my good friend Black Dog when I first met him: hurting, alone, afraid and self-absorbed. AJ, you remind me of his former master: abusive, angry, controlling and self-willed. To repair your broken relationships, you both need Christ in your life. That relationship is essential to completely and totally eradicate your self-centered actions and attitudes. Folks, you're not alone in needing His help to deal with self-centeredness—we're all in this together!

Well, my brain can do only so much before turning into mush. Furthermore, Minnie's telling me I have a better relationship with my computer than with her. Now that's really cruel! My computer doesn't cook supper! What is she, CRAZY? Hey Minnie, what's for supper?

Carter

“I don’t care how old Carrie is! She’s not going to any dance,” AJ argued. (Incidentally, Carrie’s 16½-going-on-19.) “You know what happens when you get a bunch of adolescent, testosterone-driven boys dancing with scantily dressed, hormone-saturated girls. Aren’t you smart enough to figure that out, Jenny?”

Jenny’s caustic and often critical responses only frustrated AJ even more. “Carrie is asking to go with friends to a chaperoned school event at the high school gymnasium, not to a night club or an all night event at a friend’s house. So what’s so wrong with that, AJ?” she taunted him.

Carrie jumped into the heated fracas like a frog onto a lily pad. “Yeah, what’s so wrong with that?” she insisted.

As if the stress wasn’t piling up fast enough, their oldest son Troy, who’s almost 18, piped up and said “Yeah, Carrie, maybe you could meet your big hulk at the dance and do some playing around on one of the library sofas.”

Of course, this comment made Carrie’s hair stand on end. Blushing, Carrie told Troy to take a hike. She then abruptly reminded him of his latest escapades after the so-called Christmas party Friday night at Ugly Dave’s house. Dave always made fun of Carrie’s braces, so she gave him the nickname “Ugly Dave.”

“Remember the beer incident, Troy?” she fired back. Of course, this not only shocked AJ and Jenny, but also fueled AJ’s concern that his children were getting totally out of control. AJ’s personal boiler was steaming away, and he was getting madder and madder by the moment. “Sometimes you must take control,” he said through clenched teeth to Jenny.

That was nothing new for AJ. He had a habit of forcing his way through almost every disagreement using his temper as a launching

pad. Brute force was his way of getting control. Time and again AJ justified his habit by saying, “Sometimes you need to make a point by stomping your feet, hitting your fist against the wall and throwing a few things. A little screaming and yelling doesn’t hurt either. It lets everyone know who’s really in charge.”

That evening, before you could say “Jack be nimble,” AJ tore into Carrie like a beaver on a green aspen log. “Carrie, you’re not going to the dance and I don’t care what your mother says. If you think you can mouth off to me about it, you’ve got another thought coming. End of the discussion. Go to your room.” With that he left the room, but the excitement wasn’t over.

I mean, who rips the phone cord out of the wall just to make a point? Slapping Carrie in the face because she talked back to him was downright abusive, and damaging Troy’s car was just mean. Apparently Tyler, their 12-year-old son, was frightened by all the horrible screaming, dish breaking and malicious threats that were part of AJ’s tantrum. So he slipped out of the house like a scared rabbit and ran to some neighbor’s house for refuge. They called 911 and alerted the police of the situation.

When the police arrived at the house and witnessed the damage, it was apparent to them that AJ and Jenny needed some help with their parenting techniques. By the time the courts, legal eagles and Social Services were done with AJ and Jenny, they had a renewed interest in becoming better parents. It took about 11 months for the situation to quiet down. However, the legal process was only a very small part of their education.

It’s important for you to understand that, as Jenny’s younger sister, it’s been real hard for me to help because we live so far away. My husband Gerry and I are both very concerned, but we’re in Wyoming and Jenny’s in Texas. So what could we really do about their situation? Pray? Hope? What really could we do?

But I remember so well the night Jenny called and talked with us about the meltdown at their house. We were horrified. “How could this happen?” Gerry asked.

“Well, it’s been coming for some time,” I replied, remembering numerous phone conversations with Jenny about their marriage problems. She’d confided in me that AJ would often blow a fuse, lose control of his emotions and push them around while throwing things. It all seemed to be part of his scare tactics. I think he thought it was just normal behavior for a husband and father.

Jenny told us that she would provoke AJ while trying to defend or protect the children simply by making sarcastic comments. It was her way of redirecting his anger toward her rather than the children. You understand, don’t you? Jenny and the children were scared to death by AJ’s emotional outbursts, but didn’t know what to do. Her meltdown call was different. Jenny was not only afraid, but also despondent and searching for some help as a drowning person would hope for a life jacket.

Anyway, after an hour-long phone conversation, Gerry told Jenny, “It’s time to take the bull by the horns and get you and AJ some help. Jenny, what do you say? Is it okay with you if we contact some of our friends who do marriage and family counseling and get some direction? We know you need some help, and we know just the right people. I think they’d be a great place to start. What do you think?”

When I hung up the phone, I stopped momentarily to reminisce about my own family problems a few years back and how our friends helped us work through them. They helped Gerry deal with his anger, and helped me be more constructively assertive instead of destructively critical.

Gerry and I were filled with self-centeredness. We'd disregarded God in our family and were failing as parents. But that's when crazy Carter and his lovely wife Minnie showed up. Just like so many other couples, Gerry had called Carter and asked him for some help with our marriage. As I think about Carter, even now he makes me laugh. That old rancher, whose skin is as tough as shoe leather, didn't mince any words in confronting our despicable behavior. Yet at the same time, we could feel his warmth and sincerity even when he compared us to farm machinery, ranch tools or truck parts. Carter always had something funny to say even when talking about something pretty serious. I remembered Gerry kept a list of all the names Carter called him. Names like "slacker," "slug," "sissy," "turkey," "dimples," and "peaches" all became a part of their friendship.

Frankly, Carter and Minnie were unusual people. Their Christianity actually made it into shoe leather. The teachings of the Bible are very important to them (most of the time) except when Carter was fishing, hunting or driving too fast. (At least that's what Minnie told us. I just bent over laughing again!)

I actually wondered if AJ and Jenny would react negatively to Christian teaching on family life. After all, they weren't very interested in spiritual stuff. But you know something, neither was Gerry at first. When the going got tough between Carter and Gerry over the spiritual stuff, Carter simply said, "Well my friend, you're a stubborn one but God can 'break you to lead,'" and with that he'd head to the cooler for a couple cans of Pepsi. Because of that understanding, Gerry didn't feel any pressure and was very open to listen to Carter.

Carter would send us emails in addition to his many phone calls and counseling sessions at his office. We both knew he was genuinely concerned about us, and before you knew it we had worked through our marriage troubles and were well on the road to spiritual and family recovery. Thanks to our real true friends who con-

fronted our behavior and told us what we needed to hear when we needed to hear it, Gerry and I have been growing and maturing in our relationship with Jesus Christ, with each other and with the children ever since.

Isn't that a wonderful story? As I sat there reflecting on those troubled days, I got goose bumps all over just thinking about it and tears of joy filled my eyes. Now I wondered if those same friends might be helpful to AJ and my sister. Would Carter and Minnie be willing to counsel AJ and Jenny via email?

When we finished the phone call from Jenny, I was struck with a sense of urgency and felt sadness for my sister and her family. You know the feeling, don't you? You want to help, but the future looks pretty bleak. At that very moment Gerry returned to the kitchen. He knew I'd been crying.

"Sue, are you all right?" Gerry asked. It was at that moment I returned to my senses, and Gerry and I realized that it was time to contact Carter and Minnie.

Well, it's been almost a year of emails back and forth with wonderful results. AJ and Jenny wanted you to know the whole story. They've agreed to let you in on all the details. So sit down, gather up some low calorie ice cream, some chips, dip and a soda and we're off to the races again. Enjoy!

Sue and Gerry

TO: CARTER and MINNIE
FROM: GERRY
SUBJECT: Parenting problems in El Paso, Texas

Hey, you two! We both enjoyed going with you to the Stock Show last month. Carter, you looked so cute with your big cowboy hat and those red elephant skin boots. Why did you choose red? Minnie, can't you dress the old guy better than that?

But the looks on your faces far outweighed Carter's fashion sense that day. You both looked so proud as your grandson took his turn in the Mutton Bustin' Competition. He actually rode that woolly critter a pretty long time, considering his rear end spent most of the time dragging in the dirt. When he fell off, I don't know who hurt the most—the little cowboy down in the arena or the old cowboy up in the stands with a little tear running down his sunburned cheek. Carter, was that a tear from a proud grandpa or were you tearing up because your grandson didn't place in the money? Or was it because your grandson got a kiss from the Rodeo Queen and you didn't? Come on Carter, 'fess up! (By the way, why didn't you let your grandson hold his own trophy? You rascal!)

On a more serious note, there are problems brewing down in Texas and I'm not talking about moonshine. It's Sue's older sister Jenny and her husband AJ. Things have been pretty turbulent lately for their family, but now the turbulence has turned into all out war. Their marriage is falling apart. Their three children are a mess.

Troy, their oldest, is 17. Carrie is their 16-going-on-19-year-old daughter. Tyler, their 12-year-old, is a mama's boy filled with lots of anger. That's no wonder, considering all that's been going on.

You see, this past week AJ lost his cool. It all started over a simple disagreement about Carrie going to the New Year's Eve school dance. What started out being a simple difference of opinion soon escalated into emotional meltdown. Before it was over, AJ broke some dishes, damaged the dining room table, pushed Jenny head first into the couch, smashed out the windshield of Troy's car, took his car keys and grounded him for the rest of the school year (or for the rest of his life, whichever lasts longer). AJ was even physically abusive to his daughter. He slapped Carrie in the face and gave her a bloody nose.

Thankfully, their youngest son Tyler ran to the neighbors up the street and they called the police. Seems to me this was probably the only responsible act the entire night. It got very ugly. I can understand why the police felt Jenny and the children were in danger, and why they left that night for a safer location.

Now Social Services wants a complete investigation before the children return home. Jenny is devastated. AJ's angry at Social Services for sticking their noses into something that isn't their business.

Isn't that the way it often goes? Generally, destructive parents try to avoid personal responsibility by shifting the blame to someone else. It's either the neighbor kids who are at fault or the school, the computer, the church, the television, or the pastor. Seldom is the issue ever the parents' fault.

Self-centered behavior sure wrecks a family, doesn't it? When you mix self-centeredness, anger, lack of good communication skills and no self-control all together, you get this kind of a mess. In fact, you can see how self-centered living has practically destroyed their family relationships. The Bible reminds us of the folly of being hot-tempered. This family proves it!

Carter, you've told us that being a happy family is all about *knowing*. *Knowing* God, *knowing* your spouse, *knowing* your child, *knowing* the biblical principles of selfless living, *knowing* what to do, *knowing* what not to do, *knowing* how to be self-controlled and *knowing* how to get help when it's needed. Frankly, AJ and Jenny really don't *know* how to be a family and don't *know* where to begin. Would you be willing to help them learn?

I can't promise you that AJ will listen, or that Jenny will follow your advice. At times it looks pretty hopeless to us but I know what you're thinking! You've quoted Hebrews 11:6 to me plenty of times: "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Do you think we can move forward in faith, believing God will reach out to AJ and Jenny through us?

Carter and Minnie, please let us know if you'd be willing to help. By the way, AJ's quite a fisherman. Does that help you decide? I'm tempting you a bit, but for a good reason.

That's enough for now. Sue and I will be anxious to hear from you. Our love to you both!

Gerry

P.S. Since email worked before, why not try the same kind of thing with AJ and Jenny? What about an email Parenting Co-op? We could send emails back and forth with the purpose of learning how to improve our family situations. Frankly, we could use your counsel on parenting as well. Sometimes our kids just drive us to the nutty farm—so nuts that occasionally we don't even act like Christians. You could send copies of your teaching emails to both families. I hope we'll be back in the email business soon. Join us, will you?

TO: AJ and JENNY
FROM: SUE
SUBJECT: Let's make a deal!

Jenny, we're so thankful you felt free to call us. Be assured of our prayers. We've been very concerned about your family—but honestly, we didn't know what to do or say. Since your phone call, we're even more concerned.

It's shocking to us about the children. Please try to stay positive. Hopefully, something good will come out of this ordeal and the children will be home in no time. Gerry and I are very sorry, but try to realize that God can make something beautiful out of ashes. He specializes in difficult situations. In the meantime, it's probably necessary for everyone to collect their thoughts, get control of their emotions and start learning how to properly live together.

I can just imagine how difficult it is to raise teenagers. They have minds of their own and the size to back it up. Our children are much younger and yet are a pretty big handful. We also get pretty frustrated, lose control and fight amongst ourselves. We certainly understand your frustration!

AJ and Jenny, even though several hundred miles separate us, please remember that we love you and are praying for you. Both of us are trying to figure out what we can do to help, but as inexperienced parents ourselves we don't know what to recommend. We have our hands full with our own parenting problems. Jenny, can you remember when your children were nine, seven and four years old like ours? You can relate to our parenting issues as well.

Anyway, a thought came to us. What if we got some people together to discuss parenting techniques via email? In other words, wouldn't it be helpful for all of us to learn from each other's experiences? We need the help, the tools and the creative ideas to improve our own relationships. Fact of the matter is, we often parent by the seat of our pants. Honestly, who wouldn't want to learn about better parenting via email?

To top it all off, we know a couple in Colorado who've already raised their children. Gerry and I have asked Carter and Minnie to join our little email co-op of needy parents. They have a boatload of experience and lots of practical tips to back it up. They have four adult children and a truckload of grandchildren. I'll bet they're bursting with creative ideas for needy moms and dads. What do you say?

By the way, don't you have to go through some form of counseling required by the courts? Maybe the courts would allow you to counsel with Carter. He does family counseling and serves as an elder in his church. Doesn't hurt to ask!

We don't want to stick our noses into your personal business but maybe we can all get some help at the same time. The email idea might be just the ticket. Would you be willing to share your parenting experience with other interested parents using email? What about learning from Carter and Minnie? Does any of this sound interesting to you?

Just let us know. Gerry and I love you both.

Sue

P.S. Incidentally, tell AJ that if he likes hunting, fishing, racquetball, football, soccer, baseball, swimming, skiing, gymnastics, bowling, eating or channel surfing, he'll love Carter.

TO: STU and STACY
FROM: SUE
SUBJECT: Matthew 25:35-36, 40: "... unto the least of these..."

I can't believe what happened! God is constantly surprising us with miraculous realities. We knew you were moving but little did we know you'd move that close to AJ and Jenny! It's a small world, isn't it? Who would have guessed their neighbors are in your Bible Study group?

In our devotions this morning we read from Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." The same chapter, verse 12 says, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress in the gospel." These verses reminded us that with God, there are no coincidences! God has a plan for everyone and He will perfect it and our circumstances will turn out for greater progress in our spiritual lives (Romans 8:28). We thank God that He has a plan for AJ and Jenny. He's even using their bad circumstances and great neighbors like you folks for His divine purposes.

Thanks, Stu and Stacy, for putting your Christianity into shoe leather. I'm sure your unexpected visit and cherry pie said quietly, "God loves you." Your kindness reminded us of another passage in the Bible where Christ encourages us to reach out to the "hungry, the thirsty, the strangers" because in doing so, we do it unto Christ Himself. It would have been so easy for you to just go about your business and occasionally wave at them while driving by but you actually went out of your way to meet them. We just want to

say thanks. I'll be sending you a coupon to Dairy Queen. Have a malted milk on us!

I'm writing to personally invite you to join our email group. Jenny thought you might be interested. Actually, Gerry and I have been interested in developing a group of three to four families that would be willing to trade parenting experiences and insights via email. We're struggling with various aspects of our own parenting and are often frustrated by our lack of experience and knowledge. Just this afternoon, my two youngest got in a spat over the Legos and both ended up crying. I didn't know what to do, so I just sent them to their rooms. Oh well! We really don't have anyone to bounce ideas off of. Plus, I think we could use someone looking over our shoulders and holding us accountable for our behavior. I must confess that sometimes it isn't a pretty sight.

As you know, I've presented this idea to Jenny. I think she's OK with it, but I don't know about AJ. Wouldn't they be a great addition to the group? Here's what I have in mind. Let's get you two, AJ and Jenny, Gerry and me and crazy Carter and Minnie into an email Parenting Co-op. I've already asked Carter and Minnie to help with AJ and Jenny and join us in the email co-op. I'm hoping they'll jump at the chance. They're lots of fun and they'll have good advice for us. I imagine Old Carter will probably have all kinds of ranch illustrations about raising cattle, horses, dogs, kittens, mice, rabbits, chickens, gerbils and parakeets that apply to parenting children. He's often said, "I've broken horses to ride, cows to lead and dogs to growl so kids aren't that difficult."

Let us know.

Sue

P.S. We'd sure like AJ and Jenny to get involved in a good church. Could you help in that direction?

TO: GERRY and SUE
FROM: JENNY
SUBJECT: I need to be in your group

Count me in! If anyone needs help with her kids, it's me. My children are living with another family, eating with strangers and are afraid to come back home. I need all the help I can get. So does AJ, but he refuses to admit it.

AJ's just like his father. His dad lived most of his life with his head in the sand. He totally denied the lousy condition of his marriage and family. Like father, like son!

AJ's so stubborn it's sickening. It's been over a week since everything went to pieces and we've yet to discuss the problem. Can you believe that? It's like if we ignore the problem, it'll vanish. And here I am, caught right in the middle of dealing with AJ's indifference and encouraging the children. I can't win for losing! I scream, demand and cry but it's no use. I've been walking this tightrope for 17 years and I've had it!

I just wish there was someone who could gain AJ's trust so he'd open up and face his past as well as deal with our present problem. I'm willing to join your group because my family is fighting for survival. I don't know about AJ. I showed him your last email but his only response was, "Let the courts provide the 'quack.'" See what I'm dealing with?

I'm anxious to meet Carter and Minnie, especially since they've been down this teenage road before. Who couldn't use a parental

mentor? I'll show AJ all the emails, but I can't do anything beyond that right now. He's being too bullheaded. I'm sorry.

Actually, I did breach the subject of counseling with the social worker last week. It'll be mandatory that AJ gets anger management counseling. We'll also need some local parental supervision and guidance. Our caseworker encouraged me to learn from whatever sources were available. It'll look good on our record when our case goes to court, which is scheduled to happen in two weeks. We'll just have to wait and see about the counseling, but let's move forward with the email idea. The sooner the better!

Isn't it unusual how we met Stu and Stacy? Out of the clear blue sky here's these people standing at our door with a cherry pie, introducing themselves as friends of my sister. How amazing is all this? I'm glad Stu and Stacy will be a part of our email group. Stacy was pretty excited about it and wants to get started right away.

Yesterday, Stacy and I went out for ice cream. You know, I haven't had any real friends down here until now. Now I have someone to talk with and a friend to confide in. I really enjoy her phone calls.

Later, Sis.
Jenny

TO: GERRY and SUE
FROM: STU and STACY
SUBJECT: We're in -
it's either medication for the kids, or for us

We still attend Community Bible Church here in town. No, they haven't thrown us out—yet! It's actually only three miles away. We'll try to get AJ and Jenny to go with us, but I think that's down the road a piece. Right now we need to work on our relationship so they can trust us.

When I read the heading on your last email (“... unto the least of these...”), Stu and I were very touched. It's exciting to be a part of God's work in the lives of others! When we took the cherry pie over to AJ and Jenny, we never thought all this would happen. But that's what makes it a “God thing.”

We're going to have fun with the Parenting Co-op idea. Stu's overwhelmed with the whole deal of parenting. Having never had children of his own and ending up with two of them almost overnight has him backpedaling as fast as he can. I can't believe how a six-year-old and a four-year-old can take a 200-pound muscle man and turn him into a marshmallow in seconds. While he wants to be a good father, he's like a fish out of water. He doesn't know how to go about it. He was pretty self-centered in his pre-Christian days, and it takes time for all that to go away. But what's new?

Hey, hold on a minute! I let Stacy write up to this point, but now it's my turn. Stacy's the most disorganized parent ever. It's a wonder that I haven't broken my neck on a roller skate or a rubber ball.

Stacy thinks that “turning up the volume” is the only way to make the children obey. I guess I’ve learned that the more the volume goes up, the more the children tune out and the bigger my headache gets. We discipline differently. Stacy thinks “time out” means putting the child in the corner for five minutes. I think time out means Stacy and I leave the house for five days with no children. See how different we are?

Of course we want to be a part of your email group. I know the email idea really works because it was so helpful when Stacy was going through all her marital problems. It’s so much more personal than sitting down and reading a book of “how-to’s.” I’m anxious to hear from crazy Carter and Minnie. I hope they join us or the group might simply turn into a pooling of ignorance. When does it all start?

Actually, I think it’s already underway!

Later!

Stu and Stacy

P.S. Just one other footnote. I got a call from Jenny yesterday. We must have talked for 30 minutes. That girl has plenty of problems in her life, and is she ever depressed over them. I took the liberty of sharing my personal faith in Christ and how He has made such a huge difference in my life. Getting me through my marriage problems and the death of Mitch was no easy assignment, even for God. She didn’t seem to be offended. We’re going to get together again next week and discuss our families. And Stu had coffee with AJ the other day to get a little more acquainted and plan a fishing trip. Keep praying!!

TO: GERRY and SUE; STU and STACY
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Wise as serpents, harmless as doves

God is wonderful! The Bible teaches that before the foundation of the world, God ordained that Stu and Stacy would move right under AJ and Jenny's noses. If a person doesn't believe in God, it's understandable they might attribute such things to coincidence. But as a believer I understand this to be God's providential care of those He loves. Don't you?

Would you mind if Old Carter gave you a pat on the back for a minute? Thank you! I am so impressed by the way each of you are ministering to AJ and Jenny. Your example to them is very wise, and very Christ-like. They must be embarrassed about their circumstances, but you neutralized their problems in such a loving way. Nobody likes being an example of bad parenting. When others are willing to be transparent about their own marital or parenting failures, it builds bridges that everyone feels comfortable crossing. I like your email group idea. It offers AJ and Jenny lots of protection, and it's a great vehicle for sharing ideas. Maybe over time they'll both want to get involved. Minnie and I would sure be honored to be a part of it. We're both real anxious to meet AJ and Jenny.

When I move cattle from one pasture to the other, the most important thing is to get all the cattle gathered and headed in the same direction. Oftentimes my horse needs to work pretty hard collecting the stragglers who are hesitant to join the rest of the herd. One thing's for sure: it doesn't help to go screaming and yelling after the strays, but rather patiently and persistently encourage them to join their cow friends. Otherwise I might have cattle every-

where. Sometimes the strays are afraid, and other times they're just plain stubborn. In either event, getting them onto the trail with all the other cows is very important but takes patience. Did you get that? **It takes real patience!**

It seems like we have a nice group of folks who want to go in the same direction—all except one, and that's AJ. Everyone will need to work hard and be very careful not to spook him or he'll end up running in the wrong direction. He might be a little stubborn, even fearful, but deep down in his heart I know he loves his family. Persistence will pay dividends if we're patient, and trust God to touch his life.

Sue, I read your last email to us very carefully. I focused on the sentence where you mentioned that self-centeredness ruins or drains the life out of family relationships. I like the word "drain" because it speaks of a gradual process. That's exactly how it happens with families. It's like a slow leak in a stock tank. Over time the water leaks out, leaving a huge mud hole in the process. To make matters worse, the cows who come to drink are out of luck.

Family relationships are a lot like that. If we're not careful, our family relationships gradually drain out over time through the hole of self-centered living and leave our families thirsty for life-giving relationships. AJ and Jenny have lost their relationships, haven't they? It's our opportunity as their Christian friends to guide them to the "water of life." They need supernatural help to fill up their family with selfless relationships **that only GOD can provide**. They need God to plug up the hole of self-centered living and quench their thirsty souls. Notice what Isaiah 55:1-3 says: "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to ME [God Himself], and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline

your ear and come to ME. Listen, that you may live.” God is the answer for families who’ve lost their direction and are drying up on the inside. Let’s make sure everyone gets that message! Right?

Initially, maybe Jenny can have AJ just read our emails. Then with a little “planting and watering” God can work in their hearts and cause that seed to grow. Always remember that unless the Lord builds the house, when we build, we labor in vain. Let’s be praying now for God to give us direction in building a bridge over to AJ. Stu taking AJ out for coffee was the first step in that bridge. Good work!

Thank you for inviting Minnie and me to be a part of your parenting work. We’re saddled up and ready to chase cows! Check your cinch!

Carter

Life at the Lazy-U reminds me of AJ and some other parents.



TO: STU and STACY
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Start your parenting journey with
a healthy marriage

Stu and Stacy, you old rascals. How in the heck are you? It sounds like we'll have a hoot in this Parenting Co-op provided nobody gets offended by my poor English.

Doesn't God have a delightful sense of humor? He gives children to young people who know very little about parenting, yet have unbelievable energy. But He doesn't give them to older people who have more life experience, and generally more wisdom. Go figure!

What that tells me is this: *it takes more energy than brains to raise kids*. That's a very good principle to keep in mind. If you're a young parent and you're spending a lot of time in the recliner, you must have your parenting on backwards.

Stu and Stacy, parenting is one of life's most important and challenging tasks. All parents struggle in the process. That's why our hair turns gray if we don't pull it out first. We develop chest pains, occasional ulcers and diarrhea. To say nothing about all the emotional effects including anxiety, guilt, frustration, feelings of incompetence and the temptation to murder. Just kidding!

Parenting's tough. What are parents to do? Everything is so goofed up! Our country is collapsing into the abyss of no absolutes and no convictions about anything, from the absence of prayer in schools to immorality on television. Is it any wonder parents are

running for cover—taking refuge in churches and private educational systems? Yet as pathetic as the condition of our country is, we parents have the great opportunity and privilege to raise our children under these challenging conditions. Even though it seems like the wheels are coming off faster than we can put them back on, God is still in heaven and sits on the throne. That, in and of itself, should empower us to be courageous and confident as parents knowing the truth of 1 John 4:4: “Greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world.” (KJV)

Stu, this parenting business must be pretty challenging for you. You’re the most recent spouse and parent in our email co-op. Stacy’s been parenting for a few years and has some on-the-job training but not you. You might be hesitant to step into the role of father knowing that there’s a protective mother just around the corner. Tanya and Rusty are Stacy’s children and you lack experience in parenting. Stacy might be a little nervous about that. You might even be a little fearful of her disapproval. All this makes for a confusing situation.

That’s why communication and strategy are so important. Blended families, families with physically or mentally challenged children, families with only one parent, families with an inexperienced parent and even traditional family models all will benefit from good communication and strategy. If you don’t communicate and have some strategy to your parenting, then look out!

Because Minnie and I are Christians, we use the Bible in our counseling. Unless those reading this email are willing to learn from biblical principles and the experience of others, raising children can be a very painful proposition. I know what you’re thinking, Stacy. Yes, even with biblical counsel and a good strategy, parenting can still be very painful. But more times than not, the pain will be reduced by learning how to parent from the written Word of God, and from the wisdom and knowledge of other Christian parents.

Before we get to this matter of parenting, I'm going to take the liberty of picking on you. (Just remember I'm sending this email to everyone in the group as well.) Stu and Stacy, did you memorize your wedding vows? Do you recall what they said? Think, Stu! As you spoke your vows to each other you must have been so proud. You entered into your new relationship with conviction and determination to make God the center of your relationship, didn't you? Good going! You're on the "first base" of parenting.

Stu, one of the most important components of good parenting is how you treat your children's mother. We often overlook this important ingredient. So, I recommend that you make arrangements for a babysitter and take Stacy out for a nice meal at the corner steakhouse. As you're enjoying a big T-bone steak, tell her how much you love her and how thankful you are for her. Tell her how you appreciate all her efforts to keep the house clean and organized, to clothe the children and to see to it that all of you are gaining weight through her wholesome meals.

Stacy, you need to appreciate the work Stu puts in to keep food on the table. Thank him for his leadership. Let him know that you haven't forgotten about his dedication to his work.

Make sure you do these special dates with each other on a regular basis. Your children will watch the way you act toward one another, and they'll take careful mental notes. When a father is disrespectful or distant it not only hurts the children, but also gives them license to treat Mom in a similar way. When a mother is demeaning or critical, it also gives the kids permission to treat Dad like that. You should never let the children be disrespectful of your spouse. That's especially hard for children to understand if *you're* being disrespectful of each other.

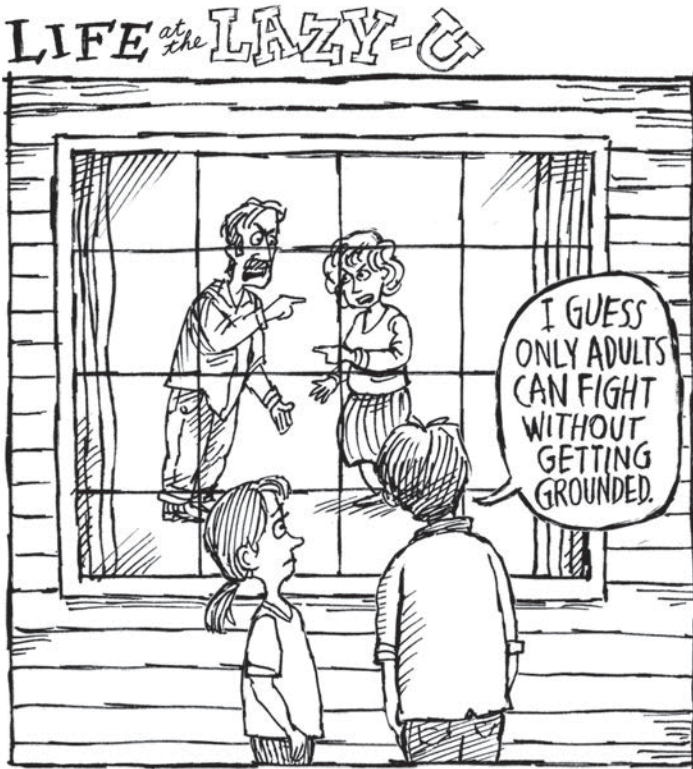
You should support each other so the children learn that Dad and Mom are a loving team. Show kindness and affection to each

other. That way, the children will learn to be respectful and caring toward their parents.

Here's a question for the group: what should happen if one spouse becomes verbally or emotionally abusive to the other? What then? It's very simple. Someone needs to be taken out back to the woodshed by some loving friends and thumped a bit. Don't you agree? There's no excuse for this kind of negative behavior.

Let's do a little recap exercise:

Point #1: Parents, if you want your children to grow up and be successful young people, start by loving each other. Kids notice how you talk and act toward each other.



Point #2: During dessert on your date nights, take some time to discuss some mutual **expectations and goals** of your parenting. Take a napkin and jot down some goals that you can work toward together. For example:

1. Being more consistent in discipline
2. Objectively evaluating your parenting
3. Structured family times (no phone or TV distractions)
4. Lowering your voice and controlling anger

My point is simply this: you must be headed in the same direction or you'll have nothing but confusion in your parenting. Always keep in mind that parenting is something a father and mother do together, not independently of each other.

I'll send another email in the next couple of days.

One other thing. Minnie and I are planning a trip down south and would love to drop in and see you folks. We plan on being in El Paso for an insurance meeting from March 2nd to the 5th. Minnie says she found some money under the mattress and wants to buy you all dinner. What do you say? We'll bring a housewarming present if we can find some more money under the couch.

Til then, crank out some romance,
Carter

P.S. Does it surprise you that marriage is one of the most significant issues with parenting? If parents can't discuss their parenting together, then parenting is a free-for-all. The kids work the parents against each other and the parents work the kids against their spouse. Let me ask you again, does your marriage create a safe place for your children to live? Does your marriage have the strength it takes to raise your children effectively? If not, then first things first! Get busy working on your marriage. Pronto!

TO: AJ
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Fishing and pig hunting

Good Morning, AJ! My name is Carter. I've known Gerry and your sister-in-law Sue for many years (against my better judgment, I might add) and in fact, just got an email from them. They told me you're quite the fisherman. Is that true? I don't know if I'm a fisherman, but I *do* know I like to go fishing. I always hesitate asking someone for fishing directions. Generally, though, one fisherman is always willing to help out another fisherman—provided that when they go fishing together, he promises to not catch more fish.

Here's the deal. I'm coming down to Texas the first part of March and I'd like to go fishing down on the coast. I've never fished "deep sea" style. I'd like to try it. I know that you're very busy with your own work, but wondered if you might know somebody who would be willing to make a few bucks (\$300) and take me fishing. I'll pay for the boat rental and whatever else I might need, including a huge freezer for my trophy whale.

What do you think? Could you lead me to someone? I'd certainly be willing to go with you, as well, if you could work it into your schedule. The \$300 would probably fit just as good in your pocket as it would in somebody else's.

I'll bring my Ruger 6mm Magnum if you can arrange a pig hunt as well. That's another one of my 17 weaknesses. I love to hunt

anything from blondes (elk) to brunettes (bear) to say nothing about squirrels, badgers, white tail deer, black tail deer, mule deer and rattlesnakes. I even like hunting for friends like you.

In any event, I sure am looking forward to meeting you and Jenny in March.

Check your “fly,”
Carter

TO: CARTER
FROM: AJ
SUBJECT: How about some of each – fishing
and pig hunting?

I know who you are. Your bad reputation goes before you. You have other friends down here in Texas. Stu and Stacy were talking to us the other day and they told us all about you. I understand that you're a lousy fisherman on top of it all. Well, that's OK. I specialize in lousy fisherman.

Carter, I already have a boat, all the gear, and plenty of time. I don't need your \$300, so you can stick it where the sun doesn't shine. I'll be going fishing whether you go or not, so having another person go along is no big thing. Bring your own raincoat in case the boat sinks!

If the fishing is good, we'll bag the pig hunting. If the fishing stinks, we'll go chase hogs. How's that? If neither of those is productive, we'll chase antelope with my jeep.

Now, *that's* one heck of a lot of fun. You get in the jeep with the top off and head out across the beautiful Texas landscape. When you see some antelope, off you go with rope in hand. The idea is to get close enough to them critters so you can rope one out the side of the jeep. I understand you're quite the cowboy.

Incidentally, the last guy I took antelope roping got so excited he fell out the side of the jeep and broke two fingers on his right hand. When he hit the dirt, all I could see was his hardhat bounce

straight up in the air. Don't ask me why he was wearing a hardhat. I can't remember. Through the rear view mirror I could see my ex-friend crawling around on the ground like a disoriented squirrel looking for his stash of acorns in a cactus. He was actually looking for his glasses.

You want to rope some antelope, or are you as big a sissy as Stu says?

See ya' in March!

AJ

TO: THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER and MINNIE
SUBJECT: Sperm donor dads vs. real dads

It looks like the Parenting Co-op is well underway, so here's another teaching email. You can respond, if you wish, by sending back your specific comments and any questions that might apply to your individual family needs. I'll also try to answer your questions broadly enough with general applications so that each family can easily apply them.

For your information, I've found one solid friend down in Texas. At least there's one real man who fishes and hunts. Thanks to AJ, I hope to bag the biggest fish and the meanest pig ever. The only problem I see is that he probably won't get out of bed. The guy is a slacker. AJ my man, you know I'm kidding. I'm really looking forward to hanging out with you.

This email is principally to the men. It concerns their responsibilities connected to parenting. Now ladies, this doesn't exclude you from your responsibilities so read on.

Dads play a very critical part in the parenting process, don't they? I've learned that unless men are willing to face their tremendous parental responsibilities head on, much of our time and energy coaching families will be wasted.

I get emails from wives and mothers who are concerned about how their husbands are treating (or not treating) the children. Many dads treat their children too rough. Others are distant and

uninvolved. Some scream and yell constantly. Others are so passive they're virtually inconspicuous. Some dads spend huge blocks of time at work and play. Others are spending an exorbitant amount of time in front of the blasted TV or the computer screen.

I can't believe how many dads disconnect from their responsibilities, and just leave the parenting to the mother. Oh, they might play with the children while Mom cooks the evening meal. But after dinner, it's back into the recliner. They might yell at the children from the recliner now and then, but to creatively parent or deal with discipline effectively is out of the question. More times than not, it's off with their buddies to do something away from the children. You can often find them in a foursome playing a round of golf with higher-handicapped shooters or shooting skeet at the local gun club. Absentee fathers call this "male bonding." I call it a bunch of bull.

Incidentally, I just got an email from one woman who said that last week her husband was home with the children a total of two hours. He's apparently a golfing fanatic. A lousy one at that, I understand. She is one ticked woman! I can tell you this much, if she ever does with his five iron what she threatened to do with his five iron, he's going to be in one heck of a lot of pain just below his belt. (I can't criticize him too much, because I've needed to dig the five iron, a pitching wedge and a putter out of my hide several times before. Minnie's great at hiding my golf clubs.)

I guess all of us guys struggle with the same problem. Being involved with our kids is a tough assignment. It takes focus, discipline and strategy.

Let me illustrate this with a personal illustration from my parental arsenal. I have four kids, one of each kind. Our two sons and two daughters are each as different as day and night. My youngest

son was always an interesting challenge for his parents, as well as his teachers at school. He might be a lot like one of your kids.

From the very beginning of his first year in school, he was not a happy camper. He felt that his schooling was radically interfering with his education at the ranch. Frankly, he wanted to stay at home and punch cattle all day. The school would have no part of that, so off to school he went. Getting him to school was easy because he was locked up in the bus and couldn't escape. However, *keeping* him at school was a much more daunting exercise. You're getting the picture, aren't you? He basically made it miserable for everyone.

His teachers were obviously running out of gas when Minnie and I got a special invitation to a parent-teacher conference with the entire school hierarchy. "This is cool!" I thought. "Maybe they legalized handcuffs!" Anyway, it was a meeting with several high-powered educators to discuss how to "fix my son." You see, they saw my son as the problem, not my son's parents.

His teacher was present. So were the principal, special education teacher, two social workers and one child psychologist who wasn't married and didn't have any children of his own. However, he did have a bunch of empty theories. It was a pretty impressive lineup for a little country school! The only person who wasn't there was the brand inspector.

We all crowded into a little room. They proceeded to answer the question, "What are we going to do with this little trouble-maker?" Around the circle of higher learning, the question went ricocheting off the walls like a stray bullet. They were going to do everything from drug the lad to incarcerate him in the corner of his room until he had underarm hair that was long enough to braid. All of their actions seemed so right. Punish the boy! Medicate the lad! Reject the disobedient little rascal! It all sounded so right.

But not once in the entire meeting were his problem *parents* ever addressed or questioned. Never once did the brain gang confront me, my absence in the family or my indifference to my son's problems. Never once did this think tank consider how my son's father played into his disobedience and behavioral problems. Did they even consider how distant I was from the parenting process? Couldn't they figure out that my anger was being reproduced in the life of a frustrated little guy?

Didn't they know that the marriage problems Minnie and I were having caused stress and insecurity in this little feller's life as well? Didn't they care about that? Apparently not! They never once asked me about my personal life, or a single thing about our home life. I just figured they knew how to fix my son. Mistake Numero Uno!

Over the next couple of days, Minnie and I became very uneasy about our meeting. Then it hit me. Like a bolt out of the blue, I was struck square in the heart: *Why does my son need to suffer the consequences of me being such a lousy dad? Why should the brain gang discipline, reject and medicate my son for problems resulting from my personal failure as a dad? His school problems were an extension of my lack of involvement in his life. There was nobody to blame but me, especially not the little guy in overalls who had a tear running down his cheek because "nobody liked him."*

Within the week, there was another meeting of the "think tank of higher learning." This time, I called the meeting and Minnie and I led the discussion. By the time the meeting was over, everyone had learned two very valuable lessons:

- Lesson #1: Don't mess with a problem child until you talk with his problem parents.
- Lesson #2: Commitment and involvement are essential to good parenting.

With the cooperation of the school and direct involvement on our part, we began a written daily evaluation of my son's performance at school. Every evening at home, his performance review was discussed. We encouraged him if it was positive, and encouraged him accordingly if it was negative. We had an incentive program whereby he could earn points for his good performance at school, then be cut loose to do something else he really enjoyed—like riding his horse.

By the end of the school year, a different boy emerged. His teachers, the principal, both social workers and the brand inspector were all very impressed with his progress. More importantly, by the end of the school year, I was a very different parent.

During that year I learned a very important lesson about raising kids: **you must first raise their parents!**

Sometimes we parents need to be made aware of our parental responsibility. Yes, children do stupid things. That's why our job as parents is to guide and counsel them. It is our job to properly teach and train our children. It takes hours and hours of training, patience and creativity. Frankly, I spent more time training my cattle dog to drive cows than I did training my own flesh and blood to deal with school. What a sorry dad I was!

Now let me ask you fathers a question. Do you spend more time exercising, surfing the net, watching TV or doing a hobby than training your own flesh and blood? Learn from my mistakes, men, and get down to business with your children. After all, it's your responsibility.

Later alligator! In the meantime, check your cinch. . . .
Carter

TO: GERRY and THE MEN
of THE PARENTING CO-OP
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Silent and not-so-silent child abuse

Gerry, thanks for your phone call. I was glad to hear my last email upset you. I know you aren't physically abusive to your children, but you raised a couple of interesting questions:

1. What's the difference between the physical injuries sustained by a child at the hands of an angry or frustrated father and the emotional injuries sustained by a child at the hands of an absent, disconnected or indifferent father?
2. What's the difference between the emotional damage done to a child by a father who screams, yells, hits or has temper tantrums and the emotional injuries resulting from a passive, uncommunicative, controlling, manipulative or distant father?

Well, Gerry, I see children who've been physically crippled by abusive fathers who take out their frustrations on them. Yesterday, I read a story about "Shaken Baby Syndrome." Seems an irresponsible father shook his little baby so hard that the little guy suffered several critical injuries which included a severely cracked skull, swelling of his little brain and contusions in both eyes. My heart rate shot up to an all time high! To make matters worse, his little twin sister was placed in foster care after the doctors found that she had also sustained serious injuries including a broken arm and leg. The mother of the two injured children explained to the investigators

that she had seen the father, Mr. Bonehead, shake the children. However, she didn't think he'd rattled them to the point of injury.

The article reported that this sorry, out-of-control dad shook his children because he was angry and frustrated. All I could do was wish that somebody would grab him and shake him around a while to see how he likes it. What kind of person takes a seven-week-old baby and just shakes the tar out of him? Picture this 180-pound man holding his little fifteen-pound baby in his hands. He screams, yells and shakes the poor baby mercilessly. It just breaks my heart and makes me madder than a disgruntled old bull. How about you?

This kind of incident happens all the time. What's wrong with fathers? They don't stop long enough to think about anybody but themselves. Even little helpless babies are at the mercy of their self-centered, self-absorbed, self-serving and self-willed fathers. The Bible tells us in 2 Timothy 3:1-4 what men will act like in the latter days. It says, "Men will be lovers of self... arrogant... ungrateful... unloving... without self-control... brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

I guess we've arrived at the latter days, haven't we? These terms often describe fathers and husbands who have lost their moral compass and revert to sinful behavior that is repelling and inexcusable. So it is with the father I just described. Do any of these terms apply to your parenting?

Dads, here's a word of warning: if you can't control your anger, keep your hands in your pockets where they won't hurt anybody. Never take out your frustrations on little people or your wives.

The answer to the problem of parental child abuse, as well as every other parenting problem, is to *fix the parents*. Educate the parents that crying babies aren't the problem. Neither are rebel-

lions teens. We need to train parents to learn self-control and manage their emotions more effectively. It's the parent's anger, frustration, impatience and lack of self-control that's the issue. These self-centered behaviors make parenting less effective and more destructive.

I've said all this to suggest that as parents, we need someone to teach us how to be selfless, controlled and wise in our parenting. We need to be taught how to be responsible and effective parents who have learned to control their emotions and frustrations when the going gets tough.

Just look around and observe the number of parents that are at their wits' end when it comes to dealing successfully with their children. Through my counseling work, I'm constantly brushing shoulders with parents that have run out of energy, ideas, time and patience. Parents shouldn't focus all of their time and energy on the problems of their children, but rather allocate some time and energy to solving their own problems as parents. How about we focus on the parental problem of self-centeredness? That covers parental laziness, impatience, inappropriate discipline, lack of creativity and unwillingness to teach and train.

I know these physically abused children have been emotionally hurt as well. But there's another distinct group of emotionally crippled children we don't like to discuss. Especially in Christian circles. They're the sons and daughters of preachers, elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers and hard workers—moms and dads alike—who never affirm, validate or approve of their kids. These parents do a lot of damage to their children as well. It's just not as noticeable as physical abuse.

Let me impress this on you! There are many emotional side effects to children from fathers who are disconnected, uninvolved, and non-affirming. Often these children end up with their brains

scrambled in a different way. Far too often they turn to drugs, alcohol, and sex in their quest for parental love and approval.

The horrible tentacles of irresponsible and self-centered parenting, whether physical or emotional, eventually reach into every aspect of a kid's life. Take King David as a good biblical example of this. For all the good David did in his life, he was pretty uninvolved with his children and the results were horrific. Let me give you some food for thought from 2 Samuel, chapter 13. What would you do as a dad if one of your daughters was raped by one of your sons? Do you know what King David did? Not a thing, except get a little angry. So his son Absalom took matters into his own hands and ordered his servants to kill the rapist, his younger brother Amnon.

Now if your son, like Absalom, wanted to patch things up with you, how long would it take for you to set up the meeting? Read on in 2 Samuel 14. King David wasn't in any hurry. It took him *over two years* to see Absalom. From that point on, Absalom's anger got the best of him. He continued on an evil, angry path. Consequently, Absalom set out to steal the hearts of all the men in his father's kingdom. He eventually sought to kill his own father.

As the saga continues, a battle ensued between the army of David and the army of Absalom. As an act of belated "fatherly kindness," David told his generals to win the battle but preserve Absalom's life. That was thoughtful! Late, but thoughtful.

Sometimes later in a father's life, he begins to see more clearly the broken relationships between him and his children. I believe this was the case with David. I think he finally realized all the damage and distance between him and his son Absalom. Sparing Absalom's life seemed to be the only answer to his heartfelt grief and regret. However, during the battle Absalom's donkey went un-

der a large oak tree and Absalom's beautiful hair got tangled in the tree. There he hung until Joab, one of David's trusted generals, arrived.

Joab was so angry with Absalom that he ignored David's orders. Joab thrust three darts into Absalom's heart. Then Joab's armor bearers surrounded Absalom and killed him. When King David finally heard the news about his son's death he cried, "Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33, KJV)

Absalom reached out for his father's approval, but David was too busy running his kingdom. Absalom wanted a relationship with his dad, but David was preoccupied with so many other things that he just didn't have the time or interest to love Absalom. Absalom suffered the emotional abuse of an uninvolved father. Do you get my point? There were no physical scars to tell of David's abuse, but his neglect of Absalom left emotional scars that tormented the boy his entire life.

I've said all that to say this: fathers are responsible to properly, and I emphasize *properly*, teach, train and discipline their children. Your children don't need visible bruises on their bodies to indicate child abuse. All they need are broken spirits from an angry, indifferent, controlling and distant father who is verbally or emotionally abusive. They want you to love them, but maybe you're too busy with other things and other people. They long for your approval but maybe you're too far removed from their lives, and too self-consumed to plug in. Oh, how they want you to pat them on the back, give them a hug of approval and love them. Will you do that? Could it be you're too busy patting yourself on the back?

Is it this way with you? I sure hope not. Let's face it. Fathers are often disconnected from the parenting process. Mom's circuits are

fried and the kids are absolutely driving her to the funny farm. Dad goes to work, or out with the guys after work, oblivious to the underlying needs of his family. And we wonder why kids are screwed up! Well, folks, it's time for a wake up call! **Maybe it's time for Dads and Moms to get a little shaking!** How about calling this the "Shaken Parents Syndrome"?

The Shaken Parents Syndrome, when done properly, **unscrambles** your brain and gets your parenting back to "sunny side up." Are you still with me?

Meditate on these things, and I'll wrap up my remarks in another email tomorrow. Till then give your kids a hug, OK?

Carter

P.S. I need to have you answer a question before my email tomorrow. Some dads and moms are involved to a fault. They're controlling, legalistic and virtually "smother" their children. They don't allow their children one ounce of independence and demand the children do everything just like they want. These kids grow up always looking over their shoulders for a critical, judgmental and smothering parent who doesn't allow them to be individuals. Do you see a problem with this kind of **negative involvement? What does that do to a child?**

TO: THE MEN of THE PARENTING CO-OP
(continued)
FROM: CARTER
SUBJECT: Bible illustrations about uninvolved dads

Sorry I couldn't finish my email yesterday. Minnie and I went on a hospital visit and were late getting back to the ranch. Of course, I needed a piece of pie after our visit. By the time we returned home I had other things on my mind, like getting some shuteye.

So here we go again. Since the Bible has so much to say about parenting, let's use another illustration right from its pages. We all know the Bible reminds Christians and non-Christians alike to stay involved with their children, to teach, train and discipline. They should avoid an angry spirit, be patient and self-controlled. So let's learn together in spite of our spiritual differences. Who knows? Maybe we'll not only be better informed about parenting, but also learn a lot more about God Himself and His wonderful plan of salvation. So why not try a little Bible reading?

The most important parenting principle we learn from the Bible is that we should follow the model of our heavenly Father. He loves us as His children. God disciplines His children with loving care as a gracious parent. He is involved in every aspect of His kids' lives. What a great example God sets for parents to follow! However, unlike God, many parents choose to raise their children using the latest fad in parenting instead of the time-tested biblical principles. Can you say "disastrous"? Or they rely upon the model of their earthly fathers instead of their heavenly Father. Say "disastrous" one more time! Here's the problem of relying on your earthly father.

A few years ago, a man came to my office for counseling. Another pastor in town had referred him to me. This guy was probably 40 years old and had a very obvious physical disability. He told me about how, while he was growing up, his father punished him by hitting him on the side of the head. The damage to this man's body was the result of an abusive father who hit him in anger. Do you know why this man was in my office for counseling? He was there to get help because he was disciplining his children in exactly the same manner as his father had disciplined him. That didn't make the Social Services people very happy. That's precisely why parents need to consult the Bible for parenting tips instead of parenting like dear old dad.

Not only does the Bible give good advice about parenting, but it also allows us to peek into the lives of fathers who pathetically failed their children. We saw that in the life of King David. Now let's look at 1 Samuel chapters 2 through 4 and the story of a priest in Israel named Eli. He was a busy priest and occasionally got involved in counseling, much like myself.

Now Eli had a couple of kids named Hophni and Phinehas. (Who calls their kids Hophni and Phinehas anyway? Imagine what the kids at the local junior high called them!). Anyway, these two sons followed in their father's footsteps as priests. We're told that these two knuckleheads were "worthless men; they did not know the Lord." What we have here are two sons whose father is a priest, that are likewise in the priesthood but as *false* priests. They were religious charlatans! Did you get that? These slackers were in the business of religion for the fringe benefits. They really didn't give a rip about the Lord or His people. They were just sanctified thieves and hustlers.

But God had their number, and was determined to put these profiteers and womanizers out of business. God was also ticked at Eli for honoring his sons over Him. In fact, God was so angry that

His judgment fell on the entire family. God declared that both boys would die on the same day, and Eli would lose his priesthood. But you ask why does poor old Eli lose his priesthood over the actions of his sons? Good question! God gives us the answer in 1 Samuel 3:13. There we learn that God will “judge his [Eli’s] house forever for the **iniquity which he [Eli] knew**, because his sons brought a curse on themselves **and he [Eli] did not rebuke them.**” In other words, God hates it when a father is not involved in the parenting of his children.

Absentee parenting doesn’t honor God! If a dad sits back and just lets his kids do whatever they please, God gets real concerned. If children get away with doing evil and their father doesn’t even lift a finger to correct them, teach them or protect others from them, God gets a real nasty headache. Hey fathers, did you notice the mother of these two problem kids isn’t even mentioned in the scripture? To me it’s rather striking that the kid’s problems rested squarely on the shoulders of their disconnected, indifferent father. Sure enough, God made good on His Word as always. In chapter 4 we find out that both boys died in battle—and old Eli died of a broken neck after falling backward beside the gate. Ouch! End of story.

How’d you like that story, men? What did you learn from these two stories about King David and Priest Eli? Isn’t the lesson simply that God wants fathers to be involved in the parenting process of their children from start to finish? To ignore their needs, or to distance yourself from the teaching and training of your children, is just unacceptable. In fact, we live in a culture that defines this phenomenon as the “absentee dad” generation.

But this problem hasn’t just happened during our lifetime. The very first human family needed a father to get involved with his sons. You can check it out yourselves in Genesis 4. Adam needed to step in between Cain and Abel and help them work through

their sibling rivalry. But he didn't. There's no record of him lifting a finger to help mediate his sons' disagreement with each other over the proper sacrifice to God. Rather, Adam was nowhere to be found. In their father's absence, Adam's son Cain actually kills his brother Abel.

We need to plug into the lives of our children. We don't need to smother them. Just be aware of what they are doing and what they are thinking. We need to be prepared to lead them through the many minefields they'll encounter while growing up. We need to have the courage to confront their sinful behavior and take the necessary actions to protect others from their wicked ways. We need to set aside the necessary time to teach them God's Word and God's way. Do you agree, or don't you?

Here are a few hints to start you on the path of involvement:

- First, stay abreast of what's happening in your kids' world. Read news magazines and books that help you understand what they're facing.
- Talk with their friends, visit their schools and learn what your children are dealing with.
- Pray and read the Bible to get God's instructions on how to lead them. Then teach them what God says about life. You can do this at the dinner table.
- Understand how peer pressure is affecting your child's dress, speech and attitudes. Be involved with how your daughters look in public, and how your sons are looking at other people's daughters. Teach them about personal appearance, correct speech and godly attitudes remembering that Christlikeness starts with what and how they think, not with what they do or don't do! Keep in mind that good parenting affects the heart, not just the behavior.

There's more to come! But for now, dads, think about the bad results of indifferent and uninvolved parenting. King David lost his son, Absalom was a human disaster, Eli's two sons were killed, Eli broke his neck and Cain slew his brother Abel. Sad but true! Seems safer to be a good parent!

Love you all,
Carter

Here's something to think about from *Life at the Lazy-U...*

