

# Contrasting Beliefs About Parents And Children

Copyrighted excerpt adapted from *Shame-Free Parenting* by Sandra Wilson, Ph.D. (InterVarsity Press)

*We may not always live what we profess, but we always live what we believe. And what we believe about our parents profoundly affects us. As we learn to live in the truth about relationships between parents and children, we can teach that truth to our children.*

*Circle the lies that you have believed about parent-child relationships. How would your living and relating be different if you deeply believed and consistently lived out of the truths on the right?*

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## LIES

1. Parents are "giant geniuses" who will always be smarter and stronger than their children.
2. Children are selfish and "cause trouble" when they have personal needs of their own that inconvenience their parents.
3. Parents are supposed to protect and direct their children forever since parents will always know more than their children.
4. Parents are supposed to love children more when they obey them or make them look good, e.g., by academic success.
5. Children are supposed to make their parents happy.
6. Children are supposed to please parents, and if they work hard enough and are good enough, they will be able to please them.
7. Children are supposed to meet all their parents' needs and give them a reason to feel good about themselves, that is, "fix" them.
8. All parents can accurately assess their children's God-given intrinsic worth, so the parents' treatment of their children is an accurate statement about the children's true identity.
9. Loyal, loving and respectful children must always follow all of their parents' rules for living and parenting, since parents and their rules are always right.

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## TRUTHS

1. Parents are older human beings. This means they have more information and physical strength than their children. Under normal circumstances, their children will be about as smart (or smarter) and as strong (or stronger) someday.
2. All children have legitimate personal needs that often inconvenienced their parents. This is one of the realities of parenting.
3. Parents are supposed to protect and direct their young children. As children get older, parents are supposed to teach them how to protect themselves in most situations and how to seek God's protection and direction in all situations.
4. Children should not have to earn parents' love. Parents are supposed to love their children "for no good reason".
5. Children don't have the power to make their parents (or anybody else) happy.
6. "Being pleased" is a function of someone's personal value system. People are supposed to live to please God. This may or may not please parents too.
7. Children don't have the power to "fix" parents or any other person. (God doesn't send children to "fix" parents. He already sent Jesus to do that!)
8. All human beings have intrinsic worth because they bear the image of God. Therefore all human beings deserve respectful treatment. In reality, parents' treatment of their children is more a statement about them, than about their children.
9. Being a loyal, loving, respectful child does not mean pretending that parents and their rules are perfect. Loyalty is not a synonym for lying. And having a different opinion is not disrespectful.

# Snapshots of Shame-Free Parenting

Adapted from Shame-Free Parenting (IVP, 1992) by Sandra D. Wilson, Ph. D.

## SNAPSHOT #1 – BEHAVIOR AS BEHAVIOR OR AS IDENTITY

Shame-bound parents expect themselves and their children to be perfect and problem-free; therefore, any behavior that suggests imperfection may trigger an outburst of parental disappointment along with prophecies of future failure. The chart below shows how this might look. It also depicts how more Shame-free parents might respond. In addition, it shows the messages children are likely to receive about themselves based on their parents' words and attitudes.

### Behavior as Identity (with a first-grade child)

"Oh, great, now look what you did. You are always so clumsy and careless."

Message: I am a clumsy and careless person.

### Behavior as Behavior (with a first-grade child)

"Oh dear, there goes the milk. Paper towels will soak that up in a jiffy."

Message: Paper towels are good for cleaning up milk.

### With a Senior-High Child

"Can't you ever say anything that makes sense? Where in the world did you get such a stupid idea anyway? Certainly, not from anyone in *this* family! Don't let me hear any more of your harebrained opinions around here, Mr. Know-It-All."

Message: My ideas don't make sense and I am stupid. My ideas are dangerous when they differ from those of my folks.

### With a Senior-High Child

"I'm not sure I understand exactly what you're saying, let if I agree with you. But I can tell this is important to you, so, run it by me again."

Message: My ideas are important and respected, even when they differ from those of my folks. It's safe to learn to think for myself.

## SNAPSHOT #2 – CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO RELEASING OUR CHILDREN

Shame-bound parents often press their children into roles designed to make the parents feel loved and/or powerful. These parents typically give their children strings instead of wings, i.e., they try to keep them serving the insecure parents' needs instead of helping children grow-up into greater personal responsibility. The following chart contrasts these approaches and gives an example of each. Remember: increasingly grace-full parents give wings, not strings.

### Shame-bound Approach Giving Strings

Underlying Belief: Children show that they love their parents by staying "grown down" and taking responsibility for their parents' happiness so parents won't feel lonely or have to take responsibility for their own happiness.

Dominant Attitude: I meet my personal needs as much as possible by keeping my children dependent on me so that I can feel loved, needed, and/or powerful.

An Example of Strings: When my trustworthy teen asks to spend Spring break with a close friend and family, I tell my child he/she is much too young and imply s/he is very selfish for wanting to "abandon" me.

### Grace-Full Attitude Giving Wings

Underlying Belief: Parents should love their children and give them wise guidance to help them grow into a gradually increasing sense of personal responsibility. (Ideally, under the lordship of Jesus Christ.)

Dominant Attitude: I do my present parenting tasks as well as possible while trying to prepare myself and my children for upcoming developmental changes.

An Example of Wings: When my teen consistently demonstrates trustworthiness, I grant his/her request to spend Spring break at the beach with a close friend and the friend's family.

## SNAPSHOT #3 – SEPARATING FALSE FROM TRUE PARENTING GUILT.

### Examples of False Parenting Guilt

1. Not being a perfect parent.
2. Not being able to 'fix' my parents so they can be the good grandparents I want them to be.
3. Not automatically knowing about child development.

### Examples of True Parenting Guilt

1. My alcohol abuse causing fetal alcohol syndrome in my child.
2. Failing to protect my child from my spouse's physical abuse so I can avoid facing my spouse's anger.
3. Allowing my child to ride with my intoxicated parent in order to keep them from "causing a problem" in my family.  
(Being more of a child to my parents than a parent to my child.)

Repeated large doses of truth will eventually cure false guilt. But that still leaves parents with painful symptoms of true guilt and the fatal disease underlying it. The Bible calls that disease sin, and tells us that God provided the perfect remedy in Jesus Christ. If you've never done it, now is the time to commit your life to Jesus. If you have done that already, you know that doesn't mean you automatically become a perfect person or parent. That reality underscores the hope implicit in my favorite Bible verse. Jonah 3:1 says, "the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time." Over the years I've relied repeatedly on God's grace-filled second times, and so can you. Admit your mistakes. Seek resources to help you change. Ask God to forgive you and to fill you with His word of hope another "second time". Then trust Him to empower you to live and to parent for His Glory.

## Contrasting Impaired Human Parents With Our Heavenly Parent

Adapted from *Into Abba's Arms* by Sandra D. Wilson, Ph.D. (Tyndale House)

The first three numbers in the left column describe experiences that are often part of performance-oriented, shame-based families. Numbers four through six list some traits common to those raised in these families. The right column highlights corresponding differences in God and in His ways with His children.

In the column on the left, circle the experiences and traits you identify as part of your childhood or adult life. How would your living and relating to God and to others be different if you deeply believed, personally experienced, and consistently lived out of the truths described in the column on the right?

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### OUR IMPAIRED HUMAN PARENTS

- 1) Unrealistic expectations: e.g., expecting a child of 6 to act 12, or acting shocked when a child does not behave or perform perfectly.
- 2) An External focus and performance orientation to life is modeled by parents and learned by children.
- 3) Emotional Abandonment, i.e., hands-on abuse, or parents withdraw affection/tenderness because a child disappoints their expectations or because they're incapable of emotional closeness.
- 4) A Sense of Shame, i.e., believing that "I have a hopelessly fatal flaw that others don't have."
- 5) Attempts to earn acceptance, approval and love. I.e. shift from BEING to DOING as the basis for establishing and maintaining relationships.
- 6) Feelings of never being fully accepted by loved authority figures (parents, etc.) because nothing is ever quite good enough.

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### OUR PERFECT HEAVENLY PARENT

- 1) God knows our limitations, so He has no unrealistic expectations (Ps. 103:13-14). And Jesus "knew what was in man." (John 2:25).
  - 2) God consistently emphasizes in internal perspective by focusing on the condition of our hearts. E.g., see 1 Sam. 16:7, Pro. 4:23, Joel 2:13, Mark 7:21-23.
  - 3) God promises He will never abandon His children even if their earthly parents do. See Ps. 27:10. And Jesus, our Emmanuel, i.e., God with us (Matt. 1:23), promises He will not leave us as orphans in John 14:18.
  - 4) God sees all of us as equally sinful. See Rom. 3:23. The gospel is so democratic; it says we're all a mess!
  - 5) God repeatedly tells His children that He relates to them not because of their good deeds, but because of His unearned love and mercy. (See Romans 5:8).
  - 6) God fully accepts us "in (His) Beloved (Son)" according to Ephesians 1:6 (KJV).
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**REMEMBER:** In all parent-child relationships, the parent's value system and character, not the behavior of the child, determine the child's degree of acceptance. In other words, the relationship is more a statement about the parent than the child. Clearly, we see this truth in the relationship with our Heavenly Father. (For example, see Deuteronomy 7:7-9 and Romans 5:8).

God accepts us because of what Jesus has done, not because of anything we can do. This does not change no matter how long we've been Christians (see Col. 2:6). When Jesus invites to abide in Him in John 15, in effect He tells us to make Him our dwelling place, not just our launching pad into the Christian life. For as the songwriter says, "Only by grace do we enter. Only by grace do we stand." We may outgrow mumps, measles and zits, but we never outgrow our human weakness and need to rely totally upon the redeeming grace of God!

### **TO LEARN MORE, READ:**

*The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah) and *Abba's Child* (Navpress) by Brennan Manning  
*Love Beyond Reason* by John Ortberg (Zondervan)

*Into Abba's Arms: Finding the Acceptance You've Always Wanted* (Tyndale) by Sandra D. Wilson, and  
*Released From Shame, Revised Edition* (InterVarsity Press) by Sandra D. Wilson

# SHAME AND PARENTAL APPROACHES TO CHILD MOTIVATION

Adapted from *Shame-Free Parenting* by Sandra D. Wilson, Ph.D. (InterVarsity Press).

If we believe the 'shame lie' that says people should be perfect, we will feel uniquely flawed and worth less than others whom we assume are perfect since we know we aren't. Believing that only perfect people deserve life, we experience 'existence guilt', and on some deep level, imperfection feels life-threateningly dangerous. So we use our energies and resources to conceal our flaws and to look as perfect as possible. This leads to an 'external' life style where what matters most is how we look not how we really are. As parents, we may use our children as another resource to validate our 'existence worthiness' by expecting them to look perfect so we will. And we'll select child motivation strategies more to benefit ourselves than our children. Which style looks more familiar in this chart?

## Contrasting Self and Child Motivation Attitudes and Approaches

### Internal Focus

See Self/Child as Human Being

I belong to God by creation (and if I have asked Jesus to be my Savior and Lord, by salvation), so major task is to know and love God and seek to do His will for my life.

My child belongs to God, so my major task is to help my child be the person God created by teaching him/her to know and trust God.

I emphasize the internal perspective of developing my own and my child's character.

I take a "long view" for the purpose of character development, e.g., letting my child learn the consequences of procrastination by getting a poor grade on a project done the night before its due.

I talk primarily about my child as an authentically struggling Christian, a very loving spouse, a tenderhearted boy or girl, a sincerely questioning teen, an honest employee, a wise parent, or a lover and student of God's Word.

I usually ask myself and my child: "Did you enjoy yourself, and/or learn anything?"

In myself and in my child, I affirm and reward "brave attempts" as obvious successes.

### External Focus

See Self/Child as Human Doing

I belong to my parents and to others who "need" and care for me. My major task is to perform for them (as perfectly as possible) so they will approve of me so that I can feel good about myself.

My child belongs to me, so I have the right to press my child into the service of my shame-based perfectionist needs.

I emphasize an external perspective of promoting/polishing my own and my child's performance.

I take a "short view" for the appearance of perfect performance, e.g., doing my child's project myself the night before it is due so that my child maintains the highest possible grades.

I talk primarily about my child as: the doctor, the ballet star, the select soccer hero, the youngest company vice-president in history, the pee-wee league all-star, or the winner of the annual Sunday School contest to memorize the most Bible verses.

I usually ask myself and my child: "Did you win," or "Were you the best?"

In myself and in my child, I affirm and reward winning only. ("Second place is no place".)

*Dear Lord, I confess striving to find safety and worth in personal perfection and human approval. Help me rest in the security of your love and live in the freedom of your grace which credits to me the righteous worth of Jesus, my Savior. I confess, too, that I often value my children most for what they do to make me look good. Please help me love and accept them for who they are - precious bearers of your image and priceless gifts from your hand. AMEN*

