

**FOREWORD BY BOB GOFF**

NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LOVE DOES*,  
*EVERYBODY ALWAYS*, AND *DREAM BIG*

# THAT VIP SNEAK PEEK PARENTING WHO HAS BEEN THERE BOOK

**AND TRIED IT ALL**

**MELANIE DOMEN**

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# DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to my most favorite human I get to call my husband, **Jeff**. Your unending love and belief in me is contagious, along with your laugh. It is because of the two of these that after 26 years, I cannot be mad at you for more than three minutes. You have loved me into a version of myself I never knew existed. You have ferociously loved our family and modeled what the love of our Heavenly Father looks like with skin on, and it is truly my biggest joy to get to parent alongside you.*

*I also dedicate this book to the main characters: **McKay, Brock, Micah, and Bliss**, who have received my best and worst parenting moments. Thank you for your grace for this perfectly imperfect mama.*

*There is nothing in this world that I am more proud of than the beautiful humans you have become and are still becoming. You have shown me the gift of watching what God has created in you unfold into the most miraculous display of His strength, faith, grit, joy, compassion, and kindness. I love you strong.*

*Lastly, I dedicate this book to the parent reading this who is at the end of their rope. May you find that you are not alone. May you find that your imperfection is an opportunity: God might do more in your imperfection than in your perfection on your best day. I hope these pages will bring the joy of parenting into your home and point you towards a version of yourself you never knew existed.*

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# FOREWORD

I met Melanie along with her husband, Jeff, when they asked me to lunch one day after I spoke at an event. I had a couple hundred emails to respond to before I spoke again that evening, but since availability is one of my core values, I thought, “Sure! They look like nice people and I need to eat, so why not?!”

We talked about everything from why wasabi is so spicy, and the truth that food should not hurt you, to not making assumptions about people, and all I have learned about people along my life’s journey.

Melanie asked if I had any advice about raising teenagers, as they had three at home along with a grade schooler at that time. I did not have to think for long as I began going through the Rolodex of memories of all of the adventures I have taken with my teenagers. From landing a seaplane in the middle of the mountains of Canada to visiting so many different people and places with my kids throughout their childhood, my answer was to go on adventures.

She later told me that they took the kids swimming with sharks, and I knew she was well on her way.

Melanie was teaching a parenting class at the time, and I encouraged her to take all she was teaching and put it into a book, as I believe that everyone has a book in them somewhere. Over the next four years I helped guide her along the path with my friend Kim Stuart, and *That Parenting Book* was born.

This is a book every parent could use, as Melanie explores the gift of being a perfectly imperfect parent and gives practical, turnkey tips on how to raise responsible, kind people we all like to be around.

—Bob Goff



# INTRODUCTION

My husband, Jeff, and I are *huge* Bob Goff fans—so much so that many in our community call Jeff our own local Bob Goff because of his extreme energy, quirky sense of humor, and unashamed love for *Everybody, Always*. Bob calls his wife Sweet Maria. She is sweet, demure, kind, wise, funny, and very introverted.

I only wish I could be as sweet as introverted Maria. Instead, I am pretty loud, extroverted, and socially awkward if I am completely honest. Loud Melanie just does not have the same ring to it as Sweet Maria, so most who are close to me just call me Mel.

Before Bob spoke at my church's men's conference, he recorded a sermon for the whole church. The church let the staff come to watch the recording process. Since our church staff knows of our love for Bob, they generously invited us to come and watch as well.

Since we have read all of Bob's books, we know that he is a pretty approachable guy. So we stayed after and asked Bob to lunch. He said, "Yes!" We acted super chill once he accepted, but the entire car ride to our meeting point, we were beside ourselves and could have fueled the car on our own energy and elevated heart rates.

I pinched myself a couple of times throughout lunch to make sure this was real. We laughed and had the coveted experience of hearing Bob's stories in real life while eating tacos. Pinching myself once again, I then took the opportunity to ask him to give me his best parenting advice for teenagers. He said to take them on lots of adventures, and I took that to heart.

Towards the end of our time together, Bob asked me what I do. I said that I am a full-time mama and enjoy teaching parenting classes. He then asked about what I teach and said,

"Mel, I believe everyone has a good book in them. I think you have one that is worth sharing."



Inspired, yet full of self-doubt, I took Bob's writing and speaking courses, and then took the incredible opportunity to have him as a coach. He encouraged me to *Dream Big*, be *Undistracted* in my calling, and "swing for the fences" with this book.

Along the journey, Bob set me up with a real-life author, Kimberly Stewart, to help me bring this book to full fruition. Kim is not only an incredible author; she is also an incredible encourager and human, and is one hundred percent sunshine. I have to admit, sometimes I only actually wrote my assigned chapters so that I would get the chance to hang out with her over Zoom, laughing and sharing stories that had nothing to do with the book.

Over the next four years, I would text and email Bob to update him on all that was going on with our family. He was so kind to always respond.

### **YEAR ONE:**

"Look, Bob! Jeff got a mood ring just like you!"

"That's great, Mel! How is the book coming? Keep writing!"

### **YEAR TWO:**

"Look Bob! I wrote an article, and it was published!"

"This is fantastic, Mel! The world needs to hear your words. How's the book coming? Keep writing!"

### **YEAR THREE:**

"Look Bob! We are at Tom Sawyer Island at Disneyland.

Wondering if you happen to be 'in the office.'"

"That's fantastic, Mel! I will actually be there in a couple of days with dignitaries from Uganda! Sorry I missed you.

How is the book coming? Keep writing!"

Pretty soon I started to get the idea. I started to wonder if maybe "Great, Mel! How's the book coming? Keep writing!" was a specially created automatic response to my emails (can you even do that?)

It reminded me of a similar time in my parenting journey. When I was a young mom, it seemed that all of the good moms gave their kids plenty of opportunities to do *every* activity before

they reached kindergarten so they could be well-adjusted and “ready.” Not wanting my kids to show up behind, I enrolled my kids in all of the classes for preschoolers: anything from toddler swimming to preschool cooking classes to Mommy and Me Story Time at the library. Apparently, my kids needed to know how to do the backstroke, cook dinner, and read chapter books before they stepped into kindergarten.

All of these activities made me, well, tired. Really tired. My kids were skipping naps and building strong immunities picking up every virus from all of these life prep courses. I was driving all day from one activity to another, filled with guilt that I was not enough. I was not serving enough, a good enough cook, organic enough, or organized enough. I did not read my Bible enough, I was not intimate with my husband enough, and I drove through McDonald’s way too much.

Then, one day, I came across a life-changing quote about parenting from a nun who had no children. God seems to have a way of doing this. He likes to use the unexpected to speak to our souls and do the miraculous. These golden words were from Mother Teresa: “If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.”

“Look, God! I woke up at 5 a.m., trained for months, and did a triathlon!”

“Great, Mel! Go home and love your family.”

“Look, God! I am serving all Sunday every week!”

“Great, Mel! Go home and love your family.”

“Look, God! My kid is doing the backstroke!”

“Great, Mel! Go home and love your family.”

“Look, God! I made homemade baby food during nap time, and look how cute it looks in these ice cube trays shaped like flowers!”

“Great, Mel! Take a nap and love your family.”

All of my striving and efforts to please God as a parent came from a pure heart, and I know that God was super delighted with me. However, He continued to tell me to set all of my efforts aside and just go home and love my family.

This was actually kind of . . . hard. Home, for me, felt suffocating at times, lonely all the time, and the laundry was never ever done. Not only that, but family can be hard to love sometimes. Kids don't behave, and spouses do not appreciate. But God was calling me to go home and *love...both of them*. At the same time. It was a call to sanctification, and I finally surrendered.

Thankfully, He knows I am only dust. He knows that He made me for a specific calling, and it might not be to be the next Rachael Ray or Marie Kondo. That is someone else's calling. In heaven, I will be just like them, along with the ability to do a triple axel on ice skates with good skin and nails.

But for this perfectly imperfect parent, the Lord showed me, step by stumbling step, how to live out this calling to go home and love my family, and it was with delight, an incredible amount of growth, plenty of fear of failure, and tears that I was able to call Bob and say:

#### **YEAR FOUR:**

"Look, Bob! I finally wrote my book!"

#### **AND MOST IMPORTANTLY:**

"Look, God! Thank you. You sustained me all the way. You took delight in me before I ever even typed a word. I will never know, on this side of heaven, how or why You love all of us with this kind of extravagant, unconditional love, but I do know how it feels to be loved by You. I surrender this book as an offering. May it be used to show other parents how You love us and how we can love our kids in the same way."

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Writing a parenting book is a tricky situation for the family. I am sharing a lot of our stories that have helped us grow. These stories are of times we have messed up, recovered, and become wise. The main characters in these stories are, of course, my kids. In order to preserve my kids' dignity, I have given them all names of foods that I love and will be referring to them by these names throughout the book. They are in a random order to keep you guessing.

**PINOT:** My favorite glass of red wine. Pinot noir is known for being a beautiful blend of earthy old soul and youth. Like Pinot noir, this child is a deep old soul who likes to knit and still loves to collect toys from her childhood. As an extreme introvert, she is best taken in slowly at a table for two, and does not love large crowds. She loves all of God's creatures, especially the small ones, and is nurturing beyond comparison.

**COTTON CANDY:** Cotton candy is marvelous and fun. It is served in big crowds with lots of entertainment and joy. Cotton candy is sweet and the star of the show when it comes to concessions. This child is very much like cotton candy in that she is pure joy, beyond sweet, charming, and loves to be the center of attention.

**CHEESEBURGER:** This child is an all-American boy. He can be experienced at a ball game or dressed up in a five-star restaurant at a table for two. He is well rounded (thanks to having three sisters) and knows how to win over a crowd. To take him in, just like when you open wide for a bite of a cheeseburger, a smile is required.

**POP ROCKS:** If you have ever experienced Pop Rocks, you know this candy is a delightful surprise of sweetness that explodes in your mouth. This child started her life as the easiest pregnancy and sweetest baby. When she turned two, she became an explosion of strength and will, and all the wonderful things that make her a great leader today. To this day, she is still both.



**PART ONE**

**PERFECTLY  
IMPERFECT**



# CHAPTER 1

## DON'T JUDGE

I used to think that kids were a direct reflection of their parents and/or their parents' parenting. Before I had my very own humble pie dispensers, I thought that if you loved your kids well and taught them how to behave, they would just . . . um, behave, and learn from their mistakes, and make good choices by the time they left my nest. In my Child Development classes in college, I learned all about the nature-versus-nurture debate, and I was in solidarity with the "nurture" side. At that time, I believed that all kids were born as clean slates. It was up to parents to either nurture them into kind humans, or completely mess up and raise the next ax murderer. No wonder I felt an incredible amount of pressure as a new mom.

I would judge parents whose kids screamed in restaurants and showed up in the grocery store with no shoes. I would judge parents whose kids were rude and sassy and were mean to my kids on the playground. I would judge the overprotective parents who followed their kids around on the playground, and at the same time would look across the playground to judge the mom on her phone while her child was scaling the outside of the slide and jumping off of the top of the swings. I judged parents whose kids no longer followed Jesus when they went off to college, and also parents whose kids stayed at home, lived in the basement, played video games, and never went to college.

Now I know that kids are, in fact, a direct reflection of man and womankind, and were *created* to fall from grace and, *eh hem*, fail. The idea that I, as a parent, am going to have any power that can prevent my kids from making mistakes—even really bad ones, even "choosing not to follow Jesus" kinds of mistakes—is an idea coming from a heart of pride. Any thought that I might be able to parent so well that my kids will not ever turn their back on me or Jesus is coming from a place that thinks I am a better parent



than my Heavenly Father, whose kids have all fallen short. Every. Single. Kid . . . but one.

So now, 22 years later, I have eaten more humble pie than I can stomach, and I am a little more kind to my fellow parents. I have been the mom who followed her firstborn around the playground with a can of organic bug spray in one hand and an umbrella in the other. I have also been the mom on the phone while my fourth child climbed the outside of the slide with the exceptional ninja skills she acquired climbing on the counter to make herself Eggo waffles at the age of three, because I like to sleep in.

My kids have been the bully and the bullied. Both sides of that story are not fun. At all. I have had kids lead their friends to Jesus, go on mission trips, start up morning prayer groups, and lead Bible studies. I have also had a kid break my heart into one thousand pieces while choosing a different path than what they learned in my home, prayed until I ran out of tears, and then waited as they figured out who God is and what His unconditional love really means as they made their faith their own. I have been the proud mama of the kid who won all of the character and leadership awards and the mom who showed up year after year to the awards ceremony, watching all of the other kids get the awards for anything from the most Christlike to the best Latin or Math student, while my child went home empty-handed. They never seem to give out awards for most strong-willed and/or forgetful.

I have traded in my judgment, measuring stick, gossip, and scowls for a whole lot of empathy, Kleenex, prayer, and hugs for my fellow parents. I have decided that I will not judge my fellow parents based on the actions of their kids in the same way I do not judge God for the actions of His kids. As it turns out—though this came as a huge surprise to me—not one parent ever decided that they were going to do better because of my judgment.

Judgment is a funny thing. It never really gets the result I am looking for. While I might think that I am making myself feel or look better or even have a more spiritual reason to judge, it never really brings forth much good fruit. What I have found is that judgment leads to isolation on both sides. The one who is judging

is isolated because they do not want to associate with the one they are judging. The one who is being judged is isolated because they never feel like they can measure up, or they do not have the energy to try to meet such impossible standards with all that they have on their plate between parenthood, work, and all of the other challenges life throws at them.

What we need to understand is that every parent is doing their best. Most of us really love our kids with a crazy kind of love that you only know if you are a parent. Every parent is also facing a battle that we might never know. The mom on the phone at the playground might very well be getting a text that her loved one has passed away or that her husband is leaving her. Or, on a much less dramatic note, she might be scrolling through social media to try to find some kind of a connection with a friend who is not two years old and still pooping in her pants. This mama may be isolated and more lonely than she ever thought she would be in these years as a mom of a preschooler.

So, parent, if you, like me, are someone who is prone to judgment, you will find an incredible amount of joy in your own parenting when you lay that measuring stick down. You will find that you are less hard on yourself because you stop holding yourself to the impossible standards to which you are holding others. You will find the warmth of grace that surrounds your soul when you realize that we all—yes, even you—are doing our very best in a world that can feel so cold and lonely.

Forgive the bully and his or her parent. Ask the isolated parent of the child who makes all the mistakes to coffee and let them know they are loved and accepted, and so is their child. We are all works in progress. May we make this parenting journey a little more kind for one another as we embrace one another with empathy, a few Kleenexes, and prayers.



## CHAPTER 2

# THE PERFECT PARENT

I wanted to be the perfect parent. The one who brought homemade heart-shaped iced cookies to the Valentine's party in grade school. The one who hung the family's T-shirts to dry so they wouldn't shrink and used the fabric softener that smelled like fresh gardens. The parent who wore her son's jerseys, and the parent whose kids would want to hang out with her as teenagers. I wanted to be a parent more than anything in life . . . so much so that I went to college and told my career counselor that my only purpose in life was to be a mom. He said there was not a degree for that and put me on the path of early childhood education.

I dove into child pedagogy and development. The more I learned about how little humans develop, the more I wanted to know. This college girl who pulled all-nighters with her Dr Pepper and Snickers to write the papers and cram for the exam (all at the same time) also found herself reading stacks of books in the library for fun and sitting in the front row in classes. I accidentally made the Dean's List because I'd finally found something I loved to learn about. I fell in love with teaching and loved every part of it, both in the Montessori classroom and while teaching third grade in public school. Well, every part except for the parents. I did not love some of the parents. I used to tell people I could teach my entire life if I did not have to deal with high-maintenance parents.

Then, I became one. I finally became a parent, even a high-maintenance one. I finally understood what it is to have your entire heart outside of your body, exposed to all of the world with its viruses, hazardous toys, foods, and judgments from other parents, and I finally understood why high-maintenance parents acted so crazy.

My ideals of being the perfect parent slowly began to crumble, from hating being pregnant to preterm labor and bedrest to seriously having no idea how to breastfeed (even though I read all

the books and watched the videos) to not having a clue that babies really did wake up all. Night. Long. And they needed you all the livelong day. Like, you could not shower or go to the bathroom by yourself and your body would never ever be the same.

The craziest thing is that even with all of this sacrifice, I would look into that sweet baby's face and say, "Yep. She's absolutely worth it. She's what I live for, and I would not only give up my body for her, I would give up my life for her. But I am really tired. I am really scared. I am really inadequate and have no idea what in the world I am doing. Oh *wow*! Look! I am pregnant *again* and I still have not slept through the night."

All I knew was that I would do this parenting gig differently than my parents did it. So I fumbled through the first two years of motherhood with a nursing baby in one hand and a parenting book in the other. My babies still did not sleep through the night for the first year of their lives, and I was tired. I was finally at the point of surrender, and this is where my parenting journey truly began.

## CHAPTER 3

# PERFECTLY IMPERFECT PARENT

This “perfectly imperfect” truth really hit me when I was outside playing catch with my four-year-old son. I had just put his baby sister down for her afternoon nap and was ready to play the how-much-can-I-get-done-before-the-baby-wakes-up game that every parent knows all too well.

However, my son *loved* baseball. And I *loved* him, so I chose to play for a little bit. It was a hot Texas summer day. In the afternoon in Texas, it is actually so hot that every creature outside is silent. Yes, even the insects find it too hot to exert enough energy to make a sound. The birds are too parched to tweet, let alone sing, and everyone in their right mind is inside. However, this was the time that worked in our day, so we played, sweat and all, in the only shade we could find on the hot pavement of our driveway.

I wanted my little guy to feel like a successful baseball player, catching every ball I threw. So I would aim straight for the center of that Little League glove. However, as much as I tried, I could not hit my target. The baseball would go between his legs, over the fence, too far to the left, too far to the right. He, in turn, had to learn how to throw to me so that the ball went straight into my glove because I was not that great of a catcher, and if the ball did not hit my glove, I was not about to run in the heat to get it. I was so slow that he would run around and get the uncaught ball and put it in my glove. We would laugh, and I would say, “Buddy, I am so sorry. You can do this with Daddy when he gets home.”

To be fair, his daddy did play college ball; he was much more of an expert at this anyway. Yet my little four-year-old baseball player would always say, “No, Mom! This is fun!” Again and again, I would watch my little guy run for my missed throws and catches as they bounced down the alleyway. *At least he’s getting his exercise*, I thought.

In a strange turn of events, my imperfect skills in baseball trained up a really good first baseman. When my little guy joined

a Little League team, he was the best choice for first base because he could catch any ball those developing little six-year-old arms of his teammates could throw to him. Not only that, he knew just how to throw a straight zinger to the catcher when a runner was approaching home. Watching from the stands, I would just laugh when spectating parents marveled at his “natural ability” to catch any ball thrown at him and throw so accurately. Whether too high, too low, just out of reach, or in the other team’s dugout, my kid was Velcro to that ball.

Turns out, this “perfectly imperfect” truth applied to every part of my parenthood. I stopped running from my weaknesses, instead embracing them and trusting that God would perfect them in the same way He perfected my squirrely throws, to bring about something even greater than my “perfection” could on my best day. We have a beautiful irony in our weaknesses because in Christ, “when I am weak, then I am strong” (NIV, 2 Corinthians 12:10).

My imperfect cooking abilities became an invitation to bring my kids into the kitchen and fix meals we all liked. They devoured pizzas made out of rolled-out biscuit dough, burnt on the bottom. My imperfect laundry skills became an invitation to sit on the bed and race to get the most sock matches. My kids loved the warm laundry out of the dryer, and eight to ten years later, when I told them as 12-year-olds that they would be in charge of their own laundry, they were actually happy about it. My tendency to forget a *lot* (due to undiagnosed ADD and sleep deprivation) created kids who have learned how to remember things and be responsible for their own schedules and deadlines. They also learned the phrase “Mom, will you look at me?” for when they need to tell me something important because of that constantly changing channel in my brain. “Hey, can you look at me?” is a phrase we use a lot in the house, in fact, when we need to make sure we are heard. My quick temper became an opportunity to show my kids what it looks like to struggle, pray, memorize scripture, develop, mess up again, have grace, and then eventually be free of a struggle that so easily entangled me before. “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and sloooooow (deep breath) to get angry, for your anger will



never make things right in God's sight" (taken from James 1:19) was written on index cards all over my house, along with "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare" (NLT, Proverbs 15:1).

I came to understand that struggling with an issue and then having the grit and courage to change in front of my kids was far better for them than never struggling at all, or having them watch me try to attain perfection. The reason this is so powerful is because kids see that this God-given role model in their lives, this parent, is not perfect, but works hard to do better, and that change is possible. The next time they struggle, they will remember that they too can change with some prayer, hard work, and grit. Their struggles will never make them a "lost cause."

"You are perfectly imperfect" has become a motto around my house. Every time a family member messes up, from a bad grade to a missed deadline to a messy room to a temper flared, we usually begin with "You are perfectly imperfect." We do not rest in this, however, and allow these issues to go unchanged. It just helps to know that perfectionism is not the goal. It never will be. The truth is that the growth that comes from the imperfection is the reward, as a fragrant fruit on the vine is the reward that comes from tilling the soil.

I love how Brené Brown says it: "You are imperfect, you are wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging." The goal of our family is to create a space for "love and belonging" rather than perfectionism. Another phrase we say is "The road to wisdom is paved with mistakes." We want to be a home that is safe to make mistakes in, because if we embrace them, rather than shame them, we will grow wise. Can I say that again and get an amen?

Embrace the mistakes and use them as opportunities to grow. You will never get a more motivated or alert learner than one who has just really messed up, but knows that they are meant for more, and while they may have messed up big-time, they themselves are not messed up. It was a bad choice that can be learned from if we can all just reframe how we approach mess-ups.

My own imperfect parenting skills, like those of many of us, were inherited from my parents. I was brought up in a pretty dysfunctional family. However, the more people I talk to, the more it seems that many of us feel this way about our families. My father was a volatile alcoholic, and my mom's way to cope was to withdraw and become a very successful workaholic. With their two dysfunctions, they seemed to continually make one another more sick, and, in turn, make our family sick. My one and only older sister and I were either "latchkey kids" or worse, at home, walking on eggshells with a raging father. My parents eventually divorced, as my dad's alcoholism was a cancer in the family, and it was slowly killing us. My mom remarried three years after divorcing my father. About twelve years later, my father died alone in his apartment. The alcohol took a toll on his body, and he could not recover.

I remember thinking, as a young child, that I would do parenting differently. I had a fire birthed in my belly as a first grader sitting in my room, waiting for my father to come in with the belt. As if the blow of the belt was not intimidating enough, he would pop it as he approached my room to make it an even more meaningful experience. I had refused to eat my canned asparagus . . . and the timer had gone off. I remember thinking, *This is not what love is, and this is most certainly not what the love from a parent should feel like.* I was a ball full of confusion, resentment, and incredibly low self-esteem.

Fast forward twenty years to when I became a parent. I was going to be the exact *opposite* of my parents. I was going to be *perfect*. So, I majored in early childhood education and dove into my child development classes, sitting on the front row, downloading every morsel of wisdom I could about how to nurture and care for the development of a child. As a 19-year-old, I gave speeches in my speech class about the negative effects of corporal punishment and how kids need to feel loved while being corrected rather than shamed. I then graduated and moved on to more training in the Montessori Method, as it beautifully places so much value on the child. I taught in both a Montessori school and a traditional school, and felt like I had parenthood all figured out since I had parented

classes of 20 or more kids. I was ready. I was ready to finally be the “perfect parent.” I had all the answers . . . until I actually became a parent.

Nothing was perfect about my pregnancy, or even the first year of parenthood for me. My baby arrived four weeks early, she did not know how to nurse, and I was sleep-deprived for the entire first year. I could not figure out how to get her to sleep through the night no matter how many books I read—well, skimmed. Maybe all of the answers were found in the last three chapters of the sleep training books I never finished.

We had another baby 20 months after the first one. Once again, he did not sleep through the night for the first year, and the unattainable ideals of perfectionism became more and more fleeting. My need to achieve perfection was debilitating. He was a fussy baby with colic and “projectile” everything, from spit-up to the other end. In fact, for Mother’s Day, this sweet little love “projectiled” all over me at 4 a.m. as I lifted his legs up to change his diaper in my bed. We still laugh at the outline of my body on the headboard behind me. “Happy Mother’s Day, Mom!” I was not laughing then. I was crying.

The truth is, I cried a lot in those early childhood years. I was not supposed to feel this tired. I was not supposed to feel this scared, inadequate, or lonely. I was not supposed to feel this . . . *angry*. All of my other friends seemed to have this whole “mom” thing figured out. Their babies slept through the night, they were able to do laundry and meal prep while the babies slept, and their husbands came home to a clean home, happy babies, and a hot meal on the table. At least, that’s what I thought. It took years for me to learn that things are not always as they seem, and, as Teddy Roosevelt may have said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.”

We had another baby girl four years later, and another baby girl four years after that. By then, I had learned to just get up and feed the baby when she cried. Let her sleep in my room, in my arms, in the stroller—whatever I could do to get sleep. I let go of my need for the “photo-ready” home with toys hidden and dishes matching. My fancy at-home dinners were usually “Honey, will

you pick up a rotisserie chicken?” as I fixed a box of macaroni and cheese along with a ready-mix bag of salad. I was homeschooling my older two and not available to meet up with other moms who had it all figured out. Thankfully, I had no idea what I was missing in the comparison game. I began to find my own rhythm and freedom, and the truth that I am perfect because God’s power is made perfect in my weakness.

My anthem became 2 Corinthians 12:9. In my imperfection, He is strong, so I gladly hand my weaknesses over to Him. I can tap into His supernatural power to bring about perfection in His creative way that might not look anything like I expected. His way might look, with my human eyes, a little messy. His way might look, to me, a little out-of-the-box. His way, from my understanding, might look a little . . . imperfect. This is, in fact, what makes me “perfectly imperfect.”

## CHAPTER 4

# NOT A NORMAL MOM

I will never forget the day my freshman daughter, Pinot, came home from college and, with a trembling voice, said, “Mom, I need to talk to you.”

*Oh no! I thought. What is going on? Is she about to drop out of college after one semester? Is she suffering? Is she having an internal struggle?*

This looked like a very serious conversation we were about to have, so I sat down with her on the couch. She was careful and kind with her words as she took a deep breath and went for it:

“Mom. Did you know that our family is super different from almost every other family I have been around?”

“Yes! Isn’t that great!? We are called to be that way!”

“Well, yes, Mom, but . . . I mean . . . We, well, you are. . . . Okay, Mom . . . I took a psychology class, and I think I understand you now.”

“Wow! That must have been some psychology class! Okay, what did you learn?” (Cue a nervous laugh.)

“Mom, you are not normal.”

“That sounds serious! Tell me all about it. Hold on, let me throw in a load of laundry real quick.”

“Mom. Where did you go?”

From the kitchen: “Hold on, Baby, I’ve gotta make some rice real quick. . . .”

Pinot followed me in the kitchen. “So what I was saying is that...”

“Yes! I am not normal according to your psychology class. Do you want chicken or shrimp tonight, and did you ever return my boots you borrowed last fall?”

“Shrimp and yes, in your closet.”

“Let’s jump in the car real quick to grab some shrimp from the store.”

We never discussed the topic again, but we had a fantastic shrimp and rice dinner.

Fast forward two years, and my youngest daughter was suffering from chronic migraines. After six months on a waiting list, we finally made it to the neurologist.

We filled out the usual thousand forms and found ourselves in a little exam room with the standard exam table with paper on top, the plastic parent chair, and a super amazing relief map of the brain on the wall. My daughter was smart and brought a book. I was not smart and thought I would get caught up on emails and texts on my phone.

It turns out the doctor's office was in a super spotty place for cell service, and was super stingy with the password for their Wi-Fi.

As the clock moved at a snail's pace from 10 to 20 to 30 minutes, I began to look for the hidden camera because I was certain I was being punked (is that even a show anymore?). "Not a problem," I thought. I would just study that plastic relief map of the brain I saw earlier on the wall. I could not fully embrace this map, so I took it off of the wall and began to trace the blood vessels and parts.

After five minutes of hyper-focused studying of the brain, I was ready to perform brain surgery. I was an expert at this point.

The clock continued its snail's pace, and now 45 long minutes had passed watching my girl read her book, counting ceiling tiles, and having a little look-see through the cabinets in the room (doesn't everybody do this?). So I began to braid my hair, as most people do. I had about ten braids going in all different directions when the neurologist walked into the room and stared at me mid-braid with the relief brain map on my lap.

Startled, I looked at him and smiled, trying to appear confident and sure of myself, acting as though this Medusa hairstyle was completely normal, and doesn't everybody take the fun relief brain map off the wall?

He looked at me and then at my 11-year-old daughter reading a book on her paper-covered exam table and said, "So who is the patient?"

It was at that point that my shrimp-eating, boot-stealing college daughter's words came back to me:

*"Mom, you are not like all of the other normal moms."*

I sheepishly smiled at the doctor and pointed to my angel of a daughter sitting on the paper-lined exam table reading her book. "She is the patient."

We proceeded to talk about her migraines. I tried to act normal as I put the plastic relief map back on the wall and slowly took out each of the braids in my hair with swag and style, all while giving a report on the migraine mania that had come with a vengeance for my sweet girl.

With all this said, I do agree that I am not your typical mom. I have never felt like I fit into most social settings. I tend to overshare and forget names. I get super excited about things most people don't, and I never really had that "cool" factor that my sister and all of my friends find so easily when meeting new people. Most of the time I feel like a labrador puppy in a room full of cats.

I have found I play well with other labrador puppies . . . and five-year-olds who also have no filter and really love to dance in public. While I used to feel embarrassed by this trait, I now believe to my core that Jesus meant what He said when he told us that the "Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like . . . children" (NLT, Luke 18:16), and if this is the case, I am going to *love* heaven!

I met my husband in college because we had a mutual friend who set us up. This guy from California had strawberry-blond hair (my favorite) and a quick smile, he prayed before our meal, and after about five minutes with him, I discovered that he was another labrador puppy. It was love at first sight. We took all of our craziness to the dance floor, making up dances: we cast pretend hooks into one another's mouths, reeling each other in, then pretended to golf and look for the ball in the distance, and then a pretend "Ouch, you hit me in the head" followed by tons of laughter.

I felt free and secure with this young man, and after a second date playing football in the rain, he had my heart. The next day, I told my sister I had found my husband and as long as my future had him in it, I would be just fine.



Thirty years later, and I am more than fine. I am living out what God promised me so many tear-soaked pillows ago, when I thought I would never see the fruit of the “hope and a future” God had planned for me (NIV, Jeremiah 29:11).

It turns out, God had big plans for these two labrador puppies and the family we would one day create. We once took a personality test on compatibility in a marriage class. When it came time to go over our tests, the facilitator began with “Who are the Domens?”

We eagerly both shot up our hands with huge smiles. He then went on to say, “What you two have is rare. Usually spouses will marry some sort of the opposite of their personality; for example, the introvert will usually find a more extroverted person and so on. But you two are both extreme extroverts and are pretty much a party in a box!”

Yep. I have never felt more understood. That is true, and while we are usually too much for most people—including two of our four children, who are extreme introverts—we have each other, and that is more than “fine.”

I recently went to visit my son in college, who had to have an emergency appendectomy. It may have been the drugs, or it may have been the long periods of time that the two of us had to just sit and talk while he recovered, but he said, “Mom. You know our family is not a typical family, right?”

“Yeeees. I have heard this before from your older sister.”

“Well, I want a family just like ours. I want the loud, dancing-in-the-kitchen, arguing-over-board-games kind of family because we are crazy, and that is what I love most about us. We are the Domens.”

Holding back the tears, I replied, “Well, Son, you absolutely made my day—my week, my year, my life—by saying that, and you absolutely will have a family just like ours, I just know it. Because you are a *Domen* if I ever met one.”

As a mom, I have learned to embrace parts of me that I used to keep hidden. God truly does have a purpose in my design. I have learned to stop comparing myself to other moms and wish I could be more “normal” and organized. I have learned that I cannot

put my value and identity in the hands of my children, especially in their teenage years. The truth is, while I was their hero when they were toddlers, preschoolers, and grade schoolers, I quickly became their zero once they hit middle and high school. In these upper grades, I was just “so embarrassing” because of the way that I breathed; and that does not even take into account that the most neutral color in my wardrobe is mustard yellow, or my car dancing choreography abilities.

Now that I am in my late forties, I am finally unashamed of the bright, bold spirit He put inside me. I am surrounding myself with people who embrace, rather than exclude, my bright light. I have finally come to terms with the truth that I am indeed beautifully and wonderfully made because God is a God of color, humor, and joy. He created the bold, beautiful birds with silly feathers on the tops of their heads, and the giraffe with the long neck and silly knobs and spots. I thank Him for “making me so wonderfully complex” because His “workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it” (NLT, Psalm 139:14).

We have all heard the truth that the values we instill in our kids are caught more than they are taught. Our kids are watching. They will catch our negative self-talk and feelings of unworthiness much more than they will ever hear all of our teachings on self-esteem and finding our value in Christ. As parents, we must live our confidence in who God designed us to be out in front of them, so that they will catch it without even knowing it.

To the parent reading this: Be encouraged to embrace whatever God-given parts of your personality you have been hiding from the world. Live them out boldly without worrying about what others think or if you fit into their circles. These characteristics are the part of you that God is actually using to build the family that your kids will one day say they want to have, so lean into them and...*Let's dance.*



## CHAPTER 5

# PERFECTLY IMPERFECT WORLD

Back in 2015, I was at a Parent Coaching Conference. I was sitting by myself eating breakfast and watching the news in the hotel lobby. The breaking news of the day was that a terrorist militant group from Iraq, ISIS, was recruiting over 2 thousand teenagers from the Western nations to come fight against their home country, the United States. Some were as young as 15 years old. My heart sank, and I lost my appetite. I stopped and just prayed a prayer of desperation for our country, asking God what a mom of four like me could do to stop this. I don't always claim to hear an audible voice from God, but if I have ever heard God actually speak to me, it was at this moment, as my tears were literally pouring into my sunny-side-up eggs. I heard Him say, *You are doing something about this. Look where you are. You are at a conference learning how to teach parents to parent their kids more effectively and keep their relationships strong. This is what changes the world.* It was at this very moment that I remembered the quote from Mother Teresa that I had plastered all over my house:

"If you want to change the world, go home and love your family."

We live in a perfectly imperfect world. We change it when we love our families. From the rising suicide rate to terrorist attacks, from school shootings to unthinkable stories of child trafficking: all of these issues can be very scary as a parent. However, when we learn how to love, guide, and discipline our children effectively, our kids learn what true love looks and feels like with skin on, and the end result is kids who feel connected in the home and do not feel the need to find their value in unhealthy ways outside the home.

We raise kids who see beyond themselves and help those in need, from a smile for a hurting soul to a meal for a family who is battling cancer, to a friend who just needs to be heard. We raise kids that we (and others) actually like to be around. We raise

leaders who are asked to lead in places from the student body to Fortune 500 companies, and from the mission field to their own homes (where all of the good stuff happens anyway).

## CHAPTER 6

# PERFECTLY IMPERFECT STYLES

We all come into parenthood with different perspectives of what parenting should look like. We all have a familiar soundtrack of “When I have kids, I will never \_\_\_\_\_” constantly playing in the background of our minds. I had the best ideas about parenting when I was 22 sipping a cappuccino in the middle of Starbucks watching all of the moms pour in, messy buns and all. Perhaps, we also place too much emphasis on the opinions of others. Whether conscious or subconscious, we allow our parents, friends, or even the stranger in the grocery store to have a powerful voice in the way we discipline our children.

I have been on the parenting scene for 22 years now. After much research and observation, I’ve come to believe there is a continuum of parenting trends.



On one of the most extreme ends, we have what is called “Permissive Parenting.” Permissive parents tend to put their children’s needs before themselves, even their marriages, at all costs. They often idolize their children and almost always take their child’s side, often unable to see that their child is capable of mistakes. Permissive parents are afraid, do not have the strength, or just don’t want to put in the effort to have boundaries.

I have found that children raised in extremely permissive environments often end up selfish and entitled. Many do not know how to respect boundaries of any kind and are in constant conflict with those who try to establish boundaries. Worst case scenario, these children might end up suffering from depression, as they

cannot find the joy in the little things in life and are unable to have healthy relationships. They might also be filled with anxiety, as they are not given the opportunity to struggle, learn from their mistakes, and grow. The kids who have been raised with this style of parenting are sometimes called “snowflakes” because they will melt at the first sign of any struggle.

On the *extreme* opposite end of the continuum, we have “Punitive Parenting.” Punitive parents really love control and authority. Love looks a lot like control in this style of parenting. Many punitive parents are afraid their children will make mistakes, and therefore do everything in their power to prevent mistakes by use of control. These parents have strong rules and strong punishments when rules are broken. There is often not a lot of grace and a lot of shame on children who cannot follow the rules. Many times the child’s opinion does not count, no matter their age, as the parent is the “be-all and end-all” source of wisdom and guidance. This parent never shows weakness or their own struggles, as this transparency might take away from their authority.

I have found that oftentimes, children raised in an extremely punitive environment tend to be risk-averse since they are afraid to make mistakes, have poor social skills, and are more prone to drug and alcohol abuse because they mask their emotions with substances. These children also tend to rebel because while they might respect or be afraid of their parents and the rules of the house, they do not have a strong relationship with their parents. They feel no need to avoid the pain of disappointing someone they love with their actions. Their rebellious actions are often used as a tool to hurt their parents in order to break free from the control they have been under in these relationships. These kids also might suffer from depression due to low self-esteem and anxiety, as they do not know how to make decisions on their own without someone telling them what to do or how to feel.

Before you feel exposed or judged and slam this book shut, please know that I can speak to both perspectives on these trends. I, your “perfectly imperfect” parent here, have parented from both of the ends of this continuum and experienced all of their ill effects.



Many times, couples are on opposing ends of the spectrum. Their marriage is in a constant state of conflict as each parent digs deeper and moves further in opposite directions on the continuum in order to balance the other out. If Mom is permissive, Dad will be even more punitive in order to “make up” for her lack of boundaries, and vice versa. This leads to a very confusing and disruptive approach to parenting, creating constant friction, anxiety, and discord because the child is stuck in the middle of this tug-of-war and feels all of the stress. My husband Jeff and I are guilty as charged.

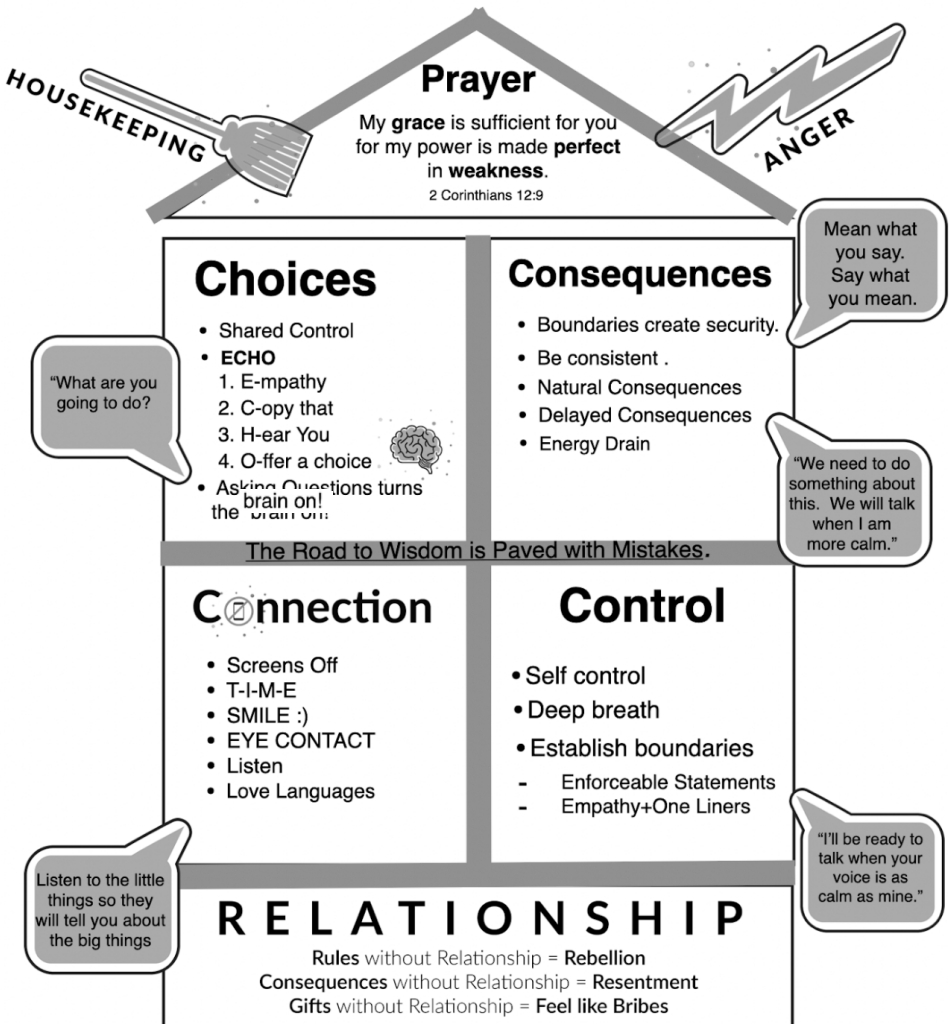
If we take an introspective look, many of us can find ourselves leaning closer to one side of this continuum. If you have found yourself in the middle, you are off to a great start! If not, this is probably why you are reading this book. The goal is to find a healthy balance right in the middle between permissive and punitive parenting because both have their good qualities within reason. The ultimate goal is to be firm like the attributes found in the punitive perspective and fair like the attributes found in the permissive perspective. Firm and fair.

We discovered the beauty found in this “firm and fair” perspective when our fourth child was born. She was a perrrrfect baby. Then, she turned two and turned our entire family on its head. My husband and I eventually did an emotional somersault from our heads straight to our knees. While I thought I had this parenting thing figured out, I soon found out what a true strong-willed child really looked like. This child knew my playbook and how to work around it. I grew as a mom. I grew in my faith. Our marriage was challenged, and we grew as a couple. We got through some really tough years, and we are now thankful for all of that growth.

We are still growing, because as it turns out, “Things which do not grow and change are dead things” (according to Louise Erdrich), and though, at times, we may have felt that parenting killed us, we are not actually dead. So, finally, I present to you all I have learned on my Perfectly Imperfect journey of parenting.

The “Blueprint” on the following page is a visual representation of most of the content of this book. As you read, we will be covering the material from the bottom up using “Relationship” as our foundation. The boxes on the left side of the Blueprint (Connection and Choices) will appeal to the more permissive or “fair” parent. The boxes on the right (Control and Consequences) will appeal to the more punitive or “firm” parent. As you read this book, keep in mind that you are in search of balance in your parenting. Lean into the boxes that are on the opposite side of the style of parenting that is more natural for you. Use this as a quick reference when you feel stuck in your parenting journey.

# THAT PARENTING BLUEPRINT



CREATED BY MELANIE DOMEN