

# Bags



*Helping Your Kids  
Lighten the Load*

CHRIS SASSER

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*BAGS: Helping Your Kids Lighten the Load*

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1— <i>Just Don't Pack!</i> .....	7
Chapter 2— <i>The Relational Bag</i> .....	19
Chapter 3— <i>The Performance Bag</i> .....	37
Chapter 4— <i>The Identity Bag</i> .....	57
Chapter 5— <i>The Comparison Bag</i> .....	75
Chapter 6— <i>The Authority Bag</i> .....	93
Chapter 7— <i>The Rejection Bag</i> .....	111
Chapter 8— <i>The Guilt and Shame Bag</i> .....	129
Chapter 9— <i>The Disappointment Bag</i> .....	145
Chapter 10— <i>Lightening the Load</i> .....	163



# Introduction

*“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1b).*

Not to tell you something you don't already know, but this parenting thing is hard. As I've said many times (and heard other people say), these little bundles of joy that God gives us do not come with instruction manuals, and they do not stay little for long. Once they become a part of our family, everything changes. We spend the next 20-30 years (maybe longer) just trying to navigate everything from sippy cups to car insurance. It's exhausting. But it's also amazing! God has entrusted us with the life and well-being of another human, or two, or three, or more (we're praying for you folks!). We get to be on a journey of life and faith that will truly have an impact on generations to come.

As we step into this conversation together, there are a few things you need to know about me:

I am: A child. Obviously, I have parents and I have been on the other side of the parenting equation for all my life. My dad passed away a few years ago, but my mom is still going strong and she is incredible. I'm over 50, and she still likes to parent. I am sure some of you can relate.

I am: A husband and a parent. I have been married to my wife Karin since 2002, and we have two amazing kids, CJ and Kylie. We've been through the infant, toddler, and elementary school phases, and we are now knee-deep in the teenage years. I am trying to figure it all out for myself and my family.

I am: A pastor. I have been in full-time ministry for almost 30 years in youth and children's ministry, and I have been serving as a family ministry pastor for almost 15 years with a growing focus on helping parents. I want everyone in my family to love and follow Jesus, and I want everyone in your family to love and follow Jesus too. I desperately want redemption for kids, parents, and families.

Most of my passion for this project flows from the last two, parent and pastor.

I am *not*: An expert. A ministry friend of mine once told me that anyone who claims to be a parenting expert is probably not a parent. Instead of listening to them, you should turn and run.

I am *not*: A finished product. I don't have it all figured out. This parenting thing is a process, and I'm learning, changing, missing the mark, and growing every day.

I am *not*: Giving up! I will not back down from this quest to be a better parent and help others do the same. It's just too important!

### ***What Does Successful Parenting Look Like?***

If you were to sit down with a group of parents and ask them, "What does success look like in parenting?" you would get different answers. Most people want their kids to experience worldly success and live the "American dream" whatever that is. We can all so easily become focused on that. We fall into the trap of believing our job is to help our kids get good grades, get into the right college, get a good

job, become good citizens, marry the right person, have the right friends, make good money, and the list goes on. We want them to be “successful” in the world’s eyes. All of that is good stuff (at least most of it) and all things I want for my kids. But what is the goal in Christian parenting? What are we aiming for in raising our kids?

As I’ve worked my way through this project, I’ve come up with a bit of a different target. You see, I know a lot of adults who have achieved worldly success, who have chased the American dream, and who are still so very empty. They have worked hard for years and years to provide for themselves and their family, but they have missed so much along the way. They have chased after things of this world and have sought to build their own kingdom with a false sense of stability. As I think about my kids and what I want for them and their future, I’ve landed on a few things.

### ***I want my kids to be healthy.***

The obvious first thought is for them to be physically healthy, but I only have a certain amount of control over that one. Aside from that, what I really want is for them to be mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually healthy. I want them to have a strong mind where they have the confidence to think on their own. I want them to be able to stand up in the face of difficulty and not be thrown by the wind and the waves of life. I want my children to be able to look people in the eye and have a real, face-to-face conversation that can lead them to deeper relationships. I want them to have a real understanding that there is a God in Heaven Who is the author and perfecter of all things. I want them to know this same God is pursuing them, and they can pursue Him back.



I once had a wise mentor tell me that one of the goals in parenting is to have a *real* relationship with your kids when they are in their 20s. That's what I want! After having talked to countless young adults who don't have a real relationship with their parents and feeling their pain, I agree with my friend. It's the idea of "keeping the end in mind" as we travel along our family journey. I can't influence someone with whom I don't have a relationship, and my kids will need my influence in their young adult (and older adult) years.

### ***I want my kids to know and love Jesus!***

We've been praying this for them since they were born. So much of what we try to do in our parenting points to this. We don't have a lot of Bible studies and family devotions in our house, but we really do try to have a Deuteronomy 6 mentality with our kids.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

So again, you *have* to determine, what is the goal in raising your kids?

*The premise of this book is that our kids are packing and carrying with them some enormous emotional baggage they have no idea how*

*to deal with.* This baggage weighs them down and often keeps them from living lives that are mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually healthy. As they move into their young adult years, their baggage frequently keeps them from being able to live life under the grace and freedom God provides. As they try to take steps forward in their faith, their bags weigh them down and hold them back in so many ways. These bags come from all areas of life and can be packed by a wide range of people.

Friends pack bags. Teachers pack bags. Coaches pack bags. Pastors and youth leaders pack bags. And yes, parents pack bags too. I am learning, in both my own experience and in what I know about others, that we as parents are often not aware of the bags our kids are packing. We may know that something is going on and they are struggling, but we have no idea the depth of pain our kids' emotional bags cause and the long-lasting effects they can have. In some ways, this is a book about awareness and preventative maintenance.

Although I believe we must fight against our kids packing these emotional bags, I know their bags are not the total sum of who they will become. Getting this stuff right does not necessarily equal perfect kids—nothing does. There is so much more to growing up, and this book could never come close to covering it all. This concept is yet another tool we can use as parents to help our kids grow along the way.

Finally, I want you to know this book is rooted in my faith in God through Jesus. In every chapter, you will read about biblical principles that play into our emotional health. I believe teaching our kids to follow Jesus is critical and plays a huge role in their overall development. You'll also read about practical, simple ideas we as parents often forget. As I have been working on this project over the past several years, it has literally changed the way I parent. I see

things I didn't see before because I am looking at my kids and their development through a new lens. I truly hope you can see what is happening with your kids, and I pray this book will lead you to help them lighten the load.

As you work through each chapter and reflect on the questions provided, I suggest you record your thoughts and answers in a journal. (Get more resources and download a free guide at [www.thebagsbook.com](http://www.thebagsbook.com).) How we answer these questions and the changes we make in our parenting can have a lasting impact on our kids. I hope you will revisit these concepts every few years as your kids move into different phases of their lives. Thinking through and recording our thoughts are worth the time and effort!

Take a few minutes to think about what “success” looks like for you as a parent. Write down some specific things you want to aim for as you raise your kids. What are the top five values and principles you want your kids to have embraced by the time they move out of your home?



## Chapter One

# Just Don't Pack!

*“We really need our parents to take the time to learn and understand the source of our baggage.”—young adult*

As we wrapped up dinner and headed to the living room, the mood was light. We had just spent an hour or so laughing, joking, and enjoying the company of this young couple. We had talked about jobs and sports and life and friends. Although my wife and I often looked forward to these sessions, I knew that after dinner the mood would change, and things might get a little uncomfortable. We were about to dive into a deep conversation about real life and serious issues. We needed to get to the bottom of some things.

On this particular night, the young man was someone whom I had known for quite a while. His family had been involved in our church for years in many different ways. He had a number of siblings, and I knew them all incredibly well. As their youth pastor, I had walked with them through years of family drama. As our session that evening moved along, he proceeded to back up the dump truck and unload it on us. Mom and dad had recently divorced, and most of the kids were struggling in different ways. I knew about the years of tension and strife, but I honestly had no idea of the depth of pain and anger this young man carried. For over a decade they had seemed like a typical,

## Bags

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healthy, American, Christian family. But under the surface, so much more was going on. He proceeded to share about his constant power struggle with his dad, his disappointment and anger with his mom, and his overall disconnect with his siblings. As this young man was embarking on the next phase of his life with his future spouse, he was carrying a bag of burdens that was weighing heavily on his soul.

Over the past fifteen years or so, my wife and I have spent many nights like this one with young couples who are on their way to marriage. We have a pre-marital counseling process where we take them through a series of conversations to help them uncover the major issues they may face in their lives together. We start with just getting to know them better and hearing their stories. It's amazing what they will share with us in just the first session. We really start to dig deep in session two. We ask them questions about their childhood and their teen years. We hear stories about their families and their parents. We learn about their hobbies and interests, their dreams and aspirations. Always, and I mean always, we hear about their bags.

You know about bags. Bags are those big bulky things that we all carry with us as we travel...through life. I'm not talking about bags full of candy or a bag full of clothes packed for an exciting family vacation. I'm talking about emotional bags that are often big, heavy, and hard to unpack. These bags that start to fill up early in life can have profound impacts on the way we see the world and how we live. The bags are painful and often stay in storage for years and years. For some, they last for a lifetime.

We all pack bags throughout our lives. It seems to be inevitable. We'll go through situations and circumstances that create memories and shape who we are. People will say things to us, do things to us, and treat us in a certain way. Oftentimes bags get packed through an

ongoing deposit of one item after another with a decreasing resistance to the packing process.

A coach tells a player that he or she is not good enough to start on the team, and this gets reinforced day after day as the kid goes to practice after practice but doesn't get to play—bag packed.

A teacher criticizes a student because he or she isn't good in that particular subject and might not “have what it takes” to get into college—bag packed.

A friend plans a sleepover with most of the girls on the soccer team, but one girl gets left out and watches the party unfold on social media—bag packed.

A parent creates situations at home where one sibling is subtly compared to another in behavior, school, or sports—bag packed.

A teen gets caught up in the moment with a boyfriend or girlfriend and makes some sexual choices he or she soon regrets—bag packed.

You know these bags. You packed some of them as you moved along your journey of life and, if you look closely, your kids are packing them now. As we hear from these young adults in our counseling sessions, I've often wondered what their parents would say. My wife and I have joked about what our kids will be saying to someone else when they are in some sort of counseling when they are in their 20s. But at some point in my journey as a parent, it dawned on me: Do my kids have to pack these bags?

That question is what has driven me to step into this project. As I have done research and talked to kids, teens, and young adults about the struggles of life, I am more convinced than ever that our kids need help. Many prominent voices have begun to sound the alarm about a “mental health crisis” that has emerged in our society, and our kids and teens are right in the middle of it. I wonder if, for years,

## Bags

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we as parents and leaders simply tried to push our kids through the difficulties of life, not taking the time to truly understand what was happening to them. I have come to believe that we don't need to push them through it, we need to help them through it. We need to help them, as much as we can, steer away from accumulating baggage that will weigh them down and inhibit their ability to step into their true identity in Christ and live the life God has for them. So, let's dive a little deeper into my question: Do my kids have to pack these bags?

While I can take ownership of a lot of things when it comes to the way I parent my kids, I know I can't completely control what happens to them in life. I can't control what they see, what they hear, or how they are treated by others in the world. I can't always control what bags get packed and how big these bags are. I can, however, decide to actively work against my kids packing these bags that could weigh them down for a lifetime. What if there are things I can do as a parent that will help stop these crippling bags before they get packed and possibly help my kids pack something else? We all know that it's often much harder to undo something than it is to never let it take root at all, especially when it comes to emotional issues.

As I searched for information on this topic, I found articles and books on how to deal with the emotional baggage of our past. When it comes to emotional baggage, I found techniques for unloading, dealing with, getting rid of, unpacking, and dumping your bags. All these ideas presuppose something about these emotional bags: that they have to be packed in the first place. As I started digging into this project, I saw a picture and quote that said, "Emotional Baggage—Don't worry, everyone has it."

Okay, so we are all going to accumulate some sort of baggage as we grow up. I get that. As a die-hard optimist (who was once called

“stupidly optimistic” by a good friend), I have to ask: does this have to be the case for our kids? Does this have to be the reality for our families? I understand we can't totally prevent some bags from being packed, but does that mean we shouldn't try? Instead of giving in to the idea we are all going to pack some heavy bags that will weigh us down, can we possibly do some things to steer our kids away from the negative baggage that is so prevalent and help them become emotionally and spiritually healthier as they grow up? Have we as a culture decided this is a war we cannot win, so we just do not want to fight? If we decide we do want to fight, do we know where to start and how to fight effectively?

I want to set up my kids for success in the future! I want them to embrace their identities in Christ, and I want to have solid relationships with them when they are adults. Over my years of life and ministry, I have learned one thing about our emotional baggage: as people grow older, the impact of our baggage gets greater and greater. I have seen this over and over again: Kids and teens who pack bags become adults who don't know how to deal with the pain of these bags. Because of this, they struggle relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. Frequently bags get packed so full they eventually burst—and that's never pretty.

Let me explain it this way. Our pastor, Mike Ashcraft, came up with a great concept we have used at our church that can help us understand the importance of this idea.

*En*

*F*

*Ex*

En = Encounter

F = Formation

Ex = Expression

We all *encounter* things in our lives through our everyday experiences.

Our encounters play a huge role in *forming* who we are and will be in the future.



## Bags

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How we are formed will play out in how we live our lives,  
in our *expression*.

From the time we are born, we begin to set patterns in what we think, what we say, what we do, how we operate, and ultimately, who we are. This is also true for our kids. So, if what our kids encounter forms who they are and how they react, wouldn't it stand to reason that we might want to pay more attention to what is happening to them?

Dream with me for a minute. What if, as a parent, I knew the most common bags that get packed over the years a child grows up, let's say from age 5 to 25? What if I not only knew the most common negative bags kids pack during these years, but what if I could *actively* work against my kids packing those bags?

What if I could be *intentional* in my parenting to help my kids *not* pack these bags? What if I could help them navigate circumstances in their lives in such a way that it minimizes the amount of negative baggage they pack? What difference would that make in my kids' lives when they become young adults? Would it change how they think? Would it change how they trust? Would it shape what they believe, who they marry, and how they one day operate as parents? Would it change the type of people they become?

If they could go into their young adult years (and then into their adult lives) *without* a ton of heavy baggage, would they be healthier emotionally, relationally, and spiritually? Would the success I am looking for as a parent be more likely? Would my kids be better off?

I think they would, and that's what I want for my kids! Sure, I want them to have good grades, go to a good college, get a good job,

find the right spouse, and have all of the success in the world. But I *really* want them to be healthy deep down inside! I want them to have peace and stability. I don't want them to have to deal with all the pain and stress it takes to carry around deep, emotional baggage, partially because I think oftentimes the enemy uses that baggage to pull us away from the abundant life we can have in Jesus. Ultimately, I want my kids to know and love God, to understand their identities in Christ, and to live from that place of freedom, not being weighed down by unnecessary baggage.

Can God's grace and mercy overcome the bags we carry and redeem them in our lives? Absolutely! Does God have a purpose for struggles, trials, and even suffering in our lives? Absolutely! But what if our kids didn't have to go through years of unnecessary pain, struggle, and confusion because of the emotional baggage they pack as they travel through childhood and adolescence? What if we, as their parents, could learn to help our kids navigate the struggles they are bound to face in a healthy way that could prevent them from packing bags that have long-term consequences? What if we could help them turn their negative encounters into tools that can be used to form them positively and lead them to the lives they long to live?

Over the last few years, as I've been looking at life through this lens, I've talked to a lot of people about their bags. I've reflected on almost 30 years of working with kids, teens, and families. I've done focus groups with college students and young adults. I've talked to people in their twenties to people in their seventies. I've taken numerous notes and I've learned a ton. In one of my focus groups, a young adult made a great observation, "Not packing the bags has to start with knowing what they are." Bingo!

## Bags

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Through this process, I've identified eight common bags kids pack:

- The Relational Bag—With parents, siblings, and peers
- The Performance Bag—In school and sports and with friends
- The Identity Bag—Struggle to understand identity, belonging, and purpose
- The Comparison Bag—Starts with siblings and moves to peers and the world
- The Authority Bag—Wrestling with who is in charge of the decisions in my life
- The Rejection Bag—From peers, teams, groups, and family
- The Guilt and Shame Bag—About what I have done and what has been done to me
- The Disappointment Bag—Dealing with disappointment and learning through failure

Each of these bags can lead to varying levels of anxiety and depression.

*This book is an encouragement to parents to take the time and effort to be aware of what's happening to your kids and be their guardians in more than just the traditional sense.* Because of my role as a pastor, I'm around a lot of teenagers, college students, young adults, and parents. I see the effects of this baggage almost every day. I beg you to do whatever you can to help your kids guard their hearts and their minds as they grow and mature and help them steer clear of this emotional baggage that can have real, long-term effects.

*This is a call to parents to take the time and effort to point our kids in the right direction and lead them to full and abundant lives.* This will require you to be more aware of what you say and how you treat these precious gifts God has given you. You will have to pay close

attention to what is going on in their lives outside the home, and you will have to work hard to redirect many of their thoughts and actions. It will take sacrifice, discernment, strength, and resolve as you seek to deposit in your children the life-giving values that will lead them down a path of true life.

*These ideas are rooted in my faith in God through Jesus.* In every chapter, you will read about biblical principles that play into our emotional health. Teaching your kids to follow Jesus is critical and plays a huge role in their overall development.

*This book is about awareness and preventive maintenance.* If you know about the bags your kids might be packing, you can try to do something about them. Although I believe you must fight against your kids packing these emotional bags, there is so much more to life that will play into who our kids become and so much more that we need to pay attention to as parents. But what if you could use what is written here to prevent much of what your kids could pack over the years? This “bags” concept is just another tool you can use as a parent to help your kids grow along the way.

As we transition into discussing the common bags, you’ll notice that many of them overlap. Life is complicated with many layers, and our emotional state is no different. This list of bags is not exhaustive; it’s just a compilation of what I have seen over the years and heard the most in my conversations. I’ve also learned that not every child will pack every bag, which is why it is so important to pay attention and be incredibly aware of what is going on in the lives of our children. Depending on how old your kids are, you may find yourself thinking, “It’s too late! My kids have already packed that one.” If you find yourself feeling that way, I encourage you to dig in and know that *it’s never too late*. It’s never too late to fight for health and to fight for your child to go in a different direction. The strategy

will be different if your kids are older than if they are younger, but a bag that is only halfway packed is always easier to stop packing (or unpack) than one that is already full. You simply have to decide whether or not it's worth the fight, and you know it is.

Before we jump in, I want to say one more thing. You already intuitively know a lot of what you are about to read. You do. You've lived it yourself as you've grown up, and if you look closely, you'll be able to see your children living it right now no matter what their age. As parents, you need to be aware that the bags you packed growing up will affect how you deal with the bags your kids are packing. As you read more, you may discover you need to do some real work to sort through your own baggage. That's another whole book (or series of books). I would encourage you to pay attention to the emotions that surface as you reflect on the bags you have accumulated over the years. You may find that you need to talk to a counselor, pastor, or trusted friend. For our purposes, you simply need to know that your past very much plays into how your kids are experiencing you, and they may be packing some of the same bags you did.

Each chapter is broken into three parts. First, I'll identify the bag by telling stories and sharing observations from my life, research, and years of ministry. I'll then give a few simple bullet points of the potential pitfalls of each bag being packed. My list won't be complete, but it will get you thinking about what might be happening to your kids if these bags get packed. You will have to keep an eye on your kids to discern whether they are experiencing these effects. I'll finish each chapter by giving you a few practical suggestions on how to prevent your children from packing the specific bag and perhaps pack something else. The third section of each chapter might be the most valuable part you read. I hope and pray that we as parents can pay attention to what is happening to our kids as they grow up in

today's world. I pray this book will help you lighten your children's loads so they may enter adulthood with less negative baggage and grow to be healthy adults.

### ***Reflection Questions***

As you look back at your life, can you identify some "bags" you have packed along the way? List some of these bags and briefly detail how these bags have impacted you.

Do you think you are aware of what is really going on with your kids as they grow up? How can you stay current with them as they move through their life?

Do you feel like you have an intentional "preventative maintenance" plan to help your kids minimize their baggage and "lighten the load" as they grow up? What are some things you already do to help your kids with their "bags?"



“Our kids carry around lots of baggage, most of which they didn’t ask for or even take on themselves. Often the emotional, social and spiritual baggage that weighs them down can feel like an unbearable burden. With the multiple voices coming at them from all sides and the expectations they must constantly navigate, they wonder who understands. In Chris Sasser’s *Bags: Helping Your Kids Lighten the Load* we not only can begin to see more clearly what our kids need but also take proactive steps to help relieve the load. Author Chris Sasser has given us the tools and awareness we need to lighten the strain. *BAGS* brings years of experience and training coupled with the deep care of a lifelong pastor caring for families. This is a great book! I not only highly recommend it for you, but to read with others, sharing ideas and prayer for the kids we love.”

Chap Clark, PhD, Pastor, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church (ret.)  
Author, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*

“I can think of few people whose wisdom about family ministry I respect more than Chris Sasser. From the first conversation we had about *Bags* years ago, I just knew he was onto something. I have watched Chris as a parent, as a pastor, and as a colleague, and I’m thrilled that his hope-filled, eye-opening, can-do wisdom is now available to lighten the load of parents, young people, and those who lead them!”

Mark DeVries, Author of *Sustainable Youth Ministry* and founder of Ministry Architects

“Parenthood remains the ‘greatest single preserve of the amateur,’ which means that failure, to varying degrees, is the norm, not the exception. My dear friend and teammate Chris Sasser’s book *BAGS* is a call for all of us as parents to stop making parenthood harder by pretending it’s not hard. *Bags* provides powerful, practical handles designed to help every parent lighten the load our children undoubtedly carry through life. *Bags* is thoughtful, insightful, helpful and a must-read for us parents in the wild!”

Stuart Hall, Communicator, Author, Director of Orange Student Leadership and INFLUNSR

“The concepts in this book are not just theories of how things should be but are tested in the trenches of real life with students and families. ‘Sass’ brings experience, thoughtfulness, strategy, and grace to helping us consider the influence of the everyday on the future of a generation.”

Mike Ashcraft, Pastor, Port City Community Church  
Author, *My One Word: Change Your Life With Just One Word*



**CHRIS SASSER** has been serving kids, students, and families in full-time church ministry for almost thirty years. He is the pastor of family ministries at Port City Community Church in Wilmington, North Carolina overseeing the ministries for kids from birth through high school and their parents. He is also a lead consultant for Ministry Architects where he helps churches around the country build healthy systems.

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