
The Intentional Parent

Becoming a Competent Family Leader



an easy and sensible approach to “leadership parenting”

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Part One: Introduction



Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

John Kennedy

I have been fortunate to be able to share a lot of my experiences as a psychologist who works with kids and families, in books that I have written and seminars that I have conducted. I have always wanted to write a book that presents an easy to follow, very specific approach to parenting education -- one that is easy to read, easy to share and discuss, and easy to conduct seminars and trainings around. *The Intentional Parent* has become that book for me.

Part One of *The Intentional Parent* is a parenting framework. This framework helps my readers understand how intentions, actions and outcomes form the foundation for becoming a competent leader. Looking at parenting from a leadership perspective has become important to me because as I write this I believe children are facing a lot of challenges. Today's kids are growing up in a world where they are influenced by media, technology, the fracturing and recombining of families, early introduction to drugs, alcohol and sexual behavior. Whether these have always been issues, or whether they are more influential issues because they come into kid's lives sooner is hard to say, but I speak to thousands of parents every year and I know they are searching for answers to the question of how to be more effective at influencing their kids to navigate the tough times of growing up. Strong parents make strong kids and I am convinced that focusing parents on the concept of leadership is beneficial to everyone.

Part Two of *The Intentional Parent* is general parenting knowledge - descriptions of common parenting concerns with specific advice on what you can handle alone and when you

should seek outside help. The advice in this section is mostly geared to kids up to age twelve. If you want content that is related specifically to teens, you can get a copy of *Dr. Peter's Guide to Teen Parenting* from the Apple iBook Store or from www.tribecakidcoach.com.

The leadership coaching in Part One will help my readers better understand the process of parenting. Part Two concentrates on situational knowledge. Part Two is not an encyclopedia of parenting topics. Instead it is a good sampling of parenting topics across the developmental continuum and I recommend reading all of them even if your kids are older or younger than the ages of the kids in the vignettes and anecdotes I have included. The second reason for Part Two of *The Intentional Parent* is to provide material for discussion at the parenting seminars I teach. There are common elements in the situations that can help stimulate your thinking and acting even if your situations are not exactly the same.

PART ONE: THE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The Broad Strokes

Here is a brief overview of the leadership framework or “go to” principles involved in becoming an intentional parent.

The Intentional Parent concentrates on these principles:

Principle One: Effective parenting is a function of competent family leadership

Principle Two: Competent family leaders ...

- lead with intention
- motivate their family members with love, high expectations and structure
- communicate their expectations clearly and consistently
- set limits which outline the natural consequences of breaking family rules

A Time for Leadership

Today's parents are more oriented toward the concept of leadership than the parents I worked with 25 years ago when I first started a practice in child psychology. Women play more important roles now in business, commerce and world leadership, and hopefully will gain even more ground in these areas. They can relate more with leadership roles than my mom clients did in the past.

Men appreciate the roles of women in the family more now than a quarter century ago, and are more willing to “co-chair” the family team, making stronger efforts in family chores that were more traditionally occupied almost solely by mothers.

These are some of the sociocultural reasons that parents might embrace a parenting approach that emphasizes leadership -- but there is also a much more practical reason. When parents speak to me about what frustrates them most, it is that they struggle

with what role to play in the lives of their children. They do not want to be too strict. They want to give children “choices,” (even though some of the choices they are given should not be made by kids). They do not want to be disliked by their kids and are afraid their relationship might not ever be reconciled if they show anger or resentment. If anything, today's parenting is often passed through filters of anxiety, guilt and regret.

I hope to influence parents to see an advantage in looking at their roles with the more positive perspective that “leadership” implies as opposed to the more negative connotation that “disciplinarian” might suggest to some. However, good leaders are good disciplinarians, and it is my intent to help you learn that being a good disciplinarian does not mean you have to bark at, punish your kids, or stifle their spirits.

Breaking a Child's Spirit or Promoting Clear Expectations?

When parents tell me “*I don't want to break his (or her) spirit,*” as an excuse for not wanting to introduce parenting expectations a child might see as negative (like clear boundaries and high expectations), what they are telling me is that they are afraid to lead their children.

Unless parents have clear intentions about what kind of behavior is appropriate and what is not, they develop parent-child relationships that tend to be chaotic and driven by the whims of their kids. They ignore behavior that represents poor judgment, disrespect, impulsivity, and aggression, believing that these negative behaviors are merely a function of “self expression.” As a result they parent with a blind eye as to how these behaviors shape their children's futures, or worse yet they parent with fear of rejection from their kids, and anxiety, walking on eggshells whenever they want their children to behave.

This can make children feel as though they are the most powerful people in the family, and so kids become insulted when they are not permitted to exercise whatever wish is floating around in their heads (i.e. “I want to eat cookies for breakfast.”) You can preserve your child's curiosity, “spirit”, independence and personal flair but at the same time you also have to teach your child that part of their future success will be adjusting to the demands of certain environments where rules and boundaries are important -- like school, on the playing field and when they are someone else's house.

When you are uncomfortable telling your child to stop talking, be respectful, stop misbehaving, pay more attention, do chores, etc., there are lots of other authority figures who won't hesitate to, and they will often do it without the love and affection you would deliver those messages with. Inevitably parenting criticisms are directed at you when your child ignores the admonitions and you get

called up to school for a good talking to. Then the guilt comes; or you might assume the teacher or other significant adult does not really understand your child, or that your child deserves a break at home given the pressure and stress of other environments. Good work habits, respect for others, and self-control all “follow the leader.”`

Parents As “Friends”

I have often found it quite ineffective to try to persuade parents to be more strict, expect more from their kids, stick to the consequences they lay out, and incentivize kids without giving them too much “up front,” without them earning it. Sometimes, parents tell me, “I don’t want my kids to feel the way I did when I was growing up.” When parents tell me they don’t want to feel the way they did growing up I answer back, “How do you know your kids won’t feel worse because you were not the kind of “friend” that they wish you were?” Kids rarely stay close to their childhood friends, but you are a parent forever.

Curiously, when I ask parents if they would like to learn to be better “leaders,” and to be able to teach their children the importance of being “successful leaders,” almost everyone can listen to that and guide their children through all sorts of challenging life experiences. The two relationships, friend and leader are simply not on the same plane.

The basic framework of the parenting education approach I lay out in *The Intentional Parent* is so simple, that even the most anxiety ridden parent can pull it off. Hopefully, the benefits you reap from this approach will bring you to your next level of evolution, not only as a parent, but as a person as well.

Intentions, Actions and Outcomes and The Leadership Framework

The leadership framework I present in this book, revolves around three simple ideas:

- intentions
- actions
- outcomes

After this framework is laid out, I will focus you on how to be an effective motivator, how to communicate effectively and how to help your children understand the relationship between behavior and consequence.

In my parenting approach, I ask parents to think and ask questions:

“What do I want to happen in this interaction with my child?”

What do I have to do to make what I want to happen, actually happen?”

“Did I do it? Did I make it happen? Why? Why not?”

You might be wondering, “Is this really a method? Isn’t this what I do all the time, anyway?” I find that most intelligent people ask themselves these questions, but they don’t do it enough and they don’t do it with purpose, and frequently, they abandon perfectly good parenting strategies because they don’t work the first time, or they don’t work every time.

I want you to interact with your kids in ways that are purpose-driven and methodical. You, in turn, can teach and share strategies with your partner, and your kids will in turn model this behavior and live their own lives in more purposeful and methodical ways.

Encouraging a Thinking Methodology In Your Kids

Part of the way your kids will benefit from your leadership style is that they will model (imitate) it. The other way they will benefit from your leadership style is that you will shape it by bringing their intentions, actions and outcomes into your parenting talks and discussions with them.

Doing this is as simple as focusing your children on *their* intentions, actions and outcomes, often with some very simple questions:

What were you thinking about when you...[did whatever you did].

What could you have done differently instead of...[whatever you did]

What do you think about how things turned out?

Parents worry about how they will approach their children when trying to encourage insight and behavior change. Breaking things down to intentions, actions and outcomes is a simple and effective strategy that will allow you to approach your children from a position of leadership throughout their lives.

You will find that kids are often at a loss for being able to respond to these questions, but getting an accurate answer to them is not really all that important. If they could answer those questions, they would probably have not misbehaved in the first place!

Like many parenting strategies, you have to wait for a “payoff.” But you will see that questions like these “prompt” intentional thinking because you are encouraging the habit of self awareness in your kids.

Tell Me What You Are Thinking

When I ask parents what they think about when they are interacting with their children, they either tell me something very vague like “I want my kids to know I love them,” which is a very wonderful goal, but it isn’t a very complete goal and it usually doesn’t stop children from whatever misbehavior might be going on. Or, parents tell me something like, “I want them to stop nagging me,” which is important for parents if one of your goals is to keep from losing your mind, but achieving this alone might not teach kids anything. I would consider both of these goals to be great secondary goals, but they do not address building strong character or navigating the difficult times in life.

You can get your kids to feel love and you can get them to nag you less -- and you can do it while teaching them to be:

- smart risk takers with good judgment
- hard workers
- excellent partners in many different types of relationships
- comfortable with who they are

In my program, parents and children learn together, learn from one another, succeed together and fail together -- as a team, with the parents as the team leaders, the driving force in helping kids meet life’s challenges.

Warm up: Know Your Child’s Temperament

Before you undertake any attempt to be coached or educated by anyone about parenting, know that you are the ultimate expert, because you know your kid(s) better than anyone else. No one knows your child’s basic style of temperament as well as the people who spend every day with them.,

In the debate over whether we are more the products of our genetic make up or the environment around us, the best conclusion science has to offer is that we are certainly strongly influenced by both.

To be an effective parent it is very important to your success as well as your sanity to understand that your child came into this world with predispositions in their behavior and approach to the world.

Temperament is the genetic contribution to behavior and can, at least in part, reflect whether your child is an easy going, good listening, calm, flexible, attentive and happy child; or whether he or she is difficult, stubborn, oppositional and even grumpy child.

Parents are almost always aware of what their children's temperaments are, but often do not realize that difficult behavioral traits do not always come from what you are doing, right or wrong, as a parent. Before we knew that children had temperamental qualities it was common for people who were experts in the field of child development to attribute the cause of difficult behavior in children to "parenting mistakes." Now we know that children who are spirited, oppositional, rigid and stubborn, and even aggressive can be born with tendencies to be that way, and even if there were a way to do things perfectly, it would not have much effect on a child's behavior.

Does this mean that behavior that is influenced by temperament is impossible to change? No, not at all, but it might mean that many, many more repetitions or corrections might be needed to create that change, and it might mean that your "workload" as a parent might be higher than a child with a more easy going temperament.

We don't know why yet but some parents are blessed with children who are easier to raise. It is entirely possible to have several children with very different behavioral styles.

Here are some typical behavioral traits which can be influenced by temperament:

Shyness - doesn't seem to like to meet new people, anxious. This child doesn't like to be singled out. Does not want to socialize with peers.

Stubbornness - hates being told what to do. This child won't do what others are doing in a group, and wants to do "her own thing." Also, this child hates being told what to do and often out at authorities.

Intense - emotionally reactive. This child can be dramatic and grandiose, and likes to be the center of attention.

People pleasing - socially aware. This child is motivated to please. She is compliant, and has a natural sense of gentility. She is sensitive to the needs of others. She wants to impress.

This is not a complete list but rather descriptions of some behavior that is influenced by temperament.

Sometimes temperament is observed as a "tendency" in a child who might be a bit left or right of average, and sometimes temperamental behavior shows itself as a moderate to extreme behavior. If your child is an extremely difficult child to raise, consider speaking with your pediatrician about it, or consulting a child behavior expert.

Turning Concept Into Action

Throughout *The Intentional Parent* you will find that my tendency is to present an idea, give you some examples of how to turn that idea into a parenting action, then further discuss and summarize. Your first example of this is right here, in this discussion about temperament:

If you have a spirited, difficult child pick and chose your battles. You will exhaust and frustrate yourself if you make correcting every bothersome behavior a battle of wills.

Remember that it is important to always try to bring your child's focus and energy to your level. Do not "stress up" to your child's level because chances are he or she will raise the bar and escalate the situation even more.

Try not to punish a child for what he cannot control. It is better to help your child improve behavior by rewarding effort for good behavior than to punish for bad behavior.

Knowing your child's temperament has little bearing on the practical advice I try to give here. You will probably want to try almost everything, though not everything will lead to immediate success. When it comes to evaluating the "outcome" of how you parent your children, you might want to reflect on your child's temperament, and know that if you lead with intention, it might take time and a lot of repetition but eventually you will get results!

The Format and Style of This Book

As you will see by how many times I refer to the notion, "less is more," is a very important concept to me. After writing a dozen "paper and ink" books with traditional editors and publishers, I am now interested in developing books that connect me with my audi-

ence through social networks on and off the internet. Electronic publishing has made it possible for me to add value to my writing by updating, adding and revising continuously. As I talk to more and more people, I will provide more feedback and value added information through the website associated with the book. The book itself will ultimately become updated and revised based on what my audience would like to see. I also look forward to taking my show “on the road” in the form of coffee talks and seminars so look for me in your neighborhood. Better yet, invite me to your small or large group!

I am currently in Revision 1.0

Visit the website www.tribecakidcoach.com to download the newest version and to get your value added content.

Let's begin!

Intentions



Absolute identity with one's cause is the first and great condition of successful leadership.

Woodrow Wilson

To be a good leader, you must be a clear thinker, and part of developing the clarity of thought required to lead is to be an “intentional thinker.”

Planning and Practicing in Your Mind’s Eye”

One of the most overlooked areas of study in psychology is the psychology of intention, but hopefully, it will not be overlooked for that much longer. Research over the last fifteen years or so is showing how important intention is to success in many areas in life.

Intention can be explained in a lot of ways, but the simplest way is, the more you think about something you want to achieve, the more success you will have at achieving it.

However, the thinking must involve planning, “practicing in your mind,” strategizing about the outcome and goal being goal directed. Intentional thinking is not the same as “wishing for success,” or blindly “visualizing,” -- these are components of magical thinking more than they are the building blocks of goal directed behavior.

One bit of good news about the power of intention is that, it appears that the harder the chore, or the more complex the goal, the more effective thinking about it seems to be -- and parenting can be a hard chore.

The skeptical amongst you might say, “*Are you telling the only thing I have to do to be a better parent to my kids is think about it more?*” The answer is: “*No, but that’s definitely where you should start.*” When you think about parenting your kids (and to be a bit more precise we are talking about *thinking about doing*) you should focus on the following:

- knowing what your intention is
- interacting with kids in a calm, assertive manner (tough to do but always possible to get better at)
- being brave enough to end ridiculous conversations by saying, “Sorry, but that’s all the conversation we are going to have about this,” and ignoring the rest of the pestering, the tantrums and the whining that follows
- understanding that immediate action-reaction (your action leading to a child’s reaction or improved behavior) payoffs can be few and far between

Identifying Your Intentions

Can a person think about absolutely nothing? I, for one, would be very envious of anyone who could think about nothing! The brain is quite a busy organ. It processes information, some estimates say, at a rate of 20 million billion calculations per second.

Actually, the problem is the opposite, especially in the the lives of busy people with a lot of responsibilities. People, it seems, are thinking about *everything*, so much so, that their thoughts jump and race, with no particular priority until something interrupts that flow of information which requires action. The result of being in that particular mode of behavior is that we become very *reactive*, and a problem with reactive thinking is that it permits the demands of the immediate environment to have priority over goal-directed thinking. Of course, that is not the only kind of thinking people do, but I think a liability of faced paced lifestyles is that the faster we move, the less goal-directed thinking we tend to do, and therefore we lose the benefits that intentional thinking can provide.

Some might disagree and say, if I am listening to demands and knocking things off my “to do” list, certainly I am “goal-directed.” The goal directedness people achieve when they multi-task is not the same as the kind of intentional thinking I am talking about, which is highly concentrated and very focused on achieving what I call a “local” goal.

Local goals are specific problem solving efforts, which might very well be part of a larger strategy, in this case the strategy being the *global* goal of , “how do I create a really desirable, happy, confident person in my child?”

To gain these benefits we have to practice two things:

- thinking
- thinking about thinking

Thinking versus Thinking about Thinking

Practicing thinking is a simple matter of focusing your attention on one thing -- for the purposes of this book, that one thing would be parenting your children as a good family leader. The tips and discussions we have throughout this book will give you lots of food for (focusing your) thoughts on leadership.

Thinking about thinking, (the fancy word for this is “metacognition,”) is a bit more difficult to explain, but the best way I have found to share this idea with people is to say that thinking about thinking is “quality control for your inner voice.” We do this by knowing what we are thinking about, and asking:

- What are the possible outcomes associated with acting on that thought?
- Now that I have considered these outcomes was that really a good thought?
- Can I put my minds eye on performing actions that will lead to good outcomes?

Most people do this some of the time, but not nearly enough, and when you are trying to change your behavior *you have to thinking about thinking with extra effort.*

To get the best benefit from intentional thinking, sit in a quiet place (some people can even make a quiet place in their minds even if they are in a distracting environment), pose a problem to yourself, for example:

“How can I get my five year old son to be more polite and not so fresh?”

Then run through various scenarios for how to deal with it, for example:

- I will take away his favorite toy
- I will ignore him when he talks in a fresh way
- I will sit him down for a good talking to
- I will give him a time out
- I will encourage him to communicate the same thing without the freshness and model the appropriate behavior

It might even help to write your strategies down in a list like the one above.

By the way, those ideas are good ones, in case you are trying to get your five year old to be more polite and less fresh.

Parenting Intentions

To make it a bit more specific to parenting, and *thinking* about parenting here are some points of reference for focusing your parenting intentions:

- *I intend to make my child's difficult behavior stop.*
- *I intend to ignore the feelings of frustration and anger I am experiencing and even ignore the behavior of my child, as long as he or she isn't doing anything harmful to himself or someone else.*
- *I intend to reward good behavior more frequently.*
- *I intend to be a good model of self control.*
- *I intend to judge myself not on a single action I take, but on the more important whole process of how I treat my children.*
- *I intend to show my child the relationship between freedom and responsibility.*
- *I intend to interrupt any violent or aggressive behavior shown to a child who has done nothing to warrant it.*
- *I intend not to give into whining and other oppositional behavior.*
- *I intend to stick to the consequences I lay out.*
- *I intend to be a good model of forgiveness and a better model for apologizing for regrettable behavior.*
- *I intend to help my child show anger with words more than with actions.*
- *I intend to teach my child the importance of confidence and the shame of arrogance.*
- *I intend for "no" to "mean "No."*
- *I intend to show my child how to see the beauty in what other people often overlook.*
- *I intend to lead by example.*

- *I intend to be a better parent than I am a friend, because friends come and go, even good ones, and you often need to be popular to be someone's friend.*

This is not an all inclusive list, but I would bet if you could accomplish the outcomes related to these intentions and you did it with love and affection you would have a better than average if not fantastic kid.

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