



What Kids Need

4 Messages That Build Identity



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Dear Parent,

There is more online help available for parents than ever. Still, childhood anxiety, depression, and hopelessness are on the rise. When asking for help, parents often say things like, *"My child... needs to learn respect, ...is SO irresponsible, ...never listens, ...constantly disobeys, ...is too distractible, ...always interrupts,"* and so on. In between the lines of their frustration, these parents' good intentions are to raise respectful, responsible, and obedient children.

Sadly, **there is often a significant gap between parents' good intentions and their kids' interpretations of those intentions.** In the parents' efforts to work toward those goals, the kids often get different and counterproductive messages. Discouragement and anxiety rise in kids and parents alike. Sometimes, even despair. And it gets harder, not easier, in spite of all the new things parents try.

In the midst of the discouragement, parents wonder, *"Am I failing? Am I ruining my child?"*

We totally get it. As professionals working with kids, and as the parents of three intense and challenging kids, we've lived this. Since 1993, we have dedicated our lives to offering hope and help to parents, rooted in biblical wisdom, informed by science and research, and now affirmed by thousands of families worldwide. We are excited to offer you an overview of what we've learned over the past 30 years as we stand with parents in the tension between their good intentions and their discouraged kids.

This ebook introduces a new way to make progress toward your good parenting intentions through the lens of messages. It turns out that good intentions and the way you go about trying to achieve them just might not be teaching kids the lessons you intend.

When parents expand their good intentions to include effective communication of messages of identity, they often experience profound impact, even transformation, in their families. They report the following sort of impact:

“There is joy and peace in our home again.”
“My kids get along with each other better than ever!”
“I’m a nicer parent!”
“It’s so much more natural to talk about God.”
“My kids are making kinder, wiser choices
“My kids know when they need a break and take it themselves.”

We know this kind of impact is possible in even the most stressed families when they expand their good parenting intentions to include messages of God's grace and truth. May you find hope in these pages as you learn to lead your family with grace!

Jim & Lynne Jackson
Co-founders of Connected Families

Note: Names of parents and children in the following ebook have been changed to protect their privacy.

INTRODUCTION

Jeni has been working with her ten-year-old Tyler to be more obedient and responsible. So when Tyler disobeys and doesn't take responsibility for cleaning up the kitchen as assigned on his chore chart, she enters the all too common battle of wills to get him to do his job.

"Tyler, please clean up the mess in the kitchen." No response. Tyler is glued to his video game. Jeni raises her voice, *"Tyler! Listen to me! You know the rules. There are no screens until your chores are done, and you've left the kitchen a mess again!"* She has Tyler's attention, but he knows from experience that Mom might give up if he stalls long enough. Besides, he hates clearing and cleaning dishes more than any of his other chores. He stays glued.

"Tyler, are we going to have to go through this again?" Jeni scolds. *"You put that controller down right now and clear and rinse the dishes, or no video games for a week!"*

Tyler senses that Jeni means business and responds, *"You could at least let me finish this level."* He slumps off his chair as Jeni follows him into the kitchen to be sure he gets a good start.

Satisfied that he knows she means business, Jeni leaves Tyler to finish, thinking to herself, *"That was easier than last time. Maybe he's finally starting to feel responsible for his jobs."*

We've got it backward

Based on what we observe with moms and dads like Jeni, it seems parents believe that if they work hard enough to get kids to behave, their kids will somehow embrace the value of obedience and responsibility. On the surface, this might seem logical, but unfortunately, this approach usually builds more *resentment* than *responsibility*.

In her effort to get Tyler to be more responsible for his chores, Jeni actually chiseled away his sense of responsibility. By nagging until Tyler gave in, Jeni's unwitting message was, *"Tyler, you are irresponsible and need me to motivate you."* So, instead of feeling encouraged, he likely feels shame. By focusing on behavior first, hoping the beliefs would follow, Jeni got it backward.

What if, on the way to helping her son behave responsibly, Jeni prioritized communicating the beliefs she wanted to instill? For example:

If you work hard enough to get your kids to behave, will they somehow embrace the value of obedience and responsibility? On the surface, this might seem logical, but unfortunately, this approach usually builds more resentment than responsibility.

- What if she made sure not to rush through dinner but worked to connect well with Tyler while they ate and affirmed how much she enjoys being with him? She'd reinforce the belief, *"You are loved."*
- What if she had noticed that Tyler grimaced as he touched the dirty ("slimy") dishes on previous nights, and she acknowledged that it was hard for him? She'd communicate the message, *"You are understood."*
- What if, during dinner, she asked Tyler if there were other chores he'd prefer over doing dishes and gave him the opportunity to suggest a new plan? She'd instill in Tyler a belief that *"You are capable and responsible."*

Would this help things go differently next time Tyler needs to take responsibility for his chores? There are no guarantees, but we've seen profound transformation in families when parents shift from prioritizing behavior to prioritizing messages.

When parents put their best efforts into communicating messages that their children are safe, loved, capable, and responsible, kids tend to live out these beliefs as they walk through life.

The shift to messaging

The messages kids get from you when they act up powerfully shape their beliefs about themselves. There is an excellent opportunity in misbehavior to be thoughtful about these messages. **“Messages” are not just what is spoken but what is experienced by your kids.** For example, if your struggling child is met with a gentle tone and a loving expression, the messages that child experiences might be, *“You are safe. You are loved. You matter. You are understood.”*

Conversely, when your struggling child is met with a furrowed brow and a loud exhale before a word is ever spoken, your child receives a message like, *“You are a problem. You are a disappointment. You are a nuisance.”* Despite your good intentions, **the messages your child receives might be the opposite of what you want to communicate.**

When you are diligent, over time, to communicate messages of love, grace, and capability to your kids rooted in God’s truth, your kids are empowered to believe they are significant contributors in this world, and then they behave accordingly.

“Messages” are not just what is spoken but what is experienced by your kids.”

4 powerful messages that build identity

How might your parenting change if, instead of prioritizing behavioral outcomes with your kids, you prioritized messaging? What if, instead of focusing on being sure your kids know what to *do*, you prioritized that they know who they *are*, rooted in the following simple list of identity messages:



There could be many more identity messages you’d like your kids to embrace. These four represent 30 years of experience helping parents equip their kids with the identity messages important for thriving, faith-filled independence.

When parents make the shift from focusing on behavior to focusing on identity, they report amazing changes of many kinds. Never perfection, but so much more laughter, wisdom, and peace.

Let’s dig into the messages one at a time.

You are **SAFE** with me!"

"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety."
Psalm 4:8

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."
Proverbs 29:25

Building a culture of emotional safety builds the trust that is necessary for true connection and influence with your child. Or, more simply stated: **Kids learn best when they feel safe.** Here are a few thoughts about how to become safe in your kids' eyes.

Start with an inward look

Our beliefs fuel our behavior. If a child's misbehavior fills your mind with anxious thoughts like, *"I'm the parent. I've got to stop this now,"* or *"What's going to happen with this kid?"* you will naturally engage with angst and try to control your child to decrease your anxiety. This thought process often happens with no awareness, and unfortunately children may get the message, *"You're a problem!"* or maybe even, *"You are unwanted!"*

An effective first step on the way to emotional safety is to consider the question, "What's going on with me?"

By giving God permission to search your heart, you can begin a healing journey of being led by His love for you.

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

PSALM 139:23,24

Once you name what's going on in you, you can consider those thoughts and feelings in the light of God's grace and truth. **Growing in God's grace and truth for yourself equips you to guide your kids more wisely, peacefully, and safely through their challenges.**

The science of emotional safety

There is a basic **neurobiological** reason why feeling physically and emotionally safe with you is vitally important for your children:

The brain is designed to protect us from anything threatening, especially if it is large and comes at us fast and loudly. (Picture a large, roaring animal running at you.) It is essential for our survival when we are threatened that we quickly a) aggressively defend ourselves or b) run away (fight/flight response).

However, this self-protective mechanism works against us in stressful family conflicts. Parents often try to regain control by rushing in (fast), towering over kids (large), with strong commands to "Stop it! Right now!" (loud). This sends our kids into a fight/flight state and shuts down their frontal lobe. Their brains will self-protect with aggressive or defensive reactions.

If we want our kids to learn anything helpful when they've misbehaved, we must approach them in a manner that is the opposite of fast, large, and loud: Slow, Low (get out of "large," intimidating postures and calm your body), and **Listen** (listen to God, listen to your child).

When you show up in tense conflict situations with "slow, low, and listen" rooted in the grace of God for us, you communicate to your children, **"You are SAFE with me."**

Notice this verse starts with *everyone*... (not just, "You need to listen to me, kiddo...")

"Everyone (yup, even moms and dads 😊) should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

James 1:19b, 20 (parenthesis added)

You're not alone!

The shift to focusing on beliefs and looking inward can take time and effort. But God doesn't leave His children to struggle alone when they feel stuck or when old (even toxic) patterns creep in. As you wrestle with the question, *"What's going on in me?"* you can consider a second vital question, **"What do I need from the Lord right now?"** Our heavenly Father loves to comfort and care for His struggling children.

Here's a real-life example from a mom working to break old patterns:

Kristi's 5-year-old daughter Sierra was intense, and so were their conflicts! Kristi wanted to learn to implement the **Connected Families Framework**, so she started with the message of safety. She rehearsed a new truth to guide her thinking at crunch time: "Jesus responds with grace, love, and mercy as He teaches me from my mistakes. I am going to do that for Sierra."

Kristi began to "model out loud" her own process for calming down. She'd say things like, "I'm pretty frustrated right now." Or "I need a bit of God's grace right now." She'd take a few deep, slow breaths and respond to Sierra with a gentle smile, "Ok, now I'm ready to talk with you about this."

Within a few weeks, as Sierra felt safer with her mom, her defiance decreased significantly, and she began following her mom's example! Her kindergarten teacher commented, *"She's an intense little girl, but I've never seen a child calm herself so well! She just starts talking to herself, and pretty soon she's talked herself 'off the ledge.'"*

Over the years, Sierra's parents, Kristi and Steve, worked hard to communicate messages of safety and love in their relationship as they nurtured long-view, godly wisdom. At 14, she told her parents, *"I don't think I'm wise enough for a smartphone yet."* (I'd say that is quite a bit of wisdom.) Sierra is still intense, but she is now a delightful, level-headed 16-year-old who has a great relationship with her parents (and a simple device for texts and phone calls.)

Does this sound possible? **IT IS!** Trusting relationships, marked by safety, is the starting place.

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

ISAIAH 41:10

You are LOVED no matter what

*"God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Romans 5:8

Delight and connection

When you are feeling *loved* and *treasured* by God, you are almost certainly less likely to yell at your children. You are less likely to *"misbehave."* Kids are no different. Children who feel your delight are less prone to outbursts and behavior challenges. Many parents have shared stories like this one:

"I chose to set aside my typical avoidance of roughhousing play and join in what became an epic pillow fight battle with my kids! It was incredible to see how much joy, connection, fun, and regulation it brought to all three of my kids and our schoolwork, but especially to my 12-year-old son with ADHD. I saw a remarkable difference throughout the entire day. He was more regulated, better able to focus, and had fewer sister-bugging behavior challenges! During dinner prayer, he thanked God for the 'awesome pillow fight' we had. It was a great reminder to me of how helpful it is to put aside the 'important stuff' on my to-do list and have fun playing with my kids."

Playfulness, snuggles, high fives, fist bumps, and *"I love you"* types of connection build vital strength in your relationship with your child. They fill both of your hearts with joy!

Nearly all parents find that playful affection and delight are easiest to express when kids are already in a cooperative mood ("well-behaved"). However, **if parents express love only when children behave well, the message kids get is that love is conditional.** They may learn that "good behavior gets me love." This can put kids on a performance treadmill that runs faster and faster and is difficult to get off of. When children believe love is earned, their emotions and sense of value tend to rise and fall with their performance. They may even make compromising choices to gain approval or attention.

This is not what you want for your kids.

Unconditional love

If you express love when your children struggle or misbehave, you effectively communicate, "You are so valuable that you are loved in spite of what you do."

Expressing love and kindness during challenging times is the only way to convince your children that your love is trustworthy, not conditional. This is why we say, "Misbehavior is the golden opportunity for unconditional love."

"Misbehavior is the golden opportunity for unconditional love."

As you show your kids that "[tantrums, defiance...or any other misbehavior](#)" cannot separate them from your love, it can help them internalize the idea that nothing can separate them from the love of God either ([Romans 8:38-39](#)).

In misbehavior, parents have the most incredible opportunity to show children that gospel love is "*wide, long, high and deep*" enough ([Ephesians 3:17-19](#)) to envelop them, even when they misbehave.

There are many ways in which unconditional love can be communicated when kids mess up - a gentle smile, a hug, light humor, or simply conveying love with heartfelt words. Another powerful way to communicate love is by expressing sincere empathy.

Empathy and Emmanuel

Empathy is about putting yourself in your child's shoes and making your best guess about what it's like to be them. *"You look really upset. Are you frustrated about how your drawing turned out?"* or, *"When we talk about your concert, you seem anxious. Is there anything you'd like me to know about that?"*

Sometimes empathy is best expressed simply through calm presence - nearness with no agenda. Children know that you understand how hard it is when life is just not working for them.

Empathy communicates powerful messages: **"You are understood."** **"You are not alone."** **"I am for you."** **These are the life-giving messages of Emmanuel - Jesus, "God-with-us."**

When children feel understood, they often want to make a wiser choice because they feel joined, not opposed. Even when consequences are still needed, kids are usually more receptive to those consequences because they feel loved.

When your kids are defiant, disrespectful, or are bursting with big, difficult emotions, start with sincere empathy. You will react more calmly, help your kids build emotional maturity, and, most importantly, communicate to them that they are loved unconditionally... no matter what!

You are CALLED and CAPABLE

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well."*

Psalm 139:13-14

We are, each of us, born in God's image and created to do good work. It's easy to forget this when life gets challenging and kids get unruly. But it's still true.

Part of your calling in life is to raise your uniquely gifted children to walk in *their* calling - to love God and make a difference in the world. Keeping this truth alive in your thinking is important, especially when kids misbehave.

It's tempting at such times to make a "short game" goal of commanding obedience and punishing to get your child to comply while losing sight of the "long game" goal of Godly identity rooted in trust in Christ. Learning to engage with your kids' misbehavior while holding on to a vision for their capability and calling can transform discipline from an annoying headache to a holy adventure.

Here's an example: When I (Jim) was in youth ministry with high-risk teens, I met a large, angry-looking teen named Dave. He came from a "good" home with lots of rules and religious values. He claimed to have "given my life to Jesus" a few years prior. His parents had high expectations, and his older sister was a popular honor student.

When I met him, Dave was what his mom called "*a real troublemaker!*" She thought everything was fine until Dave was in 4th or 5th grade, and then "*the lid came off.*" He had been in and out of mainstream and alternative schools, juvenile court for truancy and dumpster fires, and carried himself with a dark and intimidating demeanor.

Knowing that even scary-looking teens like Dave are fearfully and wonderfully made, I kept looking for ways to connect with him. (... "You are safe with me".... "You are loved no matter what" 😊). I also watched for ways to *encourage* him, "*fill him with courage*" and use his talent constructively. There was a picnic coming up at the youth center, so I asked Dave if he was willing to be "*the fire guy*" for the event. He flashed a devious smile and said, "*Do you have any idea who you're asking?*"

"*I do!*" I said with a confident smile of my own. "*From what I hear, you're good with fire and smart enough not to burn down buildings when you play with it, and I'll bet you could even convince some buddies to join us. (I knew he'd probably avoid being alone with me.) I'll pick you up the day before so we can go to the woods and collect a bunch of firewood.*"

"*Are you sure?*" he asked.

"*I am.*" I wasn't sure whether Dave would show up on "collection day," but he did, with a couple of friends I also knew.

They collected a huge pile of wood, and it seemed only natural that they had a "test burn." I gave the conditions. *"Keep it safe."* I clarified, *"Build it as big as you want, but keep it in the (4-foot) ring."* They did. I watched closely at first, but as it became clear that they were diligent about the ring, I kept working on other preparations for the picnic. The guys were delighted when I brought out hot dogs and marshmallows for a quick cookout. They then helped set up some tables and chairs for the event, and we were done.

Afterward, Dave looked at me with the first sustained eye contact I'd ever experienced with him. After a few seconds he sincerely proclaimed, *"That was cool, Jim."* Just four words, but words that communicated so much more. By enlisting and trusting Dave in a meaningful job while giving him and his friends space to adventure, I earned a truckload of trust in return and experienced a transformation in Dave's engagement with me. The event went smoothly the next day, and Dave engaged more fully in the group from then on. And he became the fire-building team leader at every future opportunity.

I couldn't help but wonder how Dave's life would be different if his parents had learned what I had learned about how to conduct relationships with kids through the lens of messages.

While Dave's mom suggested that *"the lid came off all of a sudden,"* we've come to understand that behavior like Dave's at age 10 or 11, while it seems to come out of nowhere, has actually been brewing for a long time. What if his mom had let go of trying to get Dave to be like his sister and instead focused on helping him know that he was safe under God's grace, loved no matter what, called and capable, and responsible for his actions and relationships?

What a privilege it was to be an agent of God's grace in Dave's life, to call out (and give opportunity for) the good work God prepared him to do. Our only regret is that we didn't somehow find a way to help Dave's parents make the perspective shift that this ebook invites.

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

EPHESIANS 2:10

When kids like Dave get in trouble, they usually tap into their God-given strengths and talents to accomplish what's important to them. If parents' (or caregivers') primary goal is to "straighten them out" or fix the problems through punishment, these kids often grow discouraged and keep up the behavior in ways that are harder to catch. Over time, they come to believe that they are troublemakers rather than talented people.

Making a priority to communicate the message: **"You are CALLED and CAPABLE"** can reverse the journey toward discouragement and instead can encourage them (literally, "fill them with courage") to use their talents for good.

Whether with your own kids or someone else's, the vision (the good intention) to breathe life into a child's calling and capacity is a great challenge that comes with great (even eternal!) reward.

As you engage more with Connected Families, you'll find abundant resources to help you communicate the identity message, *"You are called and capable."* You'll be equipped to teach values and skills for problem-solving, reconciliation, resilience, integrity, responsibility, wisdom, authentic faith... and more.

You'll find that parenting becomes less about *managing behavior* and more about *mentoring belief and building skills!*

You are RESPONSIBLE for your actions

"Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted."

Galatians 6:1

Kids miss the mark. Parents miss the mark. And we are all responsible for making right what our behavior has made wrong. Ultimately, this is about reconciling the fact that each of us, born into sin, is invited by the Holy Spirit to take responsibility for our sin, confess it to God, and surrender our lives to Christ. We are then reconciled to God, *not because we get things right*, but because of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8).

Bringing this "grace mindset" into the corrective discipline of children is paramount to their understanding of God's grace and truth. Focusing primarily on the message, *"You are responsible for your actions,"* is the gateway. Here's how to do it.

Shift the focus.

For good or for bad, kids' misbehavior is the best opportunity for parents to shape their children's beliefs and sense of identity. So, we invite parents to shift their primary focus in corrective discipline from "getting the right behavior" to "shaping a strong identity."

Here's a quick example: Let's say Sibling 1, the older and stronger sibling, is upset because Sibling 2 used Sibling 1's prize possession without permission. They are fighting verbally and escalating to highly inappropriate language. What's a parent to do?

Option 1 - Manage behavior.

Let's imagine you're their frustrated parent. It happens most days, and you've been clear about what you expect. Your usual response is, *"How many times do we have to go through this? Both of you know better. Now go to your rooms, and don't come out until you can say you're sorry!"*

Neither sibling likes this option, so they mutter, *"Sorry."* It is not sincere, but it's expedient and keeps them out of their rooms. You are satisfied they got the message and will stay out of each other's hair for a while. Before leaving, just for emphasis, you add, *"If this happens again tonight, I'll have to get a bit more drastic."*

But what message(s) did they get?

Indeed, every time you engage with your kids' misbehavior, they get a message. And because emotions run high at such times, the messages tend to sink in. Unfortunately, if the pattern you repeat is similar to Option 1 above, the messages are rarely what you intend.

While the desired messages are probably about respect, obedience, and better habits, the messages the kids get are starkly different: *"You are a nuisance and dependent on me to sort this out."* Through the comment, *"How many times do we have to go through this?"* they hear, *"What's wrong with you? You don't learn. You're not capable."* And in the requirement to apologize, they get the message, *"You don't have to be sincere."*

Scenarios like this are far more complicated than explained here, but hopefully, you see how many subtle messages can be contained in brief interactions like this.

Option 2 - Focus on identity messages.

Particularly the message, *"You are responsible for your actions."* Now, led by this good intention, instead of quickly shutting down their argument, you might observe from afar, trusting that the lessons you've proactively taught will help them choose wisely. If you sense they need a little guidance to avoid a serious altercation, you might say, *"Do you two want some help, or have you got it?"* If it's clear that your kids will escalate toward physical harm, you may get between them, saying, *"Okay, this looks tough; how do you want to solve it?"*

Any of these calculated approaches are based on whatever you discern is needed to keep the weight of responsibility for solving this on your kids. This approach powerfully communicates messages of respect and responsibility to kids, especially when you have proactively built a value of reconciliation and communicated, *"You're **called** and **capable**"* of resolving conflict by teaching them those skills.

We recognize that this described scenario could represent a thousand nuanced options. The goal is not to give a script for how to respond but to show how embracing the primary goal of communicating that *"You are **responsible**"* can change the tone of challenging situations and set a trajectory toward wiser responses to kids' misbehavior.

In our book and online course, we equip you with tools for the use of "make-it-right consequences" when needed, but always with a focus on the messages kids receive from your discipline.

Now what?

FINAL WORD

If these four messages are ones you communicate when your kids misbehave, they are likely well on their way to valuing God's grace and truth in their lives!

Our prayer is that, after reading this, you will be more thoughtful about how your discipline can connect with your child's heart. We hope you've recognized a few ways you are already leading your family with grace by communicating these four powerful messages to your children. We are excited to partner with you as you continue in your journey to guide kids toward God's purposes for them.

Dig in to keep learning and growing!

- » Take the [Discipline That Connects With Your Child's Heart](#) online course.
- » Purchase the full-length [Discipline That Connects With Your Child's Heart](#) book.
- » Check out our [parent coaching](#) and other [online course options](#).

Kids who grow up believing they are *safe* in God's care, *loved* no matter what, *called* and *capable* of doing the good works God has prepared for them to do, and *responsible* to God for their actions and their lives are kids who grow up to change the world for God's glory.

Our kids need this. **Our world needs them.**

About Jim & Lynne Jackson and Connected Families

Since 1993, co-founders Jim & Lynne Jackson have worked with thousands of parents of all kinds – single parents, adoptive parents, parents of teens, parents of kids with intense behavior challenges, parents in blended families, parents of wealth and parents in poverty, and any other kind of parent you can think of. [Jim & Lynne](#) and their [growing team](#) are committed to bringing you content that will challenge, encourage, and equip you to be the thoughtful and confident parent you long to be and to lead your family with grace.