



PARENTING



MEANINGFUL
RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

by Donald Miller

We all want our kids to grow up feeling loved and cared for. And yet we know every child needs to be shaped and molded. Many of us live in the tension between trying to mold our children into healthy adults while also allowing them to have their own free will. And let's face it, sometimes we're just trying to keep them from tearing down the house.

So how can we shape and mold our children without crushing their passions and individuality?

For our course on parenting, I invited Mark and Jan Foreman, parents of Jon and Tim Foreman from the band Switchfoot, to join us for a conversation about bringing up kids. To Mark and Jan, life is like a game in the sense that it's supposed to be fun, has a definite end to it and, well, let's face it, there are those who do well and those who don't. What we really want is for our kids to do well in life. We want them to avoid the traps we fell into and we want them to be happy and healthy. We want them to get the most out of life they possibly can.

Most of us go into parenting trying to control or shape our children, but what if we went into parenting asking “*who are these children becoming?*” And “*how can I help nurture that process?*”

Mark and Jan realized, while they were bringing up two boys that great kids don't happen by accident. They created a family plan and will teach you to do the same. In addition, they realized their children feeling loved and cared for was even more important than their children being disciplined. And they fleshed this idea out in the type of conversations they had with their sons. And finally, they made a commitment to never say no, meaning they never shut down their children's passions but rather redirected them to more healthy pursuits.

These four basic paradigm shifts will give you enormous inspiration and guidance as you bring up healthy, happy and productive children.

More than any of that, though, the very fact that you bought this course means you're in the highest percentile of good parents. Just the fact that you were willing to think about your parenting style means, more than anything else, your kids are being looked out for and nurtured.

We hope you find this course inspiring and helpful. Enjoy your time with Mark and Jan Foreman.

Sincerely,

Donald Miller

SESSION 1

The Game of Life

The Game of Life is based on chance, but real life is based on real decisions. What are we aiming for when we become parents? What is the end goal or what would we consider winning, as parents? The following exercises will help you identify and sharpen the qualities you want to develop as a parent as well as throw out any unhelpful qualities you may have picked up from your own parents.



Watch the Session 1, Part 1 video. Then follow up by completing the exercises and answering the questions below.

SESSION 1, PART 1

Having a Family Plan

Exercise 1: Your Future Kids

Let's start at the very end of *The Game of Life*. Fast forward into the future and imagine your kids as adults in their 20s. Discuss the following questions as a group or with your spouse:

What does winning as a parent look like for your children? What are some of the qualities you want them to have? Use the section below to list a few characteristics, traits, and abilities you hope for them to have as adults.

Exercise 2: Your Future Relationship

Use the page below to write down your answers to the following questions, then discuss your answers:

List some adjectives describing the kind of relationship you want to have with your kids.
Trusting? Thoughtful? Honest? Vulnerable?

What practices could you establish to create this kind of relationship? Daily, focused time with each child? Family meetings? Family walks? List a few ideas.

Exercise 3: Keep vs. Discard Pile

Much of great parenting comes from a thoughtful reflection on how we were parented. Mark and Jan presented a brilliant idea when they said we should have a keep pile and a discard pile regarding the qualities our parents employed while parenting us.

On a **Keep** card, on the next page, write down one thing from your family of origin you'd like to keep. On a **Discard** card, write down one thing you'd like to discard. Repeat this process until you run out of things to write down. Discuss your answers.

KEEP

DISCARD

KEEP	DISCARD
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗
✓	✗

SESSION 1, PART 2

Pressure



Watch the Session 1, Part 2 video. Then follow up by completing the exercises and answering the questions below.

Exercise 1: Outside Pressure

In the spirit of the keep and discard piles, let's use the same technique with outside pressures coming at you from culture. What are some of the pressures you notice in culture that affect your parenting? Which ones do you want to keep? Which ones do you want to discard?

Exercise 2: Protecting Your Kids

Do you really win by focusing on protecting or always trying to play it safe with your kids? How can you help your kids begin to lean into society and culture, rather than lean back from it? What are some specific experiences or opportunities you can give your kids to help them lean into life?

How can you, as a parent, better lean into society, confident that you have something to give rather than always reacting or protecting yourself from society? Remember, your kids will follow your lead.

SESSION 2

The Love Tank

This session is about a parenting philosophy referred to as “The Love Tank,” in which the idea is to focus on relationship as opposed to behavior as parents. What does it look like to focus on filling love tanks rather than getting people to do what you want them to do? What would it take to fill your child’s love tank?



Watch the Session 2 video. Then follow up by completing the exercises and answering the questions below.

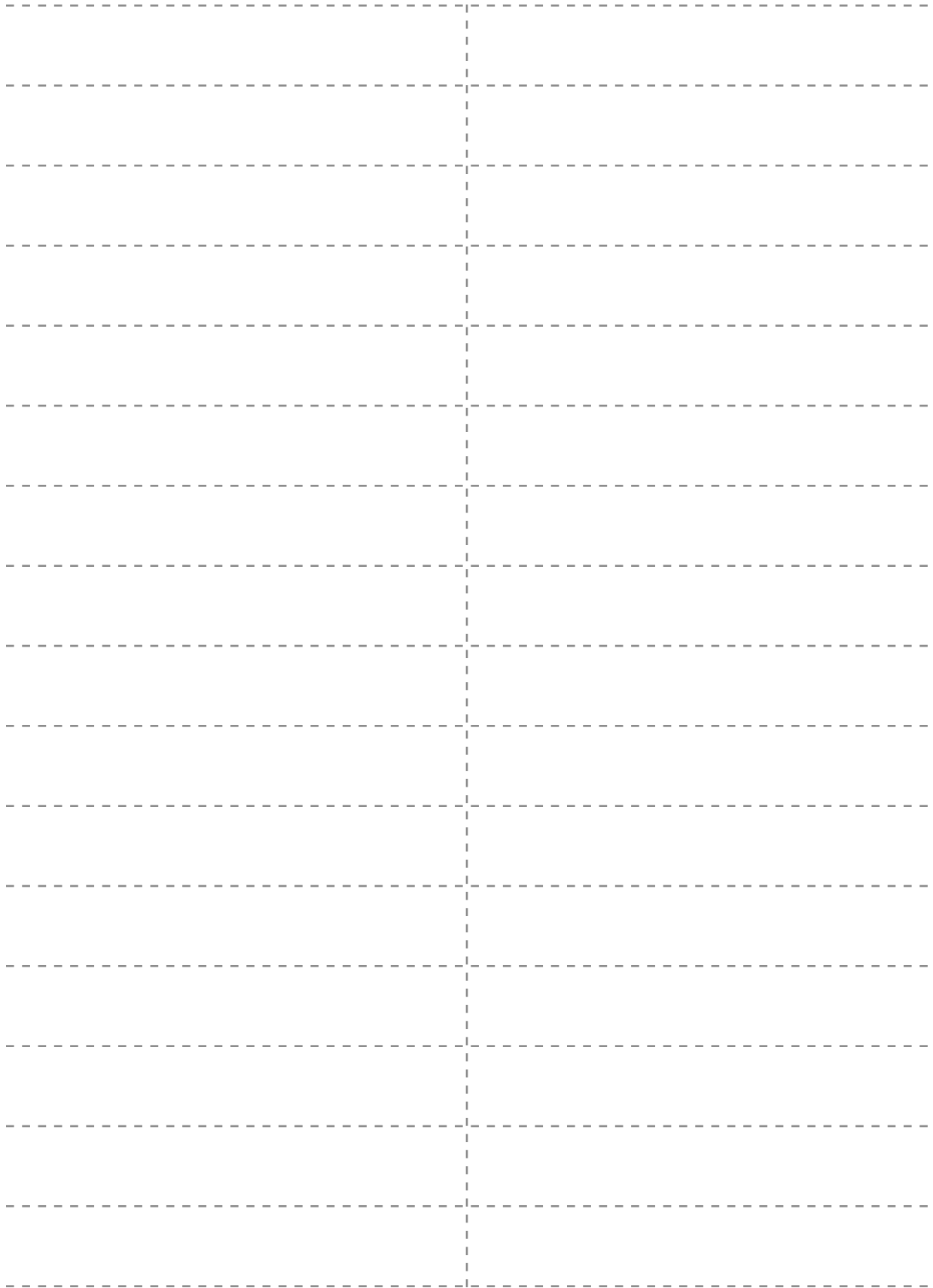
Exercise 1: Fill Your Child’s Love Tank

Think of the ways each of your children’s love tanks are filled. Every child is different and likely has his or her own love language. Take this time to brainstorm and write out what things make each child feel loved on the cut-out strips below. What are the things you do or say that make your child light up?

Cut out your answers and put them into jars corresponding to each child. Each jar is a physical representation of your child’s individual love tank.

Ask each child to put his or her own things in his or her jar: *What do you enjoy doing with mom and dad most? What are your favorite things to do?* This can then morph into different things as they grow up.

Brainstorm and write down some specific ways you can begin making more time to act on your love. Discuss them with your spouse.



SESSION 3

The Four Types of Talk

In this session, Mark and Jan dissected communication with our children into four main methods. Below, you'll find the four methods divided into quadrants on a sheet of paper: Small Talk, Control Talk, Explore Talk, and Heart Talk. Make sure to use this diagram in the following exercises.



Watch the Session 3 video. Then follow up by completing the exercises and answering the questions below.

Exercise 1: Small Talk

What are some small talk interactions you have with your children?

What are some things they like to talk about that you might consider small talk? List them in your small talk quadrant box on page 15. When your child speaks to you, are you putting down whatever is in front of you and looking them in the eye?

Exercise 2: Control Talk

Good control talk looks like giving advice or teaching something. Bad control talk looks like increasing volume, increasing our threats, passive aggression, and pouting.

What are some of the ways you find yourself using control talk? List them in the control talk quadrant box on page 15. Discuss how you can better facilitate rather than control conversations with your children.

Exercise 3: Explore Talk

Explore talk requires sharing the control with someone else. Rather than the *I win, you lose* mentality of control talk, you're focusing on how you can both win. Explore talk takes more time, but your child also gets more ownership in his or her decisions.

In the explore talk quadrant box on page 15, write down one example from this past week where there was a problem you helped your child solve, or maybe a moment where you dreamt together or had a “what if” or “how come” exploratory discussion.

Do you give your child options or do you tend to make a choice for him or her? How have you seen explore talk work in disciplining your children? How could it help you in disciplining your children moving forward? Write down and discuss your answers.

Exercise 4: Heart Talk

Heart talk happens when your child is not afraid to share with you what he or she is really thinking, really feeling, or really dreaming. How you respond when your children open up to you dictates how they’ll open up to you decades later.

In your heart talk quadrant box on page 15, write down something heartfelt or vulnerable your child has shared with you and how you responded.

Welcoming more heart talk helps make your home feel like a safe place for your kids. What types of things, like a tendency to be critical, do you think deter heart talk between you and your kids? What are mistakes you’ve maybe made or watched other people make that shut down the person who wants to open up? Discuss with your spouse.

Do you find yourself correcting or offering advice when your children share something more than listening and engaging with them? Discuss how you can be a better listener and question-asker.

Small Talk

Control Talk

Explore Talk

Heart Talk

SESSION 4

Two Phrases

Most kids assume their parents love them, but they don't always know if their parents like them. By learning the value of the phrases "Never say no" and "I enjoy you", we can begin to affirm the latter as parents.



Watch the Session 4 video. Then follow up by completing the exercises and answering the questions below.

Exercise 1: Never Say No

“No” is probably the most powerful word in our vocabulary. It has the ability to shut people down, especially our children. What if we were to change from using the brakes, which is the no, to using the accelerator, which is the yes?

In what ways are you saying no right now when it would fill your child's love tank to redirect to a yes? Write a specific or reoccurring instance down and discuss with your spouse.

Exercise 2: I Enjoy You

How can we begin to communicate “I enjoy you,” rather than “I accept/tolerate you” to our children? What activities or interests can we better come alongside them in? What is one thing you can do or say today to affirm that you enjoy your child rather than just accept them?

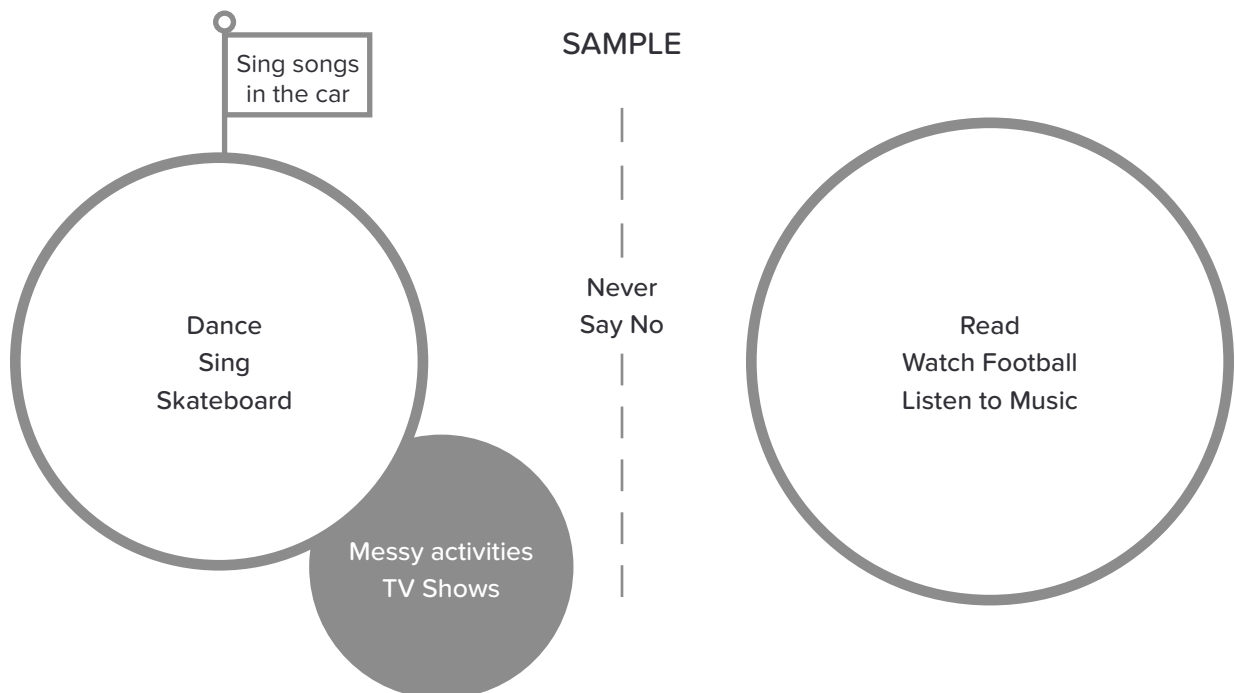
Exercise 3: Planets

Using the split diagram on page 18, draw a circle to represent each child you have on the left side. We'll call these circles "planets." Now write down in each of these planets the things each child enjoys. *What do they like to do? What do they most often talk about? What does "come play with me" usually look like? What are his or her favorite toys/subjects/interests?*

Now draw a circle on the opposite (right) side of your paper that will represent your planet. Write down some interests you have, things you're passionate about, subjects you enjoy, and what you do with most of your time. Notice how, unless you deliberately make time and effort to enter into your children's worlds, it's not going to necessarily happen naturally.

Recall one recent memory where your child invited you to come play with him or her in some area of his or her interest. Then draw that like a flag coming up from his or her planet. That marks his or her invitation to you to come into his or her world.

Somewhere between or above your planets, write the phrase "Never say no." Remember: Sometimes when you say yes, it can be a qualified yes (Examples: *after I'm done with this conversation* or *as soon as you finish your chores*), but the object is to always find a way to say yes to those invitations into his or her world.



Exercise 4: The Dark Side

Every kid has a dark side of his or her planet—interests or quirks that are at odds with you. They may be areas you don't easily know how to relate with or want to explore with him or her. You may even hope to discourage those interests. On page 18, draw an extended circle from your child's planet; this is called "the dark side" of your child's planet. Write down the interests or quirks that come to mind.

How might you be communicating that you don't enjoy your children because you don't acknowledge or try to get to know their dark sides? Which part of their planets are you not doing a good job of visiting?

When you say I don't want to know a *part* of you, it's hard to separate that from I don't want to know the *whole* you. How can you begin to intentionally visit those areas? What holds you back from doing so now? Discuss with your spouse.

Exercise 5: Meshing Worlds

Are there any rituals or patterns you've created to help bring you and your child's worlds together? What is an intentional ritual you can create to enter each other's worlds on a more regular basis? Write it down and discuss with your spouse.

How do you encourage your children to think outside their own worlds and learn how to love and think about other people? What are some worlds out there that you can begin to visit with your children together? Discuss.

Conclusion

Children really are like seeds, born on the earth to grow and thrive. And just like any living thing God made, their environment can positively or negatively affect them. The idea behind this course was to give us tools, as parents, to create a fertile soil our children can grow in.

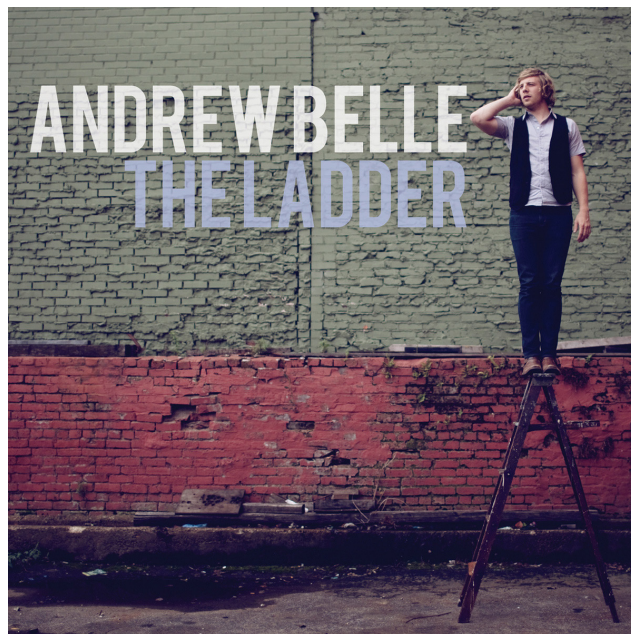
The primary element in fertile soil for humans is unconditional love and acceptance. Of course we all have to discipline our children, but creating an environment of extreme control, while making our lives easier, isn't the most healthy soil. Our children need to make mistakes, have dark sides, test the boundaries and so on. And if their love tanks are full, and if they feel listened to and not squashed, guiding them toward a life of health is easier.

Hopefully these conversations and exercises have dramatically inspired and encouraged you as parents. With these practical tools, you will now positively affect your children's lives well into adulthood. The thoughts they think about themselves, the ideas they believe, the impact they have on the world will come from you as a parent teaching them they're worth listening to, their ideas matter and that it's perfectly okay to be perfectly human.

From our team to yours, thanks for caring so much about your children and your family. Thanks for having these conversations with Mark and Jan. And thanks for making the world a better place by teaching your children how important they are in the eternal story of life.

Sincerely,

Donald Miller



Music from

The Ladder

by Andrew Belle



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