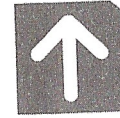


Parenting Beyond Your
Capacity: Connect
Your Family to A
Wider Community

Reggie Joiner
Carey Nieuwhof

CHAPTER ONE



The Orange Parent

A parent's influence is best realized in partnership with a wider community.

I (Reggie) had two preschoolers before I became aware that I could probably use some help as a parent. I was twenty-eight years old and had just been hired by a large church in Florida as the pastor for young adults and families. The first Sunday after I arrived, we went to lunch after church at a restaurant called Jungle Jim's. As we were escorted to a table in the center of the room, I vividly remember noticing we were surrounded by members of the church who were also having lunch.

We sat at the table and arranged our two children, four-year-old Reggie Paul and two-year-old Hannah. As the new pastor in town, I was sensitive about how well my kids behaved. But before I realized it, the waitress put an orange soda in front of my daughter. Hannah was ecstatic that someone had actually given her something without a lid to drink. She was even more excited when she

discovered the designs she could make whenever she flipped her straw and sprayed orange droplets on the white tablecloth.

If you have preschoolers, you know how easy it is for things to get out of your control.

My wife was seated next to Hannah. Sensing my angst, Debbie made a few attempts to redirect our daughter's artistry. With every attempt, Hannah became more determined to decorate the table in orange.

I decided to take things into my own hands. After all, I needed to set an example as a pastor and a parent for an entire congregation now observing the commotion at our table.

Honestly, I'm not sure why I said what I said. I knew better. It was just the only thing I could think of at the time. I was desperate for her to behave. So I leaned in as close to Hannah as I could, stared into her eyes, and said in a voice low enough that only she could hear, "If you touch that straw one more time, you're gonna die!" As a two-year-old, she had already learned how to call my bluff. She glared back at me, looked back at the cup, hit it with her right hand, and poured orange soda all over the table.

I jumped up and grabbed her to make a quick exit for some quality father-daughter conversation. As I walked between the tables, my two-year-old started yelling, "Daddy, please don't kill me! Daddy, please don't kill me!" Then, sensing she had an audience, Hannah kissed me on the cheek and laid her head on my shoulder and said, "Daddy, I'm sorry."

I heard the entire restaurant say with one voice, "Awwww, how

sweet."

When I think back to our episode with Hannah's orange soda, I'm reminded of how much more difficult parenting is than most of us realize. Many of us discovered soon after our children were born that our parenting toolboxes were missing some of the tools we needed to be effective at the job.

Many times we found that we had been handed tools from our own parents that we automatically tried to use on our children. It is quite ironic that we will use phrases or techniques that our parents used on us, even though those approaches didn't work on us any better than they work on our kids. I became convinced early in the parenting process that I needed to learn better parenting skills.

In the process, I read hundreds of books, attended dozens of conferences, and had thousands of hours of conversations with parents who were smarter than I was. What did I get out of them? A sinking feeling of being overwhelmed. It seemed like there were dozens of things I needed to improve, and it was difficult to know where to start.

The issue is about my personal capacity. Maybe it's just me, but I never seem to have enough time or space. Instead, my approach to parenting has often been random and reactive. I think many of us respond to what we feel is right in the moment. We reach for the closest book on the shelf, scan the first Web site in our Google search, or sort through multiple lists given to us by the "experts." Then we parent by experiment.

We can always see our mistakes in retrospect better than we realize them in real time. I can mentally search through the archives of our family memories and pinpoint moments I wish I could redo. I poignantly remember times when things got out of control, when my values

became clouded and I made decisions based on an immediate situation rather than the big picture. I don't think I am alone. Too many parents

Too many parents wake up one day and realize they have economized on the very relationships they vowed would always be a priority.

wake up one day and realize they have economized on the very relationships they vowed would always be a priority.

I recently sat down to summarize a few truths I want to remember about parenting, just so I could stay focused. I'm not suggesting this is a comprehensive list. It is just my own list of parenting priorities:

- What matters more than anything is that my kids have an authentic relationship with God.
- My wife and I are not the only adult influences my children need.
- My children need to know I will never stop fighting for a right relationship with them.
- My relationship with God and with my wife affects my children more than I realize.
- Just *being* together can never substitute for *interacting* together in a meaningful way.

After I wrote these phrases, I realized a common thread ties them together: the value of relationships. Sometimes, we forget the essence of parenting is really about nurturing critical connections that affect every child's future.

At this time in my life, all four of my children are moving through their college years and into adulthood. As I review the past and look forward to what's ahead, I'm amazed how these statements have transcended every season of our experience together. I wish I had written them down twenty years ago. It is just too easy to get preoccupied with trying to be a model parent and forget the real purpose of parenting.

I am going to suggest a few things that I hope you will remember as you read this book:

No one has more potential to influence your child than you.

The fact that you are the primary influence in the life of your child is something you probably already intuitively know. Most parents have a sense that their relationships with their own children are very important. We are aware that we are stewards of influence during the most formative years of someone's life. For good or bad, you will influence your children. This is a responsibility parents carry in a way that no other being on the planet will or should. Teachers, pastors, and coaches will never have as much potential to influence a child's character, self-esteem, perspectives, or faith as a parent does. That teacher, pastor, or coach will have influence that is temporary. It will come and go during different stages of your child's life. Your influence as a parent will be permanent.

Are you starting to feel a little pressure? Good. It may be healthy from time to time to feel a little desperate, especially if your desperation drives you to get help and admit that you don't

have the capacity to be a perfect parent. If parenting isn't a little intimidating, then maybe you don't really understand how critical your role is.

Of course, if I really wanted to make you *worry*, I could start quoting the experts and their statistical analyses about everything from high-school dropout rates to teenage pregnancies to juveniles who end up in prison because of bad parenting. I could even show you that if you don't have enough dinners at home with your children, your kids will fly off the tracks.

I would never want to use any of that information to make you panic. If you are like me, you already feel the expectations on parents are pretty lofty. Most of us start off with the bar extremely high. When our first child was born, Debbie and I decided we would never fight in front of our kids, never let them watch television, and never feed them fast food. That was before we realized that the only way we could find time to fight was when they were watching TV and that every McDonald's commercial had subliminal messages that hypnotized our kids to beg for McNuggets. Our standards didn't last very long, and we started feeling guilty early in our parenting experience.

What does all of this have to do with influence? The point is that there is a built-in sense of responsibility most parents feel simply because they are parents. The drive you have to get this right may mistakenly compel you to try to become an expert parent that you will never be. We can buy into the myth that we have to make more lists, get more organized, work much harder, and never make mistakes in order to be successful parents. But instead, we need to remember that our influence has more to do with our relationships

with our children than it does our skills as parents. Your purpose as a parent is not to develop exceptional parenting skills.

If you establish unrealistic expectations for yourself, you may create an atmosphere where you become discouraged and frustrate your children. If you are not careful in your zeal to "win" at parenting, you may actually create an unhealthy culture. It is vital to guard your mind-set and stay focused on the primary role of the family.

Your role is not to impress your children or anyone else with your ability to parent; your role is to impress your children with the love and nature of God. The fact that no one has more potential to influence your child than you do implies that you have a natural, God-given advantage to love and lead your children. Does that mean you don't attempt to sharpen and improve your parenting skills? Of course not. But it does mean you parent from the perspective of a relationship, not from your competence or abilities. This levels the playing field for parents. Put another way, this is the reason a mother or father who may not be an expert at communication or a genius in child psychology can be an exceptional parent. Your relationship gives you the potential to influence in a way that others cannot. You are a mother. You are a father. No one else can do what you can do.

That's why Carey and I wrote this book, because we believe in the potential of every parent to do what only he or she can do. But there is a flip side to this principle. It is the other thread that runs through these pages: Some things are simply beyond a parent's capacity to do.

Here is a sobering thought: Your present family will never be enough for your children. Even the best parenting in the best family will never alone be enough to develop relationally, emotionally, and

spiritually healthy children. I am not trying to minimize your role, especially when we just finished elevating it. I'm trying to balance it with the polarity of two truths that coexist. The parent is an essential and primary influence. There are things no one can do as well as a parent. But there is another truth that is equally important: There are some things a parent cannot do as well as others. Consider a second principle about influence:

You are not the only influence your children need.

Some parents start out thinking they are the only guidance their kids will need. This starts when children are infants. Then they become preschoolers, and a few years later we discover we have adolescents in the house. We become acutely aware that our kids need something more than just us. It is the process of growth, the path to independence and adulthood. God has designed everyone to need

When you learn to parent beyond your capacity, you tap into other influences that also have the potential to impact your children's future.

and connect with others. This is central to their significance as they become part of a bigger story and expand their own influence.

When you learn to parent beyond your capacity, you tap into other influences that also have the potential to impact your children's future. You become intentional about modeling relational values. You exchange short-term outcomes for

a long-term impact. Here is a primary point of this book: Your children one day will seek affirmation and approval from adults other than you. Either you can become intentional about enlisting other trusted adults to influence your kids, or you can depend only on your limited capacity. You can leave them alone to discover random influences who will shape their character and faith, or you can help them proactively pursue strategic relationships for their lives.

This principle has a direct correlation to your capacity. Face it. Your children will encounter a number of things that you are not skilled at doing. Maybe it's in the area of education, health, athletics, or talents. Just because you may not possess a specific skill does not mean that you don't have the relational influence to move your son or daughter to get whatever help he or she needs. Isn't that what parents do all the time? If you don't have the skill, you take the initiative to tap into something beyond your ability. You enlist a tutor, teacher, coach, doctor, or nurse to help. With a strong commitment to do what you can and to seek out the help of others to do what you can't, you practice a version of parenting beyond your present capacity. It's not your ability or skill level that matters as much as it is your relationships with your kids and your efforts to move them in the right direction.

What if you simply admitted that you don't have enough capacity on your own to raise your son or daughter?

What would happen if you decided to become intentional about inviting other leaders into your children's lives?

This is where a third principle comes into the picture:

Two combined influences will make a greater impact than just two influences.

We call that the Orange Factor.

If you haven't experienced it already, you will almost certainly encounter finger painting during your child's preschool years. A magical moment occurs when a child learns that mixing two colors produces something new. It is exciting to see how two pigments can merge to create something different and distinctive. That's what happens when red and yellow combine their efforts to make orange.

We use the color orange to symbolize what it means to parent beyond your capacity. It is just one way to visually remind parents why they need other influences in the lives of children. If you trust someone else to help teach your daughter math, you are thinking Orange. If you depend on a coach to show your son how to throw a football, you are thinking Orange. You are tapping into another influence besides your own to make a greater impact. What if we applied the same principle to the moral and spiritual development of our children? What if we assigned the color red to represent the unconditional love of family, and what if yellow represented the light that comes from a larger community of faith? When those two influences combine efforts to influence a child, the result is transformational.

Carey and I have seen firsthand the role other Christian leaders play in the lives of our children. So when we think Orange, this color

When you think Orange, you see that two combined influences make a greater impact than just two influences.

reminds us of the importance of a partnership between parents and the church. Both are important, and the principle is simple. If you paint only with red, you will see

what only red can do. If you paint only with yellow, you will see what only yellow can do. But when you paint with red and yellow, you'll get new possibilities, fresh solutions, vibrant outcomes. When you think Orange, you see that two combined influences make a greater impact than just two influences.

Hopefully, you are beginning to see the potential.

There are two powerful influences on the planet—the church and the home.

They both exist because God initiated them.

They both exist because God desires to use them to demonstrate His plan of redemption and restoration.

If they work together they can potentially make a greater impact than if they work alone.

They need each other.

Too much is at stake for either one to fail.

Their primary task is to build God's kingdom in the hearts of men and women, sons and daughters.

Both the family and the church are systems comprised of imperfect people but designed by God to tell His story to the world. When you think Orange, you embrace the potential of combining your influence with that of a faith community to make a greater impact than either of you can make on your own.

We are not simply suggesting you just find a church to make your children more spiritual. That would still be only painting yellow. And it's going to take

Working on the same thing at the same time is not as effective as working on the same thing at the same time

more than your family has to offer. That would be only painting red. Your family and church are probably trying to do the best job they can independently. Churches

are full of programs that inspire families, and countless families participate regularly in their local churches. Both groups are simultaneously hard at work to build faith in children, but in most cases they are not working in sync. They may be working toward a similar goal, but working on the same thing at the same time is not as effective as working on the same thing at the same time *with the same strategy*. When you creatively synchronize the two environments, you get more than just red or yellow—you tap into the Orange Factor.

Our hope is that this book will help you know how to partner with the right influences to make a greater impact in your kids' lives. Throughout the following pages we want to help you clarify the shared values we believe will help you prioritize the relationships that will shape your children's future.

We are going to invite you to engage your family in a bigger story, a story that will expand their perspectives and reveal a significant role in this world. It's a story that involves more than just your family; it involves other influences who are on a journey to discover who God is and why a relationship with Him really matters. We

hope the essential values in this book will help you navigate through a variety of different seasons as a parent. We want to encourage you to establish a lifestyle as a parent where you ...

Widen the Circle ... Invite others to invest in your children, so your sons and daughters have other voices that will help shape and determine the direction of their lives.

Imagine the End ... Focus your energy and effort on the issues that will make a lasting impact.

Fight for the Heart ... Create a culture of unconditional love in your home to fuel the emotional and moral health of your children.

Create a Rhythm ... Tap into the power of quality moments together, and build a sense of purpose through your everyday experiences.

Make It Personal ... Allow your kids to see how you strive to grow so they can understand how to confront their own limitations and pursue character and faith.

Each of these values can help you establish a lifestyle of parenting beyond your capacity. Here is what we promise will happen if you read this book:

- You will still get tired as a parent.
- You will still struggle with what you should do in a number of situations.
- Your kids will still not always behave exactly the way you want.
- You will still stay awake sometimes, worrying about your kids.
- You will still wonder, more than you should, if you're a good parent.

Oh, and there's one more thing we promise ...

Your relationship with your children,
and with the other people they need in their lives,
will move in a better direction.