

# WINNING THE HEART OF YOUR CHILD

9 KEYS TO BUILDING A POSITIVE LIFELONG  
RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR KIDS

**MIKE BERRY**



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To Rachel, Krystal, Noelle, Jaala, Andre,  
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# Contents

Acknowledgments 13

Introduction: *From My Heart to Yours, So We  
Can Win Theirs* 19

## Part 1 The Great Misunderstanding

1. Winning the Argument but Losing the Heart 27

*Pick the Right Fight*

2. Boundaries Built with Love 35

*One Essential for Parenting Influence*

3. What the Gilmore Girls, Buddy the Elf, General  
Patton, and Mr. Strickland Share in Common 45

*How Not to Parent Your Child*

4. The Ugly Stepsisters of Parenting 57

*Create a New Parenting Pattern*

## Part 2 Parenting for the Win

5. Everything I Know about Influence I Learned  
from My Mother-in-Law 71

*Key 1: Blend Love and Discipline for Influence*

6. Fourth Place Can Win 79  
*Key 2: Understand and Embrace “The Shift”*
7. You Need a Bigger Circle 89  
*Key 3: Amplify Other Voices of Influence*
8. Time Is Not on Your Side 99  
*Key 4: Use Your Time Wisely*
9. Be Fully There 115  
*Key 5: Stay Involved with Your Kids*
10. I Would Rather Be the Tortoise 123  
*Key 6: Commit to Consistency*
11. Hollywood Lied! 135  
*Key 7: Love No Matter What*
12. A Parent’s Greatest Enemy 153  
*Key 8: Listen to What Is True about You*
13. Potato Salad and Headstones 163  
*Key 9: Leave a Lasting Legacy*

### **Part 3 Moving Forward**

14. The Hats Parents Wear 177  
*Defining a Good Parent*
15. Eyes on the Prize 191  
*Parenting Is a Long-Term Investment*
16. Direction Determines Destination 201  
*Parenting with More Than Good Intentions*
17. Worth the Fight 209

Notes 215

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# Introduction

## *From My Heart to Yours, So We Can Win Theirs*

Ten years.

I used to think ten years was a long time. When I was ten years old, I thought it would be an eternity until I saw twenty. When I turned twenty, it seemed forever till I would turn thirty. Then I turned thirty. . . . You get the idea.

Now that I'm forty-one, I no longer believe ten years is a long time. Correction: *I know* it's not a long time. The other day my wife, Kristin, and I realized that we will be empty nesters in just eleven years. Eleven years! That's not long. Yesterday I was buying diapers for my newborn. Today I'm shopping for her first car. Seems like tomorrow Kristin and I will be moving into a condo, our empty nest.

I've been at this for some time now. We are the parents of eight children, all of whom came to us through adoption. For nine years we were also foster parents of twenty-three children ranging from newborn to high school age. Not only have I experienced my own sixteen-year parenting journey,

currently raising children who have been in our care from a young age, but I've also coached hundreds of thousands of parents as a family life pastor and now a family consultant and public speaker. Kristin and I cofounded a blog with over a hundred thousand readers a month in multiple countries. In hundreds of conversations, no parent has told me they wish time would speed up. They all want it to slow down. Or they wish they could regain some of it.

I'm discovering every day how fast time moves. I often feel like I've woken up four quarters into a football game and suddenly find myself at the two-minute warning in this whole parenting thing. This begs the question, What am I going to do with the time I have left with my children?

In 2002, my first child was born. I spent the first few weeks in utter shock—mostly because we adopted her, and the entire process from start to finish took less than three months. There was no initial doctor's appointment confirming the pregnancy seven or eight months before the due date. No ultrasound pictures to share with family. No eight-month gestation journey for mental and physical preparation—redoing a room in our house, shopping for baby clothes, celebrating with a shower. This was airdrop parenting at its best. As I think back on it today, I am beyond grateful. But back then I was clueless. Not just new-parent clueless; time clueless! I thought I had plenty of it.

I was in my midtwenties, three years into my gig as a youth pastor. Kristin and I had been married less than two years, and until our daughter was born we both worked full-time. I worked at a church that demanded much from me. As a young guy, eager to prove myself, I filled up the youth calendar with as many activities as I could. I didn't want anyone

to think I wasn't doing my job, so I convinced myself I had to do whatever was asked of me, no matter how often it took me away from my young wife and, soon, my newborn daughter.

I worked at a suburban church that had recently built a new building in a growing upscale neighborhood, poised to become even bigger. So you can bet I worked my tail off. Youth conference? *Added to the calendar.* Retreat? *Added.* Student leadership team? *Also added.* I added and added until my only open night was Saturday. Even my so-called day off was usually filled. I thought I was supposed to do this. More importantly, I thought that since my daughter was a newborn, she needed me less than she would when older. (I also mistakenly thought the same about my wife.)

It's now sixteen years later, and this morning I dropped off that newborn for the start of her sophomore year in high school. She got out of my car, saw her friends, and ran to hug them, forgetting about me. She meant nothing by it. She's a kid. Yet she's also a young woman. "Where has the time gone?" I whisper as I watch her bound across the lot. My heart aches a little, and I snap a quick picture of her with my phone. Then she's gone.

*Ahh, time, slow down please, I beg silently. You are hurting my heart every time I think how fast you are fleeting.*

I pen the pages of this book from a place of wishing I could go back in time and whisper truth to my younger self. It's a place of understanding what it really means to be a parent—how critical it is to understand parental influence and how to lead and love your children to the best of your ability. This is also a plea from me to you: please understand that time goes by faster than you think. Before you know it, that newborn, that toddler, that second grader is beginning

her sophomore year of high school, and you suddenly find yourself in the eleventh hour.

## The Journey Ahead

Through these pages, I will attempt to help you understand a few key truths. In part 1, I will explain some ways I believe we have gotten our entire approach to parenting wrong. In part 2, I will present nine keys you must understand and apply if you are going to win the heart of your child. These are musts if you want to achieve the healthiest relationship possible with your children, especially during their adolescent years and eventually when they are adults. And in part 3, I will explore what a lifelong relationship with your child looks like, where it begins, and how you sustain it.

In this book, I'm going to take you deep into the interworking parts of a parent-child relationship and show you how to improve the way you interact with and parent your kids. Woven throughout are three central parenting principles:

1. *Understand your influence.* You are the most powerful voice in your child's life. Some of you may have trouble believing this. Trust me though. Your child listens to you, studies you, and believes you. Sometimes this may not seem true when other voices seem louder than yours, but you hold a place of special influence with your child. The key is to use it the right way.
2. *Shift your perspective on your role as a parent.* Believe it or not, your primary role is *not* to teach. Notice I said your *primary* role. Teaching is still a role, but not the first and foremost one.

3. *Fight for what matters most.* As we discuss the nine keys to building a positive lifelong relationship with your child, you'll begin to see how healthily wielding your influence (principle one) and accepting your God-given role (principle two) enable you to win your child's heart.

## Hope for All Parents

I write this book to two types of parents. First, I'm writing to the parent of a preteen or a junior high or high school student. You think your child isn't listening to a single word you say. I know you because I am you, and I've been you many times in the past. My hope is that through these pages you will gain a fresh perspective on your influence over your child and on how to encourage the best possible relationship with them. May you come to understand that your voice is crucial during this season of your son's or daughter's life. May you learn to exercise your influence in a new and special way with your child, and may doing so help you reap dividends worth more than gold. May you regear yourself so that you no longer fight merely to win an argument or to enforce your perspective but rather to win your child's heart.

Second, I'm writing to the parent of a newborn, toddler, preschooler, or young elementary school child. You may believe you have a ton of time, so you are not really paying attention to the opportunities you have with your child. My prayer is that this book will prepare you for what is to come and will help you to decide now what is worth fighting for—that is, connection and relationship both now and well into the future. May you be reminded that time waits for no

one and is moving at the speed of light. Don't be discouraged. My goal is not to alarm you but to give you a healthy warning. I want to help you accomplish two things—make the most of your time with your child and better use your parental influence.

Are you ready to get started? Me too!

Here's to healthy parental influence. And here's to fighting for what matters most—the heart of your child!

PART 1



# THE GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING

# 1

## Winning the Argument but Losing the Heart

*Pick the Right Fight*

“Sometimes it is easy to forget that you can win the argument and force the right behavior but lose the heart in the process.”<sup>1</sup>

This statement by Carey Nieuwhof, from the book *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity* by Reggie Joiner and Nieuwhof, hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks. I was sitting in a local coffee shop, reading under a single overhead light on a chilly Indiana morning, and watching patrons move quickly in and out of the shop, grabbing coffee and pastries on their way to work. I instantly replayed the previous night’s argument with my then eleven-year-old daughter. My words echoed in my mind—every syllable that I had thought at the time was making a pretty darn good point, every dominating fact that shut her down and put her in her place while elevating me as the genius all-knowing, all-seeing father with whom she should

instantly agree with zero argument. I had spent many years thinking an argument victory was making a lasting impression on my children. But that morning I was convicted. For the first time, I saw the great canyon I was forging between my children and me.

I could identify with Nieuwhof's explanation of the inner dynamic that drove him to win: "Like a lot of dads, I get wound up when my authority is challenged. It's in me as a man to go head-to-head and fight to win the argument, to crush the rebellion, and to prove that I am in charge."<sup>2</sup> Yep, that was me. After all, that's the way I was raised. That's how my mother and father dealt with my disagreement, my rebellion, my crossing their boundaries.

Even as I type these words I cringe. I missed the point so miserably. I can still see my little girl standing dumbfounded as I dominated the conversation, interrupting her, refusing to let her speak, driving a massive wedge between her heart and mine. She had come to expect this from both my wife and me, to the point that she began to go silent.

There I was the next morning, feeling guilty as I read, "You can win the argument . . . but lose the heart." That's exactly what was happening every time my daughter upset us or disagreed with us. God has given each child a voice, but we were quick to silence hers. We only cared about proving her wrong and winning what we thought most important—the argument. We had lost sight of what was indeed most important—*her heart*. Her spirit was fragile, learning and growing, and we couldn't see that we were crushing it by dominating every conversation.

Circumstances from her past also speak to her reaction. We had adopted her a few years earlier when she was three.

Before that she had spent time in two foster homes. She had come from a place of trauma, so it was no surprise she struggled at first to see us as her parents. She had learned to shut down in heated situations—her defense mechanism—so she struggled to articulate her thoughts and feelings. From among her options—fight, flight, or freeze—she chose freeze. This made it easy for two highly driven firstborns, who didn't come from trauma, to prove our points and win arguments. But that was wrong. We were clueless about what we were doing to our daughter.

Thus my regret, my guilt, and my shame at what I had done. I sat alone, sipping coffee, wiping tears, in sudden realization of what I had been doing to my child through my insatiable need to always be right. If she had had a cell phone at the time, I would have flooded it with a dozen texts, apologizing. I was tempted to drive the thirty minutes to her school, pull her out of class, and hug her.

### **Why Must We Always Win?**

It's hard to blame any of us who have fallen into the trap of thinking we must always be right in arguments or other interactions with our kids. As you read this, you may be feeling the same guilt or shame I felt. You may realize that you've fallen into the same trap of constantly fighting to win, proving your child wrong, and working to elicit a response that indicates you are getting through. Don't beat yourself up. Parenting is hard work, and we spend much of our time trying to figure out just how to relate to our children. Then we blink, and they have entered a new season. Everything we thought we knew we have to adjust or relearn, especially with

teenagers and particularly with difficult ones. Plus, many of us grew up in an era when discipline was swift and the rod was never spared. Or we had parents who lectured. (That was my wife's and my childhood story.) So it's understandable that we approach parenting with the methods that are familiar to us. We lecture, we instruct, we teach, and we allow no negotiation. Our parents used this approach on us, and it worked (mostly). But there is a better way.

Here's the thing. We don't always have to win the argument. Do you realize that always "winning" risks losing your child's heart? If we must always be right, always prove our point, always have our way and allow no room to hear our children's voices, we create a new danger. We leave no margin for their hearts to grow and flourish. What's more, we teach them they have no voice, no say in life.

When I was growing up, my dad was often angry and always had to have the last word. This taught me two things. First, I needed vigilantly to watch everything I did or said because at any moment I could cause a blowup. Most of my childhood was spent tiptoeing around to avoid waking the bear. My sister and I would watch the clock every day, knowing the exact moment Dad was due home. We had to be sure our toys were picked up. Nothing—and I mean nothing—could be out of place. Any disorder would prompt a lecture or rant or belittling tirade. Even when everything was in order, we might still face a dressing-down. What a terrible thing for children to go through, but that was our life.

Second, Dad's conquer-all attitude taught me to keep my mouth shut. It was better to stay quiet and wait until the lecture ended. Or if I spoke, to simply agree. My dad had to have the last word, so what was the point? As a result, I

carried an inability to speak up for myself well into adulthood. I also struggled with major insecurity and a sense of inadequacy. Even now, in my forties, I wrestle with this from time to time. My dad had won every argument, but he had lost my heart. It wasn't until well into my adult years that we repaired our relationship. We have a good one today, but for many years we did not.

At every age—whether elementary, preteen, junior high, or high school—our children have fragile hearts. Make no mistake about this. Yes, they are resilient, but their ability to recover has its limit. With so much on the line, we lose much by our insatiable need to win. Our children do need boundaries (which we'll talk about later), and structure is good. In no way does winning the heart (rather than always winning the argument) mean that our children can say or do whatever they want. There is a time and a place for discipline, especially when a child's choices are unwise. But we must pay closer attention to the *why* behind the argument and the true ultimate stakes.

## Choose Your Win

In this book, I want to make a case for a different approach—a paradigm shift—to parenting. After seventeen years as a parent, eighteen years coaching numerous parents, and now writing and speaking to hundreds of thousands of parents around the United States, this new approach is what I believe is the healthiest means to eventually (key word, *eventually*) enjoying a lifelong relationship with our children.

When we focus solely on winning the argument, we may with good intention be giving priority to our parenting role

as teachers. As I've explained, we must be teachers, but we must give even higher priority to our other roles, such as being listeners and defenders of our children's hearts. Successful, positive parenting is not built merely on external behavior modification. Nothing authentic ever is. It's built on a fierce focus on the heart, communicating in such a way that our children know above anything else that they are valued, loved, and cherished.

I would love to go back in time and change those moments when I got it wrong with my daughter. But all I can do is change my interactions going forward. Even more important is changing my *intentions*. She needs a mom and dad who cherish her. She needs a father who, no matter the circumstances, lets her know how much she's valued, even if she has disappointed us with an unwise choice.

Just recently, our daughter did something that warranted a consequence. She made a decision that was not only bad but also unsafe. In the past, Kristin and I would have gone in loaded for bear. We would have anticipated her arrival home from school like a hunter waiting in the shadows for prey. That may sound overdramatic, but sadly it's close to the truth. Fortunately, we talked over lunch that day and agreed on a wiser approach: "When she gets home, we'll sit her down and affirm that we love her. We'll state precisely the problem with her poor decision, outline the consequence, and be done with it. No extended explanation or lecture." And though we told her we loved her, we also went on demonstrating our love in action. Why so short and simple? Her heart is more important than a win in the argument column. Our old method of parenting was dangerous.

Unhealthy methods may modify our children's outward behavior but at what cost? What are we losing by coming out victorious? Too much, if you ask me. I believe in a way that positively influences our children at every age and wins their hearts in the process. It comes down to our tone, attitude, and intention.

That chilly morning as I read *Parenting Beyond Your Capacity* and was cut to the heart, I realized for the first time how critical my words are to my children. That's when I began to change.

Perhaps this is a beginning for you too. Maybe after reading this chapter you are feeling convicted, as I was. That's okay. I couldn't change the past, and neither can you. But you can change your present and future. Try to let go of regret and shame, and view your parenting journey through the lenses of hope and new resolve. Change starts here, and this change can transform your parenting forever.

## Pause to Reflect



1. What was the priority for your parents—winning arguments with you or winning your heart?
2. Which of these has been your past priority with your children?
3. What is one new way you can emphasize your love for your child and your child's value?
4. What will this require you to *stop* doing or to do less often?