

## *Introduction*

### *What This Handbook Is All About*

*“I sure wish I had known all this twenty-five years ago!”* That’s what I’ve sometimes been told after my conferences on successful parent-leadership, lectures I have given over the past several years to groups of parents throughout the English-speaking world. The words, often said in humor but sometimes with wistful regret, came from older parents, mothers and fathers whose children had already grown and left home.

To come right to the point here: I have written this handbook, the fruit of my thirty years’ experience with families, so that you, a young parent, won’t have to express this regret in the future. I’ve written it so that you will form a much clearer idea of how other parents, ordinary men and women just like you, have lived as great leaders in family life and have succeeded with their sacred mission: to raise their children right. I want to give you a “job description,” so to speak, on how to succeed as a leader to your children.

Let me be clear here. When I say “succeed,” I don’t just mean parents’ methods of discipline, or how they keep kids under control, or how they handle hassles in family life. These are short-term achievements but only part of real parental leadership.

Parents really win success with their children only in the long term. *Parents succeed with their children when the kids grow up to become competent, responsible, considerate, and generous men and women who are committed to live by principles of integrity—adults who bring*

## Compass

*honor to their parents all their lives through their conduct, conscience, and character.* Raising children to become adults like this is what parenthood is all about.

Raising children right is difficult these days. It is a real challenge to know what you're doing and where you're going. And as the great Yogi Berra reportedly once said, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up someplace else."

As I hope you'll better appreciate from this book, raising a healthy family is a great sporting adventure. When parents bring children into the world, they set out on the greatest, most satisfying adventure of all—the challenge of leading their children, little by little, day by day, to become great men and women.

To do this right, parents need a compass, some fixed frame of reference to help them cope with uncertainty, set their bearings from time to time, and lead their family confidently. Without this compass to fall back on, parents can easily lose their way in the hectic tangles of normal family life.

So, what is this compass, this set of reference points, that I've seen great parents rely on—and that forms the lessons of this handbook? The compass of great parents is several things:

- Their sense of sacred mission: the certainty that God has called them to lead their children to responsible adulthood, to lead them to have a great life, and to lead them home to Him.
- The compelling and hopeful vision they have of their children's lives twenty years from now, what kind of responsible, competent, upright men and women they should grow to be.
- Their commitment to build character and conscience in their children that will last them all their lives.
- Their reliance on three sources of strength: God's help, their own never-failing love for their children, and the experienced wisdom of other parents who've succeeded.
- Their steely determination, bolstered each day by their

## *Introduction*

ideals and prayers, never to give up until their children have grown to become excellent men and women.

This book explains details of this compass that great parents live by and succeed with. But that's not all. It sketches out a kind of map for you, too. It shows you the terrain where others have ventured, the day-to-day experiences of other parents who've succeeded with the challenges of family life. Almost everything in these pages comes from parents' experience, much of it hard won.

Let me back up a bit and explain how I came to write this book.

For twenty-one years, I worked to help establish two independent secondary schools, one in Washington, D.C., and the other in Chicago—The Heights School and Northridge Preparatory School, respectively. I was director of Northridge for twelve years. By any measure, I'm pleased and proud to say, both of these schools have been hugely successful. That is, they've turned out excellent young adults who bring honor to their families.

During that time, I made it my business to know hundreds of families intimately. I studied their family lives up close. I watched children grow into maturity, very often successfully but sometimes not. Over many years I talked with hundreds of fathers and mothers, visited their homes, asked questions, learned a lot.

All this I did for one reason: I wanted to learn how parents succeed or fail with their children.

I watched many parents succeed as leaders, while others failed, and their children eventually left our schools. Some parents saw their children mature into excellent men and women, often before they left high school. Others, though, especially as their kids struggled through adolescence and

young adulthood, met with disappointment, regret, and even tragedy. Their children suffered from lack of self-confidence and self-control, substance abuse, protracted immaturity, irresponsible and self-destructive behavior, aimlessness in life, troubles with careers or marriages or the law.

Through my countless conversations with fathers and mothers, I tried to account for the differences. I searched for patterns of family life among those people who eventually triumphed with their children. What did these successful fathers and mothers have in common? What was their compass, that set of guiding principles to which they kept referring? What did they manage to do right? Most importantly, what could other parents learn from their experience?

Over the years I learned a lot. As headmaster I worked to pass on this experience to other parents, and many of them were grateful for this help and encouragement. They formed a clearer picture of their job, put the practical lessons to work in family life, and thus found greater confidence in leading their children to form strong conscience and character.

And that's the reason for this book. Its purpose is to help you learn from the successful experience of other conscientious parents, men and women who have succeeded with their children.

It's important for you to understand something at the outset: What I lay out for you in these chapters is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. That is, I don't claim to have all the answers about family life, and I don't know anyone who does. What I'm doing here is describing the kind of thinking and action—the compass of parenthood—that successful parents have lived by and taught me.

Since you are busy (to say the least), I have made this book short and to the point. As much as possible, I've tried to make it thought-provoking. Clear thought is necessary for any lead-

## Introduction

ership, and especially in family life. Foresight, planning, fixing priorities, clarifying your principles: all these actions are crucial for your confident parental leadership. In other words, knowing where you're going helps you know what you are doing, and this builds the courage you need to stick with your mission, no matter what. A compass like this gives you greater confidence, and confidence is one of the secrets of successful parenthood.

I would urge you—husband and wife—to read this book together slowly and thoughtfully. After each chapter, you will find questions and issues to stimulate your thought. Pick and choose among them; make up questions of your own. Whatever you do, invest the time (and it is an investment, with a big payback) to reflect, talk things over, prod yourselves steadily toward the ideal of parental partners: *unified dual leadership*. Remember that each of your children has only one mind and one conscience, and therefore needs one clear set of directions, and only one, coming from both of you together.

A couple of final points.

As you read this book, you'll notice that some key ideas are repeated. This is unavoidable. Why? Because assessing a complex issue such as family life is like studying a diamond: you turn the jewel around and see the whole through its different facets. Similarly, a family life's dimensions can be scrutinized from different points of view. So please be patient. When you've read *Compass* all the way through, you should see everything fall into place.

Also, a caveat: Please be aware that human nature, endowed as it is with God-given free will, is mysterious and often surprising. We see this in history and in many families today. For instance, Beethoven and Isaac Newton came from dysfunctional families; George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton grew up in single-parent

homes. Today, most children from consumerist homes are spoiled, but some are not. Some parents were brought up badly and then spoil their own children in turn; others, though, manage to turn their lives around and then raise their children right.

The upshot is this: for nearly any generalization we make about people, we can cite exceptions. So when this book generalizes about people or family dynamics, please realize that we're dealing here with trends and probabilities, not certainties, and certainly not dogmas or infallible recipes. There are no such formulas or recipes. Human life is ultimately mysterious.

Finally, though this book was written mostly for a husband and wife to read and discuss together, I've also designed it to be used by parent discussion groups. If you're interested in forming such a Compass Group to share experiences and insights with friends—and I urge you to do so—please read the Appendix. It explains people's experiences with running groups of this sort and why many parents today have found this so hugely helpful and encouraging. Getting together to learn with friends—for the long-term welfare of all your children—may be one of the smartest things you've ever done. This is what many parents have told me.

If you wish to receive supplementary information and updated advice on what appears in *Compass*, especially in organizing a Compass Group among your friends, please consult my Website: [www.parentleadership.com](http://www.parentleadership.com).

I earnestly wish you every success with your children. I share your hope that they will grow up to be great men and women, adults who will bring you joy and pride in the years to come, your life's reward for all your loving efforts. With the help of the compass described here, may your life together as a loving family be a grand, beautiful adventure.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Big Picture: Forming Character*

Let's get right to the point here and look at questions that set the points of our compass: What constitutes the vocation of parenthood? What is the mission parents have to carry out with their children? What is a parent for? What is family life really all about?

We should clear up some misunderstandings: The job of parents is not merely to feed, clothe, and shelter their children and provide for their technical education. Nor is it just to keep the kids busily amused and therefore (we hope) out of trouble. Nor is it even to prepare children for later success in highly paid careers. Certainly these tasks need to be done, but they're not enough. Not nearly enough.

Why do we say this? Because, as we see all around us today, plenty of children are supported in these basic ways. They are nourished, clothed, sheltered, amused, and technically well educated. Yet later, in adolescence and in young adult life, they crash headlong into serious personal problems and meet with devastating disasters, even tragedies such as addiction and moral collapse and suicide, which break their parents' hearts.

When all is said and done, the real job of parents is to protect their children from harm, not just now but in the years ahead—in their personal lives, their marriages, their careers, their souls. The big job is to strengthen the children while they're small so they can later protect themselves and their loved ones.

To look at it another way, parents must teach their children to *see the invisible*. Conscientious and savvy parents lead