



OPERATION MOM

WINNING THE MOMMY WARS

MELINDA HINES

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DEDICATION

Cory, Mackenzie and Caleb ~ you inspire me to be all that I can be.

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INTRODUCTION

So many of us spend our lives feeling defeated, frazzled and insecure in our role as a mom. We often feel like we are at war with our families, the world and even ourselves, and that we are losing. You've been there, haven't you? It's a rhetorical question really – of course you have or you wouldn't have picked up this book. By being honest and vulnerable about the ways God has shown Himself to me as I've struggled with motherhood, I want to join other moms in the trenches and assure them that they don't have to go through the mommy wars by themselves.

As I surveyed moms from across the country about their struggles and triumphs it became wholly apparent to me that as moms we have to do what works for our families. There are people giving you advice - solicited and otherwise, there are hundreds of parenting books out there that claim they have the formula, but the bottom line is you have to be the mom God created you to be for the children He created just for you! My prayer is that as you read this field manual you will indeed find some encouragement to fight those everyday mommy wars, but even more that you will find a sense of yourself as you read the practical suggestions and the thoughts from other moms in the trenches.

Operation Mom is divided into four sections with four chapters each. *Operation Mom* helps moms evaluate the doubts, concerns and questions that come up during this most important time in their life and discover practical, personal and spiritual insights. Each chapter will include real life stories and battle strategies from other moms, titled In the Trenches and conclude with a Debriefing section of personal reflection questions that can also be used in group discussion. I hope that you will experience joy as you apply the strategies mentioned to reduce stress, simplify your life and enhance all your relationships. From one mom to another, this is your invitation to meet me in the trenches.

BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Before they ever bring their baby home most women daydream about what they hope and often pray motherhood will be like. No matter how excited they are, how many books they have read, how prepared they feel or how sweet their new baby is, often the reality of motherhood doesn't line up with the fairytale they have created in their mind and heart. Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy Linguist encourages new moms to let go of the myth of sitting in the rocking chair with the sunlight pouring in on them as they breastfeed a perfect little baby. "That may happen once in your lifetime, but most of the time it doesn't. It's still the greatest thing; it's just not perfect all the time." Dr. Peggy Linguist said.

It has been said that frustration occurs when reality doesn't match our expectations. No other place have I found this to be truer than in motherhood. I had long considered myself a confident and capable woman, but I was amazed how my tee tiny infant daughter, that looked like a porcelain doll, could wreak such havoc in our lives and cause me to doubt my abilities not only as a mom, but as a wife.

I just knew I would be a great mom; that our daughter would adore me and never act out, that I could handle any and everything, all while preparing awesome gourmet meals and having a picture perfect clean house. I would even have the chance to finish all those little projects I had been putting off, after all, I quit teaching to stay home and I would have all this free time on my hands. What a shock it was to my system to realize that not only could I not do it all, sometimes I felt like I couldn't do any of it.

The mommy wars I have encountered are numerous and although I recognize that my warfare experiences are far from over and in some sense have only just begun, I believe that I will be victorious. So can you! I hope that as you read this book and especially this chapter that you will be encouraged as you develop realistic expectations for you, your husband and your children and that you will realize that Being All That You Can Be is enough to win your mommy wars.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOU

YOU ARE ENOUGH

Before our daughter was even conceived, I often wondered in my heart and my mind “Am I enough?” I struggled with doubts and fears, questioning, “Do I have what it takes to be a mom? Should I even try? Who am I that God would bless me with the miracle of a child?” My worries were only intensified by the seemingly great amount of time and effort it took to conceive, followed by a difficult pregnancy and an emergency cesarean section when my child stopped growing. The fairytale I had imagined of pregnancy and childbirth hadn’t come true and the image of her birth and my abilities to push her out of my body with love and power were forever lost to the harsh reality of fear and a tough recovery.

Although I felt like my body had failed me, I believed nursing would be my chance to make it all right. Like many moms, I too had envisioned myself in our daughter’s room, sitting in the rocking chair in a beautiful white flowing nightgown, sunlight pouring in as I breastfed her. Instead, I sat in an uncomfortable chair in my kitchen half dressed in raggedy sweat pants and struggled to hold suction cups to my breasts with tears streaming down my face as I pumped milk for my baby, who was over 30 miles away in the NICU of a large hospital. Actual nursing sessions were just as complicated as I attempted to situate my 3 pound, 8 ounce daughter in such a way that my breast, which was as big as she was, didn’t smother her. The NICU had become our second home and all modesty vanished as the nurses and lactation consultants tried in vain to help the nursing process go more smoothly. There is nothing like one woman rubbing on your breast, while another rubs your child’s cheek and attempts to position her mouth to latch on to your nipple. Let me tell you, that is not the picture you want hanging in your OBGYN’s office.

Unfortunately, it just wasn’t to be, my daughter had grown attached to the fast and easy flow of the bottle and the tiny feeding tube from her nose to her tummy was a hindrance to the breast feeding process. I continued pumping and freezing my milk until it finally ran out and then came the pain of drying up. Once again I felt like a failure. Even though I had read all the books, gotten counsel from my nursing friends and tips including actual

hands on help from the lactation consultants and nurses at the NICU, I still couldn't provide my daughter with what she needed, or so I felt.

It took time, Godly counsel from doctors and friends, numerous war stories of other moms and even a little bit of medicine to finally convince me that regardless of our circumstances, I was enough for our daughter; in fact I was more than enough. One of the most important things to remember as you enter this most amazing phase in your life is that you are enough, too. The woman that God made you to be, the wife and mom that you are is more than sufficient.

In the Trenches: "I'm constantly reminding myself that I only have to be the woman God made me to be." Tonya Holter, mom of Tyler, Lauren & Kyle

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

Playing the comparison game can be dangerous and should be avoided at all cost. There will always be another mom out there who does something better than you. Maybe her kids are seemingly better behaved or her house is always clean or she always looks great. The irony is that of the many moms I talked to, many of them moms just like those I mentioned, play the comparison game, too and don't think they are good enough either. You will never be satisfied or content if you are constantly comparing yourself to the mom at church, the mom next door or the mom in grocery line – besides they are probably wishing they were more like you anyway.

In the Trenches: "I compared myself with my own mother. She seemed to be 'Superwoman.' She worked a full time job while raising three children and keeping the household running smoothly. What I learned with my two boys, now 29 and 21, was that they would not grow up remembering the meals I cooked or how white their underwear was after a serious bleaching. It didn't matter if the house was spotless. It mattered more that they were comfortable in their home." Sandra McIntosh, mom of Jeremy & Nicholas

Time spent in comparisons is not only futile it can also bring pain as moms begin to believe that they don't measure up. Fortunately, that inadequate mommy feeling can be replaced when we accept ourselves as God made us and discover that our children are not intended to be exactly like anyone else either. A friend who attends the mom's group I lead puts it like this, "My expectations for motherhood were so naïve. I was going to be the kind of mommy that never, ever raised her voice. My children weren't going to eat candy - they wouldn't even want candy. They would always obey the first time and would sit quietly and do as they were told when in church or school. Bedrooms would always be neat and clean. All of these ideas came to a screeching halt when my son was about three years old." Melissa Harwell said. When her son did just the opposite of her expectations, Melissa felt hurt and upset and found herself comparing him to the other children at church, especially when she felt judged by the other moms. "I started thinking that Ethan was that bad kid that no one wanted in their class. I even began yelling at my little one because I was embarrassed about his behavior when I was around these other moms."

Melissa Harwell said. A job change brought the Harwell's to a new town, and with that move came a new group of friends which helped Melissa gain a more positive outlook on herself and her son. "I realized that I wasn't a bad mom and Ethan wasn't bad either, he was just like other kids his age. I wish I had learned earlier to hang out with other moms that accepted me and my child just as we were instead of looking down their noses at us when things didn't go perfectly. I honestly don't know how they got their little angels to be such little angels, but I know one thing for sure: I'll bet they don't have nearly as much fun with their children as I do with Ethan since I've learned to accept him just as he is. Who am I to be embarrassed about the way the Lord has made my little boy?" Melissa Harwell said.

CONQUERING GUILT

In addition to their sweet newborn smell and their yummy soft skin, babies have an unusual ability to give the gift of guilt. Guilt over what you think you should do, but don't; guilt over what you did do, but shouldn't of; even guilt about feeling guilty. There is no limit to what moms might unintentionally do to bring on the yucky coulda, woulda, shoulda battles. You might forget the baby's hat on a cold day or sunscreen on a sunny day. You may be so enamored with your precious bundle of joy that you rock him or her to sleep every night and feel guilty that when they should be able to get themselves to sleep, they can't or won't without screaming. Later, you may yell at your child in frustration and anger. Unfortunately, like your children guilt also grows with time. You must conquer it before it conquers you.

You will make mistakes as a mom – we all do, but if you spend more time focusing on the things you do right and less on the things you do wrong you can win this mommy war. It's tough to do, I know; one of my personal strongholds are those coulda, woulda, shoulda battles. I am guilty of a self-defeating pattern of doubting myself from moment to moment and decision to decision. See what I mean, there is even guilt in feeling guilty. Yikes! Nothing productive comes out of torturing yourself with guilt, instead chalk those guilt-inducing moments up to experience and change your battle strategy in the future to eliminate them. We will cover more battle strategies to defeat guilt throughout the book, but for now let go of the guilt and embrace the beauty of getting it right.

In her book, *Motherhood: The Guilt That Keeps On Giving*, author Julie Ann Barnhill suggests conquering mommy guilt by making a list of all the things you feel like you have done right as a mom. "Truth is we have all done innumerable things right. But all too often those details get relegated to the back corners of our memories. It's all too easy to forget the sweet, sane moments when engaged in day-to-day, year-after-year battles with fussy newborns, peevish toddlers, anxious preschoolers, squirrely 11-year-olds, and hormonally raging teenagers – perhaps at a time when you're feeling fussy, peevish, anxious, squirrely, or a bit hormonal yourself!" I can't agree more, so put this book down right now, get out a pen and piece of paper and write those guilt conquering positives down. It may be difficult at first, but here are a few from my list to get your mind going.

Waiting (by choice and later by providence) to have children, so Cory and I could be “just married” for a while.
Letting Mackenzie sleep with us when she was a newborn.
Putting Caleb directly in his bed when he was a newborn.
Date nights, vacations and stolen moments with my husband to reconnect.
Girl’s night out and weekends away with my friends to get rejuvenated.
Admitting to myself, my husband, my OBGYN, my pediatrician, my pastor and my friends that I was struggling and needed help.
Having a tea party with real china with my 4 year old instead of writing.
Not sweeping everyday or mopping every week.

In the Trenches: “Being a mommy was the only thing I really wanted out of life. I was ready to give my precious baby everything I had and be the best mom on this planet. It took me about 10 weeks to realize that would never happen. I discovered that to be the best mom, I couldn’t give every part of myself to my son. I had to hold some of myself back to spread around and share with others in my life. I learned to make alone time for myself. I learned that in order to be a good mom I first had to be a great wife. Now, because I do these things it allows me to enjoy being a mommy so much more and I also know that I will never be that perfect mom, but that is ok.”

Melissa Allen, mom of Hayden

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR HUSBAND

ESCAPING EXTREME EXPECTATIONS

After a long day of nursing battles and post partum tears, with the laundry and dishes piled up around me, when my husband came home from work, I just wanted to hand him the baby and hide in my room. I was so overwhelmed and looked at his grand entrance as my pass to escape from it all. I expected him to rescue me and fortunately for a while he did. My husband could sense my desperation and adores both of our children immensely, so he was happy to spend some one on one time with them.

Eventually, my husband admitted he expected and needed some time to unwind and relax, too and coming home to a house that looked like a bomb had went off in it and tossing him a screaming baby as if they were a grenade, just wasn't cutting it. I would be lying if I didn't admit that I selfishly wondered when my downtime was supposed to be. But, as time went on, I was better able to cope and as we escaped extreme expectations we worked out a battle plan that was agreeable to both of us.

WEAPONS CHECK

Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy Linguist, believes that the biggest hindrance to shared parenting is fear. “Usually when people aren't involved early on in a baby's life, it's because they are so afraid of failing. If you've ever watched a brand new Dad try to put a diaper on a baby for the first time, the look is always the same - confusion and fear simultaneously! I think knowing this, it's easier to encourage new parents about sharing the responsibilities - there are no instructions, and each of us feels completely inadequate in this parenting role at some point.” Dr. Linguist said.

New moms are not alone in their musings of doubt and fear. As much as they like to put out this tough, I have it all together image, most new dads are wondering if they are enough, too. As if the pressure of providing for their family isn't enough, the added duties of diapering, bathing, feeding and protecting their wives from the battles of baby blues and other struggles, can send any new dad over the edge. New moms can come to their husband's rescue and affirm their value and ability. I know, I know – they are supposed to be the strong ones and you have your own issues to deal with, but an occasional pat on the behind and an atta boy may be all your husband needs to feel confident and become the Dad you know he can be. With the right training and encouragement, your husband can be one of the best weapons in your arsenal to win the mommy wars.

In the Trenches: “I entered motherhood the day I got married and became the step mother to a teenager and two pre-teens. I am incredibly type A and had to adjust to the fact that the girls were used to a totally different routine and outlook on life than I was. We had to have a family meeting and prioritize the things that had to be done versus what I expected to be done. Together we came up with a schedule that we could all agree to honor. After that things were much easier. I was also blessed to have a lady in my life group that had married and gained a pre-teen step daughter with that marriage. She was a huge encouragement to me and was able to reassure me on those days when things were difficult.” Alisha Huff, second mom of Jami, Chelsea, D'layni Bea & Noah

BATTLE READY

Get battle ready by addressing your expectations and any concerns as a couple before you ever bring your baby home. You are setting yourself up for defeat if there are unresolved emotional, physical or spiritual issues between you and your husband. Discussing your expectations, values and standards and resolving any issues sooner rather than later is crucial. A baby will not solve marital problems and in all actuality they may make them worse, but as your baby adjusts to world outside the protective warmth of the womb, you and your husband will adjust to your new roles as mom and dad, too.

Communication before and after baby's arrival is a key battle strategy to getting what you both need and want. It's never too early to tackle the rough stuff of discipline, religious practices and the division of labor - no, not the kind that delivers the baby - the other that makes life manageable. Put your battle plan together as you learn more about each other than you thought possible.

Children have a unique ability to bring out quirks related to our own childhood in addition to each of our own realistic or often unrealistic expectations. Will you let the baby cry it out when putting them to sleep – if so, for how long? Will you breast or bottle feed (this one may change once the baby arrives)? Does your husband believe in spanking, do you? What beliefs do you want to pass on to your children? Who will get up with the baby in the middle of the night? If he works and you stay home does that mean you will handle all the household chores? How will you negotiate time for your friends, time for your hobbies, time for each other and who will watch the baby? The list could go on and on – the goal is to address these areas before you are ambushed in the heat of battle.

In the Trenches: "I had children very young and didn't really consider all the ramifications involved. My children kept me on my toes, kept a smile on my face and always taught me that life is what you make of it. They are now 34, 31 and 28 and I still learn so much from them. I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without them. I know it would not have been nearly as fulfilling and full of love." Suzanne Baty, mom of

Heather, Amber & Derek

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR CHILDREN

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

As a former parenting and child development teacher I thought I had a pretty good idea of what my children would be like and accordingly the best way to mother them. Surely, I would benefit from all those text books I studied in college, the wisdom of my brilliant professors, my hands on experience in the classroom and in youth ministry with my husband. Oh, how wrong I was.

I knew that it was normal for babies to cry, but I questioned every whimper and was embarrassed when I couldn't comfort them quickly in front of others. I knew that all children whine, throw fits and outright rebel on occasion, but I thought and said out-loud, "not my child". I knew that all children grow and develop at different rates, but felt that my children would be faster, smarter and prettier than everyone else's children - at least part of that came true. Logically, I knew that one day I would hear those 5 dreaded words, "you are a mean mommy," but my heart told me different, and I was crushed when I heard it for the first time. Just coming to terms with the fact that my children aren't perfect has been a battle in its own right. I know it sounds silly and foolish – I wasn't even a perfect child, how could I expect my own children to be?

In the Trenches: "When I was pregnant with my first child, I would sit and daydream about motherhood. It was a beautiful picture. I would sit and read books to my nicely dressed children. The girls would wear beautiful dresses with patent leather shoes, my sons would be in nice slacks. I would read great books to them and they would hang on my every word listening ever so intently. They would sit still and quiet until the story was over. Three children later – I've realized that my dream was just that – a dream! Reading to preschoolers is more of an interactive experience; an endurance test for moms." Alene Snodgrass, mom of Courtney, Blake & Lindsey

DEADLY COMPARISONS

Just as we compare ourselves to other moms, mom's often play dangerous comparison games with their children, too. If we are not comparing them to an idealistic textbook definition, we compare them to our friends' children or to their own brothers and sisters. Recently, in a conversation with my pediatrician, I expressed my concern that our son seems delayed in his speech. All the while, my daughter was attempting to carry on a conversation with the pediatrician, too. The pediatrician replied jokingly that most moms think their second child is slower than their first. She went on to say that often the first child talks for the second and reminded me that boys seem to develop slower in some areas than girls. How true, my daughter spoke so early and clearly and now often speaks for her brother as he simply grunts and points – he is a little man after all.

Comparing our children to others can be just as damaging to their spirit as it is to ours. Children have an uncanny knack to sense when they are being compared and that pressure is too much for them, whether they are the ones that feel like they don't measure up or the one that is supposed to be the example. God made each of our children unique and their personalities are a gift that we should treasure, not attack.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

As moms fight their daily battles, they must let go of their unrealistic and unfair expectations of themselves, their husbands and their children in order to win. Let go of that often overwhelming need to be the perfect mother with the perfect family and realize that you and yours only have to be who God made you.

In the Trenches: "I believe that the fear of the unknowns is the greatest fear for first time mothers. Not knowing what to expect is scary. You can read all the books and feel like you are going to be prepared; but you are not, there is not a baby born that is textbook perfect, they are all different. It's great to have someone that has been through the experience to give advice and help. My sister Karen, an experienced mother of two, stayed with me for a week when we brought our first daughter home. It was very comforting to have her there to help me through all those unknowns and first's." Linda Rhoton, mom of Melinda, Breanne & Reagan

DEBRIEFING

How has the reality of motherhood not matched the picture in your mind?

How have you reevaluated or negotiated your expectations of motherhood for yourself and with your husband?

Do you compare yourself with other moms – your own or your friends? If so, how do you measure up?

BOOT CAMP

As I picked up the phone and said hello, one of my best girlfriends cried out “tell me it gets better”. I spent the next hour assuring the mom of a 4 year old and a 4 day old that it does in time get better. Her vulnerability was touching and pretty soon we were crying and laughing together as I recounted my first days with two children. I let my friend vent, offered a few tried and true suggestions and I went to see her the next day.

Whether you are adjusting to your first bundle of joy or your third, the demands can be frustrating at best overwhelming and debilitating at worst. Those first few days, weeks and months may feel like you are in the middle of boot camp, but give yourself permission to take it easy and enjoy this amazing season of your motherhood journey.

One of the first things I discovered during my pregnancy was how many people; including strangers had an opinion or some precious bit child rearing wisdom to give me – along with a gentle pat on my belly. The situation only increased with the delivery of our daughter – now people wanted to tell me as I was sleep deprived, exhausted and overwhelmed to enjoy every minute of it, all while touching my premature newborn who sure didn’t need to be handled by strangers.

Some of the advice people gave me and the tips I gleaned from the surveys I gave to new and been there, done that moms, and even a few grandmas have been helpful. I’m going to share some of it with you and encourage you to figure out what works best for you and yours. There is so much you can do to make the transition to mommy hood and this chapter will give you battle strategies from the experts in the field – doctors and moms.

In the Trenches: “I well remember the feeling of helplessness when my first baby was born. ‘You’re going to send home an infant with me? I’m just a baby myself!’ What an awesome responsibility to care for the entire world of that little one. As time went on, I gained confidence in my ability to interpret the cues of my child, because we were together all of the time. It is still humorous to me how a mom knows the babble of her toddler. She knows exactly what the running commentary is about, because she has been there during the playtime with a special toy, or discovery of a new flavor of ice cream. What an awesome job!” Sally Ferguson, mom of Nate & Anna

BATTLE PLAN

In those early days after the birth of your baby choose wisely where you will go and what you and baby are up to participating in. One of the most difficult outings I ever had was about two weeks after my son was born. Our family chose to attend a baseball game with another family on the 4th of July. What should have been a fun filled outing complete with fireworks with our then newborn and 3 year old and the other couples 2 and 4 year olds turned into an uncomfortable outing for all of us. For some reason one of our friends tickets wouldn't scan properly so we had to wait for him. While we were waiting for him to work it out, Caleb had a blowout diaper.

Once we finally made it our seats Caleb decided he was hungry and I had to try to find a comfortable place to nurse him. I just couldn't do it in the tight stadium seats with the other 3 kids in front of us and ended up nursing him under a blanket on a bench in the breezeway, which was none too breezy.

When we left the game we just missed the trolley back to our cars and had to wait a long time sitting on the ground and trying to keep the kids entertained and quiet Caleb who had started crying. I guess the stress of the evening and the extended amount of standing and walking caused me to start bleeding again and blood gushed all over my shorts. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about it, I didn't have any sanitary items and I couldn't get back in the stadium anyway, plus we couldn't risk missing the trolley again.

Eventually, we caught a trolley, but Caleb's cries only became louder and as my husband tried to soothe him a few rows behind me, the bus driver complained about the noise and wondered aloud why parents bring babies to the game anyway. At that point I almost agreed with him. By the time we got through game traffic and got back to our car Caleb was in full blown wailing mode, we put him in his car seat and attempted to drive home, thinking he would fall asleep. He didn't and we had to pull over in a gas station parking lot so I could nurse him again. The evening was a comedy of errors as we all learned a valuable lesson about not rushing back into life.

In the Trenches: "As prepared, well-read and knowledgeable as I thought I was, it is nothing compared to bringing that baby home and things not go as planned. I remember after 6 weeks, various after cream after cream and a terrible diaper rash that wouldn't let up, sitting in the living room floor with my miserable infant and just bawling, literally tears streaming down my face saying, 'I just can't do this anymore.' He was miserable and hurting and I was miserable and hurting for him because I couldn't seem to make the hurt go away. He spent the 3 days naked on a pallet in my parent's living room. Then it hit me at 2 am one morning - it has to be the diapers, he just can't wear disposables. I had noticed the rash beginning to clear some since he hadn't been wearing a diaper at all. So here I went to Wal-Mart at 2 am in search of rubber pants, pins and cloth diapers. For the next six months I traveled nowhere without my diaper bucket and a bag full of cloth diapers. Oh what fun!" Wendy Johnson, mom of Kutter & Kaden

DO NOT DISTURB

OBGYN, Dr. David Morehead suggests sleeping when the baby sleeps. “New mothers often struggle with the change in lifestyle and sleep deprivation seems to take a real toll - physically and emotionally.” Dr. David Morehead said. Pediatrician, Dr. Peggy Linguist agrees and suggests sleeping even during the day at first. “This sounds simple, but you wouldn’t believe how many new moms will crash and burn at about 6 weeks because they are trying to live on 4-5 hours of interrupted sleep.” Dr. Peggy Linguist said. Go to bed early, sleep late, and nap – the laundry and the dishes will still be there when you wake up.

Mother of two, Sally Ferguson recalls that she felt like a different person when she didn’t get enough rest. “It seemed like most of those toddler days, I was a walking zombie. Too many short nights and long days; if I could do that over, I would give myself permission to take naps too. Those little ones deserve a mom who is rested and peaceful.” Sally Ferguson said.

Experts at the National Sleep Foundation recommend 11 to 13 hours of sleep per night for children age 3 to 5; 10 to 11 hours for children 5 to 12; 8 ½ to 9 ½ hours for teenagers, and 7 to 9 hours for adults. Sleep deprivation is a very real thing not only for moms, but for our spouses and our children. Set the precedent today to ensure you and yours are getting enough rest.

Avoid using the bed for things that are not sleep related. Your bedroom should be a place of rest and peace, so forego working or watching TV in bed.

Find another place for time-outs, so your children don’t learn to associate punishment with sleeping.

Have a set sleep and wake schedule for everyone in the house. You may even want to institute a period of quiet time before bed in order for everyone to unwind by reading or doing some other quiet activity.

Take the phone off the hook, put a note on the door not to ring the doorbell and let someone else greet any guests and sleep when the baby sleeps, everything else can wait. Be sure to acknowledge your friends and family's visit and gifts or meals if you are sleeping, nursing or otherwise indisposed.

In the Trenches: "I took advantage of napping when my baby napped. I let my husband and everyone else that offered take care of the meals and chores, so I could concentrate on me and the baby. I needed the rest and time to establish breast feeding, those were the most important things at the time, All the other stuff could be done by someone else." Tonya Holter, mom of Tyler, Lauren & Kyle

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

Pediatrician and mom Dr. Peggy Linguist believes that God gives each mom maternal instincts that we should trust. “I remember early on in my training, a very young, uneducated mom came in with her baby. She couldn't say what or why, but she knew something was wrong with her 2-month-old. He didn't have fever, but she said he was feeding differently. Our attending physician, who was older and wiser than most of us, insisted on admitting this baby to the hospital. Turns out, this baby had meningitis and would have died if we had sent him home. This mom knew before there were any obvious signs that there was something wrong, and she followed her God-given instincts about it.” Dr. Linguist said. While the situations you face as a new mom will probably never be that dramatic, we each have maternal instincts that we should listen to. “I think a big part of my job is helping moms recognize their instincts and to follow them. Read the books and listen to your doctor and your friends and your mom, but in the end, follow your heart. You will always know your child better than anyone else. God designed it that way.” Dr. Linguist said.

KNOWLEDGE POWER

Don't be embarrassed or afraid to ask questions either. After our son was born, no matter how frequently we changed him, pee would soak through his clothing. In frustration one day, my husband threw up his hands and said, "what kind of worthless diapers are we using?" It wasn't long after that I was sharing that story with one of my girlfriends and she asked if we were pointing Caleb's penis down when we put his diaper on. I felt like someone could have stamped stupid on my head. No one had told me that and even as a former parenting and child development teacher I had never heard of such. Sure enough, it wasn't the diapers that were the problem; it was our lack of knowledge.

In the Trenches: "I always tell new moms that there is no shame in asking for help. No matter if it's calling a friend for advice, or your doctor for medication, or your mom for some sleep. Those first few months can be survival of the fittest, so use your resources, and ask for help." Lori Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

CLEANING STRATEGIES

Don't feel guilty if your house is not as clean as you or your husband would like it to be. Unfortunately, cleaning is just one of those things that is difficult to keep up with when you have a new baby, toddler, preschooler and eventually teenager in the house. Seriously children no matter their age are demanding of our time and messy to boot.

This was tough for me, not because I am a neat freak or anything, but because my husband needs a clean house. Eventually, my husband learned to accept less than perfection in the house, the meals and so much more and I instituted a time of quick cleaning every night before he came home from work. We both learned that what we were giving up was replaced by something much greater – the gift of our children.

Several of the mom's I spoke to said they also hired a housecleaner and simply lowered their standards; remember a dust bunny or two never killed anyone.

In the Trenches: "I have a house cleaner come every 2 weeks and it is well worth the money. She does all the deep cleaning that I just don't get to because I'm working, so instead of spending all day Saturday scrubbing the floor and the toilets I am able to spend that time with my precious family." Tiffany Stevens, mom of Hannah & Emma

CONTINGENCY PLAN

Plan some activities for your older children ahead of time so they don't feel left out and act out. Call a friend – ask her to watch your kids when you are having a rough day, then return the favor when she is. After we had our son, our daughter would act out every time I tried to nurse him. It was a difficult adjustment for all of us. Several of my friends stepped in and took her swimming or took her to the movies, so I could have some time alone to recuperate and focus on the baby. She thought it was a treat and it was – especially for me!

In the Trenches: “The best advice I can give new moms is this: If others offer help, don't be embarrassed to take them up on it and at the same time, don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. I felt really bad about sending Ethan to play at friends' houses the first few weeks that Sara Beth was here. I didn't want to feel like I was taking advantage of people and pawning my child off on someone. I needed some rest, though, and I couldn't rest with an unsupervised six-year-old in the house. I had to convince myself that these people were my closest friends, and they wouldn't offer to take him for an afternoon, if they didn't genuinely want to help me out.”

Melissa Harwell, mom of Ethan & Sara Beth

PROTECT YOURSELF

As a new mom you need to learn how to say no. Stop worrying what others might think, and stop saying yes out of obligation. Instead when someone asks you to do something, politely tell them that you will have to get back to them. Take the time to pray and decide if it is something you really want to do. Since I quit teaching to stay home, it seems people assume I have more time, when in all actuality I am busier than ever. It has been a long process, but I have learned to say no.

Recently a woman who works asked me if I could watch her daughter the next day because her babysitter couldn't. I quickly answered yes before I considered all the other things I was committed to that week, like writing 4 articles, a picture session with a friend, a conference call with my Celebrate Moms leadership team and speaking to a MOPS group, not to mention my family responsibilities. I forced myself to call her when I got home from church and tell her I just couldn't do it; don't worry she found somebody. Remember, just because someone asks you to do something doesn't mean you have to do it, sometimes as women we need to take care of ourselves and our families and let somebody else get the blessing of serving.

RETREAT POWER

Author, speaker and mom of four, Kathy Pride has also been a childbirth educator for years and has a few suggestions on how to create a retreat from the world in those first few days home. She encourages moms not to answer the phone. “Tape the outgoing message to give pertinent information, such as, overdue and counting, not getting much sleep, pick up some milk and drop it off if you are coming my way.” Kathy Pride said. She also suggests hanging a robe behind the front door to grab and throw on over whatever you are wearing when you need to answer the door when someone unexpected arrives. “It hastens their departure, especially if you mess up your hair and look weary and confused; which is, after all, the reality.” Kathy Pride said.

SIBLING STRATEGIES

Many moms (and dads) assume it will be so much easier to add another child to the family than it was to add the first, but reality often doesn't bear that out. Trying to soothe the newborn so they don't wake your toddler or your husband and attempting to nurse while entertaining your preschooler and answering the phone may make you wish for more hands, better yet a nanny. Avoid making additional significant changes in your first child's life. For instance, it may not be the best time to potty train your child or move them to a toddler bed after just having another baby. Adjusting to a new sibling is hard enough.

NURSING TRICKS AND TIPS

Nursing was so difficult for me, but I am glad that I did it for at least a short amount of time. Whether you choose to nurse or not, know that your decision is your own. Do what is best for your and yours and don't worry about other's opinions. That being said, here are a few battle strategies to equip you in your nursing battles.

Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated and produce more milk.

Use a nursing pillow to help situate the baby and ease the weight on your arms.

Try different positions until you and baby figure out the best method for nursing.

Be sure to have boxes and boxes of breast pads on hand to prevent leakage.

A long hot shower will help the milk come down for pumping or nursing.

If you are breastfeeding and supplementing with bottles – choose nipples that as closely as possible resemble your own.

Ask a lactation consultant, nurse, your pediatrician or a close successful nursing friend for their advice and hands on help if necessary.

Invest a little in a good nursing bra latch will unhook easily and wear t-shirts or button up shirts for easy access.

Wear a sports bra for a more firm and comfortable hold as your milk dries up.

Last, but not least if you and the baby spend more time crying than nursing – don't feel guilty about stopping, it may be time to switch full time to the bottle.

In the Trenches: "I never was big on schedules. I did what worked for me. If they were hungry I fed them. I still went to the mall during nap time. I never let schedules keep me from doing things that I wanted to do. I don't think of it as being selfish, I think it made me a better mom because I was still doing the things that made me happy." Stacie Brown, mom of Taylor, Haylie & Peyton

TIMELY TACTICS

Before I had children, I have to admit that I often wondered what stay-at-home moms really did all day. I had a written to-do list of everything I thought I could accomplish now that I was at home from deep cleaning, to organizing all our closets and traveling to see old friends. I have always been an over-achiever or so I thought.

My extra free time was not that free as I spent hours nursing, pumping, cleaning and trying to squeeze in a little rest. As an avid to-do lister, I must encourage you to be realistic about how much of your to-do list you can accomplish. For a time you may even want to eliminate some of your responsibilities, just be sure not to make any rash decisions in those first overwhelmed days and weeks that you might regret later. It may not be enough to just reduce the number of things you want or have to do; I have also had to adjust my expectations about the speed at which I can get things done. The necessary interruptions and drain on your energy as a new mom is sure to slow you down a little.

A to do-list really is a great idea because it also helps with that forgetful mommy brain issue. It's not so much that you can't remember important things as much as it is that you have more important things to remember. As you complete the items on your "to-do" list, check them off or cross them out so you are able to see all that you have accomplished and what's next. Many new moms also become frustrated in their first few weeks at home because time seems to go by slowly. Living on a newborn's clock can be difficult and moms often fight the urge to get up and get things done. They become irritated when it seems like all they do all day long is feed the baby and change diapers and there seems to be nothing to show for all their efforts. It eventually smooths out as your baby starts lengthening the time in between feedings as well as their sleep time.

Try not to obsess about when the baby eats and how long it takes or how often the baby sleeps and for how long. While schedules work for some mom's and their babies you may consider living without a clock for a few days or weeks. Time is irrelevant as long as you feed the baby when they are hungry, change them when they are wet, and they sleep when they need to. Instead pay attention to your baby's signals; they will let you know what they need when they need it. I hate to even say it, but often once you get your baby's routine down it

seems to change. Just when the baby starts sleeping through the night, they will inevitably get a cold, a new tooth, or hit a growth spurt and want to go back to nightly feedings or not want to sleep at all. Organize your schedule and routine for even greater efficiency.

Unless you're expecting something crucial, check and answer your e-mail and phone messages no more than once or twice a day.

When you make an appointment or date, write the person's name and phone number in your planner and enter it in to your cell phone, so you won't have to search for it if plans change.

When scheduling commit to a certain period of time, such as between 12:00 and 12:30, instead of at 12:15. That way, you can still make the target time even if the baby has a dirty diaper or needs to nurse just as you're about to walk out the door.

Set up a specific area near the door to place items that need to be returned, mailed or taken to the cleaners so they won't be forgotten. If you have an entry closet or mud room, use clear plastic shoe bags to hold things like keys, cell phones, mail, permission slips and other miscellaneous items.

Buy two of everything you use regularly, like ketchup, ranch dressing, and toilet paper, so you'll never run out. Create a master grocery list and post it on the refrigerator. When you run out of something, add the item to your ongoing grocery list for your next trip to the store.

In the Trenches: I made lists on my computer and have adapted them as Josh has grown. When he was a baby I made a list of everything that should be in the car for a short outing, and also for a full-day, such as the beach or amusement park so when we were packing to leave I could quickly glance at it and not wonder if I had forgotten anything. I laminated it and stuck it to the inside of my trunk. It had things like bottled water, extra clothes, hat, snacks, sunscreen, small toys, swim diapers, towels, camera, batteries, and an extra shirt for mom, etc. I also made a packing list for airplane travel—what to pack for a carry on and for the luggage. It's saved me many hours of re-writing the list every time we go somewhere.” Lisa Copen, mom of Joshua

DEBRIEFING

What has been the best and worst advice you have received about motherhood?

Make a list of who you can call on to help you and then actually do it!

What no longer matters as much to you that you can eliminate for you to-do list?

CALL IN THE RESERVES

I have always considered myself a very independent woman, the commander and chief of my life if you will, but after I had our daughter, I began to doubt my adequacy to care for her and even myself. The basic survival skill of asking for help should be a required test before moms ever check out of the hospital. Since it's not, this is your crash course in delegating. Whether you are a stay at home mom, a working mom or somewhere in between now is the time to learn how to ask for help. Your husband, extended family and friends are usually ready, willing and able to pitch in – you just need to ask. As a new mom there are so many responsibilities and pressures that you will face. Some days it will seem like you are losing the battle and that is when you need to rely on the help of others the most. For some of us that's more difficult than for others.

In the Trenches: "My husband worked nights when I had our first son and I really couldn't handle six nights alone. I will end up calling my step mother in the middle of the night and she would come over in her jammies and all." Katy Warsing, mom of Tait & Gavin

DELEGATE AND WIN

In many other cultures the mother is often banished to her room to rest and simply bond with her baby while her mother or other family members take care of the household duties – wouldn't that be nice. You don't have to move to another country, just ask for the help you need. Just as your friends and family offer you their wisdom and experience, most will also be willing and able to offer actual hands on help. Your family and your friends are your best resource in this battle zone.

If they want to assist you, they most likely won't mind some suggestions on how they can be most helpful. However, it won't do anyone any good to criticize their efforts. It really doesn't matter if all the laundry is folded and put away, much less ironed. Let it go if the towels aren't folded perfectly or the toys aren't in the appropriate bin. Learn to accept and be thankful for the help your husband and children provide.

One of the worst enemies in the battle of delegation is a condemning spirit. After our children were born, I occasionally criticized my husband's contributions. Your husband may not feed, diaper, clothe or bathe the baby right the first time, maybe even the first twenty times, and he may never do it like you do it; but be thankful he is at least doing something. Let unreasonable expectations go and avoid correcting him and other with a spirit of condemnation, unless you want to insure their retreat.

It can be difficult to ask for help, to admit that we don't have it all together, but there is power in our vulnerability. There are just some times in our lives when things get too much for us, but we must let go of the notion that others will think less of us if we admit we need help. No one thinks less of us when we seek help from a lawyer or an accountant, in the same way, new moms (anyone for that matter) should be able to seek help from their family and friends and even the counsel from doctor, psychiatrist or counselor if necessary. Admitting that you're overwhelmed, anxious or depressed is not a sign of weakness. Sometimes just saying how you feel brings a cathartic release. Keeping your feelings a secret only intensifies them and most likely your family and friends already sense something is wrong.

In the Trenches: “Up until the point of giving birth to my first child, I’d never asked anyone for help of any kind. The key to getting it all done is to welcome the help when it is offered and don’t feel inadequate if you feel like you need to ask for it. Welcoming the help keeps your sanity intact.” Sandra McIntosh, mom of Jeremy & Nicholas

YOU NEED ALLIS

One of the tips I heard again and again was to tell people what you actually need. Clearly communicate your desires and expectations to people helping you during the first few days or weeks at home. Avoid being vague and just going along with their suggestions. No one knows better than you what you need. If all they want to do is hold the baby, but you are too exhausted to do the laundry and the dishes state specifically that you would like them to do that, as well.

Do you want help with the housework so you can concentrate on the baby? If so, what housework would you like them to do? How would you like them to do it? Do you prefer to have someone diaper, dress and check on the baby so you can rest and recuperate? Or do you prefer to have someone with you while you care for the baby?

Military alliances are necessary to achieve long-term objectives that further the common interests of the members. These relationships are similar to the alliances we must form with other moms as we share common interests, views, or purposes. Jesus himself sanctioned alliances when he established His twelve disciples. He even had three best friends in Peter, James and John. These three men were privy to Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:2), his deep sorrow in the garden (Mark 14:32), and the first resurrection from an empty tomb (John 20:3).

It is a wonderful idea to have a small group of trusted friends that share your beliefs, interests, and standards for life. Other moms from your church, play group or mom's group are the perfect candidates for your alliance. Here are a few ideas to initiate and cultivate positive friendships. Leave the guys and the kids at home and have a chick flick movie marathon, complete with all the fattening snacks you can stand. Put on mud masks or give each other pedicures to make the girls night out complete.

Don't forget about your old friends. Seek out a friend you haven't seen or talked to in a while. Call or write and ask them to get together sometime soon. It can be such a blessing to renew an old friendship and introduce them to your new child, too.

In the Trenches: "If someone ever offers to help, take note of it and call them when you need the help. My opinion is, they wouldn't have offered if they didn't want to help. Also, go to your friends that are in similar situations and trade out. For example, if you watch my son while I go to the gym I will watch yours while you go to the grocery store. Just know that they are feeling the same way you are and will be more than happy to trade services." Melissa Allen, mom of Hayden

DAD DELEGATION

Moms are not alone in their battles – your husband is there as your helper and you need to rely on him. Just because a certain responsibility used to be yours doesn't necessarily mean that it should continue to be yours. Every so often, you and your partner should reassign the responsibilities involved in running a home, caring for a baby, working and doing everything else that needs to get done.

According to Dr. David Morehead he is often questioned by concerned husbands about whether or not their wife is ok and how they can help. “I encourage Dads to help mom as much as possible, and give her a break from time to time. It can just be so overwhelming when there is no let-up from the constant demand of motherhood. I usually just try to remind them that they are not alone with the difficulty of the transition, and don't be afraid to ask for help when they need it.” Dr. David Morehead said.

More often than not, your husband wants to help, he just needs some direction. Now is not the time to be vague and hope he reads your mind. Doctor and mom, Patti Powell, suggests that new parents work together and realize that fatigue and exhaustion make us say and do things we normally wouldn't. “Be quick to forgive and make clear responsibilities for each other - don't just assume that your husband knows you want him to do the laundry. If you never discuss it, your resentment will build up very quickly until you explode.” Patti Powell said. Your family, friends and especially your husband are there because they want to help, so let them.

Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy Linguist also suggests letting dad help with the day to day stuff to relieve your stress. “I tell moms to figure out what they need and ask for it. I always needed a walk by myself outside by about 5:30 pm. Some moms need help at night, whether it's dad doing a night-time feeding or going to get the baby. Some moms early on need a husband who will help fend off "well-wishers" who want to stay for hours, or relatives that are difficult. I had one mom who just wanted 30 minutes for a shower and to put on her make-up for the day, so her husband figured out how to arrange his work schedule to provide that for her - talk about someone feeling loved. She was a great mom anyway, but that 30 minutes a day made her so effective and happy.” Dr. Linguist said.

One of the best suggestions we received and followed from others was for my husband and I to sleep in shifts. For the most part, regardless of their work schedule, most husbands can assist in the nighttime routine. If you have older children, get to bed as quickly as possible after they have gone to bed. The laundry, the dishes and even the thank you notes can wait. Sleep deprivation is your enemy – let your hubby take the first shift till 2:00 am and then you will be on call. He doesn't have to stay awake – he just needs to get up with the baby as needed. Same goes if you are nursing – my husband would bring the baby to me and then take them back to their bed. By sleeping in shifts, you will hopefully get in at least a few hours solid sleep and daddy gets special uninterrupted bonding time with the new baby.

In the Trenches: “Delegating is a great weakness of mine, so I am lucky to have a husband who feels parenting is his responsibility, too. Every future bride should ask this question before she marries a man: ‘Do you feel parenting our children is as much your responsibility as mine?’” Judy Dippel, mom of Lindsay & Ryan

PASSING ON THE COMMAND

It has been said that as moms we are working ourselves out of a job. As your children age, they become capable of doing things for themselves, so let them. Eventually our children will leave us and the home we have made for them to make their own way in the world. We do them a disservice if we do not learn to delegate some of the household responsibilities to our children. There is so much they need to learn from cleaning, bill paying, cooking, to the dreaded laundry.

In the Trenches: "Delegation is a good thing. I delegate to everyone I can. My kids help out by doing their own laundry, my husband has chores he is responsible for and if my sister runs to the store, I get her to pick up some milk for me too." Kathy Firkins, mom of Kaiti, Max and Christopher

DEBRIEFING

Who in your family can you ask for help?

How can your friends help you?

List at least three chores or other activities that you can delegate to someone else.

Negotiate with your husband about feeding, bathing and bed time responsibilities.

SEARCH AND RESCUE CALL IN THE TROOPS

In an interview with Today's Christian Woman, Women of Faith speaker and author Luci Swindoll said, "Other than my relationship with Christ, friendship is the most important thing in my life. We only have so much time and energy, but friendship is worth it." Today more than ever, families live miles apart from each other and hectic schedules make it difficult to maintain significant relationships, much less get the support and encouragement we need to win our mommy wars. New moms are in dire need of rescue and searching for friendships with other moms is a great battle strategy.

Who knows better how you feel than another mom? Your husband really doesn't want to hear about your sore and leaking breasts, the gas pressure - I mean abdominal pain - really, did someone forget to tell me something? Throw in sleep deprivation and what it does to your spirit and you are a mom in desperate need of rescue.

I often call my other mommy friends when I have a question or I just need to vent. We all know who those friends worthy of speed dial are, too. Topping the list is the friend who freely admits that she gets stressed too; next, the friend who has the not so helpful husband when yours forgets to pick up the formula or the diapers (hypothetically speaking of course). Don't forget about those friends still hanging on to those last few pregnancy pounds when you can't find anything in your closet to wear. The friend who nursed her kids until it almost wasn't legal when you need help with your technique and finally the friend who struggled with nursing and bottle-fed all her babies when you are finally ready to give nursing up!

In the Trenches: "Girlfriends are important because they come from a similar reference point. I thought my husband should read my mind and meet all of my needs. I thought he should be my knight in shining armor and rescue me from stress. I found out that stress is a part of life, and he needed someone to rescue him too. We need each other, but we also need friends of the same gender who can fill needs in various ways. That takes the pressure off of marriage and allows it to be a safe haven for one another." Sally Ferguson, mom of Nate & Ann

NO LONGER AN ARMY OF ONE

Friend, fellow author and mom of two adorable boys, Dena Dyer, believes that while she couldn't make it through her mommy wars without the support of her family, she is equally grateful for her friends. "I think women really need a support system, especially when their kids are young. With families being spread out and the grandparents not being as available as in years past, we moms really need help. I encourage women to find a group like MOPs, Moms in Touch or Bible Study Fellowship, where they can receive encouragement and comfort, as well as practical help like meals, babysitting, a girls' night out, etc. when they need it." Dena said.

There are thoughts and feelings that only another mom can understand and places in a woman's heart that only a best girl-friend can reach. I hope you have a special girlfriend in your life. Someone that gets you; knows your faults and loves you anyway. I am blessed to have a few friends like that in my life now, but there have been times when I have felt utterly alone and spent countless hours crying out to God for a special friend just for me. I think most moms would agree that they have felt that same sense of loneliness and would like to exchange it for something more. All of us, especially moms, long for a safe place to share our frustrations, joys, hopes and dreams. God has created us with a deep need for meaningful relationships and so He understands a woman's desire to have close friends because He gave it to us. I hope that God's perspective can shed some light on the subject for all of us as you join me in the search for a few good friends that can rescue us from the mommy wars.

FIGHTING FOR FRIENDSHIP

It has often been said that to have a friend, you have to be a friend. Unfortunately, a woman's friendships are often complicated and sometimes downright messy. I have been through my share of ups and downs in my relationships with other women, but I have learned that friendships at their core are in-depth relationships that must be developed and earned. They enrich our lives and bring us joy in so many ways. At its best, friendship combines trust, support, communication, vulnerability, loyalty, availability, risk, empathy, understanding and intimacy. These characteristics of friendship are craved by all women, but they aren't created easily or immediately. Friendships are constantly evolving and as a result, can last for a moment or a lifetime.

A great example of a friendship that was fought for can be found in 1 Samuel 20:1-4. We can learn a great deal from David and Jonathon's relationship that can apply to our own friendships. It was centered on their equal devotion to the Lord and each other. They stood by each other through thick and thin, despite differences in status, pressures from family and even threats of death. They protected each other and looked out for one another's best interests because they loved each other, even as much as they loved themselves. David continues to honor their friendship even after he takes the throne when he offers hospitality to Mephibosheth, Jonathon's crippled son.

In the Trenches: "Our family lived far away, so I relied on a good friend. We swapped babysitting when we needed to go grocery shopping, had an appointment or just needed to get away." Cindy Mong, mom of Alison &

Ethan

MENTOR MANEUVERS

Recently, I heard Beth Moore speaking about the importance of mentoring through friendship. While she praised the mentors in her life, I couldn't help but wonder - wow, what kind of woman do you have to be to mentor Beth Moore? Friendships have the ability to not only sustain us, but to add a much needed breath of fresh air to our lives. In the everyday trenches of life we all need a mentor to stand beside us modeling, encouraging, noticing, teaching, offering and relating to us in love. In Titus 2:3-5, God admonishes women how to live a life of influence. I want to share with you my take on how you can not only become the woman God wants you to be, but become a mentor for other women.

The first step in developing those all important mentor friendships is becoming a model. No, not the kind that wears shirts that would fit your two year old; think more along the lines of the Proverbs 31 woman.

The next step in establishing a mentor relationship is to provide encouragement based on mutual admiration and respect. You can speed the process along by motivating your friend to "be all that they can be." Hey, if it works for the army it can work for us moms, too. Become their biggest fan or cheerleader. If they are a great cook or writer encourage them to enter a contest. Just as you do with your children, brag on them often and in front of others. Reward them with a lunch or coffee when they lose weight, read their bible continually or even mend a relationship. Send a note or buy flowers for a woman who has mentored you, thanking her for her friendship and example.

In order to mentor someone you must get out of your box and notice them. I have a magnet on my refrigerator with the statement, "A true friend thinks you're a good egg even when you're slightly cracked." I love that thought, but I want to take it a step further. A true friend is one who cares about you enough to speak the truth in love, to help mend those cracks. Arguably, the greatest benefit of forming mentor relationships with other Christian women is the accountability you share. Friends must be willing to ultimately risk losing the relationship for the greater good. We must begin to call our friends on the carpet when we suspect something is

amiss. When one strays or gets caught up in something that doesn't bring honor or glory to the Lord, her observant friends can help get her back on track.

There is no limit to what we can teach each other and our friends are also a great resource and wealth of knowledge. We can learn so much from others if we just open our hearts and minds. Pass on your cooking or cleaning tips as you embrace your friend's awesome bible study techniques. Maybe you have a foolproof nursing method you can share with a frustrated new mom. A close friend shared her potty training strategies with me and another let us borrow her Elmo potty doll when I had trouble potty training my little girl.

My son's favorite movie is about discovering God's world. Yes, I let him watch TV – it gives me a chance to take a shower or at least brush my hair and teeth. When he was younger, he would sit in his bouncy seat in an almost trance like state as BOZ, Drew and Gracie sang about how God loves them and how they can show God they love him. One of the songs, "the more we help each other", details how much happier we can be when we help our friends. Take a tip from that adorable green bear next door BOZ and be there for your friends not only in spirit, but physically, too. There are so many practical ways to offer your heart and energy to a friend. It doesn't have to be a big gesture; it's the thought (followed by action) that counts. For example, offer to baby-sit for a friend in a bind or give her a ride to get her car from the shop or pick up something she forgot at the grocery store. One of my friends brought another a six pack of Dr. Peppers to cheer her up after she had spent a week in the house with two sick kids. As I wrote this book, so many of my friends offered emotional support, prayers, babysitting and even brought me treats to keep me going.

The final step in developing a mentor relationship is to relate to one another. Friendships will come and go as your children grow and most likely, your closest friends will be the parents of your child's friends because you can relate to them and what they are experiencing. The age and activities of your children will influence who you spend time with by virtue of spending time with your children. There is nothing wrong with that – you are going through the same experiences and can encourage each other. You will naturally have more in common with the mom from your daughter's gymnastic class than your single friend without kids – given your shared experiences of the joys and struggles of parenting in this crazy world we live in.

In the Trenches: "I joined about six other women from our church who are all mommies through adoption. It's been such a joy to have the typical mommy conversations, but also be able to ask questions about adoption issues. Topics such as 'what do you say when someone asks you, are those your real kids?' or 'what are you telling your child about his birth mom and how he was born?' Having this support has been an amazing blessing, plus our children benefit from having a lot of friends who are all adopted." Lisa Copen, mom of Joshua

PETALS OF PRIORITY

One of my daughter's favorite movies depicts Strawberry Shortcake, her baby sister Apple Dumpling, her cat Custard and dog Pupcake on several adventures to find the perfect party supplies for Apple's first birthday party. The movie is adorable and brings back memories of playing with Strawberry Shortcake when I was a little girl. In the movie, Strawberry Shortcake and her new friend Orange Blossom sing a song about how friendship grows like a flower. The song suggests that if you plant a seed of friendship deeply, it will grow with time.

The comparison of friendship and flowers may seem silly, but I think it is a great metaphor. You can compare the layers of friendship to the petals of a flower. The petals are numerous and may add or take away from a flower's beauty. Friends must be flexible in their expectations and any conflict must be resolved for a friendship to blossom. Ultimately, friendships may not last if they are not made a priority and die gradually just like a flower if they are not tended to.

One-on-one contact is a prerequisite for any friendship to mature, the friendship must be a priority and that requires a significant investment from each person. We must honor the relationship by making time, being on time and paying attention. This is especially true when you consider the demands on moms, but that is why it is so important to make an effort. You can spend time with your friends physically, by telephone or by writing them.

Time with them is essential to keep the friendship alive and planning a regular time to get together is helpful. Maybe you can meet once a week for lunch or every other Saturday morning for breakfast.

Try not to cancel at the last minute, if you must cancel be honest and let them know why. Find the time to keep a promise, even if it is difficult. Your word is important and your friends are counting on you to do what you say you will.

Remember what is important to your friends and do all you can to help make it happen. When I was pregnant with my daughter I had mentioned to a friend that I wanted to have a large number of balloons in the front yard when she was born. Her coming home was delayed 17 days because of complications, but when we arrived home, in the rain no less, my friend was there with a huge bunch of balloons. The fact that she remembered a passing comment and made it happen meant so much to me.

Run your weekly errands with a close friend to save time, money and your sanity. Have one friend can stay in the car with the kids in their car seats while the other one runs into the store. It can be so difficult to get even one child in and out of the car to pick up the dry cleaning, mail or a few groceries and this will give you a chance to connect and relate to one another during an otherwise hectic day.

SPIRITUAL INTIMACY

Talking, listening, praying and worshipping together helps to build Godly friendships and must not be neglected. Dare to be intimate if you want to take your friendship beyond a surface level. Encourage each other in your relationship with the Lord, by including Him in your friendship.

Attend a bible study group with other moms or go to a woman's conference together. Ask meaningful, open-ended questions and share intimate thoughts and feelings. Deepen your friendship by discussing spiritual questions like these: How can I support and pray for you? What is God teaching you through His word? After asking your friend a question, wait for their response, before you interrupt to share your own thoughts.

Take a walk with a friend or meet them for dessert after you have put the kids to bed. Ask questions to get a better picture of each other's hearts like these: What do you need to feel loved and cared for? What frightens or frustrates you? If you could try something fun and adventurous, what would it be? As with the spiritual questions mentioned earlier, wait for your girlfriend's response, before you interrupt to share your own thoughts.

Pray with and for each other. In her book, *The Praying Wives Club*, co-authored with her friend Dianne Anderson, Marita Littauer states, "Regardless of where your marriage relationship is today – somewhere between terrible and terrific – chances are it could be better . . . and prayer will help." Based on the principals in this awesome book, I get together once a month with three other women to talk about and pray for our marriages. It isn't a male bashing session or even a time to pray for Aunt Gertrude's cancer – it's simply about sharing what is going on in our marriages and specifically with our husbands. The spiritual intimacy of sharing your tragedies and triumphs in prayer with your girlfriends will not only benefit your marriage, it will ultimately benefit your friendships, as well.

Spend time talking about and encourage each other's hopes and dreams. When I felt God leading me to begin a Mom's ministry, I shared it with a few close friends. They encouraged me and held me accountable to do it.

They also offered their own help and support and eventually became the leadership team. It has turned into a wonderful opportunity for moms just like us to share their hearts, study the word and grow closer to God and each other. Another group of friends understood my passion about writing this book, encouraged me through the process and even helped me edit it. A sister in Christ is better than a hundred casual friends.

In the Trenches: "I couldn't make it without my Mom's group. I can't wait for the 2nd and 4th Fridays of the month so I can go to our meeting. I have met so many neat moms that are going through the same exact things I'm going through. They encourage me, pray for me, lift me up when I can't, and bring lots of joy and laughter to my life." Lori Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

COMMISERATE AND CELEBRATE

My daughter loves the movie Finding Nemo and since I have seen it at least a hundred times, I am able to draw a great deal of wisdom from it. For those of you who have seen it, you will recall the touching scene toward the end of the movie when Dory tells Marlin that when she is with him she feels like she is home and begs him not to leave her behind. Wouldn't it be nice if all friendships were like that?

When you are with a good friend, it's like you are home and you are able to relax and be yourself. You go out into the world to do what you have to, but you always have someone to come home to. We all need someone to commiserate and celebrate with, to share our ups and downs, problems and triumphs, good times and tribulations.

A genuine friendship will be comfortable, relaxed and meet the needs of both friends. A great friendship is an escape from the trial and demands of life and you are relieved when you are together. You don't have to become a fish to experience those feelings; it is possible to develop friendships like this in the rough seas of your own life. You can start by turning casual acquaintances into friends.

Speak kind words to a stranger or just smile. You will not only make their day, but you might make a new friend, too.

Invite an acquaintance that you would like to get to know better out for dinner or a movie. If you have an extra ticket to a play or movie, ask them to join you.

When you move to a different neighborhood or city one of the most challenging things on your to-do list may be finding some new friends. Take the initiative and introduce yourself to your new neighbors first.

Find a church home your entire family loves.

Attend a bible study for women or just for Moms and make a connection that will last, provide support and help chase away your loneliness.

Be a buddy to a new co-worker or visitor at church. Show them around as you recall how difficult it was for you to find your place, too. You may never know the impact you can have on others just by being nice to them.

In the Trenches: “When I was new to the community FABC took me in and gave my family a church home, something we were desperately searching for. This was a wonderful start that gave me the confidence to pursue other things in a brand new community of people I didn’t know.” Wendy Johnson, mom of Kutter & Kaden

ENEMIES OF FRIENDSHIP

There are numerous enemies of friendship including unforgiveness, secrets, criticism, personal change by one or both friends, shifts in priorities and even time challenges. However, authentic, deep-rooted friendships can survive these trials with commitment and perseverance.

Friendship without forgiveness is impossible. If you are holding on to bad feelings even after you have made up with someone, try writing them a letter. Let all your hurt and frustrations out as you write, then read the letter out loud in private. Then instead of sending the letter which would undoubtedly cause more drama, let all the pain go by tearing it up and throwing it away. This is also a helpful technique to deal with pain from your past. My counselor once had me list all the horrible things that had happened to me in my life, pray over them and forgive the offenders, then tear the list up. It was painful, but very cathartic.

In the book, *Better Together, What On Earth Are We Here For?*, Rick Warren states that, “Confession reduces the power of a secret. The beginning of healing is revealing. There is something cleansing and liberating about coming clean through confession. It also allows our group to come alongside us to support and pray for our struggle.” When we are able to share our deepest wounds with our friends we beat the enemy who wants to disgrace us and keep us separate and apart from other believers. “Forgiveness only comes from God, but healing comes from confession in community. When we confess, and then are still unconditionally embraced by our small group, God’s love and forgiveness become more tangible.” Rick Warren said.

Respect each others decisions as moms and don’t criticize each other under the guise of advice. There may be some truth to the criticism you receive, but consider the source and their motives. Make a positive change if needed, but let go of verbal abuse. Just because someone said it, doesn’t make it true.

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

Having a friend is an investment of time, energy and spirit. You need to evaluate if your chosen friends are worth the effort. Not all friendships are good for you, so you must learn to recognize those friends that are harmful. My friend and fellow Celebrate Moms team member, Judy Dippel, places a high premium on friendships, but is careful to assess if the relationships she is involved are beneficial for both parties. “Genuine friendships are very valuable to me, and nearly every woman. It’s been proven, for physical, mental and emotional well-being women need positive, trusted friendships. But negative, troublesome friendships create chaos that none of us need. So weigh the value of a friend based on what they bring to your life, and what you bring to theirs.” Judy Dippel said.

Learn to ignore the messages and messengers that only bring negativity. Refuse to hang out with negative people and surround yourself with positive people who balance out your own negativity. When I was in college, I had a friend who constantly pulled the poor pitiful me card. I finally had to stop spending time with her, because I was picking up her negative spirit. I can be negative enough on my own without anyone else’s encouragement, thank you very much.

Avoid relationships with people who consistently blame you and/or everyone else for her problems. There is always something wrong with this person, and instead of taking responsibility for her life, she’d rather blame others.

Steer clear of friends that gain energy from complaining and dumping their frustrations on others.

Then there are needy friends who call to ask for your guidance, support, information, advice, or whatever she needs to feel better in the moment. The conversation generally revolves around her, and you can almost feel the life being sucked out of you. If you think you are being manipulated, make an effort to resolve the issue or move on.

Other so-called friends take pleasure in causing you shame or embarrassment. They may cut you off, put you down, reprimand you, or make fun of you or your ideas in front of others. She often ignores your boundaries and may try to convince you that her criticism is for your own good.

Others discount or challenge everything you say and have a strong need to be right and can find fault with every situation. It can be exhausting to have a conversation with them, so eventually you end up giving in and deciding to just listen.

One of the worst kinds of friends is the gossip who talks about others behind their backs. They receive energy from relaying stories, opinions, and the latest "scoop." Be careful what you share with them, after all, if she'll talk about someone else, she'll talk about you.

In the Trenches: "I have had a couple of really painful break ups. It is best to try to communicate as honestly as possible, but regardless sometimes the friendship die or change anyway. I think it is a myth we can have lots of close girlfriends. There really will only be a couple in a lifetime. If there are strong differences in personality, style or discipline, sometimes it is better to just boundary those relationships and set realistic expectations."

Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

DESPERATE MEASURES

When we allow our friends to share our grief they also share in our joy. The loss of a child or even a job can be devastating and it is vital to offer your support. Knowing how the grief process works and that everyone deals with a crisis differently is also important. The best way to care for a friend in a crisis is to just be there.

Listen to their heart and allow them to express their pain in their own way.

Don't worry about not knowing exactly what to say. Saying that you are sorry and you love them is enough. Give them a hug or hold their hand.

Don't just offer to pray for them, stop right then and there and pray with them even if you are on the phone.

If they need someone to speak for them, whether that means answering the door or the phone, volunteer to do it.

Be alert to any needs that you can help with like food or even money if they are struggling financially.

If your friends need to go to marriage counseling offer to care for their children for free.

Whether you have walked with a friend through something traumatic, like the loss of a child or an affair, be sure to check back with them after the initial storm passes. It will mean so much to them to receive an encouraging note from someone during the holidays, on their birthdays and the anniversaries of their loss.

A MOM'S BEST FRIEND

Before His arrest, Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. However, He left the three and went a "little farther" to be alone with His Father. It was a time when no man could join Him, comfort Him or understand what He was about to go through. He had to go alone.

I honestly believe that is a place we rarely go, but a place where God longs for us to join Him. Just as Jesus went a little farther into the garden to be alone and pray, God calls us to come a little farther, to be completely alone with Him. People are a poor substitute for God. Our friends were never intended to meet all of our needs. No woman, or man, can do that, only God can. Our best friend must be Jesus; He is the only one that can fill that empty place in our hearts. However, I do believe that there are times when God gives us the wonderful gift of friendship with another woman and for that, I am deeply grateful.

DEBRIEFING

Do you respect your friends and care about their well being? How do you express your concern and appreciation of them?

Who has mentored you in the past? Send them a note of gratitude.

Who among your friends can you mentor and how?

How do you handle conflicts with your friends?

Do you have a friend that you need to apologize to?

Is God truly your best friend? How can you make time with Him a priority?

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

LOGISTICS

There may never be another time in your life when it is as important to get organized as right now. There is so much to do and while most moms think they have plenty of time to get it done, 9 months goes by fast and you must work out the logistics. This chapter is full of tips, hints and suggestions to help you make your way from the hospital to your home and through your everyday mommy battles.

HOSPITAL FIELD MANUAL

I felt awful during the majority of both of my pregnancies, so I had to take advantage of all the moments here and there that I wasn't throwing up, in pain or just plain nauseous to prepare. Then surprise, surprise, an emergency C-section shortened my preparations for our first child by a month. I wasn't even packed to go to the hospital. Thankfully, an awesome friend stepped up and went to the house and packed a bag with all the essentials including our cameras so we could capture her arrival and my glasses so I could actually see our precious daughter since I had been crying so much my contacts were useless. Don't get caught unprepared; it is essential that you are ready for baby to come home from the hospital. Below is a list of items you may need or want for your time at the hospital. You may also want to include other things that are special to you.

Personal Care:

nursing pads & sanitary napkins
tooth brush, toothpaste & mouthwash
shampoo & conditioner
body wash & face soap
hair brush, comb & clip or ponytail holder
hair dryer & curling iron
deodorant
face & body lotion
contacts, solution & glasses
lip balm & make-up

Clothing:

socks & slippers
nursing nightgown & robe – you don't want to have to wear the one they give you
several pairs of underwear
clothes to wear home – most of us don't fit right back in our skinny jeans

For Baby:

infant nail clippers – they won't give them to you at the hospital and their nails will probably need to be trimmed so they don't scratch themselves

special blanket

toy or other gift from older sibling to give the baby

coming home outfit including socks, shoes, hair bows or hats

Extras:

if Hubby is staying with you, he will need similar overnight items

snacks and drinks – only eat if you are allowed

gum or hard candy

money for vending machines

good book or magazines

watch

cell phones & chargers

calling card

cameras & chargers

baby book to fill out, for guests to sign & for footprints

thank you notes – every time someone visited me, I wrote a thank you note after they left, so I wouldn't forget

your own pillow

personal CD player or IPOD

movies – before our daughter was delivered by emergency c-section, I planned to watch Adam Sandler movies during labor to distract me and make me laugh

a picture or something else to focus on while you are in labor

DIAPER BAG FIELD MANUAL

The suggestions below include what you may want or need in your diaper bag. Just like the list of hospital items, you may not feel they are all necessary. If you think diaper bags are unattractive or awkward, you can use something that suits your personality and lifestyle instead. Try a backpack (that will please Dad) or a purse with several compartments for a different look. I used a small beach bag for our daughter and a tiny bag intended for kids gardening tools for my son. You may even want to eliminate the need for a purse by having a separate section in a larger bag to hold all your essentials like your wallet and keys or use a coordinating smaller bag inside the larger bag that you can pull out when you drop your child off with a sitter or at the church nursery. The key is making sure that you have room for everything you need and that it's easily accessible.

Diapering & Clothing:

- 6-8 diapers depending on how long you will be away from home
- travel sized wipes
- changing pad
- diaper rash ointment
- 2 changes of clothing
- plastic bags for soiled clothes and burp rags
- diaper disposable trash bags
- hats for shade or warmth

Feeding:

- bottles
- bottled water for you & to mix with powdered formula
- formula in pre measured containers
- If bottle feeding breast milk you will want to get a smaller bag with reusable ice packs to keep the bottles fresh.
- solid foods & spoons
- snacks for you and baby

2 to 3 burp rags & bibs

Toys and Soothing Items:

weather appropriate blanket

pacifiers

favorite toy

teething ring

small board books

Safety and Emergency Items:

baby sun block

band aids

hand sanitizer

fever reducer/pain reliever

teething gel

gas drops

Epi-pen if child has severe allergies

thermometer

extra set of keys

sanitary items for you, even if you think you are done bleeding

extra nursing pads – trust me there is nothing worse than a soggy nursing pad

Extras:

clean shirt for mom – our daughter was a spewer and I often needed something to change into when we were out and about

always have a disposable camera in your diaper bag so you can capture every precious first moment

SAFETY FIRST

If you haven't already, now is the time to child proof your home. Time flies by when you're having fun and before you know it that tiny infant swaddled securely in their basinet will begin to roll over, do the commando crawl and eventually transform into a tenacious toddler walking around the house and getting into anything and everything.

While you don't want to stifle their desire for exploration you must take action to keep them safe from harm. Take a first aid and CPR class, and encourage anyone who will be taking care of your child to do the same, including family members. Only hire child care providers and babysitters who are CPR certified. Create a list of emergency numbers like family contacts, doctor's offices and poison control.

Child proofing is never "finished", you must continually check for dangers around the house every day and add more thorough safety measures as they grow. Remember, the most crucial part of child proofing is adult supervision. Always be aware of your surroundings and keep a close watch on your child at all times.

EVERYDAY TEMPTATIONS

Purses contain an assortment of hazards, including medication, coins, sharp objects and makeup. Keep your purse out of your children's reach. I put a hook on the inside of our entry closet door to hang my purse and the diaper bag after our little girl discovered my lipstick and decided to decorate her entire body with it. Remember, what I said about adult supervision? Keys should also be hung up and out of reach. They are filthy and sharp, plus your key chain may have small pieces that can pose a choking hazard.

GETTING AROUND

Carpets hide objects that can cause choking such as coins and the corners of kitchen floors, especially underneath cabinet edges, often harbor choking hazards like dried pasta, beans or pet food. Get down on the floor and check for items regularly. Keep the floor swept and vacuumed and make sure any spills are cleaned up immediately. Keep pet food bowls inaccessible to children.

In the Trenches: "Preparing for baby means think low. Have your husband crawl around and make sure there aren't sharp or dangerous things at the baby's level - this will look kind of funny and it is ok to laugh." Kathy Firkins, mom of Kaiti, Max & Christopher

NURSERY

Your baby will spend a large part of their time in the nursery, especially in their bassinet or crib. Be sure that everything you purchase meets or exceeds current safety standards. Crib slats should be no further than 2 3/8th inches apart to prevent baby's head from becoming trapped. Avoid using soft bedding such as pillows and blankets which can cause suffocation. Instead dress your child comfortably according to the temperature inside the house. Remove or tie up hanging cords from window treatments not only in the nursery, but throughout your home. All baby items including their bouncy seats, swings, high chairs and strollers should have straps that go around the waist and between the legs to prevent baby from slipping out.

BATHROOM

Never, ever leave your child unattended in the bathroom whether in the tub or otherwise. Babies are drawn to the toilets, too. Toilet lids that lock will prevent them from playing in the toilet and getting hurt or even drowning. Both of my children loved to put toilet paper in the potty – not only was it a waste, but it was a mess to clean up when it overflowed. The temperature in the bath tub is also important to monitor. Your water heater should be no more than 120 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent scalding and you can even buy bath toys with thermometers to make sure the water is cool enough for baby.

ELECTRICITY

Store all electrical items out of reach and do not leave them unattended when in use. Serious burns often result from irons, hair dryers and even curling irons. Children can also injure themselves by pulling on cords that are attached to heavy items. Also, make sure that there are no holes in the cords, the smallest amount of saliva can conduct electricity and the baby may be shocked. Plug all outlets, little ones (including mine) are by nature curious and will stick their fingers or other items, even their tongues in them. Children quickly figure out how to remove safety covers from plugs, so you may want to buy the most difficult tamper resistant type you can buy to begin with.

APPLIANCES

Soon your toddler will be just tall enough to pull a hot pan off the stove and strong enough to open the door and climb in the oven. My toddler loves to pull out the silverware when I am loading the dishwasher. I can only imagine what he would do if he could get it open and get to the knives or breakables like glassware without my watchful eye. Refrigerators are especially tempting to growing kids who figure out that is where the food is. They are dangerous not only because of the possible choking hazards inside, but also because they can get trapped inside and suffocate since the doors are airtight.

Keep pot handles turned inside so they can't be reached and attach knob covers to prevent your children from turning on the burners and a stove guard to protect little hands. Finally, install locking devices on all appliances that have doors and straps on the backs of dishwashers to prevent them from tipping over.

CABINETS AND DRAWERS

From small, to sharp objects, medicines and chemicals, cabinets and drawers that are not protected are an accident waiting to happen. Dressers and bookshelves are also dangerous and can easily be tipped over if they are not properly secured to the wall. My own daughter stood on a rocking horse to get a pair of her brother's shoes out of his top drawer and the chest fell forward. She lost her footing and ended up with a large scrape on her back, but thankfully, my little boy wasn't in the room or he would have been seriously injured.

Cleaning supplies, poisons and medicines should be kept in a high cabinet that is locked. Install latches on the insides of doors and drawers whenever possible. It's also a good idea to install door knobs to keep little ones out of rooms where they don't belong like the bathroom or closets. Consider putting toys and plastic ware like sippy cups and shatter resistant child size dishes in lower cabinets.

COLLECTIBLES & PLANTS

Decorative pieces made of glass and even plastic can easily break and cause injury from cuts or choking. You may be tempted to keep some things out so children will learn what to touch and not to touch, but consider if it's worth the hassle of telling them no repeatedly or the very real possibility of losing something precious, expensive or irreplaceable.

Plants are very attractive to little children, unfortunately they can also be very dangerous. Potting materials like rocks and marbles are choking hazards and many plants are poisonous. Keep poisonous plants out of your home altogether. Place other plants outside or in high places to alleviate temptation.

STAIRS & WALKERS

According to the National Safe Kids Campaign over half of all nonfatal injuries to children are from falls. Many of these injuries happen on unsecured stairs and baby walkers cause more injuries than any other type of nursery toys with most of these injuries involving stairs. To prevent such injuries the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly suggests avoiding walkers altogether. It is also a good idea to install safety gates with locks at the tops and bottoms of stairways. Keep stairs free of clutter to prevent falls and supervise young children as they learn to use the stairs.

TABLES AND FIREPLACES

Not only do tables and fireplaces often have sharp edges, babies learning to walk often use them for leverage as they cruise around. Install padding, bumpers or use cushions to protect your little ones from injury. We had our own trip to the emergency room after our daughter fell off a chair and hit the corner of our fireplace. It was horrible and though it only took one staple to close the gap, there was blood everywhere and we were both traumatized. Fireplaces are also dangerous because of the heat which can cause burns; my friend's son actually burned his forehead severely when he pressed it against the glass screen on their fireplace. Use a fireplace guard to keep children away and avoid burning fires altogether until you child is old enough to understand the risks.

In the Trenches: "I keep pillows in front of my fireplace and we put the coffee table in the attic after our daughter cut her face on it once. She had to get stitches and she still has a scar." Gwenean Morton, mom of Luke, Rylie, Abbie & Macie

SMOKE AND CARBON MONOXIDE

Two thirds of home fires that kill children happen in homes without smoke detectors according to the United States Fire Administration. Infants and toddlers are especially at risk because the beds are normally elevated and as smoke rises, they are unable to get themselves out of their cribs. Be sure to install smoke detectors on every floor of your home with additional detectors in each bedroom. Check the batteries twice a year, perhaps when you change your clocks. You should also purchase a fire extinguisher if you don't already have one.

Have an escape plan in place in case of fire including who will get the baby or other children so you and your husband won't backtrack and become overwhelmed by the fire or smoke. Establish a meeting place and remember that most young children are more likely to hide from fires than to run from them and they are dependent on their parents to keep them safe.

Carbon Monoxide is just as dangerous if not worse because it is a colorless and odorless gas that can cause death and other serious injuries. Gas stoves and dryers, fireplaces and water heaters are all common sources for the gas produced by combustion. Carbon monoxide poisoning can cause numerous health problems including neurological problems, memory loss, learning disabilities and personality changes and can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth for women exposed during pregnancy. Install battery powered carbon monoxide detectors to alleviate the possibility of poisoning.

OUTSIDE

Once your children become more mobile and start playing outside you must become vigilant about safety there, as well. Always insist that your children wear the proper protective gear and practice specific safety rules for the game they may be playing. For example, do not allow your children to ride a bike or skateboard without a helmet.

Pools are another outside risk and not just the large in ground ones. I have a close friend who's child almost drowned in an above ground pool. Her toddler was outside for less than a minute and climbed the ladder and fell in. Fortunately, an older cousin heard the splash and was able to get her out fairly quickly. Keep the door locked and install an alert that will let you know when the door has been opened. Remember, a child can drown in just a few inches of water so be watchful even around baby pools.

Be sure to discuss with your children in an age appropriate manner the risks of playing outside including not chasing a ball into the street, where they can ride the bikes and to look out for strangers. You may want to keep the doors locked and put extra safety locks at the top that slide in and out and are out of reach of little ones so they are unable to get outside without your knowledge.

CLUTTER CONTROL

Once you have packed the hospital and diaper bags and created a safe home it's time to get organized. Take advantage of your nesting mood and get your house in tip top shape before baby arrives, you won't have the time or energy to do it after. Clutter is an enormous time stealer and may be the greatest enemy of efficiency and with a new baby or children underfoot time becomes an even more precious commodity. Getting rid of the clutter and organizing your home makes your living space feel more relaxing and welcoming, too.

Most of us surround ourselves with so much stuff. Frames, knick knacks, candles, collectibles and even old magazines are everywhere you look, add to that all the baby gear and toys that new motherhood brings and it can be overwhelming. Unfortunately, when organizing, it often looks worse before it looks better. Stay to the course though, it will all be worth it in the end. The good news is that once you begin to experience less clutter in your living space and more money left in your wallet, you will be addicted.

When you de-clutter and get organized, you are better able to cherish life's simple pleasures. It will also help you find what you need quickly and focus on the things that really matter, like your family, buried under all that stuff. Following are valuable principles and tips with child friendly options to help you along in the process.

PRINCIPLE #1**NO ONE ORGANIZATION OR CLEANING PLAN CAN SOLVE ALL YOUR PROBLEMS.**

Find what system of organization works best and work as a family to get organized and be realistic in your expectations. A reasonably clean and abundantly comfortable home is preferable to a sterile one whose inhabitants would rather be almost anywhere else than keeping up their picture-perfect surroundings.

As with any other changes you make in life, like changing your eating habits and activity level in order to lose weight; the changes you make to organize your home and your schedule must work for you and your family or they won't last.

If you are a stacker, try using trays or baskets. If you are a traditional filer, than use file boxes or accordion folders.

If you must keep your kid's art projects, file them in boxes or take pictures of the finished pieces and file or place them in a photo album instead.

In the Trenches: "As a single mom, we had to work as a team to get things done. My children always had a chore chart. They still talk about how awful it was. The housekeeping wasn't always up to par, but they learned the value of working together to get things done. They learned to trade chores to fit their schedules or to get out of the things they really hated. They learned to compromise so everyone got something good from the situation. On Saturdays, we would turn up the music really loud and sing and dance around while cleaning the house. It got done quicker and we had fun together." Suzanne Baty, mom of Heather, Amber & Derek

PRINCIPLE #2**DAY BY DAY**

Organization is an ever-changing process; you will never “finish” and you must update as needed. Establish an acceptable level of cleanliness and organization that all members of the household can agree on and maintain it daily. Doing a few simple things every day like wiping down the shower doors and walls when you get out, wiping up spills immediately, making your bed when you get out of it and doing laundry daily rather than letting it pile up, can make a huge difference.

Keep things in order by quick cleaning your desk and car every night. Put baskets at the bottom of stairs for items that need to go up and be put away daily and place small wastebaskets and storage items in every room. Have a quick clean time everyday with your family. Set a timer 5 or 10 minutes before bedtime and race each other to see who can finish first or make a game out of picking up by closing your eyes, counting to ten and trying to guess what your child put away.

Divide and conquer by breaking cleaning and organizing tasks into small chunks of time or areas. For example, the next time you are on the phone de-junk your junk drawers with plastic dividers that snap into place for a custom fit. Try using small clear containers to group like items like rubber bands, paper clips, and batteries together. Group menus, coupons address label and stamps in separate plastic bags.

Another area of clutter that can really sneak up on you is clothing because children grow so rapidly that they outgrow their clothing just as quickly. Productivity specialist, speaker, fellow author and mom of three, Kathy Firkins, encourages moms to keep a plastic container in the bottom of the closet or within reach of the dresser. “Once you try something on and see it no longer fits, drop it in the plastic container (make sure to get the matching blanket, hat or socks). This action will only take you one second, but will save you hours trying to sort through to find those outfits that still fit.” Kathy Firkins said. Kathy also suggests going through the rest of your children’s clothing and tossing the remaining items that you know will not fit by next year once per season. “Toss those in the box, label it with the appropriate size and store it into the attic for the next child or if you plan

to donate these items place them in a paper shopping bag and once the bag is full put it in your car to drop off at the nearest crisis center.” Kathy Firkins said.

In the Trenches: “I try to get McKenna to keep all her toys that she’s playing with on a quilt on the floor; this way they’re not strewn about all over the house. I also require her to pick up her toys each night before she goes to bed.” Andrea McClain, mom of McKenna

PRINCIPLE #3

**DECIDE WHAT IS REALLY VALUABLE AND DISPLAY IT PROMINENTLY, EVEN PRICELESS ITEMS
LOOK LIKE JUNK IF THEY ARE LOST IN CLUTTER.**

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of sorting through two huge boot boxes of family photos for my husband's grandmother. It was such an awesome undertaking, but well worth it when it produced six beautiful albums to help narrate the history of his family. They certainly didn't need to be stuck in the closet where no one could see them.

Consider the value of your life in respect to the time it takes to store, clean, insure, transport and protect anything you keep. Don't spend hundreds of dollars a year for a storage facility, if it would be cheaper just to buy the item stored again.

Sort through it all and keep only the things you really love.

Give duplicate pictures to someone who might want them, throw away any fuzzy or distorted images and display or store the rest appropriately.

PRINCIPLE #4

DON'T HOLD ON TO THINGS JUST BECAUSE SOMEONE GAVE IT TO YOU; IF YOU DON'T LOVE IT AND YOU WON'T MISS IT, LET IT GO.

Be careful though, a close friend of mine actually brought some jewelry I had given her to a white elephant gift exchange at a Christmas party. The next year as a joke, she brought some dishware that I had given her as well – the nerve of some people. In reality, she has mastered the art of letting go in this area. The jewelry was long ago out of style and the dishes no longer matched her new kitchen. Still, you may want to go a safer route and give your unwanted items to charity.

PRINCIPLE #5**AVOID THE VISUAL CHAOS OF CLUTTER.**

Remember how in the movie, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, the walls, floors, cabinets - every possible surface was littered with drawings, toys, bags, you name it. Imagine how quickly you will be able to clean when there are fewer items to move, dust and fuss with. A substantial amount of clutter drains you mentally, too, because you can't avoid it and there is no place to rest your eyes and maybe even your body. Begin to un-decorate by eliminating anything that qualifies as clutter.

Remove refrigerator magnets, cluttered windowsills and patterned or colored paper products.

Use a pretty pump on the sink instead of bottles of liquid soap.

Cut off "Do Not Remove" tags on throw pillows, toss old magazines, empty boxes and bags, too.

Reuse baby wipe containers or baby food jars to hold small items like buttons, cotton balls, hair accessories, medicines and office supplies.

Use shoeboxes as drawer separators for socks, pantyhose and underwear and ice cube trays for jewelry, sewing notions, loose change and even screws.

Purchase drawer dividers or cutlery trays for kitchen, bath, dresser or even office clutter and add built in shelves to closets to make better use of the space available.

Use pretty boxes, bins and even mini suitcases in graduated sizes to hide clutter. Colored mesh bins add color, are see through, and fold away easily when not in use. They are great for using on a shelf for toys or books, too.

In the Trenches: "When you bring something into the house do not just put it down; put it in the correct place. Only touch the object once. This will save you time later plus you won't have clutter." Jennifer Pope, mom of

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PRINCIPLE #6**PURGE UNWANTED AND UNUSABLE ITEMS AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR.**

Begin by going through all your drawers and cabinets and discard any storage containers with lost lids, missing shoes or socks; anything not used within the last 2 years. As you reduce, reuse and recycle you will begin to assess what really matters and what doesn't. I did find a missing flip-flop once after I threw out the other one, but that was a fluke and the expense to replace them was minimal at best. In all probability, half the stuff you save that you think you might need later, you won't be able to find anyway.

Do a quick sort into piles for selling, keeping and tossing.

Get rid of things that are unattractive, outdated, inoperable and unsafe, as well as unfinished projects.

Organize the keep pile. For example, convert your favorite songs from dozens of CD's or tapes onto one to keep. If you have a large number of videos, begin by separating the movies you no longer watch. Then try to eliminate at least 20% more, but keep at least the families top ten.

Organize the odds and ends that are left by condensing them into smaller collections and placing them in appropriate storage items or displaying them.

Store like items together for easy access and decide which items you use the most and the least and store accordingly.

Move anything not used frequently to the basement, garage, attic or a closet.

Infant and toddler toys have a way of taking over any home. Productivity specialist, speaker, fellow author and mom of 3, Kathy Firkins, encourages moms to play a little hide and seek. "Hide toys away and then rotate them

with current toys. Your child will have less to choose from, you will have less to pick up and they will actually enjoy playing with just a few toys at a time.” Kathy Firkins said.

In the Trenches: “Purge and prune. Purge possessions and prune commitments. The less you have, the less there is to take care of.” Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

PRINCIPLE #7

LOSE THE GUILT OF THROWING OUT PERFECTLY GOOD ITEMS THAT YOU NO LONGER NEED OR WANT AND KEEP CLUTTER FROM TAKING OVER BY GIVING OLD ITEMS TO A FRIEND, CHARITY OR SELLING THEM FOR A PROFIT.

When you purchase something new for your home or yourself, get rid of something old.

Every so often clean out your child's toys and books and donate the items they are no longer interested in to your church or a hospital.

Donate your professional clothes to someone hunting for a job or your old formal and accessories to a teenager in need.

Give your child's baby clothes to the parents of other newborns. When our daughter was born premature, we were not prepared, but were touched by the kindness of another couple who gave us their premature daughter's old clothes.

Give your extra toiletries, towels and bedding to a shelter. For some time our church has an apartment for unwed mothers and they always need donations like furniture, appliances and clothing for the mom and their children.

In the Trenches: "We made \$80 by selling my husband's dress pants that no longer fit on eBay." Tiffany Stevens, mom of Hannah & Emma.

PRINCIPLE #8

BEAT PAPER AT ITS OWN GAME. TRY TO HANDLE ITEMS LIKE MAGAZINES, CATALOGS, MAIL, AND SCHOOL INFORMATION ONLY ONCE.

File it, toss it, sign it or pay it when it is received, or at least have a system to put everything in for your attention later.

Open mail near the wastebasket and don't even waste time opening junk mail, but make sure you shred credit card applications and the checks they send you.

Keep greeting cards and bills filed by category to send as needed. Write the date it should be mailed where the stamp would go, so you will mail them on time.

If you purchase newspapers or magazines, pull out the articles you want to read and trash the rest immediately.

After trying a recipe that you like write the name of the recipe and page # in the front of the book so you can find it quickly or transfer it to your own favorite's cookbook. Do this with recipes you discover in magazines as well and eliminate all those random scraps of paper floating around in your kitchen drawers.

Create a portfolio of all your favorite pictures from magazines or sketches or ads - whether it is styles that you like in clothes, hair or furniture. It will save storage room and when you hire a professional to cut your hair, remodel or decorate your home you will be able to share your ideas and vision more clearly.

In the Trenches: "Paper is not naturally my friend. In fact this mess-nemesis of mine is combated daily. To help with this I have implemented a system to help me deal with mail clutter. I have created folders specific to each business and indicating the urgency of action. When I open the mail, things that need to be shredded are put in a small plastic trashcan labeled 'shred'. Things that are trash are immediately thrown in the trash and everything else is filed away in appropriate folders based upon action needed or business they relate to. Once a

week, I will sit down and pay bills and handle all of the papers/mail in the 'to be paid' folder and then I will file them in their main folder, removing the oldest item and putting it in the shred folder if applicable." Wendy Stewart Hamilton, mom of Kayleigh & Andrew, second mom of Kaile

PRINCIPLE #9

EMBRACE THE MANY NEAT AND ATTRACTIVE WAYS TO GET AND STAY ORGANIZED.

Adjustable shelves and storage trays that roll out or sliding basket systems and tilt out drawers at the sink for sponges and scrubbers are another great way to organize and save space.

Use clear square plastic containers to maximize space and find what you need quickly, whether it's pastas, baking supplies or cereal. Great for children, because you can purchase generic and they won't know.

Store overflowing items like office or party supplies, fabrics and sewing items and craft projects in fabric covered hat or shoe boxes that look great stacked together. Label each box with a sample of its contents or just its name.

Use hanging vegetable baskets, metal buckets or baskets to contain towels, magazines or kitchen and bath supplies.

Hide beside clutter on an open bookshelf by attaching a skirt with Velcro. I use a plywood circle and round skirt on top of an old file cabinet to hide it.

A plant stand or an old ladder is perfect for organizing books, magazines or CD's and you can add a plant to the top and a wine rack is perfect for storing rolled up items like magazines and towels.

Use an old silver trophy cup, pretty vase, silver cake stand or a lazy Susan to hold your favorite toiletries and use a beautiful pitcher or old cookie jar to store often used utensils on top of your stove or counter.

Use S hooks in the bathroom to hang small monogrammed tote bags on a towel bar to hold each family member's toiletries or in the kitchen to hang tools and other utensils, to free up drawer and counter space.

PRINCIPLE # 10

CREATE SPACE FOR STORAGE AND CHOOSE ITEMS THAT DO DOUBLE-DUTY IF POSSIBLE.

No floor space, look under the bed. Add pull-out drawers on casters or tubs, you can even purchase bed risers to create more room.

If storage is tight, choose ottomans for seating or coffee tables that provide storage for blankets, toys and magazines. Attach casters for added versatility.

Build a box bench along a wall for seating and storage and add a decorative cushion to match the room to finish it off - perfect spot for larger children's toys.

If space is tight, downsize your appliances or purchase stackable ones like washer/dryer combos or under the cabinet microwaves.

PRINCIPLE #11

USE ALL THE VERTICAL SPACE POSSIBLE.

Consider outfitting a closet with a vinyl-coated heavy-gauge wire system of bins, drawers and shelves. In addition to organizing everything from hats to shoes, a wire system offers high visibility, air circulation and won't collect dust the way solid pieces do.

Add shoe racks or shelving for cans on closet and pantry doors and vertical dividers for cookie sheets.

Use clear hanging shoe bags to store small baby items like shoes, socks, hats, bows, bibs and more.

Hanging canvas sweater shelf bags are also perfect in the hall closet for beach paraphernalia like towels, shoes, hats, sunscreen and suits or for winter gear.

A simple bookcase or pantry shelving unit with adjustable shelves can be used for a shoe closet and much more. Simply use a decorative curtain to disguise and tuck in a hallway or mudroom.

PRINCIPLE #12

CREATE PLACES TO DO SPECIFIC TASKS AND ORGANIZE FOR EFFICIENCY WITHIN THEM, SO YOU DON'T SPEND MORE TIME LOCATING WHAT YOU NEED, GETTING IT ALL OUT AND PUTTING IT AWAY AGAIN THAN YOU DO USING IT.

One of the best gifts my husband has ever given me is craft closet he created for all of my scrap booking, bow making, writing and gift wrapping supplies. He included a desk and shelves for storage of our many books, too.

Arrange your clothes and shoes by season, color and type for easier access.

Store shoes in clear boxes, which look neater and stack more easily than loose shoes. Attach a Polaroid picture of the shoes on the outside of the box, so you can find the pair you want quickly. I use plastic shoe racks on the closet floor and divide my shoes by type and season.

PRINCIPLE #13**FIND A HOME FOR EVERYTHING, ESPECIALLY ALL THOSE BABY SUPPLIES AND TOYS.**

Many moms I surveyed said they filled baskets with all the essential baby supplies that they could take from room to room. Include things like diapers, wipes, diaper rash cream, cotton swabs, onsies, bibs, burp rags and a bulb syringe.

If you have a changing table, load it up with baskets to store bibs, powders and lotions, burp rags, blankets and maybe even little socks.

Create a spot in every room for the larger pieces of equipment. I kept the bouncy seat in our bedroom, the swing in the living room, the rocker in the baby's room and of course the high chair in the kitchen. When we had our son we saved even more space by getting rid of the high chair and replacing it with a booster seat that we attached to a dining room chair.

Get a toy box, basket or shelving system to contain all the toys and have your children help you put them back where they belong when play time is over.

Have a small stash of toys stored neatly in a basket or bin in each room of your home. That way if you are in your bedroom your child can play with a certain toy there and if you are working in the kitchen, something new there.

In the Trenches: "I love my changing table and I store everything Kenna needs on it's shelves in baskets for a quick change. Plus, I put a picture of her cousins over it so she can see them when I change her." Krystle Sikes, mom of Kenna

DEBRIEFING

If you haven't had baby yet, pack your hospital bag and make sure you include one special item that you must have to distract you or keep you comfortable at the hospital.

Begin to child proof your home by installing safety latches today and getting rid of dangerous plants, chemicals or small items tomorrow and so on.

Establish a fire escape plan including route and collect valuable emergency phone numbers including poison control and you doctor's office number.

Are there pieces of furniture or other large items in your house that you no longer love and can get rid off to make room for baby?

Begin today to de-clutter by going room to room and removing items you no longer enjoy or that are inoperable.

COMMUNICATIONS

Communications within our family is vital to our victory or defeat. We must learn how to fight fair, share our wounds and express our love for our families in order to win our mommy wars. I want to give you some battle strategies that will reduce harm to you and your family and will help you in the trenches

WORDS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Before I ever had the privilege of meeting Florence Littauer, who I now consider a friend, I treasured her book, *Silver Boxes – The Gift of Encouragement*. The premise of the book is that our words should be like little silver boxes with bows on top – a gift of encouragement to those who hear them. I can't agree more and have adopted Florence's philosophy based on Ephesians 4:29, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." to monitor what I say by asking myself, "Is it edifying?"

As moms, wives and friends we would be wise to ask ourselves this question before we open our mouths. Don't believe me? Close your eyes for a moment and think of a few comments that people have said to you in your life. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that many of your memories may be negative. Isn't it ironic how we can remember so many more of those harsh and critical comments than the positive ones?

Some of you may actually have heard more hurtful words in your life than the kind of words that lift you up. Unfortunately, I can relate. When I was a little girl my mother, who struggled with health and emotional problems, often cursed me and said ugly things. One specific instance of this is etched in my memory, permanently I'm afraid. She would taunt me and say Melinda Fritsch the little b_ _ _ . I know now that she was coming from a place of her own pain and probably had no idea how those words and others like them would affect me, even to this day. You may even be a little bit like my mother, the type of person who gives out more discouraging comments than encouraging ones.

I want to encourage you, for the sake of all those you love, to consider the impact your words have on them. I want to challenge you today to say something kind to someone else and to keep your critical comments to yourself. Your husband, child, a parent or friend, maybe even a store clerk may need to hear a positive word, today. If you aren't at a place where you feel comfortable saying positive things to others, than live by the old adage, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

DANGEROUS WORDS

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 12:18

I have had my share of critical comments made to me about my parenting skills from strangers, including the time when my daughter was only a few months old and I had to run to local grocery store to pick up something I had forgotten for a recipe. Unfortunately, I got in line at the checkout counter behind an older woman who just had to offer her unsolicited advice. I had my daughter strapped into her car seat and when I sat it on the floor so I could get out my money, it made a loud thud. My daughter who was not hurt, just hungry, cried out and the lady scolded me for having placed her on the ground so roughly. She then proceeded to engage me in conversation about how I shouldn't be out with her anyway, because she was so small. Good thing I didn't tell her that she was really only hungry, I'm sure I would have never heard the end of it.

There have been other unpleasant experiences, like the time I was shopping with my daughter strapped to my chest in a snuggli and she was crying. Another woman just had to tell me that she must be uncomfortable in the carrier and I should take her out. These critical comments and many more like them were given in a reckless manner; they often crushed my spirit and endangered my confidence as a new mom. I pray that I will always remember those feelings, especially when I am around other crying infants; that I will be quick to offer a smile or word of encouragement instead of harsh criticism.

Remember that old adage, "think before you speak"? Consider the water filter on your refrigerator or sink and how it filters out all the impurities; when we feel angry, frustrated or disappointed we must learn to filter our thoughts in the same way. Think before you speak so your words don't harm others and avoid yelling it only intensifies the situation and more often than not, the other person isn't really hearing what you want them to hear anyway. Screaming may get their attention for awhile, but it leaves destruction behind.

In the Trenches: “Unfortunately, I often communicated anger and frustration by yelling. The only good that came from that is my daughters are much calmer with their children than I was because they hated it and chose not to repeat that mistake in their parenting.” Suzanne Baty, mom of Heather, Amber & Derek

KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21

The old saying "kill them with kindness" may have its roots in Romans 12:17-21. It is not our responsibility to change someone's heart or mind; however we are called to do our part in creating peace. This is a tough one to live out, specifically when someone has hurt you intentionally.

God is the one who will handle the doling out of punishment. He is the judge and He doesn't need us to act as a prosecutor. It is probably a good thing that we don't get to decide another person's punishment, because our view of justice is always slanted in our favor. We only see our side of the story and we want people to suffer for what they have done to us. It is not enough for us for their punishment to fit the crime, it should have a little extra zing to it, to keep them from doing it again. Today is the day to turn it around, confuse those who hurt you by continuing to be forgiving and kind. Nothing frustrates an enemy more than when we don't react in anger the way they thought we would.

WORDS OF COMFORT

Comfort, comfort my people says your God.

Isaiah 40:1

I am grateful for my family and so many of my friends who have encouraged me through their words, prayer and actions. I know I wouldn't have made it through the tough first few months of our daughter's life and the struggles we had from her early delivery, hospital stay and nursing difficulties. I rely on those same kind of encouraging and sympathetic words even now as she approaches Kindergarten and her brother enters the terrible err terrific twos.

Sometimes the best thing we can do for each other is to be willing to put an arm around another mom and remind them that they are not alone and that you care. Reveal your heart to the people you are close to, let them know what your true feelings are; trust me they need to hear it. Communicate love to your loved ones with kind words and encourage them whether they are hurting or happy. We are not guaranteed tomorrow much less another second on this earth, don't you want the people you love the most to know it?

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

Proverbs 16:24.

Words of affirmation is one of my husband's strongest love languages and that is what Proverbs 16:24 is all about. Unfortunately, full disclosure here, words of affirmation is not one of my top love languages and so speaking kind and uplifting words to him doesn't come naturally to me. I have to be very intentional when it comes to expressing how I feel about him and thanking him for all he does for me and our children. The rest of the world will tear your husband down; or worse, another woman may come along and say all the right things. We must learn to speak words of love and encouragement to our husbands, so they look to us and only us, to meet this need. This is another way to affair proof your marriage. A little encouragement can transform any relationship.

None of us, young or old, rich or poor, famous or otherwise, is without the desire for affirmation and appreciation. It can be a struggle to speak pleasant words at times, but they are so needed in everyone's life. My friend, fellow author and mom of 2, Sandra Stanford's motto is "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative". She likes to catch her kids or her husband doing something right and then praise them for it. "I want to be their biggest cheerleader and the place where they share even inconsequential information. When I pick up my son from school, I turn off the radio so I can hear about his day. I tell him what a hard worker he is and how proud I am of him." Sandra Stanford said.

In the Trenches: "Growing up, I didn't hear the words, 'I love you,' from my own parents. I decided I would break the cycle and I didn't let a day go by that I didn't tell the boys I loved them. Even though they are grown, I still tell them I love them. Telling a child you love them doesn't always mean you love all the choices they make and believe me, as they grow from toddlers into teenagers, their choices will be many." Sandra McIntosh, mother of Jeremy & Nicholas

WORDS OF ANGER

Make every effort to live in peace in your home. No one, including your husband and your children wants to live with an angry person. When you feel tempted to complain, don't. A critical spirit is tiring for you and everyone around you. Smile instead of frown when you are upset and give yourself a timeout before you react.

When moms, dads and children fight, Satan wins. We become so focused on ourselves instead of God, that we actually do his dirty work for him. We must learn the art of fighting fair if we hope to solve problems without tearing each other apart and in order to mend already broken relationships. The words we use to express our anger may win the battle, but ultimately cause us to lose the war.

Communicate with God about your problems as you pray together. God's opinion and solution to a problem is always better than our own. Also, it's impossible to stay angry with someone you are praying with and for.

Remember you are on the same team so avoid interrupting and treat each other with respect. Try to understand the other person's concerns. Build trust, by letting them you know you value their feelings and ideas.

Combine your words with a gentle touch on the arm or offer affection to strengthen your message.

Make a conscious effort to talk firmly but softly, even when you feel strongly. Most of us use a sharper edge when we argue and that only turns others off; so change your tone of voice.

Ease out of the debate mode and be willing to compromise even when you are angry. Don't try to conquer the other person, both parties should feel better and not worse after the conflict is over.

In the Trenches: "Anger is a tough one. I tend to clam up, push it down and then explode. I'm learning to speak my mind in a calm manner and learning to discipline out of love and not anger." Jill Hart, mom of Katy & Isaac

Brainstorm together for some creative solutions that will bring about compromise and choose to come to an understanding with your spouse, rather than to be right every time.

Find the right time to talk. No one is at their best when they are hungry, sleepy or distracted. Children are experts at this! Just recall the last time your child convinced you to buy them something you normally wouldn't. I bet they caught you in a great mood and capitalized on it.

Let your family know what you need when you become frustrated or angry, whether it's the chance to count to ten, a soothing bath, time alone to cool off or to take a drive and think about the situation.

In the Trenches: "It is important when frustrated to say just that. 'That is so frustrating!' I have found that instead of revealing an Achilles' heel to my kids that they will just chow down on, when I just identify exactly what I am feeling, they in turn want to be more empathetic and work with me to come to a resolution that works for both of us. In the back of my mind I hear Dr. Phil say, 'how's that working for ya!' in perfect Texan twang and if it is not – it is changed. My kids are growing up too quickly to waste a minute on being overwhelmed and out of control. The bonus is my kids also can express their feelings. Of course, when my three year old puts his hands on his hips and says, 'I am sooooo frustrated that you will not give me cookies before dinner. I want cookies!' I can't help but smile, but at the same time be grateful for the words and ability to express emotions and not present a challenge with a world's worst tantrum being waged." Wendy Stewart Hamilton, mom of Kayleigh & Andrew, second mom of Kaile

Don't fight when you are on a date with your husband. Ecclesiastes 9:9 reminds us that even Solomon knew the importance of enjoying each other's company and challenges us to focus on what really matters and not trivial things.

Ask questions to make sure your husband and children are listening and not just hearing the words you are speaking. In return, listen to their side as well; don't just prepare what you want to say next in your head.

If you or your husband is consumed with rage, it may be best to reschedule the conversation for a later time. Calling a time out can help diffuse a tense situation and allow both parties the chance to cool down. It is much more imperative to win the war for a happy marriage, than to just win the argument.

Instead of “you” statements, program yourself to use “I” statements. For example say, “I was hurt when you forgot to call me.”

In the Trenches: “I try to use ‘I’ statements and not rant and rave, but it is so hard. I am better at this mentoring others than practicing it myself.” Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

WORDS OF HUMILITY

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time.

1 Peter 5:5-6

Pride may be one of the biggest stumbling blocks to forgiveness. Any relationship can be made whole if the parties would humble themselves and give their heartaches over to God for him to handle. Pride is the opposite of humility and will eventually destroy your relationships. When I humble myself, I am able to put God and others before me.

We must learn to respect each other and affirm the other person’s value, to forgive and let things go. Pay careful attention here, I am not justifying habitual abuse of any kind. I am simply speaking to the minor and unkind ways we treat each other in our everyday lives. I believe that you must have a healthy set of boundaries to protect yourself from being hurt. We all deserve to be treated with respect, which means that you should never allow another person to curse at you, demean you or otherwise harm you. When someone crosses that line whether they are a friend, family member or stranger, you need to guard your heart carefully, until it is resolved.

Don’t be so hard on your loved ones, instead be patient when they make a mistake, they aren’t perfect and neither are you. No matter how hard we try, we all fail at times and it is important that others, especially our children, see that we are human and make mistakes. Humbly admit your fault in the situation and apologize. Your example will help your children learn that it is ok to make a mistake and teach them the importance of reconciliation.

In the Trenches: “I always try to apologize if I mess up, this is important to show my family that I too have to take responsibility for my actions.” Wendy Johnson, mom of Kutter & Kaden

WORDS OF HEALING

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Luke 6:27-28.

According to Jesus we must do whatever we can to heal a broken relationship. Restoration requires action; thankfully, Jesus spells out how to do it. Nine times out of ten the other person desires to resolve the problem, as well. We may just need to be the one to take the first step. If you are having a problem with someone, take it before the Lord. Ask for His forgiveness and to reveal where you have been wrong.

Pray that you will discover something new to admire and appreciate in the other person. I have experienced the power of God transforming my heart in this way; trust me it works. The more you pray for those who mistreat you as God says, the quicker your heart will begin to soften towards them.

After you have confessed your wrongdoing to God, go to the other person and do the same. We have to acknowledge responsibility for our sins, as well as admit and apologize for our contribution to the problem. By admitting you were wrong and asking forgiveness, you speak volumes about your love and concern for the other person. True confession comes from a place of repentance and not justification. It's not an apology if you include excuses for your bad behavior.

When resolving a disagreement of any kind, attack the problem and not the other person. Let go of name calling and angry accusations; no possible good can come out of character assassination. Sometimes, we just need to remember that our enemies or the people we are angry with are God's children, too.

In the Trenches: “Our pastor would say, I am the skunk and my husband is the turtle. I feel like I can take a lot, but when I reach the limit I blow. I like to discuss things right then and there and my husband tends to avoid conflict. I will spew out everything I am feeling, often time in a rush of yelling and crying and then I am okay. Unfortunately, I have usually said something in my anger that has hurt my husband or one of the girls. I find myself having to ask God for forgiveness and then ask the person I have hurt.” Alisha Huff, second mom of Jami, Chelsea, D'layni Bea & Noah

WORDS OF RESOLUTION

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

Ephesians 4:26-27

In general, it is best to deal with conflict head on and not dwell on it. It is just not healthy to live at odds with someone else whether they are a casual acquaintance, your spouse or your children or even an enemy. This is especially true not only when applied your family, but also to the members of your church family. The devil uses anger and unresolved conflict to distract us from doing the work of God. He can also use our actions done in anger to ruin our witness.

To help you process what is bothering you so you can resolve it quickly and appropriately, write out your frustrations. This will ensure that you have covered everything you want to and speed the peace process along. You can either give it to the person you are angry with in letter form or use it as a guide while you talk to them so you don't get off track. You can also just throw the list away if it would do more harm than good to share it. Sometimes just writing it down is all the release you may need.

Let go of any resentment you have towards your loved ones. Bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping you will kill the other person. Remember, your marriage sets the tone for how your children will grow up and see the world. We are challenged to come to an agreement with others, to maintain harmony in our relationships and receive the benefit of the peace and love that comes from our Lord.

In the Trenches: “I find that journaling helps take some of the edge out of my voice when I try to work out issues with my family. By writing out my frustrations, they don't seem to keep me in their grip and I am freer to acknowledge my part in the misunderstanding.” Sally Ferguson, mom of Nate & Anna

WORDS OF FORGIVENESS

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Mark 11:25

As you have gone through the past few sections, you may have been thinking to yourself that forgiveness for those who hurt you is just not possible. So many of you would tell me that I just don't understand your situation and the type of person who has or who is still hurting you. You may be right to some extent, but none of us have ever been hurt, cursed, or treated as badly as our Lord. He is clear in His instructions that in order to receive His forgiveness we must forgive others first.

Unfortunately, some of you still can't relate because you have never experienced Christ's love firsthand. Maybe you have gone to church your whole life, you were in the pew 9 months before you were born, you attended every vacation bible school and Christian camp offered, but you are still missing it. Until you let God have control of your heart and life and accept his forgiveness, it will be impossible to forgive those who have wronged you.

DEBRIEFING:

How do you communicate love with your family?

Is there constant turmoil and strife in your family and home or do you provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment?

How can you better communicate your anger and frustration to your loved ones?

How do you think your children will remember their childhood?

Who do you need to forgive and why?

DROP AND GIVE ME 20

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that discipline is one of my most difficult mommy wars. When I began writing this book, in my naivety, I thought I had this discipline thing down, but just a few months into it as our family adapted to a new chapter in our lives, coupled with new phases in my daughter and son's behaviors, reality hit me hard. I felt like I was in the midst of my own boot camp and my children were giving the orders to "Drop and Give Them 20". The image of my 5 year old and 2 year old getting in my face like drill sergeants and forcing me to the ground, might seem comical, if it weren't so close to the sad truth.

Fortunately, in my conversations with moms at the grocery store, the park and in my ministry I have discovered once again that I am not alone in my feelings of defeat. This war isn't easily won, that is why it is called discipline, because it requires the parent to be disciplined as well. While disciplining our children is no small skirmish, let me assure you I am right there in the trenches with you and so are the many other moms you come in contact with everyday. Trade in that feeling of defeat and use the 20 battle strategies below to have your children "Drop and Give You 20" instead of the other way around.

20 BATTLE STRATEGIES FOR WINNING THE DISCIPLINE WAR

STRATEGY 1 – EXPECT REBELLION

The need for discipline can be traced all the way back to the first mom ever. Eve could have used a little self discipline herself, but unfortunately now the rest of us moms have to pay the price for her rebellion. As if increased pain in childbirth wasn't a harsh enough punishment, Eve passed her sinful nature on to us and we pass that sinful nature on to our own children. Let me be blunt here - children lack morals and one of our most important missions is to keep them from turning into juvenile delinquents. Seriously, children are tiny self-centered individuals who don't have to be taught to do the wrong thing. All children, including yours, eventually go through some period of rebellion in their lives, some are just worse than others. The scary truth is that if we allow our children to run wild as preschoolers, they will continue to do so as teenagers, where the consequences can be much more severe. Discipline at its best teaches a child to calmly do the right thing and enables them to ultimately discipline themselves and control their own impulses – too bad Eve didn't grasp this concept.

STRATEGY 2 – ASSERT YOUR AUTHORITY

In less than an hour, popular reality TV shows make it seem so easy to bring order to your family's life. You don't have to call in the super nanny to whip you and your kids into shape, nor do you have resort to boot camp tactics to assert your authority. Parents must however require their children to treat them with respect. This goes beyond good manners to a deeper sense of reverence for your authority and position in their lives.

Noted author and family counselor, Gary Smalley talks about a child's ability to take over when the parent isn't asserting their authority in his book, *The Key to Your Child's Heart*. "A child senses that he is in the driver's seat and can play the parent accordingly." Gary Smalley said.

Renowned psychologist and author Dr. James Dobson agrees about the importance of asserting parental authority and defines permissiveness as "the absence of effective parental authority, resulting in the lack of boundaries for the child. This word represents childish disrespect, defiance, and the general confusion that occurs in the absence of adult leadership." Dr. James Dobson said. If parents don't assert their authority, rarely hold their children responsible for their actions or tell them no when necessary, their children are destined for a rude awakening when they get in the real world for sure, not to mention the everyday battles that parents will be forced to fight in the meantime.

STRATEGY 3 – NEGOTIATE DISCIPLINE WITH YOUR HUSBAND

As with every other battle strategy in this book, remember to use what works for you and yours and let go of the rest. That being said, the one comment I have heard over and over again from experts with degrees and experts in the trenches, i.e. other moms, is that it is crucial for parents to decide together what behavior is acceptable, what punishment is appropriate and to carry out that punishment together. Children seem to have an innate ability to spot the weaker parent. We all know who we are; the trick is to not let our kids take advantage of our softer side. Discussing general behaviors that are unacceptable and how they will be handled before they occur may help eliminate this problem.

As a couple, hash out your opinions without your children present and do your best to honor the other's wishes. When we fight about discipline in front of our children, it not only undermines one or both parents, it confuses the child. As difficult as it may be, if you disagree with the way your husband disciplines your child resist correcting him in the moment and pull him aside later to share your concerns instead.

In the Trenches: "We never disagreed about discipline in front of our kids. If one parent disciplined the child or told her "no" about something, the other parent supported that answer. If we disagreed about the issue, we discussed it privately later. This discouraged our children from trying to play one parent against the other."

Bonnie Wheat, mom of Brenda & Charla

STRATEGY 4 – PROVIDE BOUNDARIES

Like the borders between warring countries, parental boundaries are meant to deter harm and keep our children safe. My children may grow up to call me old-fashioned and blame me for not being allowed to participate in certain activities or have certain things. I will gladly be the “mean mommy”, as my daughter called me just last night when I wouldn’t let her have donuts because she had thrown a fit earlier; or the unpopular mom when my children become teenagers and I don’t let them stay out all night, if it will prevent them from making poor choices and dealing with the consequences of them.

Children crave boundaries, especially from their parents, and feel most secure when they know where the lines are and the dangers of crossing them. Sure they may walk right up to line and look at you as they decide whether or not to cross it, but with clear boundaries there are also clear consequences to crossing that line. “Study after study has demonstrated that children need boundaries in order to grow up with a healthy sense of stability and security. By providing that for them, we give them one of the greatest gifts any parent can give a child.” Gary Smalley said.

In the Trenches: “As a mom and teacher, I can tell you for certain that kids want and need the boundaries. Don’t let the boundary be a floating target. When it is floating, your child will test you.” Kathy Lawson, mom of Kalli & Reece

STRATEGY 5 – CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

There are issues that are non-negotiable, but what your child wears or the order in which they clean their room, may not need to top the list. Instead of getting too worked up over something, stop and ask yourself, "Will this matter in 10 years?". Many times it won't, so consider carefully if it is worth the fight before you pick your battles, especially as your children grow older.

It is also a good idea to consider what the child is going through when they act out or disobey. A friend's daughter began throwing fits and weeping inconsolably shortly after family came to stay with them after hurricane Katrina. The upheaval in their home and to her schedule was just too much for their 3 year old. Her parents weighed all this carefully as they chose how to handle each meltdown.

In the Trenches: "As a mother of grown children, if I had the opportunity to improve and do it all again; I would try more often to pick my battles and not make everything a point of contention." Judy Dippel, mom of Lindsay & Ryan

STRATEGY 6 – TIME OUT FOR MOMMY

Sometimes that behavior that is driving you crazy one day can seem benign on any other. Consider your own mood and delay your response until you have sufficiently calmed down enough to react in a positive and productive manner. You may need to count to ten, take a few deep breaths or even go into another room for a moment. Whatever you do, avoid yelling, it is a sure predictor of defeat for you and your children.

Unfortunately, sometimes our own childishness, ignorance and immaturity prevent us from effectively disciplining our child. Punishment for wrongdoing is often delivered hysterically out of frustration. Most of us know it is impossible to reason with an irrational, self-centered person, but I often catch myself doing it with my own children. Unfortunately, when we allow ourselves to be caught up in power struggles with our children they will win more often than not, so give yourself a time out before you engage in battle.

In the Trenches: “Yelling doesn’t work, but unfortunately, I find myself doing a lot of it. Losing control doesn’t help anyone. Instead I often send my daughter, Tessa, to her room, when she is throwing a fit. This allows me time to cool down and allows her to calm down, too. Then I go in and give what ever discipline the act calls for.” Lori Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

STRATEGY 7 – TURN THAT FROWN UPSIDE DOWN

As I walked into the bathroom I spotted my mischievous little girl stash the red lipstick behind her back as if I wouldn't notice the evidence on her face. Instead of reacting in anger, I caught myself giggling and could feel a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. My daughter started smiling; too, we shared a laugh and then had a good talk about only putting on mommy's lipstick with permission.

Obviously, this strategy isn't appropriate for every situation, but it has worked other times as I have made silly faces to encourage my children to put away toys without arguing or to convince my son to let me wash his hair. It has often been said that laughter is the best medicine and although there are times when your child's behavior is no laughing matter, there are other times when a little bit of levity can benefit both mom and child.

STRATEGY 8 – DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS

Consider what developmental age and stage your child is in and decide if your expectations are realistic. For example, can you really expect the average two year old to sit quietly during a movie or a four year old to share his favorite toy without complaint? Dr. Sears writes that, “In the normal course of development those same behaviors the child needs to developmentally advance to the next level are the very ones that can get him into trouble. Some of these behaviors are simply a byproduct of the child's need to become an independent individual. And the "stubbornness" that keeps your child from "minding" is the same spunk that helps him get up after a fall and try again.” Dr. Sears said.

As our children grow and develop physically, mentally and emotionally their behavior changes, as well. Just the ability to walk coupled with natural curiosity to touch and taste every tempting thing they find is enough to ensnare any child. They are also developing a mind of their own and a desire to do things for themselves and their own way which can further complicate things. Such developmental changes also affect children’s moods in positive and negative ways. For example, just when you think they have grasped the concept of sharing, they make a new friend and the anxiety associated with that can cause them to overact and act out when their friend wants to play with one of their toys.

As your children get older, what works will change and so should your discipline techniques. For example, if your pre-teen loves to talk on the phone or hang out with their friends, restrict those privileges to correct behavior. Imposing an earlier bedtime while the rest of the family stays up to finish a TV show or to hang out, may also be effective.

STRATEGY 9 – PERSONALITY PROVISIONS

Just as each stage of development is different, we know that each of our children is different. Accordingly, the way we parent our children must relate to their personality as well. What works with one child, may not even phase another or worse it may do more harm than good. At best we should discipline with a firm, but loving hand. At the very least, we should respect who our children are and create discipline strategies that will honor their unique character.

Additionally, for discipline to be effective you have to find out what form of discipline works best in each situation. Discover what is most important to your child and use it for leverage as needed. A popular talk show host encourages parents to relate discipline to what our children value. His belief is that if you take something of value away from your children, they will begin to adjust their behavior to get it back. For some children the item of value may be a favorite toy or for others it may be a trip to the zoo. For instance, our daughter loves our presence, so there is nothing she hates more than a time out alone.

STRATEGY 10 – LINK IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES TO THE BEHAVIOR

Our children have a certain amount of freedom to choose their own actions, but we as parents choose their consequences. Allow natural consequences to run their course and choose logical consequences that line up with the actual poor behavior and deliver them as soon as possible. This will enable your children to consistently connect their choices to the results. For example, recently when my daughter colored all over her doll, I not only took the doll away, I also took her crayons away for the rest of the day.

If they break a toy purposefully, don't buy them a new one or create a time out toy box for your child's abandoned toys if they continually forget to pick them up. Later when they enter school and don't do their homework, let them suffer the consequences of a bad grade. If your child knows what time to be ready and they are not, leave without them. A friend of mine's discipline motto is "make the time fit the crime". Another mom I know would take her older children's bedroom doors off their hinges when anger was inappropriately displayed by slamming them.

Whatever you choose, be sure that the consequence is something realistic that you can live with. For instance, avoid threatening to throw away all of the toys if they don't pick them up. Consequences and discipline really can be harder on the parents than on their children sometimes. That old adage, "this is going to hurt me, more than it hurts you," really does have some truth to it.

Hopefully, as children grow and the consequences get more severe, their previous experiences of making choices and dealing with the consequences will benefit them. Experience is sometimes the best teacher and often our children simply must make their own mistakes in order to learn their lesson.

In the Trenches: "We really tried to make the discipline coordinate to the offense. For example, we had an official clock in the house and if curfew was missed then the next trip out of the house the curfew was made five minutes earlier for every one minute late. No exceptions!" Jean Hines, mom of Cory & Crystal

STRATEGY 11 – GOOD CHILD, BAD CHOICE

Focus on the behavior instead of the child when delivering discipline. We like to remind our daughter that she makes good or bad choices and avoid calling her a good or bad girl. We want her to feel that she is special and begin to make better choices. This serves as a reminder to her that not only is she responsible for her actions, but the consequences as well.

There is nothing like positive reinforcement to motivate people to do the right thing. This is especially true when it comes to your children. They want to please you and a simple word of affirmation when they do something without being asked can work.

Remind your children constantly how proud you are of them, how glad you are to be their mom. Be your child's best cheerleader and get excited about not only what they do, but who they are. Catch your children being good, be quick to praise them and watch their behavior improve. Abraham Lincoln once said, "It takes nine affirming comments to make up for each critical comment we give to our children."

STRATEGY 12 – DETECT, DIVERT AND DISTRACT

Our son loves to climb over our recliner onto the breakfast bar and forage for snacks on the counter, so when I detect that certain twinkle in his eye, I call his name to divert his attention and distract him with something else. The ability to detect when a child is considering mischief and the skills to divert and distract them are crucial battle strategies; especially when they are young.

In addition, avoid allowing bad habits to develop. It is so much easier to form positive behavior traits in the beginning than to encourage and achieve beneficial changes after they become part of a child's character. Children are naturally drawn to activities and objects that aren't safe. We will cover several strategies in the Logistics chapter on child proofing your home and eliminating temptations, but stopping your adventurous one before they enter the danger zone and providing a safer choice are equally as important.

STRATEGY 13 – DEFEATING TANTRUMS

Unfortunately, as moms our own actions often set our kids up for defeat. When we disregard our children's needs, such as hunger, sleep and routine; we incite tantrums as if we were inciting a riot. Without fail, a friend of mine makes sure that her son takes his nap and gets to bed on time. She does this not only for his benefit, but hers as well, because a meltdown inevitably occurs if he is not well rested. Follow her lead and avoid grocery shopping for example, which can be an invitation for trouble on its own, until your child has had their nap.

While our children shouldn't take over our lives and schedules, we do need to make adjustments for everyone's benefit. For me, that has meant waking up earlier, allowing more time for interruptions and even pairing down my schedule for a little while so as to allow time to meet my children's needs of not rushing which ultimately benefits me, too. For example, I have vivid memories of running late to church and in my opinion, my three year old at the time was taking too long to choose the shoes she wanted to wear. After our exchange eventually ended in tears, I told myself never again. More than likely, I could have prevented the problem by allowing enough time for us to get ready or even by picking out two acceptable pairs of shoes for her to choose from the night before.

STRATEGY 14 – WIN THE WHINING WAR

Sometimes when my daughter starts whining at every possible interaction, “Mommy why?”, “I don’t want to!”, “Stop Bubba!” and on and on, alas, I catch myself whining back to her, “Why can’t you just do what I say?” or “Why are you so whiny?”. While it may seem easier just to give in to the whining, that only compounds the problem in the long run. Just as you head off tantrums, prevent its cousin, whining, by considering if your child is tired, frustrated or even hungry.

Furthermore, to help curb whining, create a no-whining chart. For every day the child goes through without whining they receive a smiley face and at the end of the week if they have six stickers they will get a reward like extra TV or computer time. A friend of mine broke the days into 3 time sections – morning, afternoon and evening – which motivated her daughter to improve her behavior.

In the Trenches: “I’ve had to realize that it may be easier right now to just give in to my son when he is whining about or begging for something, but I’m only making it that much harder down the road. Otherwise, this very intuitive six-year-old will continue to whine and beg when I say no.” Melissa Harwell, mom of Ethan & Sara

Beth

STRATEGY 15 – TIME-OUT TACTICS

When your strategies to prevent tantrums or whining don't succeed, putting your child in time out may be your next choice. Time-out has become one of the most popular forms of discipline in child development circles. Essentially the strategy is to keep the child isolated for a limited amount of time so that they (and mom or dad) can calm down. The hope is to discourage future inappropriate behavior and give the parent a chance to think about what immediate consequences are appropriate.

Just as with every other form of discipline, time-out should be used judiciously. A few good rules of thumb are that the amount of minutes spent in time out should be approximately equal to the child's age and to find a safe and not too fun spot. For example, if your child is throwing a fit, you might consider putting them in time out in their room away from the audience and the attention. However, if your child's room is their favorite place and filled with toys, books or even a TV, it may not be the best place for a time-out. We sit our daughter on a couch in the living room or next to a wall in our dining room where there is nothing for her to enjoy. My friend puts her daughter in the hallway, so she misses out on the fun the other kids are having. After they have calmed down, they can rejoin the rest of the family.

Another friend of mine used a creative version of time out that her family called "hip-to-hip" time when her children would fight with each other. They were required to sit together on the couch, hips touching, and they couldn't get off the couch until their mom or dad said. Almost always, after they had been required to be on the couch together, they would get off and go play a game they had discussed while on the couch together.

Time-outs can be effective, especially for young children. Be sure that you tell your child that you understand that they are upset, but you will stop them from tantrums, whining or making other poor choices every time until they can stop themselves. Also, if the child refuses to calm down during the time-out period minutes may need to be added. After the time-out is over, be clear about what was wrong with their behavior and how to avoid any more visits to the time-out spot.

In the Trenches: "I have found that the very best way to discipline an unruly coloring-on-the-wall toddler is some good old-fashioned time out. For our youngest offenders, this might include a baby bed, play pen or car seat. Being restrained for a couple of minutes really gets the message across. When our three-year-old Nash ran across the entire park, all the while ignoring my pleading call to return, he went straight to his car seat (with the door opened and me standing next to it). His brothers continued to play and Nash was very apologetic and ready to play again. Once while baby-sitting a biter (a toddler who is trying to eat his friends) I was compelled to use this method. How else could I have possibly disciplined this kid who was intent on tasting his peers?" Jennifer Mims, mom of Grant, Brody, Nash & Barrett

STRATEGY 16 – PUBLIC POLICY

Why must stores put all those sugary snacks and tempting trinkets right in our child's line of vision? My theory is that it's a horrible social experiment – somewhere there is a room full of scientists and child psychologists viewing recordings of children screaming with a mixture of tears and snot running down their face and moms saying no as they are about to pull the hair out!

You've been there haven't you? So how do you handle those meltdowns? The audience is even larger then and the humiliation a mom feels is terrible as she plays a powerful game of tug of war with her child. My suggestion is not an easy one, but hopefully it will eventually solve the problem. If your child is whining or even throwing an all holds barred temper tantrum and they will not stop with gentle persuasion, pick your child up and leave the store.

Trust me I've been there, more than once myself! I once had a shopping cart full of items that I needed and had to leave it in the store because my daughter would not stop screaming for a toy stroller. Leave your child at home the next time and explain to them that they can go shopping with you again when they learn to behave appropriately.

STRATEGY 17 – CONSISTENCY CURE

We must be consistent about what behavior is acceptable and what the consequences are or our children will feel like they are walking through a minefield – never knowing just when they might set off a bomb of trouble. Parental inconsistency causes conflict in our children, whereas consistency in the deliverance of any discipline enables them to better predict the consequences of their behavior.

If you tell your children not to throw food or say inappropriate words once and then laugh the next time they do it, your children will be confused about what is right or wrong. If you put them in the corner or in time out for misbehavior continue with that punishment if it is working. Don't warn more than once. Warn, then follow through. Have a variety of activities, have fun with them, play with them, but discipline consistently.

In the Trenches: "I have found that being consistent with my 1 year old has proven to teach him what he can and cannot do. The hard part is to make yourself be consistent when you are worn out and just tired of telling him no, especially when he continues to throw food on the floor." Melissa Allen, mom of Hayden

STRATEGY 18 – MODEL MANEUVERS

I recently heard my daughter getting on to her baby dolls and to my delight, she used the phrase “that was a bad choice,”. However, much to my chagrin, I have also heard her raise her voice. It is amazing and somewhat scary how well children mimic their parents. According to Dr. Laura Smith, as parents we have the responsibility of modeling for our children. “If you want your kids to turn out well, you need to demonstrate the values, behavior and self control you want to see in them.” Laura L. Smith said.

Not only must we practice what we preach when it comes to controlling our tempers, we must also behave in the manner that we would like our children to behave. If I expect my children to pick up after themselves, I have to pick up my shoes and clothes, too. If I expect my child to speak in a kind tone of voice and not use inappropriate words, I too must follow suit.

In addition, one of our most important modeling responsibilities is being quick to admit when we have blown it and apologize for our actions. It is difficult, but when we admit our mistakes to our children and our spouse we set a wonderful example for their own acts of contrition. Admitting wrongdoing will also encourage your children to share their mistakes with you instead of attempting to hide them and getting in further trouble. We should also be quick to forgive when our children and spouse make mistakes if we hope for them to develop habits of humility and forgiveness, as well.

In the Trenches: “I’ve found that spending five minutes alone in his room is most effective for my strong – willed son. Despite the screaming and tears, as soon as his five minutes are up, I hold him and we talk about why he spent time in his room and what he could have done differently to avoid it. He apologizes. And then the most precious part is talking to God. I pray, ‘Dear God, it’s really hard to be a good little boy. Please help Joshua be a good boy and please help mommy be a good mommy.’ And then he says an ‘I’m sorry’ to God. The joy on his face after apologizes to God is so bright, his relief of feeling forgiven so obvious. It’s amazing how even for children as young as two or three apologizing to God provides them with a sense of forgiveness.” Lisa Copen, mom of Joshua

STRATEGY 19 – DISCERNING DELIVERY

It is essential to move your child past the point of mad to repentant for any discipline to be successful. You will learn slowly through trial and error and case by case, what will influence your children's behavior for good. Employ effective discipline techniques and reevaluate them as needed to determine if your child's behavior and your relationship with them is improving. If the form of discipline you are using doesn't seem to be getting the results you want, then let it go and try something else. When delivering your message of disapproval you may consider getting down on your child's level. This not only ensures that they hear you, it will also allow you to firmly, but kindly express your message without yelling.

Spanking is yet another hot button issue for most parents and experts in the field of child development. From theories that hitting begets hitting to misconceptions of "spare the rod, spoil the child" scriptures – there is much to debate. I believe that spanking a child is an appropriate form of discipline in the case of direct defiance and as an effective deterrent to prevent the child from doing something that could cause immediate injury, but it is not the only way. Spanking in anger or out of reflex is not beneficial and will often only intensify the situation. Ultimately, whatever form of discipline you choose should be agreed upon by both parents and bring about positive change in the child.

STRATEGY 20 – REDEMPTION

The last, but certainly not least, battle strategy for winning the discipline war is to allow your children the opportunity to redeem themselves if possible. Redemption allows our children to save face and win back a sense of their pride as they are freed from the consequences of their poor choices. For example, let them work off grounding time by doing chores around the house or allow them to slowly earn back their prized possessions that were previously taken away. I have a friend who will take her son's favorite trains away as a consequence for bad behavior. However, if he redeems himself by making better choices throughout the day, she will allow him to play with the trains before he goes to bed.

It is important for children to know that their efforts to correct their behavior and make better choices is recognized and appreciated. For instance, when a child has previously had toys taken away for not picking them up, but for several days after they pick up their toys without coaxing, it is a good time to praise them and possibly reward them by returning the toy that had been taken away originally. When we acknowledge our children's good behavior it motivates them to continue to make better choices.

In the Trenches: "We allow our children to redeem themselves when they make a poor choice. For example, we may reduce their punishment if we feel their behavior in the meantime warrants it." Dawn Brown, mom of Mandie, Misty, Chase, Cole & Malachi

DEBRIEFING

“This too shall pass,” has become my mantra as I wade through the minefield of discipline with my children. It’s not fun, it’s not pretty, but it is necessary if you want to raise children that will eventually discipline themselves. Discipline can be a huge battle, but you can win the war.

What form of discipline did your parents rely on? Was it effective?

How do you handle disagreements about discipline with your husband?

Do your children respect your authority or have an unhealthy fear of you?

Are the discipline techniques you use working?

What is one change you can make today to improve in the area of discipline?

How do you praise your children?

How can you allow your children to redeem themselves?

FINANCIAL FREEDOM

Recently, I watched an interesting piece on 20/20 where the co-anchor, Elizabeth Vargas, fresh off maternity leave, candidly broached the subject of working versus stay at home moms. One of the guests shared that her childcare expenses were double her mortgage. Ouch. The piece left me with more questions than answers and if you are struggling with your decision to work or stay home you may feel the same way.

Unfortunately, like that 20/20 piece, I will not be able to solve the dilemma for you. Choosing what you will do is ultimately one of the most personal and difficult decisions you may ever make. At least it was for me and so many of the moms I interviewed when writing this book. In this chapter, I will offer battle suggestions that all moms can use; from working moms, to work from home moms, to stay at home moms and all you moms in between, to help you gain financial freedom.

There is so much to consider, from just being able to keep the lights on and food on the table, to feeling like you have let your kids down if you are not home with them or the guilt on the flip side from not being able to buy them what they want. You may be a single mom or maybe you are just so passionate about your work the possibility of not doing it just doesn't seem reasonable to you. Maybe money is so tight that your husband is pressuring you to go back to work or maybe you have self imposed guilt and feel like you must do something more to contribute to the family finances. You may even fight feelings of doubt that you can't handle all this mommy stuff and work provides an escape from the day to day, a safe haven from the battles of teething, tantrums, and toilet training for just a few hours.

Let me assure you, there is a right and a wrong answer to the question of working or not working, but the only person who knows the answer is you. You must decide what is best for you and yours; not your well intentioned or not so well intentioned parents, friends, pastor or even the best experts in the field of child rearing and family studies.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 declares that enjoying your work is a gift given to you by God. We should seek God's guidance when choosing what to do with our time and talents in order to bring us pleasure and ultimately bring glory to Him. I have often heard it said and found it to be true that, if you do what you love and love what you do, you will never work a day in your life. If you love your job, whether it's running a fortune 500 company or running a home of 5, chances are that you are fulfilling the purpose and plan the Lord has for your life.

In the Trenches: "Being a stay-at-home mom when it was the un-cool thing to do, I was continually questioned about my role as mom from my friends who worked. I wanted to be home. We had planned for me to be home, but feelings of inadequacy overwhelmed me. Why didn't I finish my degree and become an executive like my friends had? Why was I at home wiping running noses instead? God soon led me to the Romans 12:1 in the Message Bible, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him." The verse brought healing to my feelings of inadequacy. Years later, in visiting with moms from all walks of life, I realized we all want what we don't have. Stay-at-home moms question why they aren't working and contributing to the finances, working moms feel guilty for not being home more, moms who put their children in public school feel guilty for exposing their children to the world so early, and moms that home-school question if the job they are doing is good enough. Guilt, guilt, guilt! Moms are best known for feeling guilty. Lay it all before God. He wants it all! No matter what your ordinary everyday life looks like, give it to Him as your best offering today."

Alene Snodgrass, mom of Courtney, Blake & Lindsey

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

Whatever you choose to do, be sure your husband is on the same page. This peacekeeping effort will help ensure success and preserve the unity in your marriage. Discuss how roles and responsibilities may change and clarify expectations. When I began working from home, my husband and I both had to change the way we thought it would play out. It was a major adjustment to transition from stay at home mom to work from home mom and all that that entails.

If you really want to stay home with your children, weigh the amount of money you are spending against what you are earning. Consider if it is worth the time you spend away from your family to drive a nicer car or live in a bigger house. See what expenses you can realistically trim right off the bat like childcare, work clothes, gas and eating out to make it work.

If you feel you have to work to make ends meet, but your heart's desire is to stay at home, be sure to find a job that you love and make the most of your time at home with the family. Not only will it make your time at work more enjoyable, it will help deter resentment from building up toward your husband.

Friend, fellow author and mom of three, Wendy Stewart Hamilton, recalls how difficult it was for her husband to come to terms with her choice to be a stay at home mom. "When I was pregnant with my son, I knew that I was meant to be a stay at home mom. At first, my husband fought this. He did not see how reducing our family income by over 40K would be helpful to us." Wendy said.

Wendy knew in her heart and mind that she was supposed to be home, so she insisted on it and promised her husband that she would help out in other areas, especially in budgeting. "I price-match every item I buy and/or use a coupon. It is a fun game for me and I see how much per hour I can make doing that. My record is a savings equivalent to earning \$35 an hour." Wendy said. Wendy's family attempts to live below their means in a neighborhood that they jokingly refer to as "Barbie Town and Country". "While our neighbors are upgrading, we are working to just figure out a new use for an old thing and it is amazing how what we have is often

admired especially when “that old thing” came from eBay, the thrift store or was a trashed treasure of someone else. Resale clothing stores are my kid’s best friends as well as eBay, where I can get name brand clothes for less than \$1 per item in a large lot.” Wendy said.

After her son was born, Wendy slowly added more work-from-home duties and focused on areas that are her skills and strengths – such as editing, writing and graphic design. “I work part-time at a variety of jobs; have some businesses that run with minimal involvement by me and this year will make close to double what I gave up working full-time, so that I could work part-time from home.” Wendy said.

Wendy encourages other moms who are in doubt about whether or not God wants them to be at home to try God. “Test the waters and trust that when you are doing your part to reduce your budget and expenses, God will expand that dream and bless being at home with your kids. Our family is now doing financially better with me not working outside of the home and instead home schooling our kids and running home-based businesses than what it was when I was stressed about work, hating that my kids were in daycare, worrying about private-school tuition and much more.” Wendy said.

In the Trenches: “Before we had our first baby, my career as a doctor was a big topic of discussion and prayer for me and my husband. As a couple, we decided my husband would be a stay-at-home Dad. This required us to give up an income and change our lifestyle, but the payoff is wonderful. My husband loves his new career and I get to see my daughter most days at lunch. Our approach is definitely non-traditional, but it works for our family.” Haley Wagner, mom of Ella

SURROUNDING SANCTUARY

Our homes are to be a sanctuary from the rest of the world; a place that is safe from attack and therefore serves as a refuge for our families. As moms we have the grave responsibility of creating the sanctuary that surrounds those we love and we are only able to do that when we listen to God and follow His plan for our lives.

According to Pediatrician, Dr. Peggy Linguist, a happy mom is a happy family. “I know this is probably some kind of cliché, but it is so true. I have met moms who work full-time, have their kids in daycare from 6am to 6pm, and those moms love their work and their lives and their kids are these happy, well-adjusted people. I've also met moms who feel called to stay at home and have this full, satisfying life, and their kids are happy and well-adjusted.” Dr. Linguist said.

Dr. Linguist also suggests that problems arise when moms aren't happy. “Babies and children always know and they reflect that back at us. So figure out early on, where you feel called to be, and do not feel guilty about working or staying home. We moms in the Christian community put so much pressure on each other, I just want to scream sometimes, ‘Stop the madness, and listen to God and not these other women.’” Dr. Linguist said.

In the Trenches: “I didn't choose to work after having my first child. I had to. We were and are a ministry family, so finances have never been huge, though God has always met our needs. I like to work, but after a few years of full-time work, I was exhausted. I prayerfully talked to my hubby, my boss and my friends and decided to go part-time. It was the best decision I ever made. God covered our needs by opening up more doors in writing and speaking. I have been very content with my decision and though there have been tight times when there was more month left at the end of the money, I don't regret it and neither does my family. I have more time with the kids, more energy for housework and being a helper to my hubby, and much more fulfillment because I'm not totally spent at the end of the day.” Dena Dyer, mom of Jordan & Jackson

CONTINGENCY PLAN

As your situation and your heart changes, so goes your choice to work or not to work; it is never final. I retired from teaching to stay home with our daughter thinking it would be years before I even considered working again. I was wrong and have since attempted to balance my family responsibilities with odd jobs to bring in a little extra cash. Now the picture of what I thought my life would look like has changed even more as I have taken on a ministry of writing and speaking to women just like you.

I also felt obligated to work when our insurance company failed to make their end of the payments after our second child was born. My husband and I are very disciplined when it comes to our finances, so when the creditors started coming after us, we decided that we needed to come up with extra money to cover the payments. My husband searched the internet for odd jobs and I reached out to a friend that connected me with her boss. In one weeks time I had not one but two, ten hour a week jobs to do from home.

I thought it would be so easy, my little ones would go to mother's day out one day a week while I made marketing phone calls and I would rely on the awesome distraction capabilities of TV and toys to keep them entertained for the remainder of the time. I could even take the kids with me to do my mystery shopping job. If all else failed, I knew I could rely on my husband to help out.

I'm sure you've guessed it by now, but I was a little too optimistic, maybe even a little naive. Working from home sounds like a great idea in theory, but in reality, not so much. I still had all the regular responsibilities of life to handle, too. I'm sure you can relate to the never ending piles of laundry and dishes, church and extended family obligations and meeting the needs of your husband and kids. All this while keeping a smile on my face, a song in my heart and pep in my step.

In the Trenches: When I was pregnant with my first, I decided I wanted to be a stay at home mom. About 2 months into it, my old boss contacted me with a great offer and let me bring my daughter to work with me until she was more mobile and then he paid for her to go into a great daycare." Cindy Mong, mom of Alison & Ethan

SANCTIFIED SERVICE

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:23-24

I selected the teaching field as my vocation for several reasons, but I discovered quickly that it was not for me. I wanted a classroom full of well-mannered students who respected and adored me. Let's just say, that is not what I got. I treasured all the fun days with the best students, but that is not all there was to it. But for the public school politics, paperwork, disrespectful and apathetic students, and the everyday monotonous responsibilities of teaching, I think I might have enjoyed it more.

I should have cut my losses sooner and moved on to something more fitting of the gifts and skills God has given me. However, I made it through those 5 years reminding myself everyday that I wasn't working for the overly-demanding school board, the obsessive parents or their indifferent children; I was working for the Lord. No matter how much we hate or even love our jobs, whether we work in or outside the home, we should do our best as if the Lord were our boss. What about you – when was the last time you gave your all at work? Start today to put forth your finest effort and look forward to the reward you will receive from God.

We all have tough times at work, but if you rely on God's strength, you can get through them. Sometimes just taking a break, such as a short walk after a morning meeting or an extended lunch hour can renew your enthusiasm and give you just the boost you need to get back to work, too. Try a 5 minute vacation, where you imagine yourself on the beach or skiing down a mountain! A real vacation can also be refreshing.

RADICAL RETREAT

Do you dread getting up in the morning and only go to work because you need the money or do you watch the weather and pray for snow to close down your office for the day? If so, it may be time to conference with God and reevaluate your chosen field. It is ok to be wrong about the career you chose. It is also ok to choose a different job; life is too short to be miserable. Try something new, if you don't like it, do something else. There are no bonus points in life for suffering through what other people say you should enjoy.

Needless to say, I won't be going back to teaching and the calling job eventually became too difficult for me for other reasons. The kids would inevitably need something in the middle of the call or the doorbell would ring and worse my boss wanted to spend more than the agreed upon time on the phone rehearsing and going over business strategies. I eventually came to terms with the fact that the calling job just wasn't for me, so I shared my concerns with my boss and quit. No harm, no foul – he even said the job would still be mine if I changed my mind later.

OUTSIDE TACTICS

Many of the moms I spoke to who work outside the home say they struggle with the pressure of getting it all done. To defeat those overwhelming feelings rely on time management, organization, clear boundaries and your family, friends and God.

Work for a family friendly company and be sure to let your boss know that while you are dedicated to your job, your family is your top priority.

Carry a planner with a small note pad with you and have a master calendar on the refrigerator to keep track of everyone's coming and goings.

Have the kids help by putting their clothes in the washing machine, setting the table and preparing lunches as you clean up from dinner.

Hire someone to deep clean your house and don't let the little things like laundry get in the way of time with your children.

Run errands like paying bills, picking up the dry-cleaning or non-perishable items during your lunch hour.

Hire a great babysitter that you trust, so you won't spend your time worrying.

Trust that your children are safe in God's hands even when they aren't in yours.

In the Trenches: “Since going back to work, I make sure I use my time wisely now. I use my breaks at work, to get groceries or run errands. Or sometimes I leave for work a little earlier, so I can get my grocery shopping done without having to take all 3 kids with me. By getting these small things done during the day, on my own time, it does not take away from the precious time I have to spend with my kids.” Kim Rogers, mom of Chase, Alexis, & Cason

HOME BASE FREEDOM

Choosing to stay home doesn't mean you have to stop using your mind or talents. Take a risk and turn your hobby into a home based business. Transform your passion into your profession. When I quit teaching to stay home with our daughter, I was able to make extra money by consulting and doing research on the computer for an education firm.

Determine what one skill, if developed and performed in an excellent fashion, would have the greatest positive impact in your life and the lives of those around you. Whether it's organizing, scrap-booking or decorating, the only limit to what you can do to make money is your imagination. A friend of mine enjoys making bows and has started her own business selling them, another loves to bake and earns a little extra money making wedding and shower cakes and another friend is so talented in every area of decorating, that I and others have paid her to tile our homes.

An awesome resource for Christian work at home moms is www.cwahm.com. Jill Hart began Christian Work at Home Moms, CWAHM.com, to provide resources to support moms in their work at home career. They are a legitimate partner for moms and dedicated to providing free resources to aid them in their work at home search. The site also provides current work at home moms with opportunities to promote their businesses while at the same time providing them spiritual encouragement and articles. Mom of two adorable children, Katy and Isaac, Jill understands a mom's desire to be home with her children, but still contribute to the family financially. She reminds those interested in working from home that it is a time-consuming endeavor. "This is doubly true of work-at-home moms in that we are responsible not only for the success of our business, but for our family as well. We must be self-reliant, self-motivated, and discipline ourselves in order to attain success in both areas." Jill Hart said.

In the Trenches: “I have developed a forgotten and buried talent to write. The computer connects me to the world and enables me to expand my abilities. Other friends have found creative outlets through home sales, like Tupperware or Creative Memories, and still have a foot in the door at home. It’s amazing to me how many ways there are to make it possible to be a stay-at-home mom.” Sally Ferguson, mom of Nate & Anna

RECONNAISSANCE MISSION

Just as the military conducts reconnaissance missions to obtain information about the activities and resources of an enemy or to secure data concerning a specific area, do a little recon of your own in your area of business interest.

Talk to others who have been successful in the business you are interested in and ask the tough questions. How did you do it? How much money did it cost to get started and where did you get the capital from?

It is absolutely essential that you seek wise counsel, however remember that unfortunately not everyone may have the best intentions towards you.

Volunteer for schools, churches, hospitals and businesses to discover what you are gifted in and keep track of hours, addresses and contact people for references for that paying job in the future.

Consider taking one or two classes a semester to earn a degree.

Look for positions where you can work from your home using e-mail and the internet while the kids are asleep, at mother's day out or school.

Watch out for scams and check any and all business opportunities out with the Better Business Bureau. Also, watch for red flags like employers asking for money for you to become an employee.

Be wary of get rich quick schemes – if it sounds too good to be true it probably is.

Create a business plan with short and long term goals.

Calculate the costs to see if the business is worth the risk – consider time, stress and money.

Consider teaming up with a friend to share the good and the bad of the journey.

Keep your licenses current and continually update your resume with your volunteer hours, classes and odd jobs. Keeping current in your chosen field will also enable you to compete for promotions and raises.

STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

One of the most significant advantages of working from home is the ability to arrange your work schedule around your family as opposed to the opposite. However, it is a good idea to choose specific hours to work to help keep work stuff separate from home stuff as much as possible.

If one of the main purposes of you working from home is to enable you to be with your children, don't take on too much. You are not creating a full time job, so consider jobs with a minimum number of hours and the least amount of stress possible so you are able to adapt to your new mothering responsibilities.

Treat your business like a business. Be as professional as possible. Get out of bed and get dressed for success.

Just as we talked about the importance of saying no in Going AWOL, you need to adopt that same practice when working from home. People will automatically assume that you have free time on your hands, when in all actuality you will probably be busier than ever.

Use your time wisely. When I did marketing from home, my son tended to wake up around 6:45 am and since most of the clients I needed to call were on the east coast, I would feed him and put him in his bouncy seat to watch Baby Einstein while I got a little work done. I could have easily gone back to sleep, but I made the most of opportunity to work somewhat uninterrupted.

Create business cards and flyers to help spread the word about your new business venture. Post them in high traffic areas like bulletin boards at the gym, grocery store and the library or contract with a business to put them on delivery boxes.

Create samples of your products by put it in small plastic bags attached to your business cards and give them out to prospective clients.

Create a website specific for your business and be sure to include your business name and contact information in the signature line of all your e-mails.

Set up an answering system or service that takes messages 24 hours a day.

Create a special place just to work away from the distractions of the rest of the family, including the TV. An office will also allow you to leave work and projects out on your desk, unlike working from the kitchen table.

In the Trenches: "I cleaned out the laundry room in order to create an office. It's tight, but it meets my needs for now." Melissa Howell, mom of Ken, Elizabeth, Breana & Cammie

MOM'S VALUE

Whatever moms choose to do society has begun to place a premium on their service. In a recent survey conducted by Salary.com Inc, Waltham, Massachusetts-based compensation experts, the typical stay-at-home mom in the United States would earn \$138,095 a year for her work. The 10 jobs listed as comprising a mom's work included housekeeper, cook, day care center teacher, laundry machine operator, van driver, facilities manager, janitor, computer operator, chief executive officer and psychologist. A mother who holds a full-time job outside the home would earn an additional \$85,939 for the work she does at home. According to the survey, the typical mom puts in a 92-hour work week, working 40 hours at base pay and 52 hours overtime.

ENTERING HOSTILE TERRITORY

Unlike anything else, finances can often leave moms feeling like it's the one battle they just can't win, much less survive. Our society is infatuated with money and the supposed power and success it affords. This all-consuming desire to make more and buy more is distracting us from our most important priorities. Whether you choose to work or stay home, rely on God to direct your finances and take care of you

Couples today often spend more on a car than their parents did on their first home. We live in a "have to have it now" world and consumers expect to enjoy as nice a lifestyle when they graduate from college as their parents have after working for decades. Matthew 6:19-34, makes it clear that focusing on money and possessions robs us of the joy of focusing on God. In contrast, when we approach our finances from the perspective of God's word, we are better able to pursue God's purposes for our lives.

You don't have to make an enormous amount of money to live well; neither does God require anyone to live like a beggar just because they are a Christian. In contrast, God's word tells us in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." He wants the focus of our heart and our priorities in line with Him and not consumed by materialism.

God blesses His people financially every day and it is amazing to watch people with wealth who also love the Lord, use their money for His kingdom purposes. God desires us to use our worldly assets to serve Him and to be good stewards of the money He has given us. Pray and ask for the Lord's help and guidance in the area of your finances in the same way you do for matters of the heart. Several of my friends have shared stories with me about how God has provided financially for them in miraculous ways. They recounted moments when an unexpected check came in the mail at just the right time or how their friends helped out when they lost a job.

Learning to trust God and rely on Him to provide for your needs eliminates worry and brings peace. This doesn't mean that we can just sit around and expect money for food, clothes, and shelter to fall from the sky like

manna from heaven. God has gifted each one of us in so many ways and we all have the ability and opportunity to use our skills and talents as a way to provide for our families.

In the Trenches: “My husband and I practiced living on one income after my first trimester and we were able to budget and make it work - so 6 months later we just stuck with the plan. I don’t regret being home for one second - whether the girls remember or not, I will always remember being there for them.” Tiffany Stevens, mom of Hannah & Emma

BUDGETING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Studies show that less than 30% of Americans actually use a budget and 70% live paycheck to paycheck. I don't know about you, but I believe there is a direct correlation in those figures. Discuss your priorities as a couple and develop a balanced monthly budget for the essentials and commit to follow it. Learn to live within your means and be sure to share the importance of the budget with the rest of your family.

When considering a budget, we must come to grips with the reality that there is a difference between a luxury and a necessity. We want a juicy prime rib steak, but ground beef is sufficient to meet our needs. Distinguish your desires based on that principal and adjust accordingly. Just as eating wisely is better than going on a fad diet, spending your money wisely is better than going without. If you shop and save you will be able to stretch any budget without it hurting too bad.

One of the best ways to stick to a budget is to purchase everything with cash. If you don't have the cash to buy it, you probably don't need it anyway. My husband and I use cash envelopes with a specified amount of money in each to keep track of our spending. We have envelopes for gas for both cars, entertainment, medical, personal spending money for each of us, dry-cleaning costs, gifts, cosmetics, haircuts, sitters, eating out, groceries, stamps and last but not least specific envelopes for our children's needs.

Using the envelope system is an exercise in self-discipline, but the rewards are worth it. You avoid overspending and the stress that it causes, because when the money is gone, you simply stop spending. The envelope system when used properly also helps eliminate that sick feeling women get when they have spent more than their husband's would like. Ultimately, following a budget can help prevent potential arguments.

Circumstances in our lives may change and cause you to re-adjust the budget. For example, we had to add another envelope to account for each of our children's arrival. You may think the envelope system is not a realistic option for your family, but it has worked for ours for over a decade. In case of emergencies like a trip to

the ER, having to replace the washing machine or tires on the car or if you unexpectedly lose your job, it is also a good idea to have an emergency fund with at least 3 to 6 months worth of living expenses.

In the Trenches: “I made the decision last May to stay home with our daughter. We budgeted it out and spent a lot of time in prayer over it. I now work two days a week, while McKenna is at mother’s-day-out. If she’s not at school, I’m not working. It has turned out to be a great decision. I have the best of both worlds. I still get to have the career I love and be a Mom. She gets to have me all week and still socialize with other children her age. We have had to do without some of the luxuries that we enjoyed with two incomes. I drive a 97’ Honda Accord and don’t have the hottest clothes or accessories. However, it is completely worth it to be with McKenna. I realized that I would never get this time back with her so it was high time I enjoyed it.” Andrea McClain, mom of McKenna

Follow these steps to determine your own budget. You can use the budget categories below or choose your own, but keep them as specific as possible.

Review how you spent your money for at least the past 6 months. Go through your checkbook register, credit card statements and any other receipts. Organize all of it and account for where your money went as best you can.

Write everything down for a week as well, including incidental items like coffee, cokes, stamps, money to the kids, gas, eating out, and entertainment.

Determine what extra expenses you can cut right off the bat and eliminate them. For any other extras, keep them as they are or find a cheaper alternative.

Determine your net income by calculating your salary, investments, and any bonuses, less taxes. Subtract what you are spending from what you are bringing home, to see if you are living above your means.

Multiply your net income by the estimates you come up with for the categories below to determine a proposed budget and calculate the difference between what you bring home and adjust to fit your needs and abilities.

Categories for a family's monthly budget:

House: mortgage or rent, insurance, utilities, furnishings, remodeling, maintenance

Transportation: car, insurance, gas, licenses, repairs

Food: groceries and eating out

Entertainment: cable, movie, magazines, concerts, games

Recreation, Hobbies, Vacation

Clothing: for everyone, business, play and dry-cleaning

Gifts: Christmas, Birthdays, Baby and Wedding Showers

Tithe

Donations, Charities

Personal care: makeup, haircuts, massage, pedicures

Education: tuition and supplies

Medical/dental: premiums, co-pay on visits and prescriptions

Credit card payments including interest

Taxes

Savings

Professional services – accountant, lawyer

*Child/elder care

*Child support/alimony

*If you have these expenses, you will have to adjust your budget accordingly by taking a percentage off the top of another expense like housing or if you avoid using credit cards you can use that money instead to help defray costs.

DEFEATING DEBT

The borrower is servant to the lender.

Proverbs 22:7

Are you so deeply in debt that if God called you or your husband to a new job with less pay that you couldn't take it? If so, now is the time to start following God's plan for your finances and begin to make better choices for you and your family. Ignorance, indulgence and poor planning lead to debt. Instead seek wise counsel from a Christian financial planner or money wise friend and try a few of the practical suggestions below. God expects us to pay back our debts, so we can be freed up to serve Him.

One of the most important steps to take in getting out of debt and living the way God desires is to stop all forms of borrowing. Credit card companies, check cashing and cash advance businesses all try to take money from you that you obviously don't have in the first place. Unfortunately, many people use credit cards like cash and view them as a right and not a privilege that must be used very carefully. Rely on an emergency fund in times of need instead of your credit cards.

According to the American Bankers Association, the average American carries up to \$8,000 in credit card debt at 14% interest. Paying the minimum every month actually equals only about 2.5% of the balance.

Remember, if you don't pay off your balance in full each month, you may end up paying almost double the original purchase price.

Consolidate your existing cards and shop around for the lowest interest rate in order to get rid of your debt as soon as possible.

Beware of credit doctors that say they can cure your credit problems for a price. Instead, work out a payback plan with your existing creditors yourself and cut up your credit cards.

Take on one or two extra temporary jobs to pay off debt quickly.

In the Trenches: “In addition to his regular job, my husband umpires baseball games to knock off debt. It is just temporary and when all the debt is gone he will quit.” Stacie Brown, mom of Taylor, Haylie & Peyton

DEFENSE

A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it. Proverbs 22:3

It has been said that the best defense is a good offense. Consumers must learn to protect themselves. Retailers are in business to make a profit and they have created an art form out of tricking us out of our hard earned money.

If you are not pleased with a product or service notify the salesperson immediately. If you don't get satisfaction, ask politely to see the manager. They usually have the authority to negotiate any compensation. We once had a horrible experience at a restaurant that I won't name here. Our chicken was raw and the service was slow and rude. I wrote the company to express my concerns and was sent a letter of apology and several free meal coupons to win back my business.

It is also a good practice to contact companies to share your positive comments. They appreciate them and will often send you coupons or free samples, too.

Watch out for hidden charges like shipping, handling, delivery and installation. The price of the original item may be cheaper, but the extra fees may make it a poor value in the long run.

Avoid rent to own contracts, because the monthly fee is usually higher than it would cost if you financed it outright or saved up for the item instead.

Look out for funny financing especially on "no money down and no interest" offers. Often the bill must be paid in full at the end of the free period or the interest will apply retroactive to the purchase date.

Avoid purchasing extended warranties or other expensive add-ons for appliances and computers. They are rarely used and it is the retailer who profits. The average repair fee is about the same or less than the price of the extended warranty itself. Also, your household insurance should cover theft and accidental damage.

Always look for the best price when replacing an item and check if the existing item can be repaired or updated instead of purchasing new. When repairing an item call the manufacturer first to see if they will fix it for free.

Always keep your receipts and learn the stores return policy in case you have buyer's remorse or find a better deal somewhere else. Some businesses even refund the difference in purchase price if what you bought goes on sale within a certain time period.

When paying any bill, including your credit card statement, scan the entire statement for erroneous charges and not just the bottom line.

In the Trenches: "We were billed for Doctor's services that my husband never received because of a simple mistake. Someone with the same name as my husband, was receiving treatment at the same hospital, but by a different doctor and it was billed to us." Gwenean Morton mom of Luke, Rylie, Abbie & Macie

PROTECTING YOUR IDENTITY

According to a Gartner April 2004 survey, more than 1.4 million people have been victims of identity fraud, costing banks and credit card issuers \$1.2 billion last year in new account, checking account and credit-card fraud. Criminals are also out there waiting to take advantage of you financially. Identity theft is on the rise, I know because it has happened to me and a close friend. Be vigilant, you are your best defender in the battle against identity theft and fraud.

Avoid giving out your social security number, driver's license number or your phone number on checks, at the checkout register, on bills sent back to the company and over the phone. Leave the information off or write over it, if possible. Most companies really don't need it and there may be a less than honest person on the other end of the phone, transaction or in the line next to you.

Avoid using the same pin numbers for all your accounts in case it gets stolen.

Always shred personal and financial documents before throwing them out and request your credit report regularly.

Never, Ever, No Matter What respond to an e-mail or phone call requesting personal and confidential information that you did not initiate.

While some identities are stolen through "dumpster diving", today many are stolen through phishing. Phishing is rampant and done through fraudulent mass e-mail campaigns designed to lure customers into providing personal financial information such as passwords or account information to criminals. With the increasing reliance upon technology, identity fraud has seemingly become easier to commit. The criminal simply creates a passable facsimile of an email from a financial institution, ask for a customer's data under the auspices of updating an account or confirming a password. When you respond they have got you.

If you do become a victim, immediately contact all three major credit reporting agencies by phone and certified letter to put a fraud alert on your credit profile.

File a police report; you will need it to clean up your record.

DEBRIEFING

What is your passion and how could you turn it into a career?

If you work, are you happy with the field you have chosen, do you look forward to your time there or have you worn the snooze button on your alarm clock out?

Develop your budget and determine where your money is going. Are you living above your means?

Do your monthly credit card payments exceed 15% of your take home pay?

How much debt do you have and what is your plan to pay it off?

If you felt God calling you or your husband to leave your jobs for ministry or a less paying job could you afford to do it or are you in too much debt?

PREPARING FOR COMBAT COMMANDING OFFICER

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you tasted that the Lord is good.

1 Peter 2:2-3

As moms, we are in a unique position to grasp how much our children depend on us and can relate that crucial need to our own relationship with the Lord. Babies' appetites for everything from food, clothing, shelter and love are insatiable. We feed them when they are hungry, we clean them when they are dirty, we hold them when they need comforting and we start it all over again everyday. Just as our children rely solely on us to meet their needs, we must rely solely on God to meet our needs. As a baby craves milk and must have it to survive, we should crave the Lord, as we are in desperate need of Him.

When we begin to crave the Lord and make our lives count for His purposes, we will receive peace and isn't that what we all want-just a little bit of peace here on earth. Choose to lovingly let go of control and give it to God. Spiritual maturity is realized when we begin to view things God's way more often than our own. We are indeed soldiers in the midst of combat, but when we rely on the Lord, our commanding officer, we will win our mommy wars as we follow His commands and honor His position of authority in our lives.

In the Trenches: "I intentionally ask God to speak to me through the little things. He does just that. He knows that as a mom my mind is pulled in a hundred ways a minute and it is sometimes in things such as a toy, or an expression on my child's face that reminds me of my need to be in the arms of my Father." Wendy Stewart Hamilton, mom of Kayleigh & Andrew, second mom of Kaile

SAVING GRACE

For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:16-18

Most people, Christian or otherwise have heard John 3:16 and many have memorized it. It may be the only scripture we know, but we passionately hold on to it's meaning. Maybe you learned it in VBS, quoted it in Bible Drill and so on, but I want to encourage you to read on a little farther. Don't miss what Christ says to Nicodemius, in the last two verses.

Salvation and the grace and peace it creates is the most beautiful love story! That God loves me so much that He would send His one and only son to die for my sins has never ceased to astound me. Jesus was perfect and His horrible death came to fruition because I could not reach Heaven and be in the presence of a perfect God without His sacrifice. We are all at the core evil and don't deserve grace. Fortunately, God desires a relationship with us - flaws and all. I could never reach God on my own through good works, much less repay what my salvation cost. I can however, live a life of faith, relying on His presence to lead and guide me everyday as I seek to do His will.

CRAVING FAITH

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. Hebrews 11:1-3

Faith is such a mysterious sounding word, but when you look at it from God's perspective, it becomes much clearer. So much of the Bible and other writings, Christian and otherwise, focus on the meaning and importance of faith. As a result, understanding and embracing faith can be confusing at best or lost altogether.

It has been said that there are many paths to God and the fulfillment that comes from a higher power. This belief is dangerous; it's inoffensive tone sounds nice, but it is a lie that can ultimately lead someone to hell. Who doesn't want to believe that she can do whatever she wants and still get to God? Unfortunately, this theory has led so many women, just like you and me astray. Please catch this, God's word clearly states in John 14:6, that every path chosen without belief in the one true God and Savior leads to destruction in hell.

In the Trenches: "It's hard to maintain the intensity of a relationship with the Lord when you are a new mom. Deep conversations turn into momentary pleas: 'Help me be a good mom. Help me stay awake two more hours. Help my baby sleep long enough so I can take a shower.' At six months, my son enjoyed the Veggie Tales videos and I think they were my main source of hearing God's voice while he was an infant. The Bible stories and simple lessons about not being greedy, to showing someone kindness when you don't feel like it, were God ordained messages that He allowed me to hear." Lisa Copen, mom of Joshua

SOLDIERS OF FAITH

God is so faithful to us, that it calls us to question our faithfulness to Him. His word can be trusted, because He keeps His promises and fulfills His commitments to each and every one of us. We can find so many examples of people in scripture that were faithful to God. They were obedient despite difficult circumstances and often never saw their reward on earth for their faithfulness. God's servants were persecuted beyond imagination even to the point of death and were still faithful.

Oh, how I want to be found faithful, to be known as one who pleased God. Will I still trust Him even when times are tough and I don't see the reward ahead of me? What about you, will you stand firm in your faith? Our reward and home will not be found on this earth, instead we need to look toward the hope we have in Heaven. I am awed by the idea that God is not ashamed when I call Him my God! Despite all the horrible things I have done and will do in the future, He sent His only son to save me and is even now looking forward to the day I come home.

I saw an example of faith in action recently when I watched the movie Finding Nemo with my children. Marlin and Dory have been swallowed by a whale and when the whale tells them to just let go and swim to the back of his throat, Marlin won't budge. He asks Dory, "How do you know it will be ok?" and she responds, "I don't!" He decides to trust her instincts, let's go and the whale sprays them out into the Sydney harbor, just where they needed to be. Isn't that how it is with God? We wonder if we can really trust Him, if everything will be ok. Thankfully, our God knows what is best for us and letting go of our issues and replacing them with faith, doesn't have to be so scary after all.

One of the very first examples of profound faith in scripture concerns Abraham. In Genesis 15:6, his faith in God was credited to him as righteousness. He believed God and the promises that had been made to him, in spite of the circumstances. Abraham trusted that he would be the father of many nations, despite the fact that he and his wife were childless and a hundred years old! Through his faith in God, Abraham became the father of all of us and made the birth and ultimate death and resurrection of Jesus possible. Can you imagine what you

would do in a similar situation? I'm not sure that God will ever use me to the great extent that he used Abraham, but I'm ready and willing to accept His call on my life. Are you?

In the Trenches: "I learned through trial and error that keeping my relationship strong with the Lord would be a challenge. When the children were young I would juggle my time for prayer and study around their nap or quiet time. As the children outgrew naps, we still had a period of quiet time. It was during that hour that I could be refreshed with Christ's living water. It was that hour I longed for daily." Alene Snodgrass, mom of Courtney,

Blake & Lindsey

SPIRITUAL WEAPONS

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:11

God has gifted every Christian with certain spiritual weapons to aid in their walk with the Lord and as they do battle with Satan. We can use these weapons of our spiritual gifts, the fruit of the Spirit, Bible study, Scripture memory, prayer, tithing and even the fellowship of other believers to help win our mommy wars.

Just as we discipline our children we must discipline ourselves in our relationship with the Lord. In his book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster writes, “In our enthusiasm to practice the Disciplines, we may fail to practice discipline. The life that is pleasing to God is not a series of religious duties. We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God.”

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to ignorant.

1 Corinthians 12:1

The Bible is clear in it's admonishment to discover and use your spiritual gifts. Many scriptures detail spiritual gifts and there are several good tests you can take and books you can read to try to assess what yours are. There are 16 - 25 spiritual gifts, though the total number and type vary from one text and test, to another. They can include Prophecy, Pastor, Teaching, Wisdom, Knowledge, Exhortation, Discernment, Giving, Helps, Leadership, Administration, Mercy, Missionary, Hospitality, Faith, Miracles, Evangelist, Healing, Tongues, Interpretation, Voluntary Poverty, Celibacy, Intercession, Exorcism and Service. Spiritual gifts are not the same as the fruit of the Spirit which we will study later. You can use your spiritual gifts on a short term basis, spontaneously or continuously. There are several basic truths about spiritual gifts.

Only Christians possess spiritual gifts and they can not be earned. They are not a natural talent or skill you are born with. Every Christian has at least one gift and the Holy Spirit determines what your spiritual gift will be.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Every Christian has at least one spiritual gift, but not all of them. Each member of the body of Christ, better known as the "church" also has the responsibility to use their gift or gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

Our spiritual gifts should overflow out of the love we have for God and His people. God receives the glory when we use our gifts appropriately, where and when they are needed. 1 Peter 4:10 – 11

Discover what your specific spiritual gifts are by serving in your church. Spiritual gifts produce unity and maturity among believers.

Ephesians 4:11-13

No person's gift makes them better or more important than anyone else. Every member of the body of Christ is required to use their gift for the full glory of God to be revealed.

Romans 12: 3 – 8

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:22-23

We are filled with the fruit of the Spirit when we accept Christ, it is not something that we can strive to achieve on our own. There is only one kind of fruit with nine different qualities. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit and are living through His power, the creation of good fruit will be a natural occurrence. We don't have to pray for God to help us become more patient, loving, or kind. We just need to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts daily and to live in such a way that He is in ultimate control of everything we do and say. Picture a tree in season when it is overflowing with delicious, fragrant and beautiful fruit. That is the kind of fruit that all Christians should be producing in their lives.

The premise of Matthew 7:15-23, regarding the fruit of the Spirit, is that the good tree represents the saved person and accordingly the bad tree represents the lost person. Jesus makes it clear that the saved person should be continuously producing fruit. It is not enough to have produced good fruit when you were first saved or cling to some wonderful mission trip experience from 20 years ago, the saved person should be producing fruit right now.

The lost person is unable to produce good fruit because they don't know how. Sure, they may be good people by the world's standards, but according to Matthew 7:21, only people who do the will of God will enter Heaven. The lost, referred to as the tree that produces bad fruit in this passage will be cut down and thrown into the fires of hell. Although this passage has caused me to question my own faith; it carries the power to remind me that my salvation is not dictated by other's hopes or passed down from the most devout believer in my family. Faith is personal, I must attain it on my own and producing good fruit is an assurance of my salvation. If my life is fruitless, it doesn't matter who praises me, but if my life is fruitful, it doesn't matter who criticizes me.

In the Trenches: “Just live it, to borrow from Nike - Just do it - when they see you modeling, it is huge. Like St. Francis of Assisi said, ‘Share the gospel, use words if necessary.’” Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

BIBLE STUDY

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. You rebuke the arrogant, who are cursed and who stray from your commands. Remove from me scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes. Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees. Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors. Psalm 119:18-24

When I was a little girl my mother had one of those huge heirloom Bibles that she sat on the coffee table in our living room. That Bible was used basically as a decoration and to record family information like marriages, births and deaths. Unfortunately, I don't think my mother is the only woman who neglects to read her Bible and picks it up solely to dust.

The Bible is God's love letter to us, His very words written just for us to read. When I started dating my husband, we lived in different cities so we would often exchange love letters. I treasured these letters, kept them in a special place and read them over and over again. In the same way, we should delight in the awesome love letter that our first love has given us, we should long to read it again and again and adhere to its wise counsel. It contains essential information on the meaning of life and how it should be lived. It is like a road map and the Holy Spirit is our navigator through the paths of life. It advises us how to raise our children, love our husbands, and spend our time and money and so much more. We don't just receive these truths by osmosis, we obtain them from continual and concentrated study of God's word. It is important to not only read a devotional or Christian book, but to read the actual words of God that were written down for us so long ago.

As a new mom finding the time to read your Bible may be difficult and actually doing it can be even harder. You may need to set aside a specific time to go deeper into God's word – maybe you need to get up early before everyone else wakes up, study it while your children nap or replace one of the TV shows you watch regularly with a quiet time. Use a daily reading schedule or one-year Bible to read the Bible through for a new perspective on God's word. It only takes 21 days to create a new habit, so don't give up if you miss a day.

Listen to the Bible on tape if you have a long commute or while you run errands. Spend some time rewriting the Psalms in your own words as paraphrased prayers. In my own experience, I have discovered that I am in a much happier mood and better prepared for the day when I start it with the Lord and Bible study is a key part of that.

In the Trenches: “When my son was small, I made a pact with myself that I wouldn’t do housework in the middle of the night. Those nightly appointments of taking care of a baby became opportunities to read my Bible and pray uninterrupted. The house was quiet when he went back to sleep, and I was wide awake. I grew immensely during those study times.” Sally Ferguson, mom of Nate & Anna

BATTLE READY

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:14-17

Paul stresses four functions of the word of God that will get us battle ready. They are equally important and deserve our attention, as well as our obedience. First, through teaching of Scriptures we are instructed what is right and wrong and imparted with wisdom of the truth and God. Second, through the rebuking of Scriptures we are admonished of our sins. Third, through the correction of Scriptures we are redirected when we stray. Fourth, through the training of Scriptures we are prepared for each step along the pathway of knowing God and becoming like Him.

In the Trenches: "I need to spend some time with the Lord in prayer, meditation and reading the Word every day. It's so easy to let that be the thing we give up; when it should be the first thing we reach for in the morning to get through the day. I learned early on that I had to have my quiet time first thing in the morning so I would have the strength, endurance, patience, and love that I needed to raise my kids. If I couldn't beat them up in the morning, I was having it at their first nap. It really is the most important part of being a mom and your kids will thank you one day for showing them the love of Jesus." Tonya Holter, mom of Tyler, Lauren & Kyle.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

God's word is living and still has the power to speak to us today. Of course, we can only receive that power when we actually take the time to read, memorize and apply the word of God to our lives. The more time we spend time in the word, the easier it gets to understand how it affects each one of us. God's word convicts, brings healing and power all at the same time. How awesome is that.

Memorizing scripture is so vital, because it enables you to recall what God has said about a certain subject right when you need it. You become capable of telling others exactly why you believe, have faith and hope. You can share with your friends why you are not falling completely apart in a crisis or why you don't live the same way they do.

If you can memorize your home phone number, cell phone number, social security number, favorite songs or lines from movies you are capable of Scripture memory.

PRAYER POWER

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he will hear us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we asked of Him.

1 John 5:14- 15

While God desires to meet our needs, according to His will, prayer must be so much more than a 911 call to God. Just like any relationship, time must be invested in order for it to develop. Prayer is a gift and we should treat it that way. When you pray, begin by praising God for who He is and offer a prayer of thankfulness for all He has done for you. Prayer allows us to confess our sins and to be freed from the oppression they hold over us. We are able to share our concerns with God, just like we do when we talk to a friend. Communicate your frustrations and joys with God, He knows better than anyone else how you feel and what you need. We can cry out to Him in repentance, hurt, shame and even anger, because He is our best friend.

As you pray for your spouse and children everyday, it may be helpful to use a calendar or book for specifics. I personally love *The Power of a Praying Wife* and *The Power of a Praying Parent* by Stormie Omartian.

Create your own prayer calendar and post it in a visible place. Just take a generic calendar page and add scripture that coordinates with specific things you want to pray for like your child's future mate, their choices, and their salvation and so on. When our daughter was first born I posted a prayer calendar near the toilet, so my husband and I were motivated to pray for her while we are otherwise occupied.

Journal your prayers, including your answers, so you can see how God how He has answered and what He has brought you through.

Pray as you run errands, do dishes and laundry, and change diapers.

Don't just say amen when you finish asking for forgiveness and making your requests. Prayer is a conversation where we not only speak; we listen and learn about our Savior and ourselves. God prompts us in Psalms 46:10, to just sit, to be still and know and learn of Him.

Another great time to focus your attention on the Lord and to pray for the Lord's direction and about your concerns is while you walk.

Praying over your children as you rock them to sleep is especially sweet. The window of opportunity to do this is so limited, but the difference it can make in you and your child's life is significant. I treasure the moments I have spent in prayer while I cuddled with my son and daughter. They are a wonderful reminder of what a special gift from God they are.

In the Trenches: "I keep a sheet of prayer requests on my bathroom mirror and pray over them as I get ready in the morning." Linda Rhoton, mom of Melinda, Breanne & Reagan

TITHING TACTICS

Tithing isn't a suggestion, God commands it. Simply put, when you disobey God and keep what is not yours, you sin. There are consequences for disobeying God where it concerns our finances just like any other area. There are also blessings for giving back to God just a little bit of what He has blessed you with. However, we give to glorify God, not just for the blessing we receive. The "health and wealth" gospel sounds great, but it's not biblical. God allows us the privilege of giving so that other people might have their needs met. Financial or spiritual blessings are an awesome byproduct of giving, not the purpose.

Everything we have is God's, so give your tithe to God first in accordance with Malachi 3:6-12. God declared in Malachi that the people had been robbing Him by not giving back to Him the small portion He required. We are only stewards of God's property and finances. He doesn't need the money, but we need to offer it in obedience and gratefulness just the same.

Tithing is a part of worship and God desires that we bring our tithes into the storehouse, the local church. It is almost impossible for the church to do ministry without tithes. Your 10% tithe to the church should not be divided up between other charities. If you want to support ministries beyond your church, give an offering above you tithe.

Teach your children the importance of tithing and help them honor God by instructing them to tithe on any money they receive and to give offerings beyond that. It is never too early to teach our children about the importance of tithing. When our daughter was barely 3 years old she learned with her father's encouragement that we do three things with our money, "give it to God, put it in the bank and spend it."

Your children have more money than you probably realize, they need to tithe on all of it, including gift money, their allowance and any other money they might earn. They can also learn to give offerings by donating their own gently used books or toys to others or by allowing them to buy can goods when you are at the grocery store

for the food closet at your church. You can even encourage their friends to bring a new book or toy for a homeless shelter instead of a birthday gift.

FAITHFUL ALLIES

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus. Romans 15:5

We need other Christian moms as allies in the trenches as we fight our mommy wars. I found my allies in the mom's group I founded after our daughter was born. These moms have rescued me, they have commiserated with me and they have freed me to be all that I can be, as they remind me that that is more than enough. Many of them even helped me write this book!

We need them to walk with us through our daily battles and to help defeat our isolation. Romans 12:5 & 1 Peter 4:8-9

We need them to work with us and motivate us to keep on fighting. Ecclesiastes 4:9 & Galatians 6:10

We need them to watch out for us and protect our spiritual interests, too. Philippians 2:4 & Ecclesiastes 4:10

We need them to hurt with us when we are hurting. 1 Peter 3:8 & Romans 12:15

We need them to share our faith with. John 13:35 & 2 Timothy 1:7

We need them to hold us accountable. Hebrews 10:25

LASTING LEGACY

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 upon 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 6:5-9

Arguably the most important responsibility we have as parents is to woo our children to the Lord, to help them fall in love, as it were, with our Savior. I long for the day that my children will ultimately claim Him as their own. What a privilege it is to share the joy of my salvation and relationship with the Lord with them. I hope that the words they hear and the actions they see will consistently express my love for the Lord.

Our children must establish their own faith. While we can impress upon them our faith it is ultimately their choice to believe or not to believe.

Let your children see you reading your Bible and hear you talk about the way the Lord has blessed your family. Our children model our behavior so effortlessly. Wouldn't you rather them pretend they are reading their Bible than listen to them repeat a harsh word that you said in frustration?

As your children continue to age, buy them Christian music and Bibles and study guides that they can relate to. My daughter has her own treasured Bible study guide called, God and Me! Devotions for Girls, Ages 2-5 that we use frequently.

Teaching your children to pray is just as important as praying for them, so allow your children to lead the prayer before meals and encourage them to have a daily quiet time with the Lord.

Your church family can also play a vital role in bringing up your children in faith. The church should be your child's second home, so encourage them to go to special events offered at your church, such as camp and retreats. This will enable them to build relationships with the Lord, as well as their Christian friends.

Listen to praise music in the car, while playing and bathing your children; not just at church. One of the greatest pleasures of my life thus far is listening to my daughter sing praises to the Lord. When she was only 2 she would often say, "Sing to Kenzie about Jesus." Mackenzie is even teaching Caleb to raise his hands in worship. Recently we were driving around running errands and listening to a song about how Jesus loves us and from the back seat I heard my little girl say "that's why we sing to Him, because Jesus loves us". From her lips to God's ears.

Begin a consistent time of Bible study as a family; there are so many guides out there to use or ask your pastor or children's minister for their recommendations.

Combine praise, Bible study and prayer to create a great bedtime routine. Our children's bedtime routine includes reading a Bible story and singing their favorite songs such as The Lord's Army and Jesus Loves Me. We also pray with and for our children and our daughter from a very early age started repeating what we say as well as adding her own list of thankfulness to God. Even now, Caleb listens to the prayers and says amen. This is so easy to do, and if you do it before they go to sleep, it will also help them settle down for the evening.

Moms can't possibly prevent our children from coming in contact with every objectionable thing in the world, but if your child sees or hears something inappropriate, be quick to discuss it with them and point out why it is a problem.

In the Trenches: "I have found that by making sure I am studying my Bible and participating in Bible study and worship services, Sunday school and such that I am able to keep God on the front burner and in control of my life. I incorporate God into all that we do, we pray throughout the day, we sing songs and we read books. I take the kids to Bible study and Sunday school classes and I incorporate Bible lessons into their curriculum. We do a

Bible lesson almost everyday and usually talk about that lesson throughout the day to really help it to sink in.”

Wendy Johnson, mom of Kutter & Kaden

BABY BELIEVER'S BOOT CAMP

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. Proverbs 22:6

Webster's defines the word train as "to aim at an objective or a goal." I am responsible to train my children about what it means to be a Christ follower. To influence their decision to become a Christian and to encourage them to meet the goal of remaining pure and to take their aim at becoming more like Christ. I must partner with God to help shape and mold my children's hearts; to fight the war against Satan and win the battle for their heart on God's behalf. The Bible mentions the word heart 850 times, it is that important.

As our children grow and become adults, our desire should be that the foundation of their soul is built on the Lord and our prayer that they will remain faithful to what we have taught them. In John 17:15 Jesus prayed for his followers, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." While our children live in this crazy world, they can't be of the world. We can not protect them from every evil thing in the world or lock them in the house; however we can pray for them and share our faith; all the while showing them it is about a relationship with God.

My mother-in-law i.e. mother- in-love has been such a wonderful example to me of what a Christian wife and mom looks like and I aspire to be more like her every day. When her son and daughter were growing up she shared her faith by going through the back door in conversation. "I started with a question that required more than a 'yes or no' answer and simply let my children talk. Then instead of giving advice, which they didn't ask for, I would continue with the questions until they discovered the heart of the conversation lies in their relationship with God. Fortunately it was not left up to me; God was really the one who was in control of the conversation and dealing with my children because I had already invited Him to be a part of the day." Jean Hines said.

In the Trenches: “My daughter had an opportunity to cheat on a test in 3rd grade. When we were talking about it, she said, ‘Mom, do you know why I didn’t cheat? It’s because you love Jesus so much!’ I will never forget that moment. I had always heard a relationship with Him is ‘caught-not taught’ and I realized the Anna Beth had certainly caught my passion and love for Jesus. She is 17 today and is passionately in love with Him. I like to think it was partly because I passed on a heritage of my faith.” Sandra Stanford, mom of Anna Beth & Jonathan

DEBRIEFING

Is God truly your commanding officer?

How do you keep your relationship with the Lord strong despite all the demands of life as a mom?

When was the last time you shared your faith? What was the result?

What are your spiritual gifts? If you don't know, take a spiritual gifts inventory and put your gifts to use.

Are you honoring God with your tithe?

How do you share your faith with your children

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

We must learn to recognize and defeat the enemies in our mommy wars. From depression to sin, guilt, unforgiveness, trials, apathy, imbalance and procrastination moms our fighting and losing. Get to know the enemies in this chapter and get ready for battle today.

BATTLING THE BLUES

After our daughter was born I had the baby blues which were compounded by her traumatic arrival and her subsequent extended stay in the NICU. I will be the first to admit that I had this fairy tale in my mind of what I thought life would be like, down to the image of me nursing her in the beautiful white gown in a rocking chair in her room with the sunlight streaming in.

Reality proved much different and I was overwhelmed emotionally as I sat in an uncomfortable chair in my kitchen alone in the middle of the night while I pumped breast milk that she would drink when I was unable to be at the hospital. Actually nursing her wasn't much better and ultimately proved to be an insurmountable task. As I visited with several friends, my pastor, my OBGYN and our pediatrician about my feelings, time and time again I was reassured that my emotions were normal and that I wasn't alone.

Later, despite a supportive and encouraging husband, great friends and having my mother-in-law i.e. mother-in-love stay with me, I struggled to hold it together after my son was born as well. One afternoon I found myself weeping uncontrollably in the bathtub for no apparent reason. I was definitely battling more than just the baby blues.

UNDER ATTACK

Up to 80 percent of new moms experience some degree of melancholy. For many moms baby blues may last for weeks and often the new mom may feel like it is their fault; but even the best moms, the most compassionate, the most dedicated and even moms who have struggled with infertility or those with children already can fall prey to the baby blues or postpartum depression.

It is amazing what a women's body goes through during pregnancy, add the delivery and the reality of bringing home baby when your hormones are still reeling from the pregnancy and adjusting to not being pregnant faster than it took for most of us to conceive in the first place. Considering a new mom's numerous nights of interrupted sleep, her babies cries and possible nursing or other health struggles, it's no wonder more mothers aren't overcome and spend as much time crying if not more than their newborn.

According to OBGYN, Dr. David Morehead depression can be a problem for a woman at any stage of her life, but the postpartum period is the highest risk time for a woman to experience depression. "Depression is a continuum - from very mild to severe. Postpartum blues are self-limiting, and generally run their course in a few days. Postpartum depression is more serious, and may last for months. The most severe form is post partum psychosis, which is a very serious and dangerous psychiatric condition." Dr. Morehead said.

The most common symptoms of baby blues include, but are not limited to:

Bouts of crying

Stress and tension

Mood swings

Difficulty concentrating

Trouble sleeping followed by excessive tiredness

Impatience or short temper

Sadness or feelings of loss

Anxiety and nervousness

Lack of drive or desire for normal routine

In the Trenches: "I had a lot of anxiety and depression after my first daughter, Tessa, was born. I felt very trapped and I felt crazy, not to mention the guilt that I felt for feeling that way. I did call my doctor and he prescribe medication for me. It really helped and I feel I was a better mommy because of the medication." Lori

Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

BATTLE BASICS

Fortunately, when they take care of themselves and share their struggles with others, most new moms will overcome the baby blues in a relatively short time period (although it feels much longer). There are several things you can do to help battle the blues. You don't have to feel this way and there is treatment available. What your child needs most is a happy mom, so don't be embarrassed to ask for help from your doctor, family and friends.

Give yourself time to recover, adjust and connect with your baby. Most pregnancies take nine months and adoption may stretch out even longer. The moment your child actually enters the world is an awesome miracle, but becoming a mother is a life long journey.

Focus on your baby and don't feel guilty about taking the time to get to know your precious gift. The rest of the world including phone calls, housework and even thank you notes can wait.

Connect with others by getting out of the house even if it's just to go to the park or shopping. Talk to someone else who has been there, done that as it were. Other moms are the perfect people to remind you that "this too shall pass."

Support groups are another great resource for new moms. One of the main reasons I felt led to begin a mom's group was to create a safe place of encouragement for moms. I have been just as blessed, if not more, by the women who attend than they have been by attending.

There are also numerous excellent on-line resources for moms including www.inspiredmoms.com and www.celebratemoms.org of which I am a core team member. Celebrate Moms is a virtual retreat that gives mothers encouragement, inspiration, and practical help on all levels—physical, mental, and spiritual—as they tackle the all-important task of nurturing their children for a lifetime. Celebrate Moms also hosts live conferences across the country.

Choose groups or friends that reflect your values and your beliefs and ultimately your faith. You want to be among other moms who understand and support you. For example, from time to time we all struggle in our marriages, especially with the addition of a little one, however if the sanctity of marriage is important to you, you should avoid joining a group that is pro divorce. While that may sound harsh, you want women to encourage you and remind you that fighting for your marriage is worth it and that you can make it. The same goes for nursing, discipline, schooling and a myriad of other sensitive issues. That's not to say that you can't have friends with different philosophies, but you want your closest friends, those that are giving you counsel to be on the same page.

The importance of rest was covered in Boot Camp and lack of sleep will undoubtedly affect your mood in a negative manner and intensify melancholy feelings so get the sleep you need when you need it.

The importance of delegation was covered extensively in Call in the Reserves and asking for help with your responsibilities like housework, cooking and even help with the baby from family and friends may also help keep the blues away.

It may sound ironic at a time when you feel so needy, but more than half of the mom's I interviewed said staying busy doing things for other people helped to stave off feelings of depression and anxiety.

Listening to music is one of the best ways to lift your mood. Pick a song like Walking on Sunshine or I Will Survive and make it your mantra. I personally love the song I am Blessed by Martina McBride. Whenever I am feeling down or sorry for myself I play that song and as I am reminded of all the wonderful things in my life, the blues are chased away.

If you are at your breaking point and there is no one there to relieve you, put the baby safely in their bed and let them cry while you cry in the other room. While you don't want to make this a habit, it's better for the baby for you to calm down before attending to them.

In the Trenches: “Becoming a mom and taking on a tremendous amount of responsibility gave me a ton of anxiety. Many people in my family and friends took medication to combat such feelings. Because I was nursing, I refused to take medication. I was anxious about the side-effects on the baby, just as I was anxious about everything else. I had to have something to take me out of that darkness. It was difficult, but I began to claim Philippians 4:6-7 and pray that over myself every time I felt anxious. Those verses gave me overwhelming peace and healing over time. I wouldn’t be as close to God now if I hadn’t gone through that anxiety and allowed Him to rescue me. What the enemy intended for evil God turned into good.” Jennifer Mims, mom of Grant, Brody, Nash, & Barrett

ONSLAUGHT OF POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

If your distressed feelings continue to disrupt your life for an extended period of time or new symptoms develop you should consult with a physician. Indeed at some point it must be determined if your feelings of depression are deeper than routine baby blues or if you are under the attack of postpartum depression. Those intense feelings that many new moms struggle with are nothing new, although the attention to them may have been intensified by the media and the extreme struggles of women like Susan Smith who drowned her 14 month old and 2 year old by driving her car into a lake and Andrea Yates who drowned her 5 children in the bathtub.

As early as 460 BC Hippocrates blamed lochial discharge transported to the brain, for “agitation, delirium and attacks of mania” which he labeled “puerperal fever”. Who knew that Hippocrates could see into the future and into my heart and mind. Unfortunately, we still don’t know exactly what causes the debilitating condition of postpartum depression, but we can win the war. Postpartum depression is an illness, like diabetes or heart disease. It can be treated with therapy, support networks and medicines such as antidepressants. The important thing to remember is that being depressed or even needing to take medicine to cope, doesn’t make you a bad mom. Admitting you have a problem and seeking help makes you the best kind of mom.

In the Trenches: “After a textbook pregnancy and delivery, postpartum depression ravaged my mind and body for 18 months. Yet, it brought me to my knees before God; it was a pivotal point in my life and my faith. I’m a better mother today because of that bizarre experience, but it was a difficult to maneuver; a challenge that I could never have anticipated, but that is exactly why I want to talk about it...other mother’s will know they aren’t alone in this trauma! We do survive postpartum depression.” Judy Dippel, mom of Lindsay & Ryan

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

My personal experiences coupled with doctors' interviews and surveys from moms across the country have made it clear that postpartum depression is very common and affects different women differently. While most women have some form of postpartum blues, some women symptoms are so severe that they meet the clinical definition of postpartum depression and along with counseling and behavior changes; new moms may also require antidepressants. Just as you take medicine to treat heart disease, diabetes or even a headache, you may need to take medicine to treat depression.

“The decision to start medications is an individual one and depends upon the severity of symptoms, the doctor's view of the situation, and the desires of the patient.” Dr. Patti Powell said. Dr. Morehead and Dr. Powell concur that the decision to take antidepressants has to be individualized for each woman. “As a Christian, I struggle with the seeming overuse of antidepressants in our country. However, just as we as Christians believe that prayer works, other medical interventions can be part of God's plan, too. If a physical medical problem is severe enough, we may decide it is appropriate to take medication or have surgery. The same logic should be applied to emotional issues. If depression is mild, it can perhaps be controlled with prayer, attitude changes, counseling, and/or lifestyle changes. But if it is more severe, and causes problems with family, spirituality, or health, then perhaps medication is appropriate. And that is where the decision to take an antidepressant may be the right one.” Dr. Morehead said.

According to Dr. Morehead it is best to use the lowest dose of medication that works for the shortest time possible. “For postpartum depression, that is usually three to six months and then you can try tapering off if things seem stable emotionally. For general depression, several months to a year may be all that is necessary, while for others it may be a longstanding problem.” Dr. Morehead said. Dr. Powell also strongly asserts that when a woman with post partum depression has severe symptoms such as psychosis or has any thoughts of hurting herself or her child/children it is a medical emergency which must be evaluated by a physician immediately and almost always needs medications.

In her book *Captivating* co-written with her husband John, Stasi Eldredge shares candidly about her struggles with depression and how she combined care for her body, soul and spirit to survive her battles and ultimately win the war. She writes, “We human beings are made up of three interwoven parts. As Paul says, ‘May God Himself ...sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Thess. 5:23). We are body, soul, and spirit. Each part affects the others in mysterious interplay of life. By seeking help through counseling, God was addressing my soul. God’s provision of the help of antidepressants was a tremendous help to my body. I made real progress. But it was not enough. God wanted to engage my spirit.”

In the Trenches: “What has helped me the most over the years when it comes to the overwhelming feelings of depression I sometimes suffer with is my mind set. If my mind is focused on what’s causing the depression, then nothing will help. When I focused my mind on the Lord and know that He’s my silent partner in the Goliath’s the world throws at me, I found I was able to handle most anything, even the depression; and even the wrong choices my children have made as they grew into young adults. I learned the hard way that God is bigger than any problem the world throws my way.” Sandra McIntosh, mom of Jeremy & Nicholas

THE ENEMY OF SIN

Sin in our lives can be just as debilitating, if not more than any other enemy, because it separates us from our commanding officer, our protector and our Savior.

Unfortunately, like most of the lessons I have learned, I learned this one the hard way.

I went through a horrible season of turning my back on God and living life only for what I wanted. For sometime in college, my hunger for the Lord was replaced by my own desires. My days became filled with improper relationships, alcohol and worse - conviction in the darkness that I had created. My heart became so callused, hard and cold. A spirit of conviction was always present, but it was not until I finally let the forgiveness and grace of God wash over me, that my heart began to turn towards Him.

One night after partying with shame and guilt all over me I pulled out my Bible. I quickly came to Psalms 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” and I realized I was delighting in what I thought would bring me the most happiness, but in the end all I had gotten was heartache.

The next day, I took drastic steps including physically moving to escape the temptations of the life I had been leading and began to make better choices as I reconnected with my first love. As I delighted in the Lord, His desires became my desires. I found myself falling in love with my Savior all over again. The things that I had thought were so important were replaced by what was important to Him.

At first glance, you may think this scripture implies that God will give us whatever we want if we just take pleasure in Him. Examining it a little closer reveals that it is much more complicated than that. When you are really delighting in the Lord the desires of your heart will actually change. They will become His desires because He will give them to you.

It was during my time of repentance that I began to connect with my husband. He was so funny, loved God and was so different then the type of men I had been dating. The more time I spent around him and watched him in ministry my feelings grew. When we finally went on our first date and I listened to him share his heart and dreams, I was a goner. Looking back, I can clearly see the hand of God in the development of our relationship. When I accepted His forgiveness and began to treasure my relationship with Him once again, His desires became my own and He gave me what I had been searching for all along. I know my husband is a gift from the Lord for retuning to Him.

THE ENEMY OF GUILT

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart with full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.

Hebrews 10:22-23

While conviction comes from the Holy Spirit, guilt after you have asked God for forgiveness of your sins doesn't. This has been one of the greatest personal struggles in my Christian life. Following the season of sin and rebellion that I referenced earlier, I was overwhelmed with guilt and that same guilt has frequently reared its ugly head in my life since. Satan is the one who reminds us of our sin, so he can keep us down. When we wallow in self-pity, we are unable to accept the Lord's compassion and mercy. Satan wants us to feel defeated; that God could not possibly love us anymore, much less ever use us again.

We would be much wiser, to take what we have learned through the pits of sin and share it with others to discourage them to go down the same road. We can also use our experiences to help others overcome their own sin and experience the grace of God for themselves. Don't let your mistakes, be wasted on guilt; instead, use your story of redemption to bring glory to God.

Sometimes as moms we also suffer guilt over things not so heavy, but just as debilitating. Maybe you forgot a family member's birthday, a friend's surgery or something important to your husband or child. When we mess up or hurt the ones we love, we should feel some sense of shame, but it's possible to be too hard on ourselves. Once you discover the error of your ways and attempt to apologize, then let go of the guilt.

In the Trenches: "My biggest enemy is guilt. When I get overwhelmed I have to sit down to pray and prioritize the things that I need to get done. Scripture tells me in Matthew 6:33 that I should not worry about tomorrow. God will worry for me, if only I could truly listen to God and His word." Jennifer Pope, mom of Chase

THE ENEMY OF UNFORGIVENESS

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:32

We have all blown it and hurt others either intentionally or unintentionally. We need to give people the benefit of the doubt and accept the great possibility that how they hurt or mistreated us was a mistake or just an oversight. The beauty of forgiveness and a reconciled relationship is that it makes your relationship with that person and the Lord stronger. Unfortunately, often we get so upset over things that we won't even remember next week. We have all been there, recounting a disagreement to someone else, and you can't even recall what the fight started over. Isn't it a shame that we are so quick to destroy the ones we love with our words over insignificant matters?

The principle of forgiveness is expressed so clearly in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant found in Matthew 18:21-35. We are to forgive as often as people sin against us. Who are we to deny someone else the same kind of forgiveness that Christ gave us? We are not allowed to hold their sin against them, because God doesn't hold our sin against us.

Misunderstandings inevitably happen; Christ experienced them in His own relationships. Our goal should be to handle conflict the same way Christ did. We must learn to make allowances for others and to over-look their faults for their benefit, as well as our own. Unforgiveness is also draining on your spirit and leaves your body in a chronic state of stress which may causes ulcers, headaches and more.

Holding on to anger will only cause the root of bitterness to grow in your heart. This is a hard truth for most of us to learn, so just trust me on this one and save yourself a lot of grief. When people hurt you, they probably don't give it much thought afterwards. In fact, you may be the only one who thinks about it ever again, excluding of course, all the other people you make miserable by sharing the details with them.

Those that have hurt and offended you may never ask for your forgiveness, and from your perspective, they may not be worthy of it anyway. Often, the people that need your love and forgiveness the most are the ones who deserve it the least. The sad reality is that so many of us hold on to hurt and pain from so far in the past, that sometimes we can't even remember what we were mad at to begin with. Worse still, we think in some twisted way that we are punishing the ones who hurt us, when in all actuality, we are only destroying ourselves and the people we love. Forgiveness, just like love, is a choice. Even when we are hurting, we must still choose to forgive the other person, if only for the sake of our own heart. My pastor often says, "Holding on to bitterness is like drinking poison, hoping it will kill the other person."

In the Trenches: "Forgiveness in any relationship is essential. We were shown a huge amount of grace and mercy by Christ, therefore how can we deny that to others. I find that often something I think is a big deal just isn't a big deal the next day or week. Andrea McClain mom of McKenna

THE ENEMY OF TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

Isaiah 55:8

The day we discovered that something was horribly wrong with my first pregnancy began like any other. I spent the day teaching and feeling nauseous as I had for the past eight months and had a regular check up scheduled after school. When I weighed in, the nurse noticed that I hadn't gained anything since two weeks before, which was strange, especially considering I gain weight just by looking at food. As she measured my stomach she also detected that it had actually gotten smaller. When our Doctor came in and said he wanted to do a sonogram just as a precaution, my husband and I started to worry a little. He soon discovered that all was not well, in fact it wasn't good at all.

According to the sonogram, our daughter was measuring way too small for her due date. She also appeared to have lost weight and had stopped growing. The Doctor estimated that she weighed only 3 pounds 11 ounces and told us as gently as possible that if we didn't take measures immediately to deliver, we could lose the baby. We kept telling ourselves was that we weren't ready, our bags weren't even packed. How could our child be coming so early and in such a scary way? We went directly from the Doctor's office to the local hospital, checked in and got settled into a room. While all of that was going on our Doctor consulted with several specialists and it was decided that we would go by ambulance to Baylor Hospital in Dallas to deliver the baby by emergency Cesarean section.

The rest of the evening was a whirlwind of emotions and activity. What we thought was going to be a routine checkup turned into the most frightening day of our lives. We prayed and cried together as we asked for God's wisdom, healing and faithfulness and He delivered. We had prayed and waited for a child as we tried to conceive with no results for almost a year. When I found out that I was finally pregnant, I was in shock and so overwhelmed with emotion that I cried and laughed. Funny, I have been doing a-lot of both ever since! My

sweet husband cried at the doctor's office when they confirmed the pregnancy, he had been so reserved and wanted to be absolutely sure about it before he got too excited.

During my pregnancy I kept a journal for our daughter describing her growth and my feelings and was often reminded of Psalms 139:13-16, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." as I wrote and prayed over her. I clung to the hope in these verses more strongly than ever, while I was in the hospital preparing to have her. I trusted God that He had made her for Him and just for us and that He knew what was best. After we arrived at the hospital in Dallas, things slowed down a bit as we were surrounded by family and friends who added their prayers to our own, and offered their support and encouragement.

Mackenzie was delivered by Cesarean section on May 10, 2002 at 9:45 am. The delivery was nothing like what we had imagined and planned for, but what a miracle it was anyway. Our daughter looked right at her Daddy as she was lifted out of my stomach as if to say "what are you worried about, everything is fine." She was perfect, beautiful and healthy despite everything. Our tiny little miracle weighed 3 pounds 8 ounces and was 17 inches long. Mackenzie stayed in the NICU for 17 days to gain her strength and learn to eat on her own. Those days seemed like forever and were filled with a mixture of emotions for our family, but the power of God's presence was there, through it all. We have since learned that if my Doctor has not been so thorough in his examination, our precious baby would have most likely have been still-born. Even though we were not ready, God had it all planned out and Father knows best after all!

THE ENEMY OF IMBALANCE

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:33

Creating balance in my life, especially since I have had children, has been extremely difficult for me, but it is something I intentionally work on each day. God's order of priorities for our lives is clearly laid out in scripture. We are to seek Him first, before family, money, and even ministry. We would save ourselves so much frustration and heartache if we would only put Him first and learn to balance the rest accordingly. Start today to spend time with God. Make a deal with yourself, to replace the time you would normally spend watching the morning news or reading the newspaper with prayer and Bible study.

Develop balance in your life by asking who or what is in control. Determine if your calendar reflects God's control of your life and glorifies His name or if more often than not, it distracts you from following His voice. Make sure that your schedule, e-mail, cell phone, TV, the internet and even other people don't distract you from your true priorities by dominating too much of your time and energy, either. As you evaluate what is most important, don't forget that the things that matter most in life should never be at the mercy of the things that matter least.

There is never enough time to do everything, but there is always enough time to do the most important thing. Evaluate if there is something God needs you to remove from your to-do list or calendar to make more time for Him and to do His will. Begin today to plan every day, week and month in advance to bring balance to your life.

THE ENEMY OF APATHY

Apathy is an especially tough enemy of new moms. We are often content to just go through the motions of our days unaware of the dangers of our complacency. If we really want to be all that we can be, we must establish priorities based on Scripture, make a commitment and take action.

Defeat apathy by defining what winning means to you and how you will do it. For me, winning includes being the person God created me to be, developing my talents, skills and spiritual gifts and ultimately feeling good about myself and my impact on the world. Uncover what you love to do or are good at and throw your whole heart into it.

If you want anything in life, you have to be dedicated and disciplined to get it – apathy is not your ally. You can't go at it halfway and expect good results or continue to do what you have always done and expect different results.

THE ENEMY OF PROCRASTINATION

The number of us who procrastinate has grown by 400% in the last 25 years, which is up to 60% of the population! There are numerous reasons why we all (including me) do it from fear of failure or even success, to disorganization, reluctance, over commitment, lack of interest, desire and motivation. Productivity specialist, speaker, fellow author and mom of three, Kathy Firkins, often asks the people she meets, “what is the most difficult part of time management you face?” Most people answer, “There just isn’t enough time!” The sad statistic is that you have all the time there is. No one can make more, save some, or somehow squeeze more from tomorrow than they did today. Time is a renewing resource.

Determine if you are using the time God has given you wisely and if you aren’t, begin to redeem it. Each morning you have exactly 86,400 seconds until the day is over. How you choose to spend those precious seconds is up to you. Kathy encourages moms to remember that although there are many demands on their time, choices they must make and interruptions to face, essentially each second is under their command. “You get to choose whether you do something now, never or in some second in the future. Those choices are powerful actions that you must take to ensure you accomplish each task set before you today.” Kathy said. Kathy believes that procrastination has a 100% adverse effect on your ability to accomplish your tasks, goals and ultimately your dreams. “Procrastinating can be one of the most devastating and counter-productive ways to eat up all your time. Get a handle on procrastination and you will get a handle on life.” Kathy said. Stop procrastination, dead in its tracks with the 14 suggestions from Kathy below.

Set a deadline to accomplish something.

Do the most important or hardest part first. (this will make you feel good!)

Make a game or race of it. (How fast can I...)

Build in a reward. (coffee, chocolate, manicure, jewelry, etc)

Get organized.

Set overall priorities and stick to them! (faith, family then work)

Take a break. (Make time to take a break from the task)

Set up a system. (I will put all top priority items in this in-box or on this list)

Start small. (one drawer, then one cabinet, a closet, then tackle a room)

Start simple.

Remove distractions or excuses. (TV?)

Organize your materials, equipment and work space.

Work towards completion, not perfection.

Set realistic goals for yourself.

BATTLE PLAN FOR GOAL SETTING

Whatever your goal is, just make sure it's God's goal, too. Your hopes and dreams should never be in conflict with Scripture, because if they are, you know that aren't from God. In order to win your mommy wars, you must decide exactly what you want to accomplish in each area of your life, write it down and share it with others. Surround yourself with people who will encourage you to go for it. When we share our goals our friends and family are able to hold us accountable and help us reach them.

That kind of encouragement and accountability is actually what prompted me to write this book and what carried me through it. It all started when my husband and I had a conversation about what I would love to do if I could do any job at all, besides being a wife and mom of course. For years, I had been writing down my thoughts and feelings on various topics, including God's word, budgeting, decorating and hospitality. I am also an avid reader and the thought came to me that I might have something to share that other women like me would want to read and could also help them. It became my own "do it yourself" project as I attempted to turn something personal into something professional. I would not have made it through this process without my husband and friends prayers, wisdom, encouragement, and of course the gift of childcare.

According to the authors of *Healthy Habits, Total Conditioning for a Healthy Body & Mind*, Kathy Corsetty and Dr. Judith E. Pearson, "Goals that are unrealistic and unachievable will only lead to disappointment and frustration. You cannot celebrate success with goals that are not achievable to begin with."

Writing down goals takes vision - accomplishing them takes commitment. Resolve today to spend more time working in those few areas that can really make a difference in your life and less time on those activities that don't. For me that meant giving up a certain amount of the time I used to spend watching TV and doing something more productive like writing, Bible study or even spending that time in the backyard with my children.

Make a list of how to get what you want and organize it into a realistic and obtainable plan. It is a sad fact, that only 3% of adults have clear written goals!

To achieve a goal we must often change, which involves sacrifice and discipline.

It is also important to identify what might be holding you back from achieving your dreams and change it. If you struggle with low self-esteem, recall previous successes and positive comments from others. If money is tight and preventing you from furthering your education, apply for scholarships or get an extra job.

Take action and do something every day toward your major goal. Maybe you really want to work or go back to school. Stop digging in your heels and just do it. Ask a friend to baby-sit so you can update your resume, make a few contacts in your previous field and let them know you are looking.

Tackle the hard stuff first so you can get them over with, and then move on to the things that require less effort in order to end your day on a positive note.

Do something, do anything, but get started. You must experience success, so you will crave it and keep on going toward your goal.

Don't give up if you make a mistake. Clarify what the most valuable use of your time is and what you are most proud of.

Set aside large chunks of time when necessary to get work done and you allow the creative juices to flow without interruption. You can also use those stolen moments to get things done while the kids are sleeping. The trick is to make every minute count - don't be distracted by the TV, phone and other demands, such as the ever constant calling for "Mommy."

It is also helpful to work when you are at your best. Some people work best at night, others in the morning. When I was writing and I needed a pick me up I would often set the alarm for a 20 minute power nap. It was the perfect amount of time to help me refocus - any longer made me feel worse and unproductive.

To become intrinsically motivated, you must be extrinsically motivated, Buy a new outfit when you have stayed committed to your workout. Purchase a new lipstick when you get the promotion you have been working so hard for. Buy fresh flowers for your desk once it's organized. Reward yourself when you reach small goals and celebrate with something bigger when you have met your major goal. Of course the real reward is having accomplished what you set out to do in the first place.

DEBRIEFING

Who can you call when you feel overwhelmed, depressed or anxious?

Do you need to consider medicine, Scripture or counseling?

Who do you need to forgive and who do you need to ask for forgiveness from?

Do your priorities reflect God's control of your life or do they distract you from following His voice?

Are you using the time God has given you wisely? If not how can you redeem it?

Share your dream with someone today who will hold you accountable.

Where do you see yourself in five years? Where will you live, what will you and yours be doing?

How can you reward yourself for accomplishing your small and large goals?

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

When we become mothers often our own needs and even desires seem to take a backseat to the needs of our family. However, just as you are instructed to take care of yourself first and then the passenger next to you in case of emergency on a plane; as moms we need to take care of ourselves in order to adequately care for our families. Find your strength and power in the Lord and begin today to fight the good fight for a healthy lifestyle for you and your family.

New mom Andrea McClain echoes the sentiments of many of the mom's I surveyed when writing Operation Mom. She shared that she never thought it was important to care for her body until after she had her daughter McKenna. "Your mindset completely changes as a Mom. I began to think, well this is it. This is the only body I'll ever have, so I better take care of it. It sets a great example for her that I am active. If the Holy Spirit is dwelling inside of our very being and our bodies are a temple of the Lord then we need to treat our bodies as such." Andrea McClain said.

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

According to OBGYN, Dr. David Morehead maintaining a proper diet and exercise routine can be a challenge for new mothers. "The entire focus is on baby, and most moms just grab what they can when they can. I usually recommend continuing prenatal vitamins for six weeks postpartum, or as long as they are breastfeeding - whichever is longer. Breastfeeding may help with weight loss, but it is not drastic - breastfeeding consumes about 300 extra calories a day. Focus on eating healthy, and trying to lose the pregnancy weight as soon as is possible, because, unfortunately, it seems so much harder to lose later on." Dr. Morehead said.

According to Dr. Morehead, exercise is also key for emotional well-being and weight loss. "Exercise is a big challenge with a new baby, so just walking with the stroller may be the best place to start. Later on, visits to a work-out facility with child care might provide some personal time, as well as help with weight-loss, stamina, emotional well-being, and stress-relief." Dr. Morehead said.

Wait for your doctor's approval before you begin any exercise program after the arrival of your baby. Also, if post pregnancy bleeding increases, or begins again after stopping, you may be overdoing it. Stop exercising and consult your doctor. It is also a good idea to let your doctor know you plan to increase your level of physical activity at any time not just after pregnancy. They may have specific advice for you as well as a few tips to get you started.

Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy linguist encourages moms to be kind to themselves during recovery. "Know that your recovery period will not be overnight. Drink more water than you think you should, eat and give yourself a break. Having a new baby is hardest for the most productive people. When you hang out with a baby all day, there aren't many tangible, immediate results." Dr. Linguist said.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

In the book, *Healthy Habits*, authors Kathy Corsetty and Judith E. Pearson, Ph.D., suggest that half-hearted statements are not beneficial and can be a detriment to achieving your lifestyle changes. “Avoid vague words such as ‘more’, ‘less’ or ‘some’. Instead of saying ‘I want to eat better or exercise more,’ say ‘I only want to eat nutritious foods in the proper quantities and ride a stationary bike at least every other day.’”

Set yourself up for success by choosing goals that are attainable and measurable.

Commit your goals to paper and keep a journal of not only what you eat, but your exercise. There is something about actually writing it all down that makes you more aware and take ownership of your choices and their consequences.

Accountability and encouragement is crucial for success when it comes to making lifestyle changes, so be sure to tell your spouse and your friends your goals.

Schedule and guard time for physical activity or it will be sacrificed to another.

That old saying that breakfast is the most important meal of the day is true. When you eat breakfast, you will feel more energetic and get your metabolism going. If you're not that hungry, have a breakfast bar or banana and see how much better you feel throughout the day. This is especially important if you are breastfeeding, your body needs the fuel in order to produce nutritious fuel for your baby.

In the Trenches: “Finding the time to work out has to be a priority or it won't happen. It is all constant discipline. You have to take care of yourself physically or it will affect everything else.” Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

We all know that positive reinforcement works so be quick to praise your family and reward yourself to encourage healthy lifestyle changes. Taking the time to celebrate success and how good you feel will also motivate you and your family to further success.

Congratulate your family and yourself for making good food choices and trying new foods.

Create a sticker chart that encourages your child to earn stickers for eating at least 5 fruits or veggies a day and then once a week let them choose an approved activity as a reward. Be sure you have fruits and veggies available so you don't set them (or yourself) up for failure.

When you reach small goals like working out 3 times a week, reward yourself with small things like a new lipstick or pair of earrings.

When you achieve your larger goals like losing a certain amount of weight, reward yourself with a new outfit or a massage.

The actual changes you make will also help you feel better and often that is motivation enough to keep going in your quest for a healthier life.

In the Trenches: "My children are grown, but it is still a battle to find time to work out. At the very least, I just step out the door and take a walk. Fresh air has a miraculous way of giving my day a fresh perspective. If I do it when I'm especially tired, there's another miracle that occurs—I'm less tired." Judy Dippel, mom of Lindsay &

Ryan

PLANNING POWER

Just as wars are won with the help of a well executed plan there is power in planning for the success of a healthy lifestyle. Plan ahead so you are prepared when that hunger pang strikes or when your schedule seems to tight to fit in a workout.

Save time and cut stress by meal planning and shopping when you have a longer period of time such as Saturdays instead of daily.

Create a shopping list on the computer than can be reprinted, put on the refrigerator and items checked off as needed.

Cook several healthy main dishes at once when you have more time and freeze them. Casseroles, soups and stews can easily be doubled and frozen for later use.

Wash and trim vegetables all at once ahead of time so they are ready to be cooked or eaten raw.

To find the freshest and healthiest food items, shop the perimeter of the store and avoid purchasing food items at eye level.

In the Trenches: "I would take the kids with me to the store to pick out at least one new fruit or veggie a week."

Mary White, mom of Jordan & Mariah

FOOD FIGHT

Food is an essential part of the healthy lifestyle picture. Think of food as fuel and create healthy habits – a diet will not last and you will probably put on more weight after you quit the diet than you lost to begin with. Instead, choose delicious foods and prepare them in a healthy manner. You can eat anything, just in moderation.

Avoid labeling any food bad or off limits, instead reserve less healthy options occasionally for treats or extra special rewards.

When eating at home serve the food on the plates, instead of serving them from platters.

Eating three small meals and two snacks throughout the day will keep your blood sugar and energy levels stable.

Avoid super sizing which not only costs more, but leaves you drained because you are eating more than the necessary portion size.

Another friend of mine actually lost weight by giving up going back for thirds.

Not only is it a good idea to eat smaller portions it is also a good idea to eat slowly and savor the flavor of each bite.

When eating out purchase a kid's meal or share a regular portion meal with your spouse or the kids. You can also order a regular meal and box up half of it for later when you are served. The portion sizes of today are at least 2 if not 3 sizes larger than what is an appropriate. Not only will this benefit your waistline it will benefit your wallet, too.

When eating out choose healthy options like vegetables instead of french fries. Even fast food chains have started offering kids meals with healthier side choices like apples and oranges and milk instead of soda.

In the Trenches: “When the kids were young, we would eat dessert before our meal at least once a week.”

Suzanne Baty, mom of Heather, Amber & Derek

MRES

MREs or Meals Ready-to-Eat have been used for years as rations for our military. They are self-contained meals that provide all the nutrition a soldier-on-the-go needs to sustain themselves. As moms we would benefit by following their lead and having healthy meals ready-to-eat. When you feel those hunger pangs coming on and the desire to forage through the kitchen or drive through your favorite fast food restaurant hits try these tips instead.

Keep fresh raw veggies and fruit cut up and ready to go. Cut up pieces of celery and mini carrots are great options.

There are great dairy options as well. Low fat cheese sticks, individual servings of cottage cheese and yogurt are also great choices.

Raisins, popcorn, dried fruit, granola bars and pretzels are wonderful pantry options.

Try individual fruit, applesauce, and sugar free gelatin or pudding cups.

Freeze grapes for a refreshing and sweet treat.

Place yummy treats in individual serving size bags to help control portion size and for portability.

Have healthy dips on hand like low-fat caramel, low-fat ranch dressing, and low-fat peanut butter.

If you feel like you just don't have the time or the knowledge to cook healthy meals for your family check out places like Super Suppers, where you choose from nutritious dinners that you prepare on site with the freshest ingredients to create freezer-ready, heat and serve entrees.

In the Trenches: “It is so easy to use an apple corer to core an apple and then put a rubber band around it to keep it from turning brown.” Tiffany Stevens, mom of Hannah & Emma

EVADE SABOTAGE

Sabotage is made up all the things that are keeping you from becoming the woman, wife and mom you want to be. There are numerous easy changes you can make to your lifestyle and eating habits to help you evade sabotage. For my friend, fellow mom and author, Wendy Stewart Hamilton, the time it took to get everyone ready and to the gym was sabotaging her fitness goals. “Although the gym was only three miles from our house, by the time I got the kids ready, myself ready, packed in the car, drove to the gym, unpacked, registered in childcare, signed in myself, got on the equipment – I had used up almost an hour of time and still had not worked out yet. That was an hour I could not afford to waste.” Wendy Stewart Hamilton said. The couple decided to purchase barely used home gym equipment on eBay at 20% of retail cost and now have a gym that is professional grade, in our home and within walking distance 24/7.

Eat regular meals and healthy snacks on hand to stave off hunger pangs and poor choices for the entire family.

If you are attending a party or other event where they will be serving lots of high fat and high sugar foods, eat a small salad or other healthy choice before arriving.

Create a no-fail environment. If you don't have it in the house you are less likely to eat it. Not many of us are going to get in the car in the middle of our favorite show to run to the grocery store for something not so healthy to munch on.

Never eat standing up or directly from the refrigerator or pantry. Instead put the correct portion on a plate and sit down to savor the flavors.

Avoid mindless munching while you watch TV or work on the computer.

Don't finish the food on your children's plate. It's better to waste it in the trash, than to waste it on your hips.

Watch your caffeine intake. While you coffee or coke gives you that extra kick in the morning drinking or for that matter eating items high in caffeine like chocolate can affect your ability to go to sleep, so avoid caffeine later in the day.

If you don't use your gym membership because it is just too difficult to get there with the baby, invest in some home gym equipment that you will actually use.

You can't just quit eating the "bad stuff" or being less than active without finding something to eat or do that you enjoy. Replace old habits with new behavior.

Watch your self talk -you eventually start to believe it. Instead make a list of all the things you like about yourself and positives that others have said.

In the Trenches: "I make my menu every week, only buy what is on the list and avoid the junk food that we don't need." Angie Westbrook, mom of Courtney, Collin & Paige

SATISFYING SUBSTITUTES

Despite the fact that our world is filled with overindulgence of every kind, recently manufacturers have come up with several products that are more health conscious. There have always been foods that will satisfy your sweet and salty tooth without adversely affecting your health – you just have to experiment to get the taste and texture you like.

Use applesauce in place of oil for a less fat, but still moist result when baking.

Use egg beaters instead of eggs to cut cholesterol, fat and calories, but maintain great taste and protein.

Use no calorie sweeteners and enjoy the sweet taste you love without the calories of sugar. They have been tested and approved by USDA.

Instead of fattening milk shakes, make smoothies using juice, nonfat frozen yogurt and fresh berries of your choice.

Use whole wheat instead of white flour when baking.

Use pork and turkey instead of beef.

Try baking your food instead of frying it.

Eat more fresh foods instead of their pre-packaged alternatives.

Light or fat free dressings are another health conscious alternative and the tastes are better than ever.

Grabbing an apple or a banana is just as easy and less expensive and time consuming as going through a drive through.

In the Trenches: “I take the frosting from the store and whip it again before I frost a cake or cupcakes. It doubles the amount and as a result reduces the calories per serving.” Katy Warsing, mom of Tait & Gavin

H2O

We all know that drinking water helps in hydration. But did you also know that staying hydrated will aid in weight loss and improve how you look and feel. Water makes up the majority of our blood and other body fluids and even mild dehydration can cause fatigue.

Try drinking through a straw to consume more water or use an extra large glass or a pint sized bottled water.

Keep the water cool and you will likely drink more. I love crushed ice, so I often go to a drive-thru to get a large water with that type of ice.

Drink 8 ounces of water before each meal, during a meal and after the meal as well; to aid in digestion, eliminate water weight and to help you feel fuller faster.

Instead of drinking sodas which have an average of 250 empty calories, drink a cool glass of water instead. If you crave the flavor try adding a piece of lime, lemon or even an orange or try flavored water.

Be sure to drink water before, during and after workouts to stay hydrated and help the body metabolize stored fat.

Eat foods that are water rich like watermelon, oranges, yogurt and carrots.

In the Trenches: "I use to drink 4 to 6 Diet Dr. Peppers a day and I never drank water. I started feeling really lightheaded and dizzy all the time. Before I diagnosed myself with a brain tumor, I went to the doctor. He asked if I drank plenty of fluids and I said 'yes, of course, 4 to 6 Diet Dr. Peppers a day.' I was very dehydrated because I never drank water." Michelle Jones, mom of Allen, Michelle & Christopher

MOVE OUT

Doctors and other health professionals suggest that we fit in a minimum of 30 minutes of activity at least three times a week. You don't have to have a structured exercise program to achieve the health benefits, just get busy with some type of regular activity. Exercise is as much about the emotional benefits as the physical. Getting out of the house and taking the baby for a walk around your neighborhood or the park and being in the sun is refreshing and will inevitably brighten your mood. Dancing around the house with the baby and your hubby will also get your heart pumping and lift your spirits.

Mom and personal trainer, Erica Fritz encourage all new moms to work hard to get their body back even if it means a few sacrifices on all parts. "I talk to too many mothers at the gym that seem to resent their children for their bodies being the way they are, because they feel like they can't work out because of the time away from them. It's better to spend an hour or two away from them when they are small to do something for yourself then to let that resentment grow." Erica Fritz said.

SNEAK ATTACK

The everyday activities you participate in also burn calories. So sneak in a few extra steps and activities and attack your health goals with a vengeance today.

Wear a pedometer to see how your steps add up and note if you need to step it up.

Chase the kids around the yard. Play hide and seek or freeze tag.

Household chores like ironing, scrubbing the floors and even the toilet will burn moderate amounts of calories.

Outside chores like gardening, mowing, raking and shoveling snow will also get your heart rate up.

Mom and personal trainer Jennifer Pope reminds her clients that after a baby your metabolic rate slows and adding weights to your cardio routine increases your metabolism so you will burn calories faster.

The gymnastics ball you may have used for birthing is also great to strengthen and stretch with.

Do Kegels to get that area down there back in shape. No one has to know you are doing it, but you and your husband will appreciate the results. Simply tense then release the muscles around your vagina.

In the Trenches: "If I don't have to 45 minutes to walk at once, I often split the time up into 3, 15 minute sessions a day." Suzanne Baty, mom of Heather, Amber & Derek

MOMMY STRATEGIES

Invest in a personal trainer. They have the expertise and are great motivators in your goal of becoming more healthy. Consider sharing training sessions with a friend, to split the cost and challenge each other.

Watch your favorite show while you run on a treadmill or ride a stationary bike.

Join a gym with childcare, so you can workout or swap childcare with another mom so you can both work out.

Swimming, jogging and aerobics are other fun alternatives that can add dimension to your healthy lifestyle. Pilates are another great way to get your abs back in shape after a baby or anytime.

Exercise before the baby wakes in the morning or during nap time. After a good workout, you may feel just as refreshed and have as much energy as if you caught a little shut eye yourself.

In the Trenches: "As a trainer it was very hard for me not to want to go back to the same regimen of working out as I had before. That was impossible, I had no big responsibilities before and I could stay at the gym for hours on end. I had to learn to balance my time and sacrifice some things." Erica Fritz, mom of Brock

FAMILY FITNESS STRATEGIES

It is great for your children to see how physical activity is important for the entire family and the time you spend together is an added bonus. Plus getting the kids excited about fitness when they are young and help them build healthy habits they will benefit from for life.

Walk or go for a bike ride as a family after dinner. Our family recently purchased bikes and I found a cart that attaches to the bike for the kids to ride in for an unbelievable price. The kids love it; we get a workout and a chance to talk about our day without the distraction of the TV, phones and computer.

Do a workout video as a family, or jump up and do jumping jacks during the commercials as you watch TV. Our family also turns on the radio and has a dance party together.

Use your baby as a counter weight as you tone your arms or legs. Check out the numerous workout videos for mom and baby, too.

Put the baby in a bouncy seat or swing while you exercise.

In the Trenches: "I try to provide healthy snacks and limit sweets and such as much as possible. I try to go to the gym at least 3 times a week every week. I stress to the boys that this is my time to work out and that it helps me to stay healthy so that I can take care of them." Wendy Johnson, mom of Kutter & Kaden

FRIENDLY FITNESS STRATEGIES

Ask your spouse or a friend to hold your feet to the fire and encourage you in your healthy lifestyle goals. That accountability is crucial to your long-term success.

Find a workout partner to hit the gym with or go walking with a friend and the babies around the park. Several women from the mom's group I lead walk together with the kids in strollers 3 days a week and another pair of friends get up at about 5 am to fit in a workout before their kids wake up.

Attending a support group like Weight Watchers or First Place and utilizing on-line support groups can also be beneficial.

Ask other moms what they did to get back in shape and take their advice if you think it might work for you.

Join a community softball or basketball team for the physical and emotional benefits. A close friend of mine played soccer on a team. She loved the great workout and the friendships.

Take a fun dance class like salsa for a little romantic exercise.

Try kickboxing or even aerobics as a couple. My husband and I even took a relaxing yoga class together a few times.

Depending on the season and the area take a hike or ski or swim together.

In the Trenches: "Being a mother of two does not allow me a lot of time for exercising. I strive to get up before anyone in the house to have that private and quiet time to exercise. It makes me feel so much better when starting the day because I know that I have done something to better my body not only for the Lord, but for myself as well." Brea Aitken, mom of Kendall & Harrison

DRILL SERGEANT

As moms we act as drill sergeants controlling what our family eats. Since we chose the food we can also make healthier choices. When our children are born we have the opportunity to shape their taste likes and dislikes. In the same way we influence their food choices, we also influence their activity choices.

It has been said that imitation is the highest form of flattery and it is up to us moms to pass on healthy eating and activity habits, but we have to create them for ourselves first. Not only is it our responsibility to monitor the amount and type of food our children consume and their level of physical activity, we must as the old adage goes, practice what we preach.

In all likelihood, they will eat and enjoy what we eat and enjoy. Just think if you had never tasted chocolate or French fries, not only would you never know what you are missing, you might have developed a craving for sweet juicy strawberries and fresh pineapple or well seasoned baked chips, instead.

If you are satisfied before finishing a meal, stop eating and avoid encouraging your children to clean their plate, as that can lead to obesity. Children who are overweight are more likely to be overweight and have health problems as adults.

Watch what you say about your own body. Comments about being fat and the like are often picked up by our children and can affect the way they see themselves.

Spend less time watching TV and your children will follow suit. Ask the kids to join you outside to play instead and I assure you they will.

To promote family activity, limit TV watching time for the family and consider removing TV's from your bedrooms.

In the Trenches: “As a family, we go for walks and try to be active, playing soccer, basketball, swimming, baseball, and golf. I cook low-fat meals. I try to keep healthy snacks around at all times. God calls us to take care of our bodies and our families.” Jennifer Pope, mom of Chase

KEEP FIGHTING

Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare and realize that slow and steady win the race. Keep it simple – make simple everyday changes to your eating and activity choices to create habits that you will be able to maintain. It's all about balance. My husband adopted several healthy habits in order to lose over 120 pounds, however when he wavered in his discipline of eating right or exercising he would start over and make adjustments to get back on track. You didn't form your unhealthy habits overnight and you won't be able to change them all overnight either.

Be Realistic. It took 9 months to put on all that weight, don't expect to lose it overnight. Especially if you are anything like me and already weighed more than you would like before you ever conceived. Embrace your body for what it is and for the beautiful thing you have done. Don't waste precious moments with your new baby obsessing over your new mommy figure.

When you mess up, don't give up. Eating something less than healthy or overeating one meal or even during a weeklong vacation, doesn't mean you are ruined forever.

Resist the urge to nag when your spouse or child make a poor choice and don't be too hard on yourself either.

If you eat a heavy lunch, have a lighter dinner or if you wake up late and miss your chance to hit the gym take a walk with the family after dinner.

When you miss a work out because you overslept or the baby got sick or you were just plain exhausted, don't let yourself get too discouraged. Tomorrow is a new day and you can start over.

In the Trenches: "I didn't work out regularly for years, but now that I do, I encourage all young moms to get out and move. It is the best antidepressant around. Trade babysitting, put the baby in the stroller, or join a gym with childcare, anything to get your body moving." Tonya Holter, mom of Tyler, Lauren & Kyle.

DEBRIEFING

Consider replacing your caffeine and sugar rich soda with water.

Find a healthier alternative to replace your favorite sugar or fatty treat with that you will still enjoy.

Take the family to grocery store and pick out at least one new vegetable and one new fruit to try together.

Check out the internet or library for healthy recipe choices and try one a week.

Create an attainable list of health goals for you and your children.

Ask someone to hold you accountable for your food and physical fitness choices.

GOING AWOL

If you haven't felt it yet, there is likely to come a period in your journey of motherhood when you will feel like going AWOL. The drive to become Absent With Out Leave is not unlike that felt by those who have run from their commitments in the military. There will be times when you just want to run away from it all, to escape from the pressure and that is completely normal. The solution is to take that leave time regularly and head off those breaking points. As we covered in *Fighting the Good Fight*, moms can not take care of others, until they learn to take care of themselves. Go Absent With Ordinary Leave and spend some time on you, you will come back refreshed and better prepared for your everyday mommy battles.

In the Trenches: "A few hours away doing something personal or even seeing a silly movie with a big bucket of popcorn can do wonders for your attitude. And kids always look so much cuter when you come home. Lisa Copen, mom of Joshua

CELEBRATE EVERYDAY VICTORIES

So often, we focus on living from one big event to the next, instead of celebrating our life and relationships a little bit each day. We daydream from the first date to the engagement, we obsess from the wedding to the honeymoon, or we are consumed with vacation plans, and the next big promotion. Later we become preoccupied with our children, but eventually we are back to searching for the next big thing.

While I encourage moms to dream, we must also learn to appreciate the everyday joys of the life we share with our husbands and children. Encourage each other to live for the things that really matter, to get excited about what God is doing in our lives on a daily basis, not just the big stuff. There are numerous ways to celebrate everyday victories and there is nothing like some alone time, even if it just an hour or two, to put the pep back in your step. My sister Reagan, a single mom, loves to get away from it all by taking a hot bath after her son goes to bed.

Remember that old saying, “all work and no play make Jack a very dull boy.” Make a list of 10 things you would love to do to help you celebrate everyday. I recently scratched hot stone massage therapy off my list and it was far from dull. Next on my top 10 is taking a dance class with my husband.

Consider the words to the song, “Live like you are dying” and get busy living every day like it might be your last. Do something measurable during your time alone like volunteering rather than channel surfing.

Trade babysitting with a friend for an afternoon and spend the time doing My friend Kristi occasionally pays her niece to watch her daughter so she can have some much deserved and much needed alone time.

In the evening let your husband take over the bath and bedtime responsibilities while you read a good book or soak in a hot tub. My friend Lori’s favorite me time activity is enjoying a Starbucks coffee and walking around Target for an hour or so.

When the kids are napping, catch up with a magazine instead of doing housework – better yet, sneak in a nap, too.

Just as you schedule nap time, play dates and dinner, schedule “me time”. My adopted mom Linda would take her girls to Children's Day Out so she could have some time away. I do the same thing so I can write without interruption, clean house or just go to lunch with my friends.

When the to do list running through your mind threatens your time alone, simply stop and write down what you need to do so you won't forget and you can move on to more pleasurable thoughts and activities.

Make sure when you go AWOL, you leave all the important information and supplies for the sitter or Dad so they know what to expect and to avoid being interrupted.

In the Trenches: “I am very fortunate in that I have a job that really provides me (suited to me and my crazy personality) with a break. I go to work and feel like I am on vacation. I travel and get put up in beautiful hotels, eat lovely meals and have uninterrupted quiet time. Other than that, the time I walk fits the bill. But I swap kid responsibilities with other moms or my hubbie helps out, too.” Kathy Pride, mom of Christopher, Matt, Tianna, & Nicole

TOP SECRET STRATEGIES

When you don't have time to take a hot bubble bath or the money to get a pedicure there are still small things you can do to lift your mood and escape at least temporarily from the pressures of the day. Try these tips when you are tired or just overwhelmed.

Head outside for a swing or a walk around the block with the kids.

Reread the notes, cards and e-mails of encouragement and praise that others have sent you, so you can remind yourself of all your positive qualities.

Pull out the hammock or a lawn chair and drink a cool glass of water or lemonade while the kids play.

Go to your room, close the door and have a good scream. Seriously it really can be a powerful way to release tension.

Write out your frustrations on paper and then tear them up and throw them away.

Take a quick shower or splash cool water on your face. You will be refreshed and more able to face the day or the task ahead.

In the Trenches: "My husband makes sure that I have time to relax and get time to myself when I need it. We all need time away to get rejuvenated." Kim Rogers, mom of Chase, Alexis, & Cason

BATTLE STRATEGIES FROM YOUR CHILDREN

We are all so eager to grow up aren't we? One of my daughter's favorite things to do is play dress up and get married, the ceremony is immediately followed by going to the hospital to get her baby out of her tummy and then she moves on to happily ever after. Would that it were that simple. Sometimes I wonder if growing up really is all that it's cracked up to be. Is a child's schedule so unpleasant that we should leave it behind so quickly? On the contrary, as moms we could learn a few lessons from our children about taking care of ourselves. Start today to follow your child's example. After all they have had the best teacher – you!

Children take naps when they need them and have a regularly scheduled bed time. If we forced ourselves to nap and go to bed earlier, then our bodies would get the rest they need. So turn off the TV and don't feel guilty about leaving the dishes in the sink every once in a while.

Children eat many small meals and snacks throughout the course of the day. Studies have shown that this will aid in weight loss and promote an overall healthy lifestyle. Begin today to eat smaller healthier portions more often and when you buy groceries for the family, buy some healthy snacks just for you, too.

Children don't worry about tomorrow because they know they will be taken care of. Let go of your fears about everything from the bills to your child's health, and trust God to care for you as you care for your child.

Children allow others to do things for them, including feeding and bathing. We should learn to accept a little pampering, too and ask for help from others. For example, let hubby watch the kids while you get a manicure or massage. When you are feeling overwhelmed with the household chores have a maid come in occasionally to do some deep cleaning.

Children sing praises to the Lord, the flowers, the bugs and even the dog with abandon. Let go of your inhibitions and don't worry about how you sound, just make a joyful noise as you worship. Listen to some upbeat music to unwind from a long day or make up a silly song about your family together. My friend Jennifer

and her son love to dance and sing the song “Life Is A Highway” together because it reminds her to enjoy the little things in life and take time to have fun.

Children aren’t afraid to use their imaginations. Nothing is impossible to a child; they just believe and go for it. Borrow that ability from your little ones and go for that promotion, write that book, or sign up to run that marathon. As moms our dreams are often sacrificed at the altar of our marriages, children and so on. While our first priority is our family we don’t have to let our dreams die. If what your heart desires lines up with scripture and isn’t a detriment to your family, then go for it. God gave us each and every one of our dreams; big, little and everything in between. Why do we doubt that the one who made us doesn’t know what is best for us? When will we learn to exchange our ideas and dreams for His?

In the Trenches: “Going AWOL is a much needed aspect in my life. Having ten minutes alone to take a bath is one of the best gifts I can get. I have those ten minutes to think about nothing at all, it clears my mind in order to start all over again the next day.” Brea Aiken, mom of Kendall & Harrison

FAIREST OF THEM ALL

Once upon a time before stretch marks and spit up stains, much like the evil witch in Snow White, we concerned ourselves with being the fairest of them all. Unfortunately, something happens when we become mothers, not only do we often lose our figure and our sleep and unfortunately, we often lose our sense of self, too.

The time we once spent on our normal beauty routine is replaced by precious moments rocking our newborns and chasing after a toddler. Sometimes even getting a shower is sacrificed at the altar of meeting everyone else's needs first. Instead of shopping for ourselves we get caught up in acquiring all the latest baby gear. Throw in the all too common baby blues and that reflection you see in the mirror may not be so fair anymore.

As mom's we sometimes need to be reminded of our old selves – not necessarily are old bodies before pregnancy, stretch marks and nursing, but our old fashion savvy selves that could turn heads just by walking in a room. Start putting beauty back on your to-do list; it's your turn to take a well-deserved time-out. Reflect about your former self before children and go AWOL to feel the awesome benefits of femininity all over again. We are after all more than moms.

In the Trenches: "It doesn't take any more time and effort to look your best than to put on a pair of sweats and you feel so much better about yourself just by putting clothes on that make you look good." Katy Warsing, mom of Tait & Gavin

Accept your body and embrace who you are. The average woman wears a size 12 to 14 and none of us look like the women on the covers of magazines, not even the supermodels, it's all a mirage. They have nutritionists, trainers and personal chefs – the only chef I can afford is Chef Boyardee. The glossy images you see aren't real, they have on stage makeup, expensive body slimming undies, and professional hair and makeup artists to create that picture perfect look. Even after all that, they are airbrushed! Focus instead on the best features God gave you and try to eat well, rest and get a little exercise to create your own healthy glow.

Trying a new hairstyle and maintaining it doesn't have to be expensive. Get a fresh haircut that flatters the shape of your face or change the color. A pretty headband or even a thick piece of ribbon with added embellishments can update a tired look. If you are feeling a little more daring, try out a new hairpiece. You can find them at most beauty supply stores and they come in various colors, styles and prices. Also, 71% of stylists surveyed by Suave agree that lower priced hair products can offer the same performance as the high-end ones, so you don't have to break the bank styling your hair.

Consult a girlfriend. Spend a day doing each other's hair, bargain shopping or adding some glam to your existing clothes. There isn't much that makes you feel more confident in a new look than the approval of another woman, besides when was the last time you vented about your desire to be a beautiful woman and not just somebody's mom.

In the Trenches: "I pamper myself by going for massages or pedicures. Also, just hanging out with the girls is fun and relaxing to me too. I use Mother Day Out days to do some of these things. I find that when I am away from my family I get refreshed. Sometimes, I feel like I am missing out on something when I am away from my family, however, the time away is recharging and good for all of us." Jennifer Pope, mom of Chase

DAY BY DAY BEAUTY STRATEGIES

In a recent survey done by Suave 89% of moms admit they let themselves go; but 100% can get themselves back. The survey also found that the average mom devotes 87.9 minutes a day to meals and only 4.2 minutes to hair. Start and end the day by spending a little time on yourself – you deserve it and by any standard you have certainly earned it. How you look affects your mood and every time you catch your reflection or receive a compliment your spirit will be boosted. Plus, the better you feel about how you look the more confident you will become in other areas of your life including your roles of wife and mom. It is amazing the difference you can make in how you look and feel with just small changes to your daily routine.

Washing and moisturizing your face every day will guarantee a healthier looking you and help prevent wrinkles and zits. Keep cleansing pads in your nightstand, so you quickly and easily erase the debris from the day before you go to sleep.

Brush and floss daily and whiten your teeth, too to freshen your look.

Once they are toddlers and can sit without support in the tub, when you give the kids their bath, put on some shorts and stick your foot in the warm sudsy water. Not only will it be soothing to your feet, it's easier to reach and wash the little ones. While your child plays, take your feet out and give yourself a mini pedi – clip and file your toes and nails. Later as you put lotion on your child, rub some on your feet, too. Never leave the bathroom and stay within arms reach at all times.

In the Trenches: “A monthly massage and a manicure does a mommy good. It is important to budget and keep appointments with and for yourself. You will fall apart if you let yourself and then you will not be strong and energetic for the most important job on earth - being a mother.” Kathy Firkins, mom of Kaiti, Max & Christopher

REGIMENTED BEAUTY STRATEGIES

There are some personal care issues and beauty strategies that are a little more cost and time consuming, but just as necessary to improve your health and overall appearance.

See the dentist regularly, have your teeth cleaned and any cavities filled. I waited too long once to have a chip tooth fixed and ended up having to have a root canal. Not only was it painful, it was costly.

Be sure to visit your OBGYN or family physician regularly for your pap smear and breast exams.

Massage is another great way to rejuvenate your body and take care of yourself. When I was pregnant with both of my children I would get a special massage that eased away the tensions and the nausea. Even for the relief in just that moment, it was worth the expense.

You don't have to spend big bucks at the dermatologist or plastic surgeon to get fabulous skin. Instead, invest a little in a microderm abrasion kit or other intense beauty product; you can buy inexpensive, quality kits over the counter now.

Budget for beauty treatments and check out places that you can get a significant discount for the same services as pricey day spas. For example, look for beauty schools in your area. The students are supervised and the cost is about half for services. Once when we vacationed in Scottsdale, Arizona, my husband and I each got amazing massages by students for less than half the going rate of the touristy spas.

In the Trenches: "Our high school has a cosmetology department and the students give great pedicures. It is so inexpensive, they get the experience they need and I am supporting the school." Pete Hough, mom of Brad,

Bonham & Ben

FABULOUS FATIGUES

I recently saw an ad in a magazine with a beautiful woman holding a little girl with the words, “Your kids say mom. Your clothes say otherwise.” It got me thinking about my own attire. I have always prided myself on looking my best, but after the baby’s came I sort of lost that side of me in the day to day busyness of diaper changes, bottles and never ending laundry. Some days I wondered if I would even get a shower and find something clean to wear, much less find something in style that showed off my best features.

Invest in quality undergarments that shape and slim. Why do we spend so much more money on clothes that we wear only occasionally and skimp on those things we wear everyday? I have a couple pairs of panties that suck you in, yet they are still comfortable and so unlike the girdles of the past. A great bra that lifts and separates is invaluable and makes you look better in any outfit. Toss the granny panties and old t-shirts you sleep in and buy some comfy and sexy lingerie, too.

Just because you have had children doesn’t mean you are destined to forever wear sweats or pj’s (unless you want to of course and the sweats make you look as hot as J-Lo). If you haven’t figured it out yet, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but even if you lose all your baby weight your body will never be exactly the same. Trash those sweats and put on a sexy dress or crisp pants and a cute top and enjoy the appreciation from your husband. Choose clothing designs that flatter your shape and camouflage trouble spots. Fashion right now is all about femininity. You don’t have to spend a-lot to get caught up with the current trend of camisoles, peasant skirts and fitted jackets either. Check out the back of your grandmother’s closet or the nearest thrift-store for great finds, just be sure they compliment your body type.

Don’t obsess over the size of the garment. Often times going one size up, particularly in the new stretchy fabrics will make you look slimmer than trying to squeeze into the size you wish you were. Remember that you are the only one who actually sees the size on the label and the fit varies from brand to brand anyway.

Sparkling accessories like jewelry, belts and purses are a fun and inexpensive way to update your wardrobe. Shop at discount stores for stylish pieces or create your own by adding beads and sequins to plain accessories you already have. Add a glitzy pin to a scarf and wear it as a belt or tie the sleeves of a t-shirt with coordinating ribbon. Use no-sew glue to add a sassy trim to the hem of your favorite jeans or skirt for new life.

SURRENDER STRATEGY

Let go of the guilt – taking time for yourself is as essential as everything else you do for your family. It's ok to spend a little money and time just on you and your desires. Not only have you earned it, tangible rewards can reduce stress and encourage us. When you take care of yourself, you will ultimately have more to give back to your family. What your children want most is a happy mom and one that feels good about how she looks doesn't hurt either. My friend, fellow author and mom, Wendy Stewart Hamilton says she runs away from home frequently and doesn't feel guilty about it. "Sometimes it is as simple as going to movies alone on other occasions I will make it a point to take a day by myself to just be still and silent and just rest. I have found that these moments rejuvenate me and I look forward to going back to being a full-time, full-day work at home, home schooling mom of two." Wendy said. Although her children don't question why she takes time for herself, she tells them simply that she is tired, and needs to rest and reconnect with the woman and mom God wants her to be. "I am teaching them to value themselves while at the same time I apply the same language to when there is one-on-one time with me and them. At those moments, they feel extra special, treasured and appreciated." Wendy Stewart Hamilton, mom of Kayleigh & Andrew, second mom of Kaile

DEBRIEFING

What one thing can you do today to go AWOL?

Negotiate time away from the kids with your husband, so you each have a chance to get away and get refreshed.

Set up a childcare swap with your close girlfriends so you can all have a little time away while the kids enjoy each other.

Get out your favorite picture of yourself and put it on your bathroom mirror to remind you daily how awesome you are and motivate you to look your best.

Go online and check out information on dressing to suit your body type.

SPECIAL OPS COUPLE DIVERSIONS

Noted author and psychologist Henry Cloud wrote in his book *Boundaries in Marriage*, “A marriage is only as strong as what it costs to protect it.” We are in a battle for our marriages and we must be willing to do whatever it takes to protect them. Just because we have become moms, doesn’t mean we have to forgo an intimate relationship with our husband in favor of our mothering responsibilities.

There is no better gift we can give our children than a loving and lasting relationship with their dad. Remember the kids will eventually leave and it will be just the two of you again. No matter the cost, you don’t want to sacrifice your relationship with your husband at the altar of your children. Below are some Couple Diversions to help you win the war for your marriage.

SURVIVING SABOTAGE

The Righteous Brothers crooned, bring back that loving feeling, cause it's gone, gone, gone. Unfortunately, we live in a time where you can get married and divorced at a drive through window. Women are often more committed to a good friend, hairdresser or therapist than we are to our spouses. God is clear on His opinion regarding divorce, it grieves Him and He hates it. You can read more about God's heart concerning divorce in 1 Corinthians 7, Malachi 2:15-16 and Matthew 19:3-9.

I am not a model wife and my marriage is not perfect. Far from it, I am writing from a place of past pain and renewed hope and joy in the restored marriage that God has given me. We struggled to create a healthy and happy marriage and at times we still do, but divorce has never been an option. Thankfully, I married a man who is stubborn and wouldn't give up on us, what a gift that has been to me. Some days, of course, are better than others, and those good days are the ones I treasure.

With more than half of today's marriages ending in divorce, obviously, the fire that once burned in the hearts of many couples has been all but extinguished. It doesn't have to be this way. Simply spending time together and doing things that you know your husband would like are great ways to fan the flames of passion.

LOVE THE ONE YOU'RE WITH

We need to accept the uniqueness of each other as God designed us and stop struggling to redesign our husband in our own image. Stormie Omartian writes in her book, *The Power Of A Praying Wife*, “The changes you try to make happen in your husband, or that your husband tries to make in himself to please you, are doomed to failure and will bring disappointment for you both. Instead ask God to make any necessary changes.” I wasted so much precious time in the early years of my marriage trying to make my husband see things like I do and do what I wanted. I learned the hard way that when I respect, appreciate and affirm our differences it is much easier to love the man God created just for me to enjoy with his own unique way of doing things.

Consider seeing a counselor if there are issues that are just too painful or uncomfortable for the two of you to deal with alone including past relationships or abuse.

Don't let unsettled issues between you simmer. They rob you of intimacy and desire. Set an appointment to discuss the tough stuff; it's much easier to do when you're not in the heat of the battle.

Concentrate on the best parts of your marriage and do what you can to improve it. When you and your spouse are in sync, everything else in life flows much better.

Don't set yourself up for disappointment by hanging on to the unrealistic expectation that your spouse will “complete” you! Most marriages are not like that often quoted line from Jerry McGuire.

Make a list of all the great things about your husband. It's a great way to focus on the positives instead of the negatives.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Stormie Omartian writes in her book, *The Power Of A Praying Wife*, “When you pray for your husband, the love of God will grow in your heart for him. Not only that, you’ll find love growing in his heart for you, without him even knowing you are praying.” Prayer with and for your husband will transform your marriage like nothing else can.

Pick up *The Power of a Praying Wife* by Stormie Omartian and use it as a guide for the time you spend in prayer for your marriage.

Hold your husband’s hand while sharing what’s on your heart and praying together. A close friend recalls a difficult time in her marriage when their couples counselor suggested that they lay their head in their spouses lap as they prayed for each other. She was amazed at how this simple physical act dissipated their anger.

As we discussed in Search & Rescue, it is essential to pray for your husband and your marriage with your friends.

In the Trenches: “I don’t know what I would do without my friends and our Praying Wives Club based on the book by Marita Littauer and Dianne Anderson. I can vent and get support and know that I will be prayed for and that my husband will be prayed for too. Also, it is a great accountability group.” Jennifer Pope, mom of

Chase

CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

As with any other aspect of a relationship, good communication is one of the keys to happiness. Unfortunately, for most couples the demands of everyday life, from the kids to work, causes communication, much like romance itself, to fizzle out. Our marriages can be so much better than mediocre when we communicate our wants and needs.

Take the opportunity in written or spoken word to remind not only your husband, but yourself, why you love him and why you were attracted to him in the first place.

Remember those old love notes you would write each other. Pull them out for inspiration and write a few new ones, too.

Leave a flirtatious note in their car, briefcase, or lunch. Write a sexy message in lipstick (or try the less messy dry erase marker) on the bathroom mirror.

Purposefully communicate about what is important to each other and most importantly, don't expect your partner to read your mind.

Have a night out and talk about anything under the sun including what you would like to happen in the bedroom. If you want to try something new, just tell him. He won't be embarrassed and will probably appreciate the suggestion. By the same token, if there is something bothering you tell him that, too. He can't change something he doesn't know about.

Negotiate about the number of times in a week and/or a particular day to have sex. Choosing a particular day helps take the pressure off of an otherwise unmotivated partner and assures the other partner that it is going to happen.

In the Trenches: “My husband and I have a standing appointment for quickie sex on Wednesday and longer sex on Saturday nights. I originally thought this would take away from the mystery or excitement, but it’s become a priority and we look forward to it; if the mood strikes other times that’s fine, too.” Name withheld per husband’s request.

AWOL

Fortunately, feelings of passion or attraction are the spark that unites a couple, not the tie that binds. Your already busy schedule and hectic life with a newborn means less time to actually have sex and the stress it brings will also diminish your desire. Add pregnancy, sleep deprivation, postpartum depression and everything else that goes along with being a new mom to the equation and romance, much less sex is probably one of the last things on your mind. Most new moms I know are more concerned with getting a shower before hubby comes home from work (if at all) than they are in AWOL sex drive.

According to OBGYN, Dr. David Morehead there are many factors that contribute to decreased libido including stress, loss of intimacy in the relationship, fatigue, depression, loss of feeling attractive and desirable, and hormonal changes. “Of course, many of these can occur after having a child. So there may not be just one thing that can increase desire and sex drive. It may be better to focus on several of these factors. Motherhood is so demanding, that many things take a back seat. And often, they should. So, some of the things that contribute to decreased libido may not be avoidable, but as more time passes after delivery, couples need to make alone time a priority, too.”

MAKE LOVE NOT WAR

According to Dr. Patti Powell unfortunately there is no ‘little blue pill’ for women to increase sexual desire and performance. “As a physician it is extremely common for women to complain to me about lack of sexual desire after childbirth. Immediately after childbirth it has a lot to do with hormonal changes and sheer exhaustion, but as the children get older the same problem often continues for many women. I always explain that there is no "magic pill" for women because God made us such complex creatures.” Dr. Patti Powell said.

Women know that their sexuality and sex drive is much different than that of men and is affected by fatigue, emotions, self image, body image, hormones, and so much more. “I think the best advice for women is to just simply make the effort. Just like love, sometimes being in the mood is more a decision of the will than emotion. I have personally found on those nights when I'm really not in the mood, but I still go ahead and make the effort, the feelings and emotion needed almost always follow.” Dr. Patti Powell said.

Internationally respected marriage and family life expert Dr. Gary Chapman wrote in his book *Covenant Marriage*, “No other human experience is more intimate than the sexual experience. It celebrates our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy.” Fostering passion, appreciation and mutual respect will ultimately help restore romance. Much of the physical, spiritual and emotional information in the previous section, *Preparing for Combat*, will also help that certain something stir again in your heart and your bedroom, but here are a few more ideas on how to get yourself in the mood to make love not war.

Pray and read your bible together. Nothing encourages physical intimacy more than spiritual intimacy.

Taking time out for yourself will help you rejuvenate and relax which will enable you to feel more amorous. If you don't take time for yourself sex may feel like one more thing to check off your to do list – more of a chore than a pleasure.

Take care of your body. The better you feel about how you look, the more likely you will feel like being intimate.

Let your husband put the kids to bed while you take a long bath. Shave your legs, put on a face mask and condition your hair. Assure him it will be worth the wait.

Invest in pretty lingerie that you feel confident and comfortable in. Men love lingerie, and it helps women get them in the mood, too. You both deserve it.

SCHOOL OF LOVE

As women we can get so caught up in the romantic fairytale of marriage that Hollywood portrays. We are saddened when it doesn't work out like we dreamed of as little girls. After our husband falls off his white horse the first time he breaks a promise or says a harsh word in anger, we think the dream is over. There are so many great books out there about marriage and romance, Christian and otherwise, that paint a more realistic picture of marriage. Many are mentioned throughout the book and here are a few more of our favorites. Happy reading.

Read the Song of Solomon for inspiration. What a beautiful picture of how married sex should and can be.

Check out Sheet Music by Dr. Kevin Leman for practical tips on having an active God-designed sex life.

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman will help you understand how best to express your love to your husband.

Making Love Last Forever by Gary Smalley tackles how to stay in love through all the tough stages in marriage (like parenthood).

Pick up a 101 Nights of Grrreat Sex by Laura Corn for suggestions that are divided by cost and in sealed envelopes for Her Eyes and His Eyes only. We have enjoyed this non Christian book by simply discarding the suggestions that we felt were inappropriate.

CONTINGENCY PLAN

A popular talk show host has often said that one of his goals is to make sure that when his wife walks into any room, she knows that she is the most important, the most treasured woman there. Wouldn't it be great if our husbands felt that way, too? Develop your contingency plan today to let your husband know he is number one. Make a fuss over him, he may say that he doesn't need it and may even act annoyed by it all, but he really will appreciate it.

Bring home a favorite treat just for your husband or treat him to one of his favorite things that he rarely gets to do or do something nice for him, that he won't do for himself.

Wash his car and fill it up with gas before returning it to him.

Whisper sweet nothings in his ear as often as you do the baby.

Take him a cold drink when he is working in the yard or take his favorite soda to him while he's at work.

Create a personalized calendar for him. Include your work schedule, date nights and add encouraging notes on days of importance for him.

You don't have to spend a lot of money, but do what you can to make your bedroom a sanctuary from the world and the rest of your home. Invest in some silky sheets, candles and mood music. As best you can, remove all the baby paraphernalia. There's nothing romantic about stepping on a squeaky toy as you come to bed.

Give him a manicure, run a soothing bubble bath or get the children out of the house, let him sleep late and take him breakfast in bed.

Initiate a conversation about something other than the kids, work or schedules while you lay in bed after the kids are asleep or do something that promotes conversation, like taking a long walk or playing a board game together. For a while, my husband and I played Yahtzee together every Tuesday night. It was great way to unwind and enjoy each other's company.

If you are going to be away from home on a special day leave a loving message or create a video message just for him. When my husband was away on our 1st Valentines Day as a married couple, he made a tape with our favorite songs and hid it with a teddy bear in the closet for me to find.

Love is at its core cyclical. When you do kind things for your husband, he will return the favor, which in short order motivates you to do something else that shows affection for your husband and so on it goes. Do your part even if he isn't. Be the partner you want him to become and eventually he will reciprocate.

Admit you were wrong and apologize.

SNEAK ATTACK

The five senses aren't just for babies learning about the world, you can tap into them to spice things up with your husband, too. Your imagination is your only limitation.

Start with sound and surprise your husband with tickets to a concert. My husband actually did this for me recently and we had the time of our lives with another couple (the wife surprised her husband). Gather your old tapes and burn a CD of all your favorite couple songs, put the kids in the backseat and reminisce while you drive around town.

Scent is a glorious thing and is the easiest to combine with the other five senses. Light some fragrant candles before lovemaking so that you can see each other. Put on your husband's favorite perfume or spray your freshly laundered sheets with a scent you both enjoy. Bake his favorite pie and let the smell greet him as he comes home from the battlefield of work. Use a scented massage oil to rub his back.

One day as a young couple were driving along they noticed an older couple in a pick-up truck. The young wife commented to her husband about how sweet it was that they were sitting right next to each other and she asked her husband how come they never do that anymore. The husband replied "I haven't moved". Maybe it's time to scoot back over next to your husband in the car or on the couch for that matter. Touch is a very powerful thing. Be sure to kiss before you leave the house and hold on a little longer than normal to create some anticipation for later. Hold hands while walking and snuggle before moving on to your side of the bed at night.

God made our husbands to be visually stimulated and that can be to our advantage or detriment. Meet for a lunch time rendezvous and wear something new and sexy to catch his eye. No matter how tired you are, fix your hair, freshen your makeup or put on a little lip gloss before you see him at the end of a long day. Splurge and buy some lingerie or at least go to bed in something besides your socks and his old t-shirt. Get rid of all those granny panties and let go of your hang-ups about how you look post baby. He still thinks your beautiful.

The old saying that the stomach is the way to a man's heart definitely has some truth to it. Make their favorite gourmet meal or dessert on a normal weekday or prepare a new yummy recipe together and use the good plates. One of the most passionate experiences my husband and I ever had involved a picnic on the living room floor on a snowy Valentine's Day. Bring out the melted chocolate, strawberries and whip cream and enjoy them and each other.

BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

One of the best ways to romance your husband is to take care of things when they are busy or away or to do the things that are important to him even if they aren't to you. Go above and beyond the call of duty to keep them from worrying about all the non-essential stuff that tends to stress them out.

Handle the kid's carpool and practice runs, take out the trash and pay the bills.

Mow the grass for him or have someone else do it.

Pick up the house before your husband gets home. This is something I attempt to do everyday because I know it helps my husband relax.

Get the kids out of the house so your husband can get things done without interruption. I am blessed to have a husband who does this for me frequently.

Keep them informed with phone calls as needed. However, don't complain about things that are out of their control.

In the Trenches: "My husband Mitch travels a great deal for work. It's hard enough for him to be away, that I don't need to burden him more by griping." Suzanne Baty, mom of Heather, Amber & Derek

TARGET TOGETHERNESS

Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy Linguist recommends going to dinner without your baby in the first 2 months after their arrival in order to begin a pattern of prioritizing your marriage. “People will ask me, ‘Isn't it ok to wait until our baby is older and can't we just take him or her sleeping in the car seat with us to a restaurant or movie?’ You can, but I promise it will be different. Take the steps now to put your marriage first, and you won't have to be introducing yourselves to each other when your kids are teenagers. Close friends or grandparents are going to be so flattered that you trust them with your infant. Plus, it really is the safest thing for a child to know that his parents love each other and want to spend time alone together.” Dr. Peggy Linguist said.

OBGYN, Dr. David Morehead also encourages couples to let family or friends baby-sit occasionally to allow some alone and sexual time together. Despite the constant demands of a having child, he encourages parents to spend time talking and keeping in touch every day to maintain emotional closeness. “Even though you are a mom now, you are still the object of your husband’s sexual desire.” Dr. David Morehead said.

Mom and Doctor of Internal Medicine, Dr. Patti Powell, agrees with her colleagues that it is crucial to leave the baby at home and make time for just you and your husband. “I can’t say enough how important it is to have date nights with your husband. Hire a baby-sitter or if you’re lucky enough to live around family, use them and go on dates.” Patti Powell said.

Let movies take you away from it all. Check out an old fashioned drive-in or stay in for an all day marathon of rented movies.

Do something educational like going to a museum or planetarium. We had the best time going to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas which chronicles the life, death and legacy of JFK.

Recreate your first date or another special occasion. There are such great memories there and you can make new ones. We have gone back to the bed and breakfast where we spent our wedding night and the Opera House where we went our first date and our wedding day.

Invest the time and money to attend a marriage retreat at least once a year. Leaving the day to day stuff behind will help you focus on each other and reignite that passion you once felt.

It doesn't have to cost a great deal of money to date your spouse, but the payoff is priceless. For example, hang out at a bookstore and enjoy a hot drink while you read or look at house plans or go for a drive in the country or a hike through the woods or have a picnic at a park and enjoy the swings.

In the Trenches: "Because of my husband's job, we were only able to attend one night of a marriage retreat, but the sessions we went to really helped us address some things we needed to deal with and brought us closer."

Melanie Avent, mom of Gracen, Ross & Easton

COVERT OPERATIONS

There is just something about getting away from your home and normal routine that helps you relax and release some of your normal inhibitions. The element of surprise is a critical battle strategy and a little spontaneity reminds you of life before you had the children. The only thing you might want to plan for is the childcare.

Pack a few things, pick your spouse up from work and spend the night in a hotel to spice things up.

Grab a tent, a blow up bed, a cooler for drinks and snacks and get away from it all at a local campground, beach or even the backyard.

Drop everything for a fun filled day at an amusement park or the zoo and act like kids again. If it's feasible, take the kids to a sitter and surprise your husband while he is away on business.

Ask him what his perfect day would be like and then make it happen.

Take an evening dip at a secluded lake or pool, sans suits!

In the Trenches: "One of the best things we ever tried for our marriage was a kit that had different scenarios. It was exciting, we never knew what to expect." Angie Westbrook, mom of Courtney, Collin & Paige

HOLIDAY ROMANCE

VALENTINE'S DAY

One Valentine's Day I bought a pretty red negligee and did a sexy strip tease for my husband. He said it was the best gift ever, even better than the expensive golf clubs I bought him on another Valentine's.

Have a scavenger hunt with clues written on red construction paper hearts hidden all over town eventually leading to a hotel.

Use melted chocolate and a kitchen funnel as a mold to create your own big "kiss" for my husband. You can even put a personal message inside.

Cut out hearts from red construction paper to make personal coupons. Include items like a 15 minute massage, ice-cream for dinner, and his choice of movie together or whatever your Valentine would enjoy.

In the Trenches: "I used a package of Hershey's Kisses to create excitement the 14 days before Valentine's Day by placing the kisses throughout the house, in the car and even at his job. I created a chart listing things my husband could buy with his kisses like a massage or special dinner. He loves candy, but he saved them all and cashed them in for something extra special." Tiffany Stevens, mom of Hannah & Emma

CHRISTMAS

Take the kids to grandma's house or get a sitter and spend the day alone with your husband. Tackle all the shopping at once and enjoy a nice meal in quiet without having to cut someone else's food.

After the kids have gone to bed and you handle all the Santa stuff make a few of his Christmas wishes come true and sleep under the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree.

Turn down one of the many party invitations you receive and spend the evening at home listening to Christmas music, watching a Christmas movie and snuggling after the kids are in bed.

One Christmas I had my sister burn a CD for my husband and me to listen to in the bedroom. My husband loved it and we listen to it frequently when the kids are tucked safely in bed for the night.

In the Trenches: "My husband and I love to drive around and look at lights together while we drink hot chocolate or coffee. It's inexpensive and very romantic." Jean Hines, mom of Cory & Krystle

DREAM TOGETHER

When was the last time you asked your husband what his hopes and dreams were? Somewhere between the dirty diapers and the late-night feedings try to reconnect with his heart and your own. Don't be afraid to dream big, our God is a big God.

Drive through a neighborhood you would love to live in and envision all the things you would love in a new house.

Have a sunset picnic at the highest point in town. One of our personal favorites was going for a 4-wheeler ride at dusk and looking at the stars together and talking about what we want out of life. That was before he sold his 4-wheeler to help me achieve my dream of going to an expensive writing conference.

Help your husband's dreams become reality by allowing him the time and possible money it will take to pursue them. If he wants to lose weight, hire a personal trainer. If he wants to improve his golf game, pay for a private lesson.

DEPEND ON YOUR ALLIES

Developing relationships with other like-minded married couples will encourage you in your marriage and the accountability you share is invaluable. Times spent with them will probably help you appreciate your spouse even more. Have fun and share babysitting costs, too.

Choose friends with your commitment to marriage. Share your joys, struggles, ask for advice and pray for each other.

Plan at least one outing every three months with another couple or a group of friends. Celebrate birthdays, marriage and each other. We often go out with a group of three other couples. The husbands enjoy each others company and we just love sharing life together.

Have a traveling game or movie night with your friends. Some people we know used to get together every Thursday night for dinner and to watch the hit TV series Friends.

We love to play chicken foot dominoes with another couple while our kids play together. We play girls against guys, always keep score and record the winners inside the box lid.

Attend or host a couple's Bible study once a month in your home.

In the Trenches: "We love our small group. We have a great time and it is such an encouragement to be with other married couples who want their marriages to work." Karen Moon, mom of Lauren, Amanda, Alyssa &

Erin

DON'T BLAME THE KIDS

Have you ever stayed home with the baby instead of spending a little time and money to catch a movie with your hubby? We can't blame our children for our lack of romance and sexual intimacy. While there are some sacrifices that must be made for our children, sacrificing our intimate relationship with their dad shouldn't be one of them.

“Though children get blamed for the parents' withdrawal from the marital bed, it is the couple's responsibility to find a way to have privacy so they can share life sexually.” Dr. Gary Chapman. Pediatrician and mom, Dr. Peggy Linguist recommends parents start early having their babies sleep in the crib or bassinet and not in their beds with them so they don't have to go through the misery of retraining everyone. “I can't tell you how many people come into our office when their children are toddlers, desperately seeking help to get their children out of their beds.” Dr. Peggy Linguist said.

If you are co-sleeping or the baby is in a bassinet in your room get creative for a few months. Try the bathroom, the guest room, the living room – just do it.

From the time they are old enough to understand, help you children learn that there are times you and Dad need to be alone. If you have to, lock your door.

In the Trenches: “For privacy, we sometimes lock ourselves in our bedroom closet.” Twilene Sanders, mom of Tanae, Talon & Taya

NO NEGOTIATIONS

We have to learn how to say no to our children, our careers and even our church sometimes in order to say yes to our marriage. Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend put it like this, “A life of ‘yes’ to everything else ultimately results in a ‘no’ to your marriage.” Sometimes just being emotionally present when you are with your mate will do wonders to boost your attraction to each other.

Turn off the computer and the phones and just concentrate on the two of you for a couple of hours.

Avoid watching TV in bed together and record your favorite show instead. 9 times out of 10 one of you will fall asleep and the TV detracts from what the bedroom is really about.

Instead of staying up late working, reading or watching TV, go to bed at the same time. You don’t have to have sex, just share the intimacy of your bed as you snuggle and drift off to sleep.

Medicines including birth control and antidepressants may also sabotage your libido. Speak to your doctor about lowering your dosage or switching your prescription.

Set a standing date whether it’s breakfast at a diner on Saturday morning or going out at least once a month. Be sure to schedule couple time on both of your calendars to protect it from other obligations or intrusions.

Plan a getaway at least once a quarter to just focus on each other and have fun. It doesn’t have to be expensive, just take the time to get away from all the pressures of life.

BUILD ON A SOLID FOUNDATION

When I was in college I took several design classes, one of which included drafting a home from the ground up using a software program called AutoCAD. The things this program could do, including laying out floor plans, placing furniture, electrical and plumbing was amazing. None of those fascinating additions could be made to the plan however until I laid the foundation so to speak. God's advises of the importance of building a solid foundation in our marriages in Matthew 7:24-27.

I love to decorate and can spend hours dreaming and shopping for just the right accessories for our home, but if my house crumbles because of a faulty foundation, all the hard work and the beauty I have created is worthless. The same is true of our marriages, unless they are built on the solid rock of Christ and He is the head of our home, no amount of romance will save a crumbling marriage. In the battle for your marriage rely on God's power and love to make it work.

DEBRIEFING

How often have you passed on sex in order to get a little bit of sleep? What can you do today to increase energy and desire instead?

Schedule a date night for this month and make arrangements for a night or weekend away from the children within the year.

Choose at least one other couple that you can go out with and rely on for encouragement and accountability.

Create a list of 5 great things you did as a couple in the past year and 5 things you want to accomplish this year.

CONVOYS OF FAMILY FUN

Moms have a profound ability to impact their family in a negative or positive manner. That old saying “if momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy” can be true! It is a-lot easier for moms and those they love to fight the daily battles of life when we feel good about ourselves and our relationships. There are so many ways to spread love and joy in your family as you romance your husband and your children. It’s the little, everyday sweet things that mean the most and a fabulous vacation doesn’t hurt either.

RANDOM FUN

When I was in college I had the privilege of working for the President of Ranger Junior College, Dr. Joe Mills. The phrase random acts of kindness was the mantra of my boss and ultimately his heart for others transferred to me. Dr. Mills challenged his staff to look for ways to perform random act of kindness and now I’m challenging you to create random acts of kindness and fun in your own family.

Leave notes of encouragement around the house, in their office, their car, lunchbox or briefcase.

Write down 25 reasons why you love your child on separate slips of paper and place in a piñata for them to bust open.

Use glow in the dark sidewalk chalk to write a message or draw a picture that your child can see through the bedroom window at night.

Give your husband or child a warm towel on a cold morning when they get out of the shower or put their clothes in the dryer.

Snuggle close to your spouse or child in a hammock or on the couch. Read to each other, look at the clouds or daydream about the future.

Help them do the chores they dread the most, such as yard work or cleaning the bathroom, or do it for them as a surprise.

Spray the inside of a metal cookie cutter with nonstick cooking spray. Put it in a hot skillet and crack an egg inside it or use pancake batter to create a one of a kind breakfast treat. Use different shaped cookie cutters that fit the season, like hearts for Valentine's Day or pumpkins for Halloween.

If it is not against school or office policy, send flowers or balloons to school or work just to let them know you love them.

Make smores in the fireplace. My husband even made them in the microwave for our daughter once – the mess was worth it.

In the Trenches: "During the heat of summer we took our daughter to an aquarium. It was nice and cool and she loved all the fish." Kristi Autry, mom of Lani

EVERYDAY FUN

Take every opportunity to discover more about each other and spend time together. So much can be learned just by being together while you go about the mundane chores of life or when skipping them.

Surprise the kids by getting them out of bed to go get ice cream with the family and possibly a friend.

Talk a walk together after dinner and look for worms or ants. Our daughter loves to pull her baby brother in a little wagon and it gives us a chance to talk about our day and so much more.

Make your loved ones smile by attending something important to them like a game, play or field trip.

Play 20 questions and learn something new about each other.

It gets harder as they get older, but let your children play hooky from school and share some special one on one time together.

Play dress up and have a tea party with your daughter, this is especially sweet with Daddy.

Take each of your children to the grocery store by themselves at least once a month and allow them to pick out the cereal and snacks for the week or let them run errands with you so you can spend some one on one time with them.

Provide child size tools and a bubble lawn mower for your children and do yard work as a family. When the hard stuff is done run through the sprinkler together.

Turn the TV off to lessen distractions and aid in conversation. On average, Americans spend about 28 hours a week glued to the tube. Tuning in a half hour to an hour less each night will give you an extra 3 1/2 to 7 hours a week to spend with your family.

In the Trenches: "My daughter Haylie and I love to ride bikes together and I run with my son Taylor." Stacie Brown, mom of Taylor, Haylie & Peyton

PREDICTABLE FUN

Create special family rituals and make your spouse and your child feel like they are the most important person in your life.

Keep the dinner hour sacred in spite of church activities, homework, sports and different practices. If possible, make eating a meal together a priority instead of eating in shifts. Spending time together daily as a family over the dinner table will become a comforting and informative tradition.

Create conversation starters on slips of paper. Take turn answering questions like “funniest thing I did today/ever” or “I helped someone today by...”

Have special pet names for each other that only the family uses.

Sing and dance together without feeling silly. Our kids love for me to dance with them to the theme music on cartoons like Strawberry Shortcake and Pinky Dinky Doo.

Create a family song or motto to the tune of a nursery rhyme or catchy song like the Brady Bunch or YMCA.

Tell them one reason every day why you love them, whether it’s something about their personality or something they do that makes you proud.

Schedule individual date nights with your children. This is especially important for fathers and daughters; their relationship will impact every single relationship she has with men in the future.

Laugh together regularly and hug often. My husband and kids love to wrestle which mainly consists of a lot of tickling and giggling.

Set up a bedtime routine. We get our pajamas on, brush out teeth and race to our daughter's bedroom. She loves beating us and then we each take turns praying. Her father and I switch off who will sing her a song or tell her a story while the other puts our son to bed.

In the Trenches: "Because my husband is a football coach and works long hours, certain times of the year, we do not get to sit down as a family and have dinner that often. One thing we try to do is make sure we start the day as a family and have breakfast together. I love starting the day like that." Kim Rogers, mom of Chase, Alexis, & Cason

SCHEDULED FUN

Set a specific night for family fun night every week or once a month. Choose whatever your family enjoys, just make sure it actually happens.

Put a puzzle together and use Mod Podge to seal it and then frame it. Put it on display in the family room.

Choose a theme from a favorite family movie and plan a meal and games around it. Watch *The Incredibles*, make power snacks like trail mix together and set up an obstacle course in the back yard.

Drape older sheets over low tree branches for a tent, cook hot dogs and smores on the grill and camp in the backyard as a family.

Set up a movie outside with a projector and white sheets tacked to the back of the house or use a blanket to create a stage and let the little ones put on a show.

As a family, create a small scrapbook of your favorite memories together. Include a photo or two from each occasion and write a few sentences about what you did and why it was special. Then sit down and relive the memories together.

Our family loves to go to Chick-fil-A on Tuesday nights. The kids eat free, they have face painting and special guest appearances by the Chick-fil-A cow, the tooth fairy or clowns. The kids have a great time in the indoor play center and we have a chance to talk as a couple.

In the Trenches: "Our kids love to set up dinner buffet style, play games or watch movies and then sleep in the living room as a family at least once or twice a month." Jennifer Mims, mom of Grant, Brody, Nash & Barrett

VACATION FUN

One of the best ways to create lasting memories and carve out much needed time for your family is to vacation together. Just being away from all the distractions of home and work allows for uninterrupted time to get to know each other better. While vacation expenses are one of the quickest ways to eat up a family's income, you don't have to give them up.

Well in advance of any trip, sit down and realistically determine how much the trip will cost and how you will pay for it.

Choose a place you can afford, take your written budget with you and stick to it as close as possible. Vacation isn't as rejuvenating when you are still paying for it 2 years later.

If your family really wants to go on vacation and money is tight, cut back in other areas like eating out and gifts for a few months.

Travel off peak or be ready to go at the last moment for deep discounts. Always ask for family, teacher, military or AAA discounts.

Use entertainment books to add to your vacation savings. Check out discount books online or call the tourism office.

A travel agent's fee may be worth paying. They have access to bulk deals and discounts that can save you a-lot of money.

Consider purchasing an all-inclusive package deal including food, airfare, hotel, and tickets to attractions and save up to 25%. When some friends of ours went to Disney World they saved a-lot of money by purchasing a package including meals and appreciated not having to carry extra cash to eat and the food was great.

Consider traveling by train and let them do the driving for you. Kids ride on AMTRAK for half price with a parent year round.

Obviously you have to get where you are going and that can get pricey. Be sure to include money for gas, car rental if needed, airfare, tolls and parking. A car trip is usually cheaper than an entire family's airfare, but watch for specials.

In the Trenches: "I'm not the most outdoorsy mom, but we often camp when we need some family time and are short on cash." Lisa Powell, mom of Logan, Landon & Lizzie

DESTINATION FAMILY FUN

After you establish how much money you can spend, you need to determine how much time you can take and decide where you want to go.

Would you like to stay in one place or visit several?

What do you and the rest of your family want to see or do?

To find a place that closely meets your expectations, surf the web, visit a bookstore's travel section or request free information from the visitor's bureau or chamber of commerce in that area.

Accommodations can be the most costly expense of all. Consider staying free with relatives or friends, but don't wear out your welcome. Camping and budget motels are another cost saving option.

All you really need is a comfortable bed, clean bathroom and of course the kids would love a pool. Consider if the pricey hotel is worth the money for the amount of time you will be in the room.

If you are traveling with your extended family or friends, be sure to get a condo with individual rooms or separate rooms in a hotel for at least each couple and their children. Some hotels offer a discount for second rooms, so don't hesitate to ask for one when making your reservations. Even if you enjoy each others company a great deal, close proximity for an extended period of time can cause friction and make the trip uncomfortable for everyone.

In the Trenches: "We love going on vacation as a large family. We always get a condo though so each couple and their kids can have their own space." Jean Hines, mom of Cory & Crystal

CAR FUN

When traveling by car, the trick is to create a comfortable car ride for all. Remember, lots of time in the car can cause irritability, no matter how much you love each other.

Be sure to take plenty of rest stops and be patient with one another. Don't drive when sleepy or hungry and let the kids get out for a minute if they get restless.

A rectangle cake pan with a sliding lid is a great travel desk for kids. They can fill it with crayons, paper, coloring books, card games and magnets and use the top for a stable writing surface.

For older kids, take along travel-sized board games or electronic games and extra batteries and throw in a blank journal to use as a travel diary.

Play traditional car games, such as "I Spy" or listen to music and sing along as a family. On a family car trip 2 years ago we made up a new family vacation song that our daughter still wants to sing.

Take turns telling stories or play books on tape that the whole family will enjoy.

Bring along a lovie or favorite stuffed animal, blankets and pillows for napping in the car. You may even consider packing a portable potty for the little ones and don't forget the first aid kit.

Be sure to take plenty of baby wipes with you, as well as plastic bags to put soiled or wet clothes in.

In the Trenches: "We have a portable DVD player with headphones and take it with us on vacation. It's a lifesaver." Jennifer Pope, mom of Chase

FLEXIBLE FUN

Be flexible so that everyone in the family has a good time. Don't set your itinerary in stone and miss out on unplanned adventures like an interesting museum or attraction that you spot on the way to your destination.

Schedule time to relax, you don't want to come home from vacation more exhausted than when you left. Don't fill everyday with so many activities that you don't have time to just sit and read, talk a long walk or bath or play a game. Don't feel guilty if you don't fit every vacation attraction in. You can still have a good time even if things don't turn out exactly like you expect.

Leave work at home if possible. Plan ahead so you are all caught up and ask to be called only if it is a true emergency. Your family needs to know that they are most important. Of course there are exceptions, like if there is a death and your husband must get back to preach the funeral. This has actually happened to my father who is a pastor and to our senior pastor on several occasions.

While spending time together is the goal of a family vacation, allow each other time to do separate things and then meet up again later for lunch or dinner.

Let everyone have a say about the activities you will participate in. Try at least one thing each family member suggests, so everyone feels apart and gets to do something they think is fun.

In the Trenches: "My dad is so bad that he actually schedules every minute of our family vacations, including the fun. It has become a running joke in our family that we have to ask him if we can smile." Mandie Harper, mom of Chance

PACKING IN FUN

Ship large baby care essentials to your vacation destination or rent cribs and high chairs from your hotel. On a recent trip we spent \$5 a night to rent a crib that our son and daughter both slept in instead of lugging around the pack-n-play.

Be sure to pack any medicines your family regularly takes, including prescriptions. It never fails that someone will get a headache, stomachache or an allergy attack because of a change in the environment.

Be sure to pack plenty of diapers and wipes as well as sanitary items for mom as well. You don't want to have to go out in the middle of the night to search for them or pay an excessive price.

Instead of rushing around shopping when surprised by a sudden trip, pack the essentials you already have on hand. Include your favorite and most comfortable outfits and add a few sassy outfits that you haven't worn in a while.

If you really need a specific item that you don't have, just borrow it. When our church gave us a trip to Cancun for my husband's seven-year anniversary there, I was so excited. The reservations, spending money, transportation, and even childcare were taken care of. The only thing I needed was a great swimsuit. If you are anything like me, you understand that shopping for something of this importance can be daunting at best. Instead of running from store to store and wasting any of the precious 24 hours I had to prepare and possibly a great deal of money for a suit I didn't love, I was fortunate that a good friend let me borrow two awesome suits that were perfect for me. I only wish I could have kept them.

Last but not least, when you pack, bring a carry on with all the essentials just in case your checked suitcase is delayed or lost.

SAFETY FUN

While on vacation, safety should be a top priority. Hopefully, nothing bad will happen on your vacation, but is better to be safe than sorry.

It is best not to put an older sibling in charge of younger ones, especially when visiting a strange place.

When going to a crowded place like an amusement park wear similar bright colors so you can spot each other easily and agree on a time and place to meet if you go in different directions.

Know what parent will be responsible for each child and carry cell phones or walkie talkies with you to make communication easy.

Never allow a young child to swim alone, even if there is a lifeguard or they have had lessons.

Teach your child how to call 911 and what to say if they get separated from you or if there is an emergency.

Have a special code word or phrase that only the family knows, so that youngsters will not be tempted to go with a stranger and use a luggage tag in their pocket, purse or backpack to write emergency contact information on.

Always bring a current photo of your child with you and remember what they are wearing that day.

Carry only a modest amount of currency and traveler's checks. Be sure to keep track of the check's serial numbers in case they are lost or stolen.

PROVISION FUN

My husband says I go on vacation just for the food, he might be half right; I like to shop, too. Meals, snacks, activities and souvenirs for everybody add up quickly, so be realistic about your budget.

Consider accommodations where kids eat free, that serve breakfast or has a kitchen if you are willing to cook.

Eat at local Mom and Pop restaurants, they are well priced and the food can't be beat. Besides, you can eat at chain restaurants and fast food joints at home.

When it comes to snacks, buy them at a grocery store and take them with you. One bottle of water can cost as much as \$2 at a convenience store or tourist location, so it just makes sense to buy a twelve pack for \$2.50.

However, budget for snacks that are a part of the experience like a milkshake at an old-fashioned soda fountain or fresh fruit at a roadside stand or farmers market.

Plan how much it will cost to attend shows, go scuba diving or anything else you might want to do.

Set a reasonable limit in this area and be sure to check into specials. For instance, my husband and father-in-law once saved \$60 each by golfing in the afternoon instead of the morning.

Ask the locals where the most inexpensive fun is and shop where they shop for cheaper prices, too.

Set a limited amount to spend on souvenirs and avoid emotional buys.

Purchase something useful that adds to your home or keep something like snorkeling gear as a reminder. On our last two trips to Mexico we bought some beautiful urns that match our bed and bath décor.

Don't feel pressured to buy at the first place you see, because vendors often carry similar goods and they use their own discretion in pricing. This is especially true when you are shopping in markets like those in Mexico and New Orleans where you can often find what you want at a better price somewhere else. On vacation once, I spent days looking for the perfect silver jewelry because I just wasn't willing to pay what the vendors were asking. It paid off when I found the perfect ring and necklace set for an unbelievable price in the airport on the way home.

In the Trenches: "Each year our family vacations at a state park. We rent a cabin and enjoy the hiking trails, biking, swimming and free historical sites." Alisha Huff, second mom of Jami, Chelsea, D'layni Bea & Noah

RETURNING HOME FUN

Before you leave your vacation destination check to make sure you have all your belongings with you. On a trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas with my husband's family we learned this lesson the hard way. We had to go back to our condo not once, but twice to retrieve two of our daughter's favorite things. The first time we were just past the check out gate when we discovered our daughter had left behind her favorite doll.

Unfortunately, we were already 20 miles away the second time when she began to cry for her blankie. This is no ordinary blankie because it was given to her by her G-Daddy when she was in the NICU, so we had to turn around to get it. Apparently when I stripped the beds that morning, the blanket was wrapped up in her sheets and I didn't notice it. To make matters worse they had already removed the laundry and placed it in a huge trailer with everyone else's. We had to wade through piles of other people's dirty towels and sheets until we finally found it. To top it off, as if it isn't bad enough already, the blankie is white just like all the rest of the laundry. You think I would know better, just the year before we accidentally left behind an iced tea maker in our cabin in Oklahoma!

PRESERVING FUN

Now that you have made so many fun memories here are a few ways to preserve them. Your memories will fade over time and creating a scrapbook is the perfect way to note the who, what, when and where's of all the important events in your families life. If the idea of scrapbooking is overwhelming and sounds like to great an endeavor for this time in your life, simply put your pictures in an album that has a spot to journal.

To get started get just the basic supplies like cardstock paper, adhesives, markers scissors and stickers. Be sure all the products are acid free.

Don't invest a great deal of money right off. You decide you don't like something later. For example I bought a lot of small stickers in the beginning because they were less expensive, but in the end I redid some of the pages because I didn't like the result which was even more costly.

Look at other people's scrapbooks or go to a scrapbook store and check out the variety of lay-outs and different types of albums.

Reduce a blurry photo on a color copy machine to get a clearer image.

Use the Bedazzler to add sparkle or add pretty hair clips, beads or buttons with glue dots to enhance your pages.

Create an awesome 3-D effect by cutting a silhouette of your subject and attaching the background to the page. Then put a pop-dot on your silhouette and place above the background.

It is so important to journal important facts in your scrapbooks. If you are like me and you don't like your handwriting, simply do your journaling on your computer and copy it on to vellum paper for your scrapbook. Journal in hidden places like on a paper that is in an envelope or in an accordion tied with a ribbon and that folds out.

Hidden places are also a good way to store numerous pictures of other people like guests at your child's birthday party. I did this with all the pictures of my daughter's friends hitting a piñata at her second birthday. It allowed those interested to look, but the focus of the page was still Mackenzie.

To add dimension and uniqueness to a page, cut out portions of the same picture separately like your child's feet, face and hands. This method allows you to use the negative space of a picture and creates a dramatic effect. Place each separate portion in frames or on individual cardstock mats surrounding a copy of the complete picture. You can attach them to each other using ribbon, yarn, robe or even metal wire.

Have your layouts and precious photos scanned and burned onto CD's. In case of fire, flood or other unforeseen events, give the copies to another family member for safe keeping

In the Trenches: "I like to use the mini size pictures that come with professional pictures in the kids scrapbooks and it looks adorable." Jennifer Eaglen, mom of Aspen & Brendan

DEBRIEFING

What random act of kindness can you perform for someone in your family today?

List and adopt practical ways to improve your relationship with your children.

What are your favorite family vacation memories?

How can you preserve those precious memories in a more meaningful way?

Plan now for your next vacation and choose a visible way that each family member can contribute to the savings. For instance, use a glass jar to hold change with a picture of your vacation destination attached to the front.

There is so much more to a mom's life than cleaning house, washing clothes, cooking meals and caring for the kids. Mom's also have the distinct responsibility and honor of making the holidays special. Unfortunately, many battles have been fought and lost in the name of holiday tradition. The pressure on moms to make every occasion picture perfect can be overwhelming. Instead, apply the winning ideas and battle strategies below as you consider what you love about the holidays, what traditions you would like to keep, new traditions you would like to begin and what traditions just aren't worth the effort.

Remember, frustration occurs when your expectations don't match reality. Let your children know what behavior is appropriate and what the consequences will be if they don't act as they should during the holidays or at special events. That being said; try to have a realistic attitude about your children's behavior. We all get a little cranky when we are hungry or don't get enough rest. Your children are especially susceptible to this when their schedules are out of whack during the holidays. The holidays begin and end at home, so make yours the center of peace, love and joy for your family and all those who enter it.

A WINNING VALENTINES DAY

Instead of buying a card, take a few minutes to write a note to the special people in your life telling them in sweet and silly ways all the reasons why you love them.

Create a family valentine mailbox with an empty rectangular tissue box or even a shoe box with a lid. Simply wrap the box with tissue or construction paper and decorate with glitter, markers or use cookie cutters as templates to cut out hearts and other shapes.

Wrap up a heart shaped cookie with a personal note written in icing on it and put it in their lunchbox or briefcase.

In the Trenches: "On Valentine's Day we make a special dinner at home for the kids and us complete with china, candles and their favorite foods." Twilene Sanders, mom of Tanae, Talon & Taya

A WINNING EASTER

Focus on the true meaning of Easter by attending services together as a family or volunteer where needed for your church.

Hide Easter treats for teenagers and adults in the house. Put clues in plastic eggs or write clues on paper eggs.

Host an egg decorating party for your little ones and your friends with little ones and talk about the significance of Easter as you work.

To avoid giving out so much candy, put coupons inside plastic eggs redeemable for an extra hour of TV or an extra story before bedtime, a special dessert, or a play date or sleepover with friends.

In the Trenches: "As a children's minister I love hosting our annual Easter egg hunt. We picnic, play and break the yard into hunting sections by age." Melissa Lance, mom of Micah & Jared

A WINNING HALLOWEEN

Make yummy goodies use cookie cutters to cut out spider or pumpkin shapes for sandwiches or use you favorite sandwich cookies to create creepy goodies with red cinnamon-drops for eyes and licorice pieces for legs.

Whatever costume you choose, be sure that children can see and breath well through eyes, nose and mouth openings. Be sure the costume is flame resistant and if you will be trick or treating at night consider adding some reflective tape to it or their goodie bag.

Every year, the mom's group I lead visits a pumpkin patch with our children. We take pictures and pick out pumpkins to take home, too.

Once your candy is inspected by an adult, divide it up into several bags and save for different times or have a candy swap with your children's friends by dividing the candy up evenly and tossing anything they do not like.

Our church hosts an annual Fall Festival for our community. The kids play games, win prizes and the adults have fun, too.

Have a pumpkin decorating contest with friends. We have done this and allowed the little ones to decorate their own small pumpkins with markers, glitter and stickers and the grown ups carved their own pumpkins.

Try fun party games like good old fashioned bobbing for apples or fill a jar with candy corns and let the kids guess the amount. The winner gets the candy, but their friends will like it if the share, too.

In the Trenches: "Our town has trick-or-treating downtown and the kids love to dress up, collect candy and see all of their friends as they walk around the square." Nisa Redd, mom of Addyson & Cayden

A WINNING THANKSGIVING

Cut out leaves from construction paper and have everyone write something they are thankful for and scatter them on the table to read throughout the meal.

Before blessing the food, go around the room and have everyone share something they are thankful for out loud. My family does this every Thanksgiving and it is such a wonderful way to share how God blessed each one of us throughout the year.

Instead of cooking a huge meal and sitting around watching football, serve lunch at a homeless shelter. Afterwards celebrate your good fortune by having dinner out.

Instead of making a large meal for just the two of them and their baby, another friend of ours decorates a gingerbread house and puts up the Christmas tree.

In the Trenches: "At Thanksgiving one year, based on the book, Silver Boxes, by Florence Littauer, each member of the family was given their own silver box and we wrote notes to each other about things we love or admire about one another." Pat Rhoton, mom of Rhonda, Craig & Kevin

A WINNING CHRISTMAS

Keep the focus on Christ by attending a Christmas Eve candlelight service or Christmas morning service together as a family.

Move the Magi closer to the manger scene throughout the month and wait until Christmas morning to put baby Jesus in the manger after you read the Christmas story in Luke 2 as a family.

Several of my friends and our children have a Birthday Party for. The children help make the decorations and we have cake. They also bring a toy or book to give to a needy child.

Let go of at least one holiday tradition that you and your family members no longer enjoy. Not only will you save time and possibly money, you will reduce your stress level.

Trade babysitting with a friend to do Christmas shopping. It's so much easier to get it all done without dragging the kids and their strollers along.

Our pastor's family has a treasured tradition of traveling to the beautiful Festival of Lights in Natchitoches, Louisiana every year.

In the Trenches: "Every year when we celebrate Christmas with our extended family we sing Christmas carols and read the Christmas story out of a special booklet we made up. Our grandmother played the piano for several years, but now we just sing along with a CD." Melissa Allen, mom of Hayden

If there is an easier or cheaper way to do something, try it. Write a letter on the computer and copy. Not only will you save time and energy, you will probably save money because a pack of paper is usually cheaper than several boxes of cards.

If you are having guests, let them help when they offer. You will not only save money and time, they will enjoy contributing. Set a theme, like Mexican or traditional and have everyone bring their specialty.

Visit a tree farm and pick out your tree as a family. They often have hot apple cider, hot chocolate and hayrides.

Take a trip back in time and visit a live Nativity as a family to see what it was really like when Christ was born.

Host a cookie decorating party. Write the invitations in the form of a recipe and include all the ingredients needed including friends, cookies, frosting, creativity, and sprinkles. Let the kids get in on the action with their own aprons and already made sugar cookies. When the party is over, pack each child a box of cookies and tie with a string and an initial cookie cutter.

In the Trenches: “For Christmas, several of us gathered our kids to decorate cookies. Everyone had so much fun decorating angels, bells and snowmen with frosting and plenty of sprinkles,” Lori Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

When you buy a new tree give the old one to a college student or a family in need. We gave our old one to my sisters when they moved into a new apartment. It saved them money and it fit perfectly.

When you put all your Christmas decorations away and get out all your everyday stuff, toss, donate or repack half of it. Keep only the things you really love. Your house will look neater and larger.

Do Christmas shopping, wrapping, baking and decorating as a family. The old theory that more hands make light work is true.

Keep an Annual Christmas Journal. Include a family picture and information about where, when, how and who you celebrated with. Information about the weather and special gifts could also be noted.

Put a new age appropriate version of the Christmas story in your child's stocking every year and read it together before you open gifts. For example, a board book is perfect for your newborn.

For a fun and unique way to celebrate Advent buy bright red, green or Christmas themed socks and attach them to a red string with clothespins and hang on the mantle or on a staircase. Buy enough for every day of December and fill them with special coupons for time with mom or dad, small toys, ornaments, stickers or other small items your kids would enjoy.

In the Trenches: "Our family gets new pj's and watch's Christmas Vacation with Chevy Chase every Christmas Eve." Krystle Sikes, mom of Kenna

CHRISTMAS GIFT GIVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Gift giving can be one of the best ways to express your love and affection for your friends and family at Christmas. Unfortunately, so many of us spend money we don't have, to buy presents people really don't need, for people we hardly know. Instead, follow these battle strategies when shopping for your family, friends and even strangers.

If you find the perfect gift for someone, but it's right then. If you find something better, you can always save it for another time, give it to someone else or simply return it.

Always save your receipts. The item may not work, parts may be missing or you may change your mind. You don't want to get stuck with store credit or a lower return price because the item went on sale.

Have your children go through their toys and books and donate the ones they no longer enjoy to a charity. Not only will this make room for their new presents it will teach them a lesson about giving, too.

Adopt an angel tree child or a needy family and buy gifts for them. Pick them out as a family and then do the shopping together, it will really help all of you to realize how blessed you are.

Plan a fun family trip instead of exchanging gifts. The memories will last much longer. If you must give presents, put small items that relate to the trip in everyone's stocking. Items like gloves for a ski trip or sunglasses for a beach trip are perfect.

For someone living alone, like a new college student, send them Christmas in a box. Include a table top tree, a string of garland, tree topper, lights and a box of ornaments. A CD of Christmas music and box of hot chocolate are the perfect finishing touch.

In the Trenches: "Instead of purchasing numerous gifts, we purchase only three gifts for each child and explain the significance of the three gifts the Magi brought to Jesus." Melanie Avent, mom of Gracen, Ross & Easton

Give the gift of encouragement by placing notes about all the things you love about your mate or children in their stocking.

Save your spare change all year long and allow your children to use it to buy Christmas presents for others.

Grandparents would love to receive a photo album of the little one complete with photos. Leave some empty pages with a promise to send future pictures.

Create a calendar of your children dressed for each month or season to give as gifts to family members and friends. You can buy pre-made calendars and simply insert photos or have them made.

Buy the same great gift for extended family and office mates. Look for something inexpensive that everyone will appreciate. Consider buying a few extra for that person who buys you an unexpected gift.

Purchase gift cards, pampering certificates or even magazine subscriptions for those hard to shop for people. Not only do you have a better shot of pleasing your family and friends, you will save countless hours fighting the crowds for that perfect gift.

Wrap homemade cookies in festive tissue paper, seasonal kitchen towels, gift bags or place on dollar store plates. (Much less expensive than using tins.) Deliver the goodies to neighbors, nursing homes and friends as a family. If you are feeling really festive, sing Christmas carols, too!

Enlarged photocopies of favorite pictures are great for wrapping small packages or use comic or foreign papers, old maps, wallpaper samples or fabric remnants trimmed with pinking shears.

In the Trenches: “When my boys were little I loved to use brown paper from the craft store or even grocery sacks to wrap gifts and decorate with my son’s handprints.” Misty Rhoton, mom of Ross & Jake

YEAR ROUND GIFT GIVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Try something creative to announce a child's upcoming birth like mailing grandparent's bibs that say "I love my grandparents" or if you already have children send a framed picture of each one and one extra with the words "coming soon".

Apply copies of your child's picture to t-shirts, caps, mugs, mouse pads and tote-bags for one of a kind presents.

Host a Scrapbook Shower for new moms. All the guests can create two layout pages for the mom to fill in later with pictures and her own journaling. You can use a theme like Nursery Rhymes for the book or go with the basics such as a page for the day they were born, coming home from the hospital, their first bath and bottle.

Give the gift that keeps on giving to your girlfriends. What mom wouldn't love a housecleaning or fresh flowers once a month for a year? Pay for a Mother's Day Out Program or commit to be their workout partner.

Give Dad something he really wants like a Greatest Hits CD of his favorite artist or even a funny movie with his favorite comedians, like the Three Stooges. Have a picture of you and him when you were a child or at your wedding blown up and framed for his office. If you want to buy a classic gift like a robe or a money clip, get it monogrammed for him

Mail your mother-in-law a card or send her flowers on her son's birthday. The sweet sentiment will tell her how much you appreciate her and her love for your husband, the grandkids and you.

Give tickets to a play or concert, gym or museum memberships.

Instead of giving China for a wedding gift, give the couple a marriage enrichment book or a gift certificate for a premarital class.

Offer your services in lieu of a gift. I love to make punch and organize parties, so when our pastor's daughter got married, I coordinated all the food to be made by church members and friends and set it up for the reception. It was a gift of love using my time and talents and saved them a great deal of money. I know she will remember it much longer than a toaster, too.

In the Trenches: "For wedding gifts, I mat the couples wedding invitation and press dried flowers between it and the glass of a pretty frame." Jennifer Dineen, mom of John Paul & Laura Beth

BATTLE READY BASKETS

Gift baskets will save you countless hours trying to come up with the perfect gift for that special someone or that hard to shop for person at Christmas, their birthday or any occasion. The baskets can be as inexpensive or expensive or as you desire.

Create welcome baskets for those visiting your home. Include slippers, guest soaps, treats and local information.

Fill a large bowl with a video store gift certificate or their favorite movie, microwavable popcorn, candy and soda for a movie lover.

Wrap everything needed for a yummy Italian meal for two in a red and white checkered blanket or tablecloth. Toss in a few boxes of dry spaghetti, a jar of pasta sauce (perhaps homemade), breadsticks, candlesticks and a CD of classical music.

Package different kinds of homemade popcorn like cheese, cinnamon and white chocolate in pretty bags and place in a fun serving bowl.

Fill a basket with a few books, a unique mug, hot chocolate, coffee or tea and a tin of cookies and don't forget a headrest pillow. Include a personalized book mark made from a picture of their loved ones pasted to a strip of decorated cardstock paper.

Pamper your best friend or mom by filling a basket with everything needed for a sensuous bath. Include candles, bubble bath, a loofah and music, or give her everything she needs for a manicure like foot scrub, lotion, new manicure tools and polish.

For the shutterbug in your life give them a new camera, film and a pretty frame or album.

Office supplies in a trash can is a fun gift to give when someone gets their first job. Include their favorite pens, a holder, post it notes, white out and other desk organizers.

For the child moving out on their own, give them a laundry basket with cleaning supplies, detergent, dryer sheets and a roll of quarters for the laundromat.

New brides would love to receive your favorite cake recipe, a new pan and all the ingredients or cooking essentials like measuring cups, spatulas and cup towels nested in a pretty set of mixing bowls.

In the Trenches: "I often give new moms a basket of basic baby medicines like Tylenol, teething gel, gas drops and a thermometer." Stacie Brown, mom of Taylor, Haylie & Peyton

BIRTHDAY PARTY STRATEGIES

Just like everything else in life, planning is the key to any successful birthday party whether it's a 1st birthday or a 30th. Children love their birthday parties even before they fully understand that it's all about them. You can have as much fun planning a child's party as you do at the party with these tips.

Select a party date 6 weeks in advance and choose one as close to your child's actual birthday as possible, when close friends and family are able to attend. As best you can, work around holidays, other children's parties, school events and vacations to ensure your child's party is the day's main event.

Consider the age of children attending when planning the length and time of party. You may want to have a come and go party instead to accommodate everyone's crazy schedules and so there won't be too many people at once.

Have your child take a nap before the party to help ensure a good mood and allow you time to handle last minute details without interruption.

Vary the activities and always plan a few extra to be safe. Time goes fast and you don't want the guests to get bored or rowdy. Create an obstacle course with hula-hoops, cones, toys and empty boxes and pass out prizes to the winner. Have a treasure hunt at the park or just play on the toys, gyms or fields. We gave our daughter a pool for her 1st Birthday and it was the center of her fun-filled party.

If you will be playing messy or water games, ask guests to wear or bring appropriate clothes.

Be sure to indicate if the guests will be fed, so they know if their children need to eat before they arrive.

Plan for early arrivals and unexpected guests that may show up.

Don't forget to charge the video camera and have plenty of film and extra batteries for your regular camera on hand.

If you have an older child, consider inviting a friend for them to play with.

Enlist the help of family and friends to get it all done. My husband is the official trash picker upper, my father in law i.e. father in love always handles the grill and my brother in law i.e. brother in love handles the video camera.

If you're planning an outdoor party, create a backup plan in case of bad weather. Try not to get flustered if it starts to rain on your parade.

In the Trenches: "My daughter and her friends had the best time playing in an unexpected downpour at the park during her 2nd birthday party. Thankfully the goodies, presents and parents were in the shelter of a pavilion."

Amy Morren, mom of Emily & Caleb

PROVISIONS GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

If you have a theme for the party have a cake made that matches the character.

Use cupcakes with different color frosting to spell out Happy Birthday or your child's name. I used several small muffin pans to create a train for my son's first birthday. Each cab was frosted a different color and had a letter of his name. I also used licorice to create railroad tracks and candies and cookies to create wheels and other decorations.

Make your own cake and once they are old enough let your child help you.

For a yummy activity, bake cookies or cupcakes ahead of time and let the party guest's frost and decorate their own treats.

PLEASE AND THANK YOU STRATEGIES

Review party manners with your child including greetings and thank yous.

Be realistic with your expectations, most children will not willingly offer to share their brand new toys.

To help ward off jealousy and fighting, give a disposable camera to the birthday child's siblings for them to use as the gifts are opened.

Take a picture of your young child holding a sign that says "Thank You" and copy on to cardstock. Have child "sign" their name for a more personal touch. Or take a picture of the child playing with the toy or wearing the outfit and send it with the thank you note.

In the Trenches: "Since I was able to write on my own, my grandmother would take a ruler and draw lines on the envelope so at least the name and address would be straight." Katy Warsing, mom of Tait & Gavin

CUTTING COSTS

Agree on a spending limit for kids gifts (\$5-\$10) among your circle of friends. This will help prevent a precedent for lavish gifts, so kid's expectations are not too high and so you don't break the bank.

Keep a stash of inexpensive, non-gender favorites like Mr. Potato Head, board games and water sprinklers on hand for last minute invitations.

Buy an inexpensive face painting kit and paint flowers, bugs or other designs on the kid's faces.

Plan on serving only cake and drinks to cut costs. If you party during a meal time, it is expected that you will serve food. Try pizza or hot dogs, they are quick, inexpensive and easy to serve. Just make sure to cut food for smaller kids to help prevent choking and check with parents about any food allergies.

When purchasing paper goods, go with solid colors, they are usually cheaper and you can use them again at a later date.

Don't overspend on goodie bags or favors. A well planned craft can be a fun activity that they can also take home. Give the guests something that goes along with the party theme like a kite or bubbles at the park, a water gun or beach ball for a luau, or have a piñata. Musical instruments and even side-walk chalk are also great favors.

Take a Polaroid picture of each guest with the birthday boy or girl and send it home with them in a cute but inexpensive frame.

Purchase an inexpensive bag of balloons at the grocery or discount store and ask them to fill them up with helium for you for free instead of buying them from the florist. Wait until party time to pick up helium balloons or they might sink.

Many fire departments will allow you to have a birthday party for a small fee or even for free. They will give the children a tour of the fire house and may allow you use a room to have cake and open presents.

In the Trenches: "I found frames with decorating kits at the dollar spot at Target and the girls loved creating their own frames as party favors." Gwenean Morton, mom of Luke, Rylie, Abbie & Macie

EXTRA SPECIAL BIRTHDAYS

Choose something your child loves from sports, animals or the circus and have everything from the invites, snacks and activities be about that to create a one of a kind celebration.

Our friends hosted a circus party for their daughters whose birthdays are only days apart in December. The invitation looked like circus tents and they decorated with streamers and balloons. There were circus snacks like animal crackers, hot dogs, bags of popcorn, unshelled peanuts and cotton candy. The birthday girls' dad and my husband dressed up like clowns and another friend painted faces. There was even a bounce house in the living room.

Take advantage of free or inexpensive resources, like a beach or a friend's pool and have a luau. Have a limbo contest and give away inexpensive sunglasses for prizes. A friend of mine made the invitations for her daughter's luau party by creating a flip flop on the computer. They decorated with Tiki torches and gave all the girls grass skirts to wear.

Several of my friends have done princess theme parties for their daughters and their friends. The girls dressed up as their favorite princesses, put on glitzy makeup and dolled up their hair. For favors they took home costume jewelry, shoes and lip glosses.

Have an all girl princess tea party. Make the invitations on pretty cardstock paper shaped like purses or teacups with the party information, including that the guests should wear dress up clothes. Serve mini sandwiches, fruit cups and a fancy cake. Another friend hosted a tea party for her daughter and all the girls wore their Sunday best. They decorated with lots of silk fabric, feather boas, hats and shoes. Each of the little girls had their own special teacup to use and take home.

Have a barn-yard themed party in your back yard. Decorate with hay bales, blue jeans and bandannas and have a petting zoo.

Make your child feel like a prince or princess for the day by making their favorite breakfast or dinner. Let them have the seat of honor and wear a crown. Then any other celebration is just icing on the cake!

Consider having a large party one year and the following year allow your child to invite a friend to participate in a fun filled outing, instead. A day at a theme park, zoo, circus, arcade, or a concert, baseball game, shopping trip or day of beauty are all things a child would love. This is especially good as your child grows older and would rather spend the day with a special friend or just the family.

In the Trenches: "I like to make their girls favorite foods and serve it on a special red plate that we only use for celebrations," Linda Rhoton, mom of Melinda, Breanne & Reagan

DEBRIEFING

What is at least one holiday tradition that you no longer love or enjoy that you can let go of?

What is at least one holiday activity that you would like to add to your traditions.

What is the best gift you have ever received?

How do you make your children feel special on their birthdays?

SECURING THE BEST RATIONS

We spent some time covering shopping and saving in Financial Freedom, but this chapter will give you the low down on how to shop and save on everything from clothing for the kid's and you to banking big bucks in the grocery store, how to afford a little entertainment and making great deals at garage sales, flea markets and on eBay. These are easy and practical solutions that have been tested by moms just like you that you can start applying today to secure the best rations.

BABY PROVISION SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

The US Department of Agriculture estimates that middle income two-parent families can expect to spend \$3,000 to \$6,000 from conception to delivery, on everything from health care to maternity clothes. You will spend an average of \$10,500 each year after on baby and then eventually top out at over \$11,290 once a teenager and finally a grand total of \$190,980 by age 18. Those figures don't even include college. Ouch! Don't be afraid, here are a few ideas on how to cut back on those expenses.

Shop with an experienced mom. She can give you the real lowdown on what baby gear you really need and what to skip, as well as tell you where the best deals to be had can be found. I made it with the basic necessities; car seat, stroller, swing, bouncer seat. Just purchase what you know you'll need and wait until after the baby gets here to get the things you're not sure of.

A friend and I frequently trade babysitting. It's free, our children have fun together and we can ask each other at the last minute.

Staple receipts onto clothing tags that way if the baby doesn't get to wear them you will have an easier time returning them.

Save up to \$1,000 in the first year alone by breastfeeding, if possible. Borrow or rent a pump to have extra supply for day care, or so other people, such as Dad, can feed. Be sure to purchase new tubes and cups for sanitary reasons.

Sign up to receive free magazines from formula companies. You will receive timely information and great coupons for formula and other baby essentials.

If you are so inclined, make your own baby food. Mix cooked meat or vegetables that you have prepared for the rest of the family, with a small amount of water in a blender or food processor. Freeze in ice cube trays covered with freezer bags. Break out and freeze in labeled, separate zippered plastic bags. For fruits, peel and microwave and freeze as above. When ready to use, take individual cubes out and warm up in separate bowls in the microwave.

Limit the number of toys you buy and invest in quality instead. This will also allow more time for personal interaction.

Look for free vaccination programs or clinics in your area. Even if you have insurance, you will still save by not paying the co-pay. We did this for several of my daughter's shots and saved at least \$40.

Shop around for a pharmacy with the cheapest rates and always ask for the generic version if approved by your doctor. An average generic prescription may cost \$10 to \$15, but the name brand may cost \$75.

Consider buying furniture and clothing second hand or borrow from a friend. Always make sure items meet current safety standards and that nothing has been recalled. Test for durability and safety. Knobs should not come off; it should be tip-resistant and sturdy and follow the manufacturer's age recommendations.

Shop around for the best deal on diapers because prices vary considerably by store. Consider purchasing off brand diapers to save as much as \$6 a package. You may have to try out different brands until you find one that

you like. My daughter broke out in one, but we eventually found one that was perfect and half the price of most name brands without clipping coupons. Be sure to choose diapers with tabs you can re-attach. This is especially important once you start potty teaching. The sticky tab kind may be cheaper, but not if you have to throw away non-soiled diapers because they have lost their stickiness.

Resale shops are a good option because they sell gently used clothing for great prices. My favorite children's resale shop only accepts great quality items. I have purchased several outfits there that look like they have never been worn and a few still had the original sales tags. I also sell my kids clothes there and get 20% extra when I take the credit instead of cash.

Buying clothing one size too big if possible, is also a good bet for young children because it allows room to grow and the items may even be able to be worn two seasons. It is so hard to find jeans that fit my daughter in the waist and the length, so I often let her wear them as capris the following season.

When purchasing clothes and shoes choose quality items that will last. Cheaper pieces may not provide the best value if they wear out quickly. However, if your child is having a growth spurt, it may be better to buy a few items cheaply.

In the Trenches: "I often shop at Sears because they offer the Kidvantage Club, which replaces your child's pants when they wear out. That's awesome when you have four boys to clothe." Jennifer Mims, mom of Grant, Brody, Nash & Barrett

TAX AND COLLEGE SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

The Child Tax Credit has increased dramatically since its inception in 1994 so be sure to claim your children on your taxes. You can also deduct day care and babysitting with the Dependent Care Credit.

It's never too early to consider setting up a 529 education account, so savings for your child's college education can grow tax free.

When your child approaches college age, apply for every applicable scholarship and financial aid early. Avoid using any service that charges you a fee to track down scholarship information, it is probably a scam. Besides, you can find a great number of scholarship applications online, through your child's high school guidance counselor and even at the college of their choice.

Be sure to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. Federal and state grants as well as federally subsidized loans are distributed on the basis of the tax information in your child's FAFSA and the savings are well worth the effort it takes to fill it out.

Consider having your child take their basics and summer courses at a community college and then transferring to a state school. Tuition is significantly cheaper; just make sure each class they take will transfer before they sign up.

Check out CLEP testing. I was able to pass an English exam and given credit for my 1st year of college English. Not only did I save money, I saved time.

COST CUTTING CAMPAIGN

Cutting costs is one the easiest ways to stretch your budget and the absolute best way to save money is not to spend it in the first place. Follow the strategies in this cost cutting campaign and watch the savings add up.

The only real bargain is purchasing something you need, that is also on sale.

Don't waste your money on things you don't use or can get for free. Cancel the gym membership you don't use anyway and take a walk with your family instead.

Instead of buying your morning muffin, drink or lunch at expensive coffee shops or restaurants, purchase your favorites in bulk at the grocery store; take them with you and save \$60 to \$100 a month. Avoid the vending machine at work, too and stash snacks in your desk so you will be prepared when a hunger pang strikes.

Don't forget good old fashioned bartering, either. Sometimes you just need to have what someone else wants at the right time. Some close friends of ours traded a used car they didn't need for their oldest daughter's wedding portraits. Another friend bartered a gun safe they didn't need or want for a hot tub.

Many banks will waive the usual fees if you have your paycheck directly deposited, so switch banks and get free checking. Avoid using ATMs that charge fees and pay bills by automatic withdrawal to save time and save even more money on postage and checks.

Stop that bad habit and put the money you would normally spend in a vacation or new house fund. Your improved health is an added bonus. Recently, one of my personal goals was to give up root beer. I saved at least \$30 a month and even lost some weight, too.

If you are a shop-a-holic, fight the urge to spend all that money and invest it instead. For example, if you spend hundreds of dollars on several pairs of shoes a year, invest in one great pair a season instead.

Postpone purchasing and the urgency of the “need” dissipates. Your desire for a sugar fix, that trendy skirt or the latest baby toy will fade and you will still have your money.

Another good rule of thumb to curb impulse purchases is to wait at least 30 days. If you still want the item after that, buy it.

Set up a skill swap with your friends and neighbors to trade services, save money and strengthen bonds. You can trade plumbing or electrical work, music or computer lessons, yard or housework, car advice and repair, bookkeeping and accounting, baking or sewing, pet walking and house sitting and haircutting. The only limit is your imagination.

In the Trenches: “Since I’m a licensed massage therapist I was able to trade massages for care from a mid-wife when I was pregnant with our daughter.” Lisa Powell, mom of Logan, Landon & Lizzie

GROCERY SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Don't shop when hungry and avoid bringing the kids and your husband if possible. They tend to select higher priced items and extras that you really don't need.

Be disciplined and stick to your list and budget. Bring your calculator so you can compare prices. Takes a little extra time, but it's worth it.

Look up high and down low because cheaper items or less expensive store brands are usually displayed there.

Always watch the register to make sure the prices ring up accurately. The sale price may not have been entered in the system or the checker may make an error. In addition to paying the correct amount, many stores will give you the item for free if it is rung up at the wrong price.

As a rule, anything that saves time in preparation is usually more expensive. It is cheaper to cut your own carrots, grate your own cheese, package your own snacks like chips and cookies into individual portions and buy juice in concentrate and mix it yourself.

Consider the price per serving when shopping. For example, a large box of Goldfish Crackers may cost \$6.62 and a 9 pack of bags may cost \$3.99 but when you divide by the portion cost the box equals .26 per serving and the bags cost .44 each. Consider if you will actually eat more than the proper serving size, as well.

Microwavable and ready-made meals are also more expensive. If you have the time, knowledge and desire make most of the meal yourself.

Cut back on delivery, too. We found a delicious and inexpensive frozen pizza at our grocery store. We can get 2 large pizzas for \$3.50 and they often include buy one get one free coupons for smaller sizes.

Purchase day old bakery items and/or buy them on sale and freeze for future use. Bread for example, can be kept in the freezer and pulled out as needed to defrost.

Buy meat like hamburger, pork chops and chicken in bulk, divide and freeze meal size portions in bags. Unthaw only what you need and buy extra when on sale.

Use leftover meats, pastas or vegetables the next day in a stew or casserole.

Purchase generic or store brand forms of over the counter medicines, vitamins, make up and toiletries like shampoo and toothpaste. The quality is comparable and in most cases it will save you cash. Also, most non-grocery items are less expensive at larger discount chains than your small local supermarket, too.

Warehouse and discount stores are usually the best place to purchase large quantities at cheaper prices on non-food items, as well as some food items. However, only buy in bulk if you have the storage space or you can split the items and cost with a friend.

Be sure to check expiration dates when you stock up, you don't want the item to go to waste before you can actually use it.

Some stores offer free turkey or hams around the holidays when you purchase a certain amount of food. Use it for that holiday, freeze it for another time or give it to a needy family.

Compare prices in other store sale ads, even if you don't shop there. Most superstores will match their competitor's prices. I once saved over \$10 this way without using any other coupons.

In the Trenches: "Instead of purchasing bottle water, we invested in a water purification filter. It has been well worth it." Twilene Sanders mom of Tanae, Talon & Taya

COUPON SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

When using a coupon always buy the smallest item possible and only use a coupon for something you would buy anyway. No savings are gained and money is lost if you don't use the item.

Check grocery ads to combine your coupons with what's already on sale as you make your shopping list. Also, just because the item is on sale two for \$5 doesn't mean you have to purchase two, you may still be able to get the sale price and only purchase one. Be sure to get a rain check if the store runs out of an advertised special on an item you buy regularly.

Look for coupons on the internet, in the phone book and in magazines. Several of my friends use the grocery game on the internet for great coupons and to find out where the savings are.

Always check to see if there is an instant coupon on the item to be redeemed at checkout or one in the box to use another time.

To organize your coupons get something to put them in like the shopping pad with a magnet on the back so you can keep it on the refrigerator and a small zipper pouch for your coupons. I keep my coupons in a small accordion folder in the car so I always have them with me.

Create categories with index cards or on the tabs provided for bread and cereals, baby, health and beauty, meat, canned goods, cleaning supplies, restaurants and anything else you need and organize by expiration dates within the categories.

Save coupons for candy bars to use when the kids are with you.

In the Trenches: "I buy two Sunday papers at a time to clip coupons and save over \$50 a month by shopping at stores that double and triple them." Kristi Autrey, mom of Lani

FLOWERS, CARDS AND PHOTOS SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

When you purchase flowers, buy them at the grocery store or the farmer's market. They are usually the same quality and less than half the price of the ones at the Flower Shop. This is especially important on Mother's Day and Valentines because the prices are significantly higher. I worked for a local florist on Valentine's Day once and was astounded by how much the prices for roses were increased from their regular high price. We actually ran out of roses at one point and since we still had customers coming in and orders to fill, someone went and bought more at a largely discounted price at local grocery store.

Greeting cards can be pricey, too, but they don't have to be. Shop for them at discount stores or closeout shops where they are often up to 70% cheaper or buy them in large packages for one small price.

Let your children design their own card with stamps, stickers and artwork or mount 4"X6" family photos on cardstock to create postcards.

Set up a free web home page for your family where you can write a holiday letter and post photos or send free e-cards instead.

Use the mailing envelopes found at the post office for shipping packages. They are very sturdy and have a flat rate. Mail all gifts, especially Christmas, early so you can choose the cheapest shipping.

For professional pictures become a member of a portrait club that best fits your needs. The membership often includes sitting fees and coupons for free pictures.

You can find coupons for professional portrait studios in magazines, the newspaper and the Internet and double up on the benefits.

Invest in a quality camera so that your pictures will not disappoint you. A digital camera may be more expensive in the beginning, but actually saves your money in the long run. You are able to review the pictures before you print them, as well as see immediately if you like the picture or if you need to retake it. The memory card acts like film, but you only have to buy it once.

When you get your pictures developed, don't purchase any that are out of focus or that you don't like. You would probably throw away these pictures anyway, so it is smart to save a little money, too.

ENTERTAINMENT SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

To enjoy the game without shocking your budget, watch at home or at a restaurant with friends. Save up for special offers in the cheap seats. We once purchased 4 NFL tickets as a birthday gift for my in-laws. We had a wonderful time celebrating together and 4 hot dogs and 4 cokes were included in the \$100 price.

Check out a minor league baseball game. They are very family friendly and often offer playgrounds and other activities for the kids for unbelievably low prices.

Sell or trade your old books for new. I sell my old books and CDs at a store where you get double the amount if you choose credit. So instead of \$5 cash, I get \$10 store credit to buy something else.

If you love to read, wait for the paperback or buy at resale, half priced book stores or garage sales. Your library may even host an annual sale to make room for new selections. Swap books and magazines with friends and read the newspaper on the internet. You can also check out books, magazines and even CDs or videos at your local library for free.

To save money on the movies, go to an early show for half price or check for special deals. Some theaters even host bring the baby movie screenings. You don't have to get a sitter and infants and toddlers get in free.

In the Trenches: "Our movie theater hosts a buy one admission get one free on Tuesday nights and you can even bring your own bowl from home for free popcorn." Lori Henry, mom of Tessa & Sophie

EATING OUT SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

It can cost up to \$2,080 a year for a family of four to eat out once a week. Eat at home instead and spend about \$10 per meal for groceries.

Consider eating early for specials and cheaper prices or check out your local chamber of commerce for discount coupons available for eating establishments in your area.

Make healthier choices when eating out like splitting entrees and drinking water - it's great for your wallet, too.

A good way to split entrees between kids is to let one child slice and let the other child have first pick, so they will divide the food more evenly.

Our pastor has 7 people in his family so they rarely drink cokes at restaurants; they order water instead and save at least \$14.

In the Trenches: "When we eat out I often order a kid's meal or share with my son. The portion size is better for your health than the upsized meals of today and it's cheaper, too." Jennifer Pope, mom of Chase

MOMMY CLOTHING SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

One of my favorite movies when I was a teenager was *Pretty in Pink*. In the movie, Molly Ringwald had this uncanny ability to create cute outfits from a few inexpensive finds. She even created her own prom dress by taking apart existing ones and putting them together. I could relate to her poverty and I craved her self-assurance and inventiveness. Take a style tip from Molly and don't pass up clothing items that could be turned into something new. Be inventive, look for great deals or trade with a friend.

I regularly shop for myself at resale shops and on a recent trip to Goodwill I hit the jackpot. I got a gorgeous Express shirt, a pair of Jones New York capri pants and some adorable ESPRIT shoes that were in perfect condition, all for \$11!

Have a clothes trading party with your friends. Each girlfriend should bring a treat and 5 or more pieces of clothes that she doesn't wear to trade with someone else. Enjoy the snacks and conversation as everyone picks out a new outfit. Donate leftovers to a local charity.

Check out the clearance bins at teen friendly jewelry and accessory stores like Claire's where you can get 10 items for only \$5. These great items are not only perfect for you; they also make wonderful stocking stuffers and secret pal gifts.

Clothing retailers generally discount during the last week of the month and often reduce prices on Thursdays on pieces that didn't sell well the previous weekend.

Clean and polish shoes to extend their life and get them resoled if they are worth it and cover a frayed or soiled purse in marabou feathers or faux fur. Update the handle by wrapping it with a long satin ribbon.

Try cute and trendy patches to cover stubborn stains or holes in your favorite clothes and use fabric dye if the color is faded.

Be sure to make repairs and remove stains on clothing immediately before they worsen. Cut out dry-cleaning if money is really tight. My close friend Gwenean told me she knew their money situation was improving when her husband told her she could start taking his pants and shirts to the cleaners again.

Ask to be put on the mailing lists of your favorite clothing stores. They will often send you coupons and notices of special sales events for preferred customers. I frequently receive \$10 coupons from Express, 25% discounts from The Children's Place and more.

*In the Trenches: "I always shop at the end of season sales so I can stock up for the next year." Alisha Huff,
second mom of Jami, Chelsea, D'layni Bea & Noah*

GARAGE SALES, FLEA MARKETS & EBAY BATTLE STRATEGIES

Before shopping, measure the room dimensions, including windows and carry a tape measure with you, so you can be sure an item fits.

Prepare a list of what you are looking for and if you can't find the right thing, ask the seller if they know where you might get it.

Go early for the best selection or later for the best bargains. Dealers hate to pack up all their wares again.

Never pay the asking or listed price, dealers expect to bargain. Negotiate politely and if the seller isn't flexible, walk away.

Check clothing for tears or stains, test electronic items and avoid painted furniture with a chalky appearance which is a telltale sign of lead based paint.

Carry plenty of small bills and something to protect fragile items.

Watch for fill a bag specials. I have filled garbage sacks at a local thrift store and a garage sale full of items for \$5. I even grabbed a few items for my friends.

Have your own garage sale to clean out unwanted clutter and make money for new items, a trip or to pay off a credit card. Be sure to find out if you need a permit, you don't want to have to pay a fine.

Try to have garage sales with friends. The more stuff you have the more shoppers you will attract and the company is a bonus.

Advertise in the paper and with balloons on street signs. Use catch words like antiques, furniture and baby items to draw a crowd.

Take the time to wipe down items and hang clothes on a rod, not only are they more appealing; they will be much easier to sort through.

Make sure you have enough help and money to make change. Never leave the money unattended. Wear a fanny pack if needed.

Save what you don't sell for another garage sale or give it away.

Try eBay - research the going rates, so you can compete with other sellers and post your goods when eBay advertises similar items on their homepage.

In the Trenches: "I have bought name brand clothing or other highly sought after items at garage sales, flea markets and sold them and my own things on eBay for a nice profit." Michelle Jones, mom of Allen, Michelle & Christopher

SHOPPING AND SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

My personal rule is to never pay full price for anything if I don't have to. Don't be afraid to ask for a discount, the retailer or seller may say no, but most will say yes. There is no end to the types of discounts you may be eligible to receive.

Always inquire about family plans, weekend specials, corporate and professional rates or perks. For example, when buying shoes for the entire family ask for a quantity discount.

Ask for a discount on merchandise that is scratched, dented or otherwise flawed. I once got 30% off a beautiful etched glass fireplace screen simply for pointing out a barely visible chip. Managers will often take a percentage off and you may be able to cover or repair the damage with little cost.

Always ask retailers for a frequent shopper discount. Many have coupon cards and when you buy 10 haircuts or even ice cream cones you get one free. Some even have punch cards for discounts off merchandise or free meals.

When you are shopping for something specific, especially if you have to go out of town to get it, always call ahead to see if the brand, color or size you want is in stock. For example, a well known craft store occasionally has large clearance sales on scrap-booking supplies, so I check their internet ad every week to see if it's time to stock up.

Check out any requirements necessary to receive a rebate and mail everything requested in by the deadline to get money back.

Ultimately, if you really love something that isn't on sale or you have been looking for that item for a long time, consider buying it or putting it on layaway. It may not be there later.

If your computer breaks down, it may be cheaper to have it repaired than to purchase a new one. Always ask for an estimate before any work is done or let a computer savvy friend check it out for free.

Do your research before you go shopping for any big ticket items. Ask friends for references and check out Consumer Reports magazine or the internet for details and to compare prices. When we bought a motorized car for our daughter, our research of buyer's comments and safety ratings, actually swayed us to purchase something other than what we originally intended.

Some stores will price match other retailers and refund the difference if you find the same item for a cheaper price somewhere else within a certain time period.

Watch out for promotional sales on expensive items. We bought tile for our new house for half price and a TV for 30% off the original price this way.

Buy expensive items off-season for a cheaper price, such as an air conditioner for your house or car after the heat wave.

STOCK UP BATTLE STRATEGIES

Find out when your favorite store changes its stock or updates their inventory, because they usually place older items on clearance at that time. Check out the end of the aisles or in clearance bins at wholesale or discount stores for bargains.

Plan on purchasing stock up items like towels or sheets around holidays when they have blowout seasonal sales. For example, look out for great deals on gifts like frames, toys or even Christmas items at after Christmas sales. They make inexpensive, great gifts to have on hand year round and to give next Christmas.

Shopping with a friend or family member enables you to split bulk purchases or great deals like buy one shirt, get one half price or three items for \$10. Also, purchasing an item together over the phone or on the internet that must shipped may save shipping costs or you might even get the shipping for free if your combined total is high enough.

UTILITIES AND INCIDENTALS SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Do a little research to find the lowest rates on your phone and other utilities. Bundling your cell phone, home phone, cable, and internet is another great money saving option.

Switch to basic cable for significant savings and stop paying for channels you don't watch anyway, or cancel your cable altogether and save \$40 to \$90 a month. Change cable companies if you find a better deal. We did this and saved almost \$20 a month and even received extra perks like TIVO, just for switching.

You can also save on your Internet usage. You can even go with an inexpensive provider, if your home phone is a metro line. If you don't use the Internet often enough to justify its cost than look up what you need at work during lunch or go to your public library.

Some insurance companies offer discounts on homeowner's insurance for improvements like a security system and a non-smoker's policy.

Install low use showerheads and low flush toilets to cut costs.

Wash only full loads of laundry and dishes and lower the temperature on the hot water heater to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

Take shorter showers, use less water for baths and turn the water off while brushing your teeth.

Turn off the lights when not in use and for lights you leave on often, choose fluorescent bulbs, they are much cheaper to use.

Empty the lint filter on the dryer every time you use it and remember a cold water rinse for the laundry is just as effective.

Adjust your thermostat and save \$20 to \$80 a month. Check your air-conditioning filters once a month and replace or clean when clogged.

Use ceiling fans year round to help heat and cool your home. Simply reverse the blade direction for summer and winter.

In the winter, turn the heat down at night when sleeping, wear socks and use extra blankets instead.

Add insulation, caulking and weather stripping as needed to seal walls, floors and doors from drafts.

HOME SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Purchasing your home is probably the largest investment you will ever make. Buy a house you can afford and stay in it.

Determine how large a mortgage you can actually afford before ever shopping.

Shop around for the best interest rate you can get in order to lower your monthly mortgage payment.

Familiarize yourself with the finer points of closing costs. There are so many fees that it can be overwhelming, so do a little research and compare the fees from one mortgage company to another.

Weigh carefully what type of loan is best for your situation, find the best deal and watch out for pre-payment penalties.

If you have a friend who is a realtor, find out what the local market values are and seek their insight when looking over contracts and financial documents.

If you are already in your home, refinancing your house is a great option to help you pay off bills and get a lower interest rate, which equals lower payments.

TRANSPORTATION SAVING BATTLE STRATEGIES

Create a budget, determine your trade-in value, order your credit report and get financing before you ever leave home to buy a car.

Shop for a new car during the last week of the month, when salespeople try to increase their monthly commissions or in December when they are trying to make room for next year's inventory.

Ask about program cars, which are test driven by sales staff and are often less expensive than new vehicles.

Find the invoice prices or dealer costs on the internet and ask about any rebates available when shopping for a new car. Dealers may even be willing to give up their factory incentives in part or all together to earn your business.

Use the internet, most new car dealers and other large retailers have interactive web sites. Shop at home and compare prices for the same car without pressure.

Choose a car that gets good gas mileage and avoid paying for extras you don't need such as license plates if you already have them.

Keep up with regular maintenance to extend your car's life. Change the oil and filters according to your car's manufacturer's guidelines. Monitor tires for wear and tear and keep them in good condition longer by rotating them and checking their pressure often.

Remove the roof rack, use your cruise control, and avoid speeding and overuse of the accelerator and the brakes.

Owning your car outright allows you to cut back on insurance extras, too. Ask your insurance agent for safe driver discounts, for taking a defensive driving course or for having certain safety features in your car like an airbag or child restraint system. Set a higher deductible for comprehensive and collision to save money, as well.

If possible, take public transportation or carpool. If you are the passenger, you can do other things read, work on your computer or put on makeup (my personal favorite).

In the Trenches: “We sold one of our vehicles and are now borrowing one because I didn’t want to work just to make a car payment. So instead of making that car payment we are paying ourselves so we can pay cash for an inexpensive, but reliable car. Our son also has to save \$1,500 before we even consider buying him a car. He will contribute that amount from the money he earns referring soccer games, mowing yards or doing extra chores around the house.” Stacie Brown, mom of Taylor, Haylie & Peyton

DEBRIEFING

What expenses can you cut out of your budget immediately?

How can you save money when shopping for baby or groceries?

What toys, clothes or other household items do you not need that you can sell?

What can you do to bring more income into your home?

Have you shopped around for the best deals on your utilities and loans?

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