

Parenting Families

Practical Strategies
for the Single Parent



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Parenting Families

Practical Strategies for the Single Parent

by Dr. David J. Ludwig

Rev. Dr. David Ludwig is a pastor, noted author, family counselor, and retired professor of psychology at Lenoir-Rhyne College, Hickory, NC. He and his wife Kathy have three sons and seven grandchildren. They reside in North Carolina and enjoy helping families through Grace Place Ministries. Discover more about Dr. Ludwig's resources at www.thinkwe.com.

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Your Child's Spirit Is an Awesome Gift

Your child was not born with an understanding of life. She develops that as she interacts with you. You are the most important person in your child's life. Through you, she develops her personality. Stuff she learns from you she will carry throughout her life.

That's why she is very familiar with you. She knows your every facial expression. You can't fool her. She knows when you are serious and when you will give in.

And she is constantly trying out new things, watching carefully how you react to them. That's how she finds your "buttons". She probably knows how to get you frustrated or upset already. She also has found out that she can get by with things with her cute smile.

You Can Get Fooled into Thinking that Your Child Is the Problem

You want your child to listen to you and to do what you say. When your child defies and frustrates you, you automatically assume that it is the child's fault. You get angry at your child and try to force him to obey. A power struggle begins, leaving you more frustrated and angry.

What you do not realize is that **you are the parent!** Your child is just reacting to what he has found in your background. He found one of your "buttons". Instead of getting angry at your child and forcing a bigger power struggle, see that which your child has found in you as his gift to you. He just exposed an immaturity you brought from your background.

Instead of getting angry, why don't you thank your child for finding one of your immaturities? Then you can spend your energy in fixing your button by growing up. You can even thank your child for finding one of your hidden buttons.

Let me put this more bluntly. If there is a power struggle between you and your child, you as the parent are at fault!

It's the child's job to find your immaturity and shift your mood. It is your job to grow up and be the parent for your child.

OK ... How Do I Grow Up and Be the Parent?

You are spiritually mature when you put the good of the family above your own personal feelings. Simply put: Think WE, not ME. As the parent, your job is to form the WE and to protect its boundaries! You model putting the family unit (WE) as more important than one's own needs (ME). Then you teach your child how to think WE.

Rules that help the family live together are called WE boundaries. You, as the single parent, initially set these boundaries. You think of the best ways your family can interact with each other and you think of what would be best for the child and for the whole family. For example, you can easily decide that disrespect should not be allowed since it damages family relationships. You can also decide that it is healthy for your child to help out around the house.

You set the boundaries initially by deciding what is good for the whole family. You get your child's input. You talk over, for example, how important it is for the family that everyone is respected. Then you all agree to show respect as you talk to each other. Obviously, you as the parent will guide the discussion as you consider what is best for the WE.

As your child matures, you allow her more and more input into setting the rules. For example, your 12-year-old would like more freedom. He would like to be able to

communicate with his friends later than his current curfew of 8:30 p.m. As you talk it over with your child, you say, "You have shown your maturity by obeying the rules, so I think WE can extend the curfew until 9:00 p.m."

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

As the child matures, she will internalize these loving, yet firm, boundaries. This will be the basis of healthy self-control when outside the sphere of your parental influence. She will think of what is best for her life (she now has an internal WE) when she makes decisions.

Without such boundaries or with boundaries that are overly rigid, the child will find it difficult to handle situations later in life. She will give in to an impulse, then later regret it. There will be a constant internal struggle between what she wants to do and what she feels she should do.

How can I do something different when I get upset?

Remember, your child's job is to use her radar on you. She will spot any guilt, anxiety, anger, or uncertainty in your own spirit. Your child knows you so well and can play you like a violin. She can get you to explode, or she can hit your guilt button and get you to give in.

Your job as a single parent is to form the WE. You have to shift away from your own immaturity or the "old self" that the child can manipulate. You shift from the power struggle to thinking about the good of the family unit. You signal your concern for the family by saying, "It is not good for us if there is disrespect, so WE will not allow it." You bring your child into the WE by showing concern for the family unit and saying WE.

Your faith can help. You can remember that you are a "WE" with God and shift to your "new self" and pray. We find these words in the Bible: "Put off the old self ... put on the new self" (see Ephesians 4:24). As God strengthens your spirit, now you can look back at your child and take away the power struggle. Don't be surprised if your child sees what is happening and says, "Oh well, I know you and God won't let me have it anyway."

Feel the shift from ME to WE.

1. *Imagine that your daughter has just defied you.*
2. *Picture yourself getting angry and starting to yell at her: "I told you to go to bed a half an hour ago, now get back there right now!"*
3. *STOP — take a breath and shift to the WE.*
4. *Feel the shift to concern for the child and for the family.*
5. *Smile and from this different place imagine saying in a firm, calm, loving voice: "WE agreed that it is good for you to get a good night's sleep, so you will go to bed right now. I am sure you would like to be wide awake for your field trip tomorrow."*
6. *Feel the difference from a power struggle to concern for the WE.*

What are my “buttons”?

Remember that you had a childhood once. There was a time when you were developing your own strategies for life. Assuming that your family life was not perfect, you got stuck in your own spiritual development.

Take a look at what you went through in your childhood developmental tasks:

Age-related tasks for your spirit (how you organized self and world):

Age 1-3: TRUST — to feel that the world is safe and can risk closeness and vulnerability. With a healthy spirit that grows out of the WE, the child has the warm feeling of being wanted and concludes that she is a gift to the family.

Age 4-6: ASSERT — to discover own impulses and find boundaries. With a healthy spirit that grows out of the WE, the child feels power to assert influence on the family.

Age 7-9: RESPONSIBLE — to adopt family values and act them out. With a healthy spirit that grows out of the WE, the child is proud to contribute to the family and is warmed by parental approval.

Age 10-12: INTERNAL INDEPENDENCE — to make up his or her own mind. With a healthy spirit that grows out of the WE, the child notices inconsistencies and reacts internally to parental authority, getting an attitude.

Age 13-16: EXTERNAL INDEPENDENCE — to show ability to act responsibly. With a healthy spirit that grows out of the WE, the child now stands up to parental authority, face to face, looking the parent in the eye and showing the value of his position. Now the child grows up!

Now listen to your own voice-tone and watch your own body language when you get frustrated with your child. Check out the nonverbals. Can you hear the whine of a 3-year-old or the “worrywart” of a 7-year-old? Do you act like a 5-year-old bully? Do you feel helpless or even lie to your child like an 11-year-old? Do you feel like being a parent takes the fun out of your life and feel like rebelling against the responsibility like a 15-year-old?

Quick guide to where you are stuck:

- **Age 1-3:** You, as the parent, revert to being dependent, clingy, and want your child to fix your feelings. Voice-tone is whiney. Body language shows helpless affect.
- **Age 4-6:** You, as the parent, revert to throwing a temper tantrum if your child does not obey. Voice-tone is demanding, constantly wanting your way.
- **Age 7-9:** You, as the parent, revert to a worrywart, constantly anxious about the child's well-being. Body language shows too much seriousness. You tend to overprotect your child.
- **Age 10-12:** You, as the parent, revert to smoothing over things, often overlooking the child's behavior. Voice-tone is passive and sometimes dishonest. You don't want to be hassled by the child.
- **Age 13-16:** You, as the parent, model immature rebellion toward authority. You are more interested in your own feelings than being a parent. You even rebel at being a parent and let the child know you would rather be doing something else.

How do I “fix” one of my “buttons”?

When your child can shift your mood so that you feel guilty, helpless, or confused ... or explode in anger ... one of your buttons has been pushed. Your mood shift always starts in your stomach. If your child can arouse such a “stomach” feeling, he can shift your mood!

“Stomach” feelings are the immature ones. “Chest” feelings are the mature ones. You can shift to mature feelings by thinking WE.

Try it the next time your child pushes one of her favorite buttons. You will feel the frustration in your stomach. Take a deep breath and think WE. Think about the good of the family, your child, and your relationship with your child.

Now you can feel the love for your child in your heart. You feel the warm responsibility take charge and do what is best for all. These are chest feelings. Feel the look in your eye change from frustration to a smile and easy control. You are now in charge and you are the parent. Now you can say, “Remember, WE decided that it was not good for our family that you are disrespectful, so WE will not allow that.”

You have just taken control of the mood. You see, as long as the child cannot control the mood, he will grow up. When you fix one of your buttons, you have given your child an incredible gift. Your child can now grow up and not stay focused on manipulating you.

You, as the parent, always have the power to step out of the power struggle with your child (who has found one of your buttons) and focus on the WE of the family unit. You stop blaming your child for the mood shift and realize you have the power as the parent to form the WE. The moment you say, "It is not good for our family that you react like this, so WE will not allow it," you have gotten the mood back. The power struggle is gone.

Again, your faith can help. Christ dwells in your heart through faith. He is there to help your spirit mature. As you take a breath in the midst of a struggle with your child, take a moment to pray. The presence of Christ in your heart will change your mood — your spirit. You realize that you are not alone. Christ has already formed a WE with you. Now, as your mood shifts and you start thinking of the good of the family, you can address your child with a smile and easy control. You reflect the love of Christ.

Remember that Your Child Is Part of the WE

The WE is not formed out of your own needs as a parent. You are responsible for forming the WE and while you have your own ideas, you must get your child's input also. You start out by thinking, "What is best for everyone?"

It is tempting for you as the parent to assume you know what is best for your child. You probably do, and could make a good decision by yourself. But as you get input from your child, he actually becomes part of the WE decision. He will be more willing to go along with the decision.

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

It is also tempting to give in to your child. You want him to like you. You also do not want the hassle. But if you indulge the child or allow the child to make decisions without the benefit of the WE, the child will stay self-centered and will not grow into a mature concern for the good of the family.

Concern for the WE creates a good balance between your role as both "policeman" and "friend". As the parent, you must enforce boundaries (policeman) and not allow your child to do anything he

wants. But you also love your child and want him to be happy (friend). Making the child a part of the WE does both of these!

How Do I Listen to My Child?

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

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

How can I understand my child if he won't say much?

Your child could be much different than you are. You may need to learn how to listen. Your child could be a "pointer" and you could be a "painter".

"Painters" and "Pointers":

- 1. One "paints a picture" when talking, while the other "sticks to the point".*
- 2. One keeps many things in mind at once, while the other focuses on only one thing.*
- 3. One reacts emotionally and verbally, while the other thinks things through inside and keeps things in perspective, showing little emotion.*
- 4. One has to talk in order to process thoughts and feelings, while the other does not have to talk, but does it all internally.*
- 5. Boy, do they endlessly frustrate and misunderstand each other!*

If your child does not talk much and seems pretty calm emotionally, chances are that he is a pointer. Even though he does not need to talk in order to think things through, he does need to feel understood so he can feel that he is a gift to the family.

How to listen to a "Pointer" child:

1. Listen carefully to the first word or phrase the child says. This is the point.
2. If you want to get to know the child's soul better, do not ask him another question, for this will frustrate him. He has already summarized one file inside and is ready to give you more detail if you want it. Asking another question will "jerk" him to another file, which is annoying to a pointer. Also he will feel you are not interested in what he just said.
3. Consider the word or phrase your child said as a "file access" word. It is just like an underlined word (in red) on the Internet. Point the curser and "double-click"! Just ask the child, "Tell me more about _____."
4. You must use the exact word the child said. Otherwise, you will probably be in another file and annoy your child.
5. If you ask how the day went and your child, after processing three seconds to access and summarize his file called "today", responds, "It was OK," then double-click on this precise word by saying, "Tell me more about what went OK."
6. He will then give you another word to double-click on, "My speech went OK."

7. Now you have another underlined word, so double-click on that to get deeper into his file. After two or three double-clicks, you will get much more detail. Then, a few clicks later, you will actually get to the emotion!

8. Remember, the pointer does not have to talk to process, so he will only talk if you double-click on his word. Then he knows you are interested.

The pointer's emotions are unprotected. That's why they are so hard to get to. Picture them looking like a "skittish fawn" that just peeks around the corner to see if it is safe. If you make any fast moves, question, or react to the emotions, the fawn will be 100 yards away. The child will actually not feel the emotion anymore.

So how do you get a skittish fawn to feel safe enough to eat out of your hand? Don't react and be more concerned with getting to the emotion rather than reacting to or correcting the child. Make it emotionally safe for the child to reveal his feelings and thoughts.

What if my child is a "Painter"?

A painter child needs to talk in order to process things. The first words out of her mouth are like the first brush strokes of a painting. The painter does not know how the picture is going to turn out in advance.

The painter has to talk in order to process her thoughts and feelings.

The most frustrating thing for a painter child is not to be able to talk and thus is stopped from being able to process out loud. The child will feel lonely and depressed and stuff will endlessly circulate inside her head.

How to listen to a "Painter" child:

- 1. Remember that the first words out of her mouth are not the point, just the first brush stroke.*
- 2. She must get emotional to express what she has to say.*
- 3. Allow the emotion ... do not ask her to speak logically and get to the point.*
- 4. Don't try to solve things or minimize by saying, "It will be OK." Instead, allow her to talk. Sit back, and watch a picture being painted.*
- 5. After the whole picture is painted and you understand, things are usually resolved.*
- 6. If you try to correct or have focused on the first words and are missing the whole picture, your child will have to crank up the emotions and get a bigger paintbrush in order to get you to listen. Often this is perceived as a power struggle to the frustration of the painter child.*
- 7. Enjoy your colorful painter!*

If you do not know how to listen differently, you will frustrate your child. You can tell whether your child is a painter or pointer when the child gets frustrated or upset. The pointer child will want to withdraw and think things through. The painter child will want to process out loud right away.

About 75 percent of girls are painters, but that leaves 25 percent as pointers. Also about 75 percent of boys are pointers, but 25 percent are painters.

Watch Your Affirmation/ Disconfirmation Ratio!

If you are the typical single parent, you will give eight negative or critical comments to your child for every positive one. You don't mean to do it, but so often your concern to correct or teach your child comes across as disconfirming to the child.

Even if you try to keep your criticism focused to the child's behavior, with a ratio of 8-to-1 negative, the child will feel that in his spirit. He will develop a sense of worthlessness and get discouraged.

Taking this one step further, you will notice your children developing the same ratio of negatives to positives when talking to you or to someone else. Keep in mind that this is a family ratio you are developing.

There is no reason this ratio cannot be improved in your home. You can make a fun WE rule: A family member earns the right for one statement of concern after giving three affirmations! This can even work for the child. After she has complimented you for a great meal, thanked brother for reminding her to do her homework, and thanked God for being close to her, then she can point out one thing that is not fair!

What If We are Divorced and the Other Household has Different Rules?

Your child will argue that he is allowed to do that at his father's house. This gives the child more power to disobey and endlessly claim things are not fair at your house.

The easiest way of handling this is to picture the WE as governing only your home. You can then form the WE and say to the child, "Maybe your father would handle things differently, but WE are in charge here and WE will do the best to take care of you."

You Have Help in Forming the WE

As a single parent, often you feel that all of the responsibility for raising your child rests on your shoulders. You feel alone in the daunting task of being a parent.

But you are never alone. God is always with you! He has already formed a "WE" with you. He is only a breath away. In any circumstance, you can take a deep breath, close your eyes, and realize you are not alone in this situation. This is like "putting on your new self".

Within five seconds, you can go from being frustrated and feeling helpless with your child's defiance to feeling uplifted and free. God is with you. Together you already are a WE. This is what it can look like:

You are trying to get your child to bed. He wants to finish his computer game. You are getting frustrated and demand that he stop right now. He ignores you. Your voice gets even more angry as you try to get him to obey. He keeps on playing.

You are five seconds away from jerking him up from the computer and threatening him with severe punishment unless he goes to bed. He will then, predictably, start crying and screaming that you are not fair (pushing your guilt button).

But then you stop, take a deep breath, and pray ... remembering that you are not

alone. Your feelings go from frustration and anger to a loving concern for your child. Your voice-tone and eyes change as you look back at your child, smile, and say, "I know you would like to play longer, but it will be best for all of us that WE get a good rest tonight."

The child will feel the security of the WE and his mood will also shift. He may try to get your "old self" back by pushing your "frustration" button, but his heart will no longer be in it.

In fact, if you develop a habit of taking a breath and closing your eyes, remembering that God has already formed a WE with you, your child may even start walking to his bedroom as he says, "Oh well, I know you and God won't let me play anymore."

There are others in your life who can help form the WE.

Remember that your child can play you like a fiddle. She knows your buttons and knows how to convince you to look at things her way.

She comes home from school and, in her whiny voice, complains that her teacher is picking on her. She knows that you get upset and guilty when her feelings are hurt by others (that is one of your buttons). You immediately get angry with her teacher and take her side.

You forgot that you are a WE with her teacher in your child's development! You

can handle things completely differently by developing a relationship with the teacher, promising to touch base with each other (WE) for the good of the child.

Now when your child comes home from school and uses her whiny voice, complaining that her teacher was not fair, you can immediately use the WE. Your first words to your child are: "Thanks for telling me that something went on at school. Stay right here while I call your teacher so WE can straighten this out. WE all want you to be excited about learning."

You will notice that the whine in your child's voice stops immediately and her story will change: "Well, my teacher did get upset with me when I was not paying attention." It is interesting how the truth comes out quickly when the WE is in place!

You also have a WE in your church community.

It is hard trying to be both parents to your child. It is also hard to form the WE by yourself (even with God's help) because your child is a professional at pushing your buttons!

A good mood is always easier to maintain when you have allies. In other words, it is healthier when there is a supportive community to help raise your child. Extended family forms one aspect of such a community. Your church community is another valuable resource.

There are always members of your church who will take an interest in your child. His Sunday school teacher is one example. Perhaps there are members of your Bible study group who get to know your family. Such associations help you feel supported and keep the mood of your family stabilized.

You never have to be alone in raising your child!

A Personal Reflection

By now you may be wondering if this technique really works. You might even be thinking, "That's easy to say but hard to do. It will never work."

Please take time to read this personal testimony from a single parent who has been pleasantly surprised!

As a single mom of a busy 4-year-old, the term that might best describe me most of the time would be "exhausted". After a long day at work, the last thing I wanted was an evening of power struggles with my son. It was always easier to just give in.

After discovering the concept of moving from ME to WE, I realized I was doing my family a great disservice by allowing my son to parent me! So I decided to implement the ME to WE concept in my family.

I admit to being skeptical at first. I just couldn't see how taking a breath and

changing my tone were going to change the way my son and I struggled. I tried it the first time when we were in the store. My son asked me for the fifth time if we could look at toys. I was preparing to lose my temper when I remembered the concept and, instead, took a deep breath and said, "No, today it is best if WE just get what WE need and go home. WE can look at toys another day."

The words were out and I waited to hear the typical wail of despair at not getting his way. We stood in the aisle staring at each other for a minute and then my son said to me, "OK". That was it, OK, — no crying, no screaming, no scene. I attributed that scenario to "beginners luck" and moved on. After a month of implementing the concept, I've come to realize that it isn't luck. It is applying a practical strategy that is helping me parent my son and helping us become a strong family unit.

It's not a magic solution, though. Every time I face a struggle with my son I have to remind myself to stop, take a breath, say a quick prayer, and then approach the situation in a calm and respectful manner. Thanks to thinking WE instead of ME, my energy is not wasted on endless battles and power struggles. The real blessing is that my son and I are enjoying more quality time together!

And if it can work for me, I am certain it will work for you. You won't lose anything by trying, and you just might gain the family you've been longing for.

Hope

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

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

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

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

The once-perfect world that God created became fractured and broken by hurt and sin. And our relationship to God our Father is also fractured. But because He loves us more than any parent ever could, He sent His Son to restore this relationship. Jesus

Christ, God's very own Son, became the Savior of the world when He took the punishment for every hurt to the cross, died and was buried, then rose in victory three days later!

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

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

About the Concept

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

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

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

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

Notes

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660 Mason Ridge Center Dr.
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In Canada, write:
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Lutheran Hour Ministries through:*

E-mail:

U.S.A.

lh-min@lhm.org

Canada

luthhourmin@lll.ca

or on the World Wide Web:

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You are a single parent. Most likely you didn't choose the circumstances that led up to this time in your life, but here you are — mom and dad rolled into one. Double the stresses. Double the issues. Double the frustrations. And then there's your child, catching you off guard and pushing your "buttons". Even the smallest issues can turn into power struggles.

What's a single parent to do? Within the pages of this book, you'll find an answer. It's a strategy for moving from "ME" thinking to "WE" thinking that can transform your family. Easy to understand and to implement, it's an approach to parenting that yields surprising results. Still not convinced? Give it a read. You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain!

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