

DAVE & ANN WILSON
WITH JOHN DRIVER

NO PERFECT

Parents



DITCH EXPECTATIONS, EMBRACE REALITY,
AND DISCOVER THE ONE SECRET
THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR PARENTING

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 **ZONDERVAN
BOOKS**

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No Perfect Parents

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CHAPTER 1

MONDAY NIGHT

Football and Parenting 101

There I (Dave) was—exactly where I would spend many Sunday afternoons for the next three decades of my life: on the sidelines of the Silverdome. The stadium was nestled in Pontiac, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit about twenty miles northwest of the Motor City. After I had finished my graduate degree in theology in California, my wife, Ann, and I had just recently moved to the Detroit area, where I took a job as chaplain for the Detroit Lions—it was a dream come true.

We had only been married for six years and were beyond excited to make the move to Detroit so we could begin this new chapter in our young lives together. It was thrilling, to say the least, but I had no idea just how exhilarating it was about to become.

This wasn't a Sunday afternoon game. This was Monday Night Football. The whole world was watching in prime time as we battled one of the best teams in NFL history: the Chicago Bears. This was 1986, so the Bears were coming off

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a momentous season the year before that had ended with a Super Bowl trophy hoisted in their locker room. Some of you may remember the Super Bowl Shuffle—if not, look it up on YouTube and prepare to be amazed, by the fashion as much as anything else. This was the team that featured Jim McMahon, Walter Payton, and William “Refrigerator” Perry, and the head coach Mike Ditka. Needless to say, they were pretty good.

And the Lions? Well, let’s just say that we were *not as good* at that point in time. In fact, someone did the math the other day and told me that after 317 losses in thirty-three seasons, I hold the dubious honor of being the losingest chaplain in NFL history . . . still waiting on my plaque to arrive in the mail. But this was early in my career, so hope still springs eternal.

The Silverdome was packed to overcapacity, with more than 85,000 screaming, face-painted, loyal Lions fans decked out from head to toe in silver and Honolulu blue (it’s a real color). It was a thing of beauty. Nevertheless, we were getting killed. Shocker. But being a hopeful newbie to the organization, I put my new role as a chaplain to good use and began praying for a miracle comeback. Turns out, God was listening to my prayer and was about to use a series of unfortunate events to answer my request in an unbelievable way.

But first, things went from bad to worse—or, as Lions fans would say, the game kept going as usual. Our starting quarterback, Chuck Long, went down with an injury. His backup, Joe Ferguson, took over. In his first play under center, Joe took a shot from the legendary defensive end for the Bears, Richard Dent, who beat our right tackle and sacked him for a huge loss. Joe just lay there on the turf for a while, unable to gather himself. When he finally got back up, it was evident he wasn’t going back into the game.

The thing was, for various reasons—injuries, contracts,

and whatnot—we had only two quarterbacks on the roster at the time. What were we going to do? This was a disaster. I continued to pray that something would happen to turn things around for this team.

“Wilson!”

The voice startled me. It resonated from the screaming mouth of our head coach, Darryl Rogers. I was puzzled. We had several guys with the last name Williams on our team that year, but I couldn’t recall anyone named Wilson. I was looking around with the other players trying to figure out who the heck he was talking to (sorry . . . “whom” the heck).

The next thing I knew, Coach Rogers was in *my* face. “Wilson! What are you waiting for? Go suit up. You’re going in at QB!”

I couldn’t believe it! We were literally that desperate—and I had never been more thrilled that so many other people had suffered gruesome injuries. (Hey, I’m not proud of it.) It wasn’t such a far-fetched idea that I would be an option at QB because only a few years earlier, I had finished my college career as a Hall of Fame quarterback at Ball State. My buddies now call it “Bald State” in honor of the *state* of my now nonexistent hairline. They are real good at jokes.

The point is that I had been preparing for this moment all my life, and finally, after there was literally no one left who could limp onto the field and yell “hut,” a coach was forced to inadvertently reveal my incredible talent to the world.

This was really happening.

The TV time-out was extended due to the rash of injuries to our team, so I rushed to the locker room and suited up. Putting on pads again was just like riding a bike—with a different kind of helmet, of course. Before I knew it, I was fully dressed and in the huddle with the other players. My hands were shaking, but I was ready.

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It was third and long and we needed a miracle to get back into this game. All Coach Rogers had said to me before sending me out onto the field as he shook his head in disbelief was, “Son, I guess . . . just, uh, let ’er rip.”

I knelt down in the huddle and called for “all fades.” In other words, I was going to drop back and throw a bomb to whoever was open. As I walked to the line of scrimmage, the huge crowd suddenly went silent, probably trying to figure out who number 15 was and why he was lining up under center.

I looked over at the stands to see my beautiful wife, Ann, sitting there. She looked stunned, but strangely hopeful. A single tear rolled down her perfect cheek as she mouthed the breathy words, “I love you!” I winked at her slyly, causing her to blush. Before my eyes had left hers and rotated back to the linebackers frothing at the mouth in front of me, I was already instinctively barking out the signals. A slight breeze began blowing across the field, causing the mullet hanging out of the back of my helmet to blow gently, yet majestically, in the wind.

Hut!

I took the snap and dropped back into the pocket. As expected, Dent immediately beat his guy again and was instantly barreling down on me. I had anticipated this, so I simply gave him a little juke and eluded his violent pursuit, somehow leaving him face-planted in the turf. *Still got it!* I thought to myself. But there was no time for celebration.

I had a game to win.

I looked downfield to see number 85 streaking behind the coverage. It was Jeff Chadwick. I calmly planted my front leg and launched the ball in his direction. To my surprise, it was the most beautiful post pass I had ever seen leave my hands—a perfect spiral sailing deep, deep down the left sideline. It must

have traveled seventy-five yards in the air—I kid you not. It was as if the sands of time had slowed to a trickle, so much so that I could see flashing lights from the sideline photographers' cameras flickering on the immaculately rotating ball as it headed directly toward Jeff's outstretched arms.

The crowd, all 85,000 plus, began instinctively rising to their feet with a collective inhale as they anticipated what would be a historic moment. The comeback of the ages. The redemption of a franchise. The birth of a legend. The ball was mere inches from Jeff's hands as he was mere inches from the goal line. It was everything I could have ever . . .

"My water just broke!"

Wait, what?

INTERRUPTIONS AND REINTRODUCTIONS

Ann here—the mother of Dave's three children and the one who actually yelled, "My water just broke" in the middle of his obviously fantastical dream. Don't get me wrong, he was an amazing quarterback in college (with a real mullet), and I would have loved nothing more than for him to get called off the bench (basically as a spectator) into a professional football game to save the day, but guys, it didn't happen.

And yes, I do love him, but there was no single tear from the sidelines or breathy whatever-it-was he said; at that moment in our lives, we didn't have time for that.

You see, we were about to become parents.

Since then, there have been plenty of real, non-dream tears though. And laughs. And cuts and bruises. And a thousand other unexpected interruptions to our dreams and plans that we eventually realized weren't really interruptions at

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all; they were our real life. In fact, no series of unexpected, unpredictable, constantly interrupted experiences defines your real life—and your dreams—more than those of being a parent.

If you read our first book, *Vertical Marriage*, you know that Dave and I are often inclined to just chime in on each other's stories out of the blue, especially when *someone* is getting a little out of control with his storytelling. (Sorry, Dave . . . you know I love you, but such is life.) In terms of this book, sometimes you will hear from Dave, and sometimes you will hear from me. And sometimes you will hear from both of us at the same time.

Like right now, actually.

If, for some reason, you haven't read our first book on marriage, it may be helpful to visit at least the first few chapters to learn more about who we are and how we got here. But then again, maybe you don't have time for that right now—the kids are screaming at you from the other room as we speak. We get it, so at least let us tell you that our life together has been a wild ride full of fun, failures, and grace. We are far from perfect, and far from perfect parents, so if you share these sentiments as a parent yourself, you've come to the right place.

Writing about the topic of parenting is a daunting task, though not as daunting as the act of parenting itself. But neither is it as rewarding. Most books you read come from experts who seem to have mastered their fields of study. Sorry, but you're not going to get that from us. We only know one way to write or speak on this parenting topic—and that's with complete honesty. You will hear the highs and lows of our parenting journey, like the time one of us (who shall remain nameless for now) kicked a hole in a wall in a moment of parenting frustration. Hopefully our raw honesty will help you on your journey as

well. Would you really want to hear from anyone who thinks he or she is a perfect parent? That's a perfect recipe for destruction . . . just ask our wall.

The bottom line is, we can't give you methods to guarantee you won't make mistakes as a parent or that your kids will turn out to be fun-loving, millionaire, doctoral-educated, philanthropist pastors who build homes, cure cancer, engineer the vaccine for COVID-19, and write poetry on the side. You should beware of such goals anyway (and also work on your run-on sentences). The truth is, if *you* don't make mistakes, how will *your kids* ever learn what to do when *they* make mistakes? They are watching both the good and the bad in your lives—and they need to see both, because real life has both. They don't need perfect role models; they need real ones. They need *you*, complete with all of your flaws, your personality faux pas, your inability to correctly spell *faux pas* without looking it up, and your quirkiness. *You* are the one God appointed to this job with *these* kids.

Congratulations!

You may be feeling right now what we've felt so many times over the years: that you are not enough for this task. We get it. And the truth is, you really are not enough for this undertaking—well, not by yourself anyway. No amount of study, contemplation, chart making, disciplining, rewarding, listening to podcasts, attending small groups, listening to sermons, or even reading books (including this one) is ever going to make you fully ready. The job is too big because it involves something bigger than any of us can create or manage—namely, *humans*.

Feeling confident yet? Hang on; we'll get there.

The truth is, you really *are enough* for the job, just not because you *have enough* knowledge, wisdom, or insight to do

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it. You absolutely do not have enough of these. But there are other reasons you are enough, which we'll get to in the coming pages. When you understand these reasons, you will be able to face the monumental task of parenting with a humble confidence to love and lead your children with an energy that is higher and longer lasting than what you get from that third cup of coffee after your kid with the flu has kept you up all night.

We believe there is a secret to parenting that most parents have never considered, and it is found in two key questions: “*What* are we trying to raise?” and “*Who* are we raising?” When those two questions are answered, we can begin to develop a plan of *how* we're going to navigate these years of parenting, regardless of *where* the varying circumstances lead.

What are we trying to raise—that is, what kind of adults do we hope our children will become? The target or bull's-eye we are shooting for is critical here, yet most parents have never really thought about this question, beyond a few standard statements we'll address.

Furthermore, it is just as important to understand who God has distinctively created your son or daughter to be. Each of your children is uniquely and beautifully designed by God with an exceptional, special identity. As parents, we can help our kids aim at the correct target by celebrating who God has made them to be while also offering them a vision for the way God wants to use them to impact the world—in big and small ways—for his good purposes.

God has something more for you as a parent—something that will help you reach past merely worrying or hoping everything will turn out okay or endlessly striving to control every detail of your children's lives. Take it from us and our mistakes—those tactics don't work. You won't—and can't—raise perfect

kids, but you can embrace a perfectly healthy parenting vision of (1) knowing what your goal is in raising your kids and (2) knowing who your kids are as individuals.

Though we have other ways to say it that we'll share, this central concept remains our overall goal as parents—the target we keep trying to hit and have often missed. No, really—we know we're far from perfect parents.

In fact, just to demonstrate that we don't think we have it all together, we're inviting our three sons—CJ, Austin, and Cody—to the party. They're grown now, some with children of their own. We could wax eloquent about this and that, but let's be honest, it could very well turn out to be all just a bunch of fluff. No one has a perfect parenting story behind the closed doors of their family experience.

So we want to open the door to our home and invite you in—well, into the time-warped version of our home. We are going to invite our sons to add a few of their thoughts at the end of certain chapters and sections in this book. Some of them have a lot to say; some not so much—probably just like your kids. Regardless, who is more qualified to point out what worked and didn't work in our home than the people who were the focus of our parenting pursuits? Though their thoughts will be brief, we've not asked them to sugarcoat anything. There is no cover-up here. And at the time of this writing, we have no idea what they'll say; we've only asked them to be honest.

Honesty is what we are asking of them and of ourselves. It's what we are asking of you as well. Honesty is necessary to move from dreams flailing about in the wind of worries, hopes, and good intentions to dreams that can come true because they are grounded in a higher reality.

Speaking of dreams, back to Dave.

WAKING UP TO LEGACY

“Wake up, Dave! I said that my water just broke!” Ann was shaking me back to reality at that point. I quickly stirred to life. I remember thinking, *Water doesn't break. It pours. It spills. It flows. But it doesn't break.* And then it hit me: *we are going to have a baby . . . today!*

I was never going to know if Jeff Chadwick reeled in my perfect pass in the end zone. I did know, however, that life was about to change for the Wilsons forever. It was a frigid January morning in Michigan, but I was hot with nervous energy. We rushed to the hospital and got Ann checked into a room to get ready for the birthing process.

There were parts to getting married that were simply enchanting. The romance. The mystery. The beauty of it all. Having a baby? Not so much. It's not anyone's finest moment, to say the least. In fact, as we walked up to her room, my eyes were drawn to Ann's shoes because I kept seeing something in my peripheral vision being dragged behind her through the hospital hallway. Yeah, the item in question was her panties stuck to her heel.

Ah, an enchanted experience.

The thing about a baby being born in the modern world, especially when he or she is your first, is that it's often a process of “hurry up and wait.” You spring from the bed like a madman, drive like a maniac to the hospital, rush to the room as if you're fleeing a burning building—and then you sit down and wait for fourteen or forty hours or so. Once we had Ann in her bed and hooked up to the baby monitoring machines, it became apparent that this was going to take a while.

Her nurse was confident that her labor was going to continue to be very slow. No problem. I was in this for the long

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haul. However, in the mad dash of getting here, I had failed to address the fact that nature was calling for me. I slipped out of the room and down the hallway to the place where many men find solace and solitude—the john. The locked bathroom even afforded me the chance to catch my breath, regain my bearings, and catch up on a little reading while I could. I left the hospital room with Ann’s blessing, promising to return in just a matter of minutes.

That was my intention, but sometimes you find yourself engrossed in a really good news article and you lose track of time. Much like the scream that woke me from my football dream, a new set of screams from down the hall jarred me from my bathroom bliss . . . and these also sounded like my wife.

“Dave Wilson! Get back here *now!*”

I clumsily gathered myself and came sprinting down the hallway, entering the room just as Ann was heading into the final moments of delivery . . . thanks a lot, Nurse This-Is-Gonna-Take-a-While! Ann was none too happy with me, but soon my bathroom-based absenteeism would all fade into a distant memory. (Glad I didn’t bring it back up.)

There I was. It was time. Watching (and yes, helping where I could) our first of three sons being born into the world that day was one of the most incredible moments of my life . . . even better than a perfect end zone spiral. I was now awake in more ways than one. As I held CJ in my arms, everything changed in an instant. That little five-pound, fourteen-ounce precious gift from God was my chance to leave a legacy that could impact the world in a positive way.

I had no idea they weren’t going to let him stay in my arms for long because he was about to be rushed to the neonatal ICU, but from that moment forward, leaving a legacy became my new dream.

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LEGACY

Legacy is one of those words that can get lost in all the feelings and impressions it produces. Much like courage, love, or hope, legacy has become the stuff of inspirational quotes and cheesy romantic comedies. But the moment I became a parent, it suddenly became very real and daunting to me. I began to explore aspects of legacy I had never thought of before—things we aim to unpack in this book.

A few decades ago (yes, I've been speaking on these topics for that long), I was talking with an elderly woman about legacy. Janiece was in her seventies and began reminiscing aloud about her life. I found out that in her late teens, she had married her husband, Ralph, who was just starting an exciting career as an airline pilot. They were young and in love, and they had the world by the tail.

It didn't take very long for them to begin having children—quite a few actually. She said they had “four jacks and a queen”—that is, four sons and a daughter. Ralph was based out of the Newark airport and also built houses on the side in the upscale parts of New Jersey. Janiece's story was an ideal picture of the life most of us want. They had the money, the big home in a gated community, the successful career, and beautiful children. It was the all-American dream.

Until it wasn't.

After nearly twenty-five years of marriage, Janiece began to suspect that her husband, now a captain with Eastern Air Lines, was having an affair when he went away on his many trips. She wasn't sure how to confirm her suspicions, so she simply made a phone call to one of the hotels where Ralph often stayed during layovers. When the hotel receptionist answered the phone, Janiece asked, “Has Captain Ralph checked in yet?”

He was a regular, so the receptionist knew who he was—and since this was long before the days of being vigilant about privacy, the receptionist unknowingly replied, “Oh, yes, he is heading to his room right now with his wife.”

Janiece’s heart broke into pieces inside her. When Ralph came home from that trip, she confronted him. She discovered that this affair was only one of several. Every dream she had ever known suddenly became a nightmare. As hard as they tried, they just could not save their marriage. They were divorced in 1963, and Janiece became a single mom. Her three older kids were already in college, so she moved with her two youngest sons—a seven-year-old and five-year-old—to be near her parents in another state.

Then disaster struck in ways she never imagined possible. Mere weeks after the move, she was given the news that her youngest son had leukemia. It was advanced. Within six weeks, the five-year-old was gone. As Janiece shared her story, her eyes welled up with tears. So did mine. In fact, I began to sob.

You see, Janiece is my mom, and Captain Ralph is my dad.¹

1. My dad’s full name was Ralph Dave Wilson. We all knew him as Dave, but his work associates called him Captain Ralph.