

INTRODUCTION

Before I got married I had six theories about bringing up children; now I have six children, and no theories.

John Wilmot

Few transitions bring as much joy, tears, and anxiety to parents as when their children graduate from high school and head off into the “real world.” It’s a strange concoction of emotions that is one part reflection (all the memories), one part conviction (did we do everything we could?), and one part wonder (how will they do?). Questions race through your mind:

“Have I taught them everything they need to know?”

“Are they on the right track?”

“Will they make good decisions?”

“How will our relationship change?”

“Can they live successfully as independent adults?”

“Are they ready?”

“Am I ready???”

As a parent, you play the vital role in preparing your teen for a successful launch. No doubt the past fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years or so have flown by quickly. Now, you’re on the verge of seeing him or her off into the next season of life. If you’re like us—and most of the other parents we meet—you want to make sure you’ve done everything you can to set him or her up for success.

It’s a tall order indeed, and what compelled us to write this book. The teen years offer special challenges and opportunities, because our children are changing so much (seeking and expressing independence and establishing their identities) and there are SO many decisions to be made. The

responsibilities of preparing them for independent living, while building a relationship that will endure forever, can feel overwhelming (especially when other voices seem to have greater influence than ours). And, while there are many excellent parenting books out there, many focus on behavior and discipline without offering the complete picture of life readiness.

These days, the stakes are higher for young adults making their way into the world. For the first time in decades, the next generation will not necessarily live a more secure and affluent lifestyle than its parents. Many would argue that economic and cultural forces have made today's world a more formidable environment than most of us experienced at that age. We agree.

In our work with educators, businesses, mentor and faith organizations, and at-risk youth programs, we have heard a resounding plea for parents and those who guide our youth to work together to equip and empower the next generation. It is an urgent situation. Colleges and employers report that an alarming percentage of today's graduates are ill-equipped to handle the pressures and responsibilities of the real world. This was yet another motivation for writing this book. As our world is becoming more competitive, our younger generation is often lacking the personal skills to succeed. We can, and must, do better.

Kids today need more than head knowledge. They need a solid, holistic leadership foundation that will support them and enable them to make key decisions in these crucial years and beyond. This includes having a purposeful life perspective, solid character, strong personal disciplines, the ability to develop healthy relationships, career smarts, financial management skills, and the capacity to overcome adversity. This book will help build the foundation your teen needs to flourish in all aspects of life.

Teens may pick up some tips at school or elsewhere, but guess what, parents—it starts with you! The good thing is, YOU are the most qualified for the job. No one else knows your teen like you do. And no one else's voice matters as much (whether you feel like it or not).

We wrote this book for you as a road map for a successful launch of

your teen into the real world—whether it be to college, the workplace, the military, service, or elsewhere. It can help bring clarity to your parenting goals and offer direction and innovative strategies to achieve them. Whether your relationship with your teen is rock solid or strained, our hope is that our message inspires and equips you for the greatest of successes—and a relationship with your adult child that will only grow stronger and more rewarding as the years go by.

One more note: *Parenting for the Launch* can be used as a stand-alone parenting guide, or, ideally, in conjunction with our companion book, *What I Wish I Knew at 18: Life Lessons for the Road Ahead*. *Parenting for the Launch* is directed to toward you, the parent, and gives a global framework for how to approach and execute the launch. *What I Wish I Knew at 18*, on the other hand, is messaged directly to your teen. It has the nuts and bolts, if you will, of the success principles you'll want to communicate before your son or daughter leaves home. We recommend you use both books for maximum impact.

Letting go of a young adult child can be hard—and it always seems to come sooner than you think. When it does happen, as it inevitably will, we want to give them wings—not strings! We want to let them go with confidence and watch them soar to success in every area of their lives.

That's our mission, and we're glad you've joined us by picking up this book. Here's to the successful launch of YOUR teen!

CHAPTER ONE

GIVE THEM WINGS, NOT STRINGS

*The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots
of responsibility and the wings of independence.*

Denis Waitley

When my (Arlyn) minute-old son was placed in my arms after a 12-hour labor, the doctor and nurses told us, “Congratulations!” while my husband Doug danced with elation. After the hubbub finally subsided and everyone else had left my hospital room, I lay in the dimness and gazed at our now-sleeping newborn in the bassinet beside my bed. In an instant, my life had totally changed. We had brought this child into the world and he was totally dependent on us. Pure awe—and total overwhelmed-ness.

Now fast forward twenty-one years.

Tyler had just graduated from college and was ready to start his first job as a land use planner in a city three hours away. We all helped him move—Doug, me, and our four younger children, then aged 18, 16, 13, and 10. We loaded up a U-Haul with his belongings and meager furnishings, drove over the mountains to Eastern Washington, and moved him into his new digs.

The first night, we were packed like sardines into the one-bedroom apartment. Doug and I were sleeping on a futon, with Tyler on the floor directly to my right—the same position in which he had rested beside me 21 years earlier, that first night of his life.

As I watched this now six-foot man sleep, it struck me how quickly these 21 years had flown by. Now here he was, about to start life on his own. My feelings were as weighty then as the day I embarked on my parenting career. In fact, they were even stronger, as we now had a 21-year history of relationship and experiences between us. How would we all handle this new season of life?

That was when I realized: You never *stop* being a parent. And you never *arrive*. You never really *want* to let go. But you eventually *have* to. This is, after all, why we raise them up—to *release* them to fulfill their dreams and purpose.

Our goal as parents when that day comes? They soar!

HOW DID WE GET HERE SO QUICKLY?

With each of my kids, I have been surprised by how quickly the launch date arrived. They don't stay babies for very long and before you know it they're teenagers. Zero to 18 in no time flat! Then off they go.

Remember how, when you or your partner were first expecting, you likely read books, talked to other new parents, and maybe quizzed your own parents? You fixed up the nursery just in time for the Arrival. "Expecting" a young adult is no less momentous—there just isn't a specific arrival date. In fact, if you're not careful, it sneaks up on you. One day they're playing dress-up and Legos®, watching cartoons, playing ball with you in the back yard, and wanting you to tuck them into bed at night. The next thing you know (or so it seems), they're into makeup, designer jeans and shoes, cell phones, video games, and dating! Their friends displace you as the VIPs in their lives. You can go days—weeks—without a meaningful conversation. This can blindside you, if you're not prepared.

The years leading up to the launch constitute a season of parenting some might call the "best of times and the worst of times," as Charles Dickens put it. It helps to be well prepared. It's good to know your goals and objectives in advance—and how you're going to accomplish them. You

need to objectively know your teen—and yourself. You’ll want to have a strong relationship with him or her and be able to communicate effectively. Admittedly, none of this is for the faint of heart, and nothing we probably ever thought about when we considered having a family.

However, you don’t have to fear the teen years. Don’t let other people’s negative experiences or worst-case scenarios scare you. No one else’s story is your story. And, no one else’s teen is *your* teen.

Regardless of how quickly you may have arrived at this point, or how unprepared you feel, you have arrived. You are parenting a teen. How strategically and purposefully you approach this next season of parenting will have a huge impact on his or her success in the “real world”—and the quality of your relationship for years to come.

PREPARING FOR LIFE IN THE REAL WORLD

When we contemplated having children, what did most of us think about? Likely our minds were filled with images of babies, toddlers, and elementary school-aged kids. Visions of their first day home, their first steps, their first words, their first ride without training wheels, their first day of school, Little League games, and dance recitals gave us joyful anticipation.

Honestly, few of us pictured a teenager being launched from our loving arms. It’s so down the road that it really doesn’t enter our minds at the outset. After all, we have SO much time before we get to that point.

Or so it seems.

Then reality hits—and they’re off.

If we did think about the teen years, we possibly thought about Friday night football games—maybe our kids or their friends would be football players or cheerleaders or in the band. We might have pictured ourselves helping them with homework and projects. We may have imagined helping them learn to drive and buy their first car, or seeing them off to their senior prom.

Sure, those are important hallmarks of adolescence (in American

culture, anyway). But, if those cultural images were as far as our imaginations were able to take us, something was missing.

In our work with educators, youth mentors, and business and community leaders, we are hearing an overwhelming and urgent cry. They tell us the current generation of young adults, generally speaking, is emerging into the world grossly underprepared to succeed. Consider these facts:

- » One in four high school students fails to graduate, according to the *Washington Post*.¹
- » In a ranking of 18 industrialized nations, the United States ranked ninth in college enrollment and dead last in college completion.²
- » The average current teen jobless rate, as of this writing, is 23.7%.³
- » Over and over we hear that many employers prefer to hire older job applicants, because they are more reliable, better mannered, more motivated, and have a stronger work ethic.

How did we get to this current state of affairs? And what can we parents be doing to equip and empower our teens for *success* in the real world and reverse this course?

AN EMPOWERING APPROACH TO PARENTING

Granted, it's not ALL about us and what we do or don't do. However, the way we train our children does have a great deal of influence on how prepared they are for leaving home and starting life on their own. There are a few approaches to parenting teens that have a significant impact on how well they will fare in life:

1. high expectations, high control style – these can create *strings*
2. low expectations, low control style – these can create *strings*
3. low expectations, high control style – can also create *strings*
4. realistic expectations, empowering style – these can create *wings*

Strings would be anything that would tie our children down and

prevent them from achieving their full potential. We *tie our kids down* when we overly control and manage them with a tight grip—even as they mature through the teen years. It can also happen when we coddle, enable, or ignore them. Regardless of which extreme, they are inhibited rather than equipped. Picture a kite—it can never fly free. It is always tied down, constrained, and maneuvered by the person controlling the strings.

Wings are the things we do to prepare our children to be secure, confident, and independent adults, who will live with integrity and impact. We empower our kids when we train them with strong internal guiding principles and give them freedom, opportunity, and accountability to apply those principles according to their unique style and interests. Picture an eagle—it can soar to the heights. It is free to explore high and far and to navigate the turbulence that life often brings.

What does that have to do with parenting? A lot! Here's what strings and wings can look like as we relate to our teens:

STRINGS:

- » *helicoptering* (hovering, reminding, orchestrating, interfering, nagging, meddling)
- » *performance-driven* (excessive pressuring of kids for their achievements and accomplishments, often because of how they reflect on the parent)
- » *vicariousness* (living life through the child; glorying in his or her successes and agonizing in his/her defeats as if they are the parent's own)
- » *enabling* (not letting him/her fail and face consequences; failing to enforce discipline or accountability)
- » *selfishness* (parents thinking it's all about them; taking personally a teen's natural need for space and independence; holding grudges/outbursts of anger when a teen makes a mistake or makes a decision differently from them; manipulation to get one's own way by withholding rewards or relationship)
- » *overprotection* (being overly fearful of outside influences and

perceived dangers; not allowing kids to experience enough of the real world to make informed choices; restricting them from meeting different people/navigating difficult situations; not permitting them to make their own decisions)

WINGS:

- » *healthy separation* (understanding that teens are their own persons separate from the parents and incrementally giving them space and respect as is due any human)
- » *trust and grace* (giving them incremental freedom *as it is earned* through demonstrating responsibility and integrity; making allowances for immaturity and lack of experience, extending forgiveness and taking the steps needed to re-establish trust when it is broken)
- » *equipping* (strategically and systematically training them to handle real world responsibilities and situations)
- » *empowering* (letting them experience new/different kinds of people and challenging situations with trust and guidance; appreciating their unique design, gifts, and interests and encouraging them accordingly; increasingly having them make their own decisions and supporting them through the consequences)

At a recent educators' conference, a professor from a large Texas university approached me after our workshop on positioning high school students for "real world success." Her question was, "This is great—but how can we get this message to their parents as well?"

She pointed out it's not only teens that are unprepared for the launch—it's parents, too. She pulled out her tablet and opened an email from a student who was failing miserably in math and science. Then, she showed me the most heartbreaking sentence in the girl's email . . . "*I really want to be studying fashion design, but my parents won't let me major in that.*"

This young lady had the gifts, creative temperament, and passion for design, but her parents were footing her college bill and had their own

expectations and agenda. Unfortunately, everyone involved was suffering—the parents, the daughter, and the university staff and faculty!

Ultimately, raising young adults and releasing them fully prepared for the real world is not supposed to be about *us* (i.e., parents) and our identity, interests, or agenda. It's about doing what's best for *our kids*. It's unfortunate that so many parents have it backwards.

I knew a family whose highly competitive father determined that both of his children would become soccer stars. The 16-year old son spent hours daily practicing drills and maneuvers, at his father's insistence, often turning down outings with his friends to movies, etc.

Though he qualified for international tournaments and awards and enjoyed a great deal of attention for his skills, the boy eventually burnt out. He quit soccer immediately after high school, turning down any advantages his talents might have given him for scholarships or a professional soccer career. When my husband and I ran into him years later, he told us he felt he had lost his childhood, resented his father, and wanted nothing more to do with the sport.

Two classic examples of strings, not wings—both tragic.

STRINGS THAT BREED ENTITLEMENT

What parents don't want their children to follow their dreams, land a solid job, and enjoy a great family life? We want them to be happy. We want them to be well-regarded by others. We want them to be *successful*.

But, here's the rub. In a genuine effort to help our kids be happy and successful, there can be some things we parents do that are extremely counterproductive (as in the scenarios above) and actually work against our objectives. Performance-driven parenting approaches aren't the only ones that do this. Another has commonly become known as "child-centered parenting."

In our work with *What I Wish I Knew at 18*, Dennis and I regularly communicate with teachers and administrators from high schools and

universities, as well as employers. They tell us of the growing issues with this younger generation: disrespect for authority, lack of social skills, apathy, and an entitlement mentality. These particular issues squarely stem from the home and are worsening, according to the many organizations working with teens and young adults. The effects of media and culture aren't helping either. Understandably, people in authority positions are concerned.

These effects aren't just happening by accident. It's beyond the scope of this book to comprehensively address them, but we do believe it's our job as parents to do our part and reverse this course. From a parenting perspective, let's consider this scenario:

Two-year old Joey is hungry. Mom says, "Joey, do you want a banana or some grapes?" Joey doesn't want a banana or grapes. Joey wants a mango. Mom tells Joey he needs to eat what is offered to him. He pitches a fit. What does Mom do next? She sends Dad out to the store to buy a mango. Mom and Dad are happy because Joey's happy. Everybody's happy, right? Wrong.

If this style of parenting continues throughout Joey's life, as it does for many, what do you think Joey will grow up thinking? How about:

- » he will always have choices
- » his happiness and satisfaction should be priorities to the people around him
- » he doesn't have to comply with what he is told to do
- » Mom will always advocate for him to get his way and come out on top
- » other people are there to serve him, not the other way around

This is overly simplistic, but I am trying to make a point. Out of our desire to provide the best for our children (and keep them happy), some of our parenting methods may be contributing to their perception that the world revolves around them. If this is the case, they're in for a rude awakening when they leave home and find that the world owes them nothing. And this is exactly what is happening—in astronomical proportions.

Do you see how this can translate to the business world? To interpersonal skills with professors, coaches, and other superiors? To a marriage? Not very well! Here's what it can look like:

- » Parents doing their children's homework, chores, etc.
- » Parents defending unacceptable behavior of their children in meetings with school officials
- » Parents complaining to and threatening educators, coaches, and employers when their children aren't receiving their desired rewards
- » Parents whose lives and schedules are dominated by their children's activities
- » Young adults who call in "sick" at the last minute because they've found something better to do
- » Young adults who don't take responsibility for their mistakes and shortfalls or show respect to others (especially mature adults)

Entitlement is what we call this attitude, this sense that other people owe us something—that we are deserving, regardless of whether we have done anything to earn it. It stems from the parenting style just described and some undesirable consequences of the "self esteem movement." As a result, children feel *entitled* to get their way, viewing rules as arbitrary and voluntary, their needs as paramount, and other people as existing to serve them. And parents, usually unwittingly, are the ones who are cultivating this mindset.

In order for parents to give our young adults wings on which they can *really fly*, we can't coddle them. If we've been doing it up to this point (as revealed in our children's' behavior), it needs to be addressed before they get out into the real world.

We can't set our kids up as the center of our universe and let them think the planets revolve around them. It may seem a short-term solution when they're pitching a fit as a two-year old, or even as an immature teenager. But in the long run, it will come back to bite us—and them.

GIVING THEM WINGS IN THE REAL WORLD

It's not easy raising teenagers, especially in our cultural climate that sends so many mixed messages (many destructive), offers innumerable distractions, and poses any number of potential perils for young people.

These days, some parents are parenting out of fear and struggling with their children's need for independence. Others think, "My kid's not ready to run his own life. If we let go, he'll blow it." Some on the other end of the spectrum think, "It's not my job to teach her how to be successful; that's the school's job!"

The fact is, whether you fall off a horse on one side or the other doesn't matter; you've still fallen off the horse. It *is* our job as parents to train and release our children successfully into the real world—and to empower them to live confidently and independently, with integrity and impact. It's not as intimidating as it might sound. And it's not rocket science. You can do it, and you can do it well.

Yes, parenting is a challenge. That's because it is a whole-person endeavor. You are needed for so much more than simply providing food, clothes, shelter, and a ride to practice. You are developing a person—mind, body, and spirit. That may not be what you signed up for—but it's the role you are in. You are uniquely equipped to parent *your* children, whether they are yours by birth, adoption, foster care, or step-parenting. Perhaps you are a grandparent stepping into the "parent" role. No matter what your situation, you **DO** have what it takes to set them up for success and let them go with confidence—to give them wings, not strings.

Are you ready to release an eagle to soar?

TAKE FIVE

*There are two lasting bequests we can give our children.
One is roots. The other is wings.*

Hodding Carter, Jr.

By the time children reach the teen years and parents need to start letting go, confidence and trust should be every mother and father's goal. Time and experience should prove that we are raising—and releasing—mature, trustworthy, well-adjusted, honest, and motivated young adults who are ready to tackle the world and make an impact.

Think about where you are right now in your parenting process, as it relates to the inevitable “launch.” How would you answer the following questions?

- » Are we thinking ahead to the transition and how we are going to approach it?
- » Are we setting goals and making decisions for our teens based on *our* interests and aspirations, or based on *theirs*?
- » When we look at the lists of characteristics describing “wings” versus “strings” where do we see ourselves? Do we need to be prepared to make some adjustments to our parenting style? In what areas?
- » What inspires us about the idea of giving our teens “wings” instead of “strings?” What concerns us and why?

