



# Wrestling with Gorillas

5 ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES  
FOR SUCCESSFUL PARENTING!

**MICHAEL AND AMY SMALLEY**

A SMALLEY SIGNATURE SMALL GROUP SERIES

Wrestling with Gorillas: the workbook © 2006 Smalley Impact LLC

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Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *New Living Translation*®

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# How to Guide

## the everything you have to know to be successful part!

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We want you to be successful in using this study guide, so we put together some important notes so you can be better prepared in organizing and teaching this study on essential parenting strategies.

First, you will notice that each week starts with an introduction article. This article is meant to help launch the material you will be learning. Do not feel you need to copy this article for your small group or Sunday school class, but you certainly can if you want to, it is meant to give you an overall picture of the session you are about to watch.

Each week is divided into three major sections:

1. **Key Verses**

These verses are the key verses used in the presentation DVD and we encourage you to have members of your group read them aloud to each other in the translation most comfortable to your group. The key verses are also a great way to get good discussions going for the group as well.

2. **Discussion Questions**

The discussion questions are meant to help foster meaningful conversation for your group time, but don't feel like you have to answer each one. If the group gets going in a different direction, then allow it to, we can't think of everything and sometimes it's better to go where people have a heart felt need. You will also notice in this section periodic "teaching points" that will help parents, couples, discussion leaders, teachers, or small group leaders with the discussion questions. The teaching points naturally flow from the discussion questions.

3. **Action Points**

The action points may be the most important part of this study. If change is going to happen in your family, or anyone's family, then something has to change. Action points are opportunities to apply the principles learned during the class. You will notice that after the first week, there is a follow up action point section, this is meant to be an accountability tool for the group. Make sure and highlight this for the group.

Each week can be copied easily on the front and back of one piece of paper if you just use the three major sections just mentioned (Key Verses, Discussion Questions, and Action Points). Most groups don't want to feel overwhelmed with too much material in their hands, so having just one piece of paper can often lead to better discussion time and more participation.

# Group Directory

## making sure you stay connected

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The most important element to small groups or Sunday school classes is the relationship developed between the members of the group. In order to help this process, we want you to pass this sheet around your class or group and have everyone fill it out on each other's copy:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
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# Week One

## The Foundation for successful parenting

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The most important gift we can give our children is the gift of unconditional love. At the core of every great parent is the understanding that effective discipline only comes from a place of unconditional love and support. Your child will not respond to your discipline, no matter what philosophy you try, if they do not first feel completely and totally loved.

We want to address stepfamilies at this point. The number one reason that a stepparent fails at discipline with their stepchild is that unconditional love and support has not been developed. You have stepped into the role of “parent” but that does not give you the right to start disciplining.

Your primary goal should be to establish how much you love the child and that you would do anything for him or her. Once you’ve accomplished this, and there is no time-line on how long this process takes, you can move toward becoming a disciplinarian in the new family. If you try to move too quickly into the role of disciplinarian, you will fail and your new family will suffer. Allow the biological parent to handle discipline at first and make sure your supportive of the biological parent’s decisions and discipline strategy.

As you experience this first session you will learn how your child will respond once unconditional love is established. It is never too late to establish unconditional love. If your children have suffered through poor parenting (and who’s children haven’t), no worries, this is not a series about becoming the perfect parent; it’s a series about learning how to love your children in the most effective way. But if you have done serious damage, then you will have to seek your child’s forgiveness, which you will learn how to do in this first session.

## Key Verses

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Luke 6:38

"If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in giving – large or small – it will be used to measure what is given back to you."

Romans 5:8

"But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

1 John 3:16

"We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters."

Colossians 3:21

"Fathers, don't aggravate your children. If you do, they will become discouraged and quit trying."

Luke 6:38

"If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in giving – large or small – it will be used to measure what is given back to you."

## Discussion Questions

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- How did your own parents do making you feel unconditionally loved?

Horribly | Poor | Fair | Good | Extremely Good

- What are the reasons behind your choice? If you answered Fair to Horribly, what have you tried or learned to do things differently for your children?

### TEACHING POINT

A reality of life is that we copy the good or bad behaviors of our parents. We want to do the good things but we don't want to do the bad things. If you grew up in a home that was unloving or abusive, then you have to make a deliberate choice to do things differently. Just because you hated the way you were

raised does not mean you will do things any different. You have to relearn how to parent and spend a good amount of energy changing the destructive things you learned as a child.

- Have you ever told your children that you love them no matter what? If yes, how have you done this (actions, words, etc.)? If no, what has kept you from letting your children know this?
- What makes you feel unconditionally loved? Is this different than what your children may need to feel unconditionally loved?

**TEACHING POINT**

We often show people love by the way that would be most significant for us. But we have to train ourselves to ask our children what it would take for them to feel unconditionally loved, and then do those things.

- Are there things you have said or done to your children that you need to seek forgiveness for? If you can't think of anything right away, stop and ask God to help you see anything you've ignored or missed.
- Are there things you need to forgive your parents for? If so, pray and ask God to help you forgive them. If you can, share these things in your small group or Sunday school class. You might need the support of your friends to help you through the process of forgiving your parents.

**TEACHING POINT**

If you can't forgive your parents, how can you expect your children to forgive you? It's not an easy issue but it cannot be ignored. If the relationship with our parents is strained or disconnected, then we had better be prepared for the same thing with our own children. Your children may not directly hear or understand the conflict with your parents, but they will learn from your actions.

**Action Point**

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This action point is hopefully obvious. We want you to approach each one of your kids this week (no matter what their age) and tell or show them how much you love them and that your love for them can never stop... no matter what.

## Week Two

### Parenting your kid's personality

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Have you ever wondered what your kid was thinking when he/she did something? We've thought this a thousand times with each of our children. One time we caught our daughter, Reagan, out on the roof with two of her friends, they were 7 years old each! We couldn't believe she had crawled out the window with her friends, but then again, maybe we shouldn't have been too surprised. Maybe it was just Reagan's personality type?

Each one of us is created unique, but when it comes to personality, we can usually combine large groups of people into basic types. Some of the earliest personality typing was done by the Greek doctor, Hippocrates, and he put people into four major categories that matched his four humours of the body: phlegm, yellow bile, black bile, and blood. Luckily we have come a long way since Hippocrates and no one has to identify with being like Phlegm.

The personality system you will be learning in this session is based off this early system of type casting.

The most important thing you need to remember about this personality session is that each of your children will be parented differently, and there is nothing wrong with that. It doesn't mean that one child will be punished and another one will be ignored, but it does mean that you need to learn your child's personality type so you can best approach him according to his personality. When you approach your children according to their personality, parenting gets easier.

## Key Verses

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Matthew 20:28

“Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Corinthians 11:1

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

Numbers 12:3

“Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”

James 4:6

“But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

## Discussion Questions

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- After discovering your child’s personality, did you learn anything different about her/him?
- Did this new understanding give you a better picture of how to discipline your child more effectively?
- Have there been any ways that you’ve invalidated your child’s personality? If so, in what ways?
- How could you specifically honor and value your child’s unique personality?
- What are some concrete ways that you could encourage and build-up your child’s personality?
- Do you find yourself in more conflict with one child than another? If so, why do you think that is?

### TEACHING POINT

We often experience the most conflict with the child who is most like us in personality. We don’t like seeing his/her growth areas, or areas of weakness, because those are usually the same in our own lives; and that irritates us dramatically. Make sure you’re not yelling at your kid for something that really needs to change in your own life.

- Based on your child's personality, how could you approach him differently when you need to confront him about something that needs to change in his life?

**TEACHING POINT**

I'm (Michael) a very sensitive individual. You do not want to come at me in a hard manner or I will shut down emotionally. I don't typically respond to criticism very well so you want to make sure and confront me in a positive manner, highlighting the things you love about me, and then share potential growth areas. Other people can handle a lot more criticism, and may even thrive on knowing the negative. Know your child's personality and then adjust how you approach him when there is a need for confrontation.

**Action Point Follow-up**

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Did you have a family meeting about hiding God's word in your heart? If not, what happened during the week that prevented you from sharing this important concept?

**Action Point**

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Sit down with your kids this week and discuss the strengths in their personalities. Ask your kids what they want to be when they grow up and discuss how that might fit with their personality style.

# Week Three

## Effective Discipline strategies

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To spank or not to spank, that is the question most parents want to know when it comes to disciplining their children. But it's the wrong question entirely. Christians have gotten too mixed up in the style of discipline and have missed the most important elements to successful parenting.

But we want to clarify something before we move on in this introductory section to week three. One of the most famous parenting verses in the Bible, and one of the main arguments for spanking is Proverbs 13:24 which reads, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."

One historically fateful day, we're not even exactly sure when, someone read this verse and thought to himself, "Wow, I'd better make sure and smack the heck out of my kid with a "rod" (can be any kind of rod varying from tree branches, belts, or wooden spoons) or I won't be a good parent." Whoever came up with that translation of Proverbs 13:24 caused a lot of bruised bottoms through the centuries. My (Michael) own father actually made us color and decorate our spanking "rod". Talk about sick, who makes their kids decorate an instrument of doom and destruction?

When Proverbs mentions the rod, it's important to know what kind of rod it was referring to. It was the rod of the shepherd, and he would use his shepherd's rod to lay it on one of his sheep to bestow high value to that sheep. It wasn't used to beat his sheep but rather to place honor on the sheep. The same is true in parenting. If you withhold honor, then you will ruin your children. As you learned in week one, unconditional love is the cornerstone to successful discipline.

When it comes to discipline, each major developmental phase will feel a little different, but understand that the major principles behind effective discipline are the same. Consistency. Consistency. Consistency. Once you've established unconditional love, consistency is the next most important element. Too many parents will tell us, "I've tried that." When we hear a parent say this we automatically know that they probably struggle with consistency. Discipline strategies are not something you simply "try" but rather something you "believe" in. In this session you will learn the most important elements to effective discipline and what it takes to raise responsible adults.

## Key Verses

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Proverbs 12:1

“To learn, you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction.”

Proverbs 13:18

“He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.”

Proverbs 13:24

“If you refuse to discipline your children, it proves you don't love them; if you love your children, you will be prompt to discipline them.”

Hebrews 12: 7-11

“As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Whoever heard of a child who was never disciplined? 8 If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all. 9 Since we respect our earthly fathers who disciplined us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father and live forever? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always right and good for us because it means we will share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening – it is painful! But afterward there will be a quiet harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.”

## Discussion Questions

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- What kind of parenting or discipline strategies have you tried in the past with your children? Have any of these worked very well? If not, discuss why. If they have, discuss why?
- What is the most important thing you've learned about discipline in this session?
- If you have not been a consistent disciplinarian in the past, why do you think you've been inconsistent?
- What would your kids do if you became more consistent? Would they respond in a positive manner or would you have your work cut out for you?

- What's the most important thing you need to make sure your kids have before they leave the home? (i.e. responsibility, integrity, values, etc.) Explain your answer to the group, class, mate, or friend.
- Have you noticed that your kids copy any of your "bad" behaviors? If so, which ones? How can you communicate with your children about your own weaknesses or growth areas?

## Action Point Follow-up

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Were you able to talk with your kids about their personality strengths? If not, then what prevented you from talking with them? If yes, how did that experience go for you?

Does anyone have a funny story about what their kids want to be when they grow up? Did it fit with their personality?

## Action Point

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Have a family meeting this week and come up with a first draft of a family contract. (If you want an example of our family contract, you can go to [www.gosmalley.com](http://www.gosmalley.com) and click on "free stuff" to download an example of our family contract.)

## Week Four

### Resolving conflict with toddlers to teenagers

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Conflict is inevitable in any close relationship. You don't have to fear conflict because you can't avoid it, so learn to embrace conflict as an opportunity for the relationship with your child to grow more genuine. Conflict is a doorway to deeper intimacy. It allows you to share feelings and needs that are important for the relationship with your child to grow.

Relationships are either getting better or getting worse, there is no middle ground and conflict does not have to be a painful experience. In fact, the only reason conflict becomes painful is because you don't understand how to resolve conflict. That is what this session is about, resolving conflict with your children.

Once you learn how to effectively resolve conflict with your children you will open a doorway to a closer more fulfilling relationship with them. We want you to pay close attention to the emergency room repair section of this session. There are times in every parent's experience with their kids that they have to step up to the plate and repair damage inflicted on their children.

The art of repairing that damage is the difference between a healthy family and kids who are ready for adulthood and an unhealthy family and kids who will carry on a legacy of pain and unresolved anger.

## Key Verses

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James 1:2

“Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.”

Proverbs 12:18

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

James 3:5

“So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do.”

Romans 14:19

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

## Discussion Questions

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- Do you feel like there is a lot of conflict in your house? If so, why might this be the case?
- What style of conflict does your family utilize? (i.e. avoidance, escalation, dishonor, or negative false beliefs) What can you do to help your children identify their conflict style?

### TEACHING POINT

Sometimes the easiest way to teach your child this kind of information is to catch them in the act and patiently share with them their style of fighting. It might sound something like, “Honey, you seem to be really upset right now and it sounds like you are escalating (depending on the age of your child you can use other words like yelling, screaming, or other strong words like that).”

Don't be afraid to also share about how you handle conflict. “Daddy sure loves to avoid conflict, but he's working on that because he needs to learn a better way to deal with his hurt feelings...”

- Why would someone get defensive in a conflict?
- Has there been too much conflict in your home? If so, why is this?
- What does your family typically do when things get heated in a conflict?
- If you're a stepfamily, how is the relationship with the ex?
- How could you improve the relationship with your ex?

- Do you ever find yourself trying to “win” an argument with your kids? If so, please explain.

**TEACHING POINT**

If you're divorced you are probably aware of all the potential consequences to children of divorce. But please understand, even though divorce is a painful thing for kids, you can significantly decrease the damage by learning how to get along with your ex. You don't even need your ex to help improve the relationship. But your kids need to see that you are honoring your ex and are doing everything in your power to resolve conflict in a healthy and productive manner.

**Action Point Follow-up**

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How did your first draft of a family contract meeting go? Was there any resistance from your children, if so, what did you do with the resistance?

**Action Point**

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Sit down as a family and discuss the ground rules for fair fighting this week. Try and type them out so you can print them and have the rules in a central location in your house so everyone is reminded about how to fight fair.

## Week Five

### Giving your children the blessing

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Wrestling with Gorillas is about creating a safe relationship with your kids. When your kids feel safe they will respond to your discipline in a positive and powerful way. Safety is created when your child feels unconditionally loved and cared for because you set discipline. Kids want to be disciplined. We know they complain immensely when they get disciplined, but I'll (Michael) never forget a 16 year-old boy who said in a counseling session, "I just wished my parents cared enough to give consequences." This boy was already addicted to drugs and had been arrested numerous times for possession and theft. I finally met with the parents, who wouldn't even drive him in for counseling sessions and shared with them how desperate their son was for their attention, negative or positive.

This last session is about giving your kids the blessing. This is based off an ancient Jewish tradition of a father blessing his children. If you want your children to leave your home filled with promise and positive expectations of the world, then giving them the blessing is critical. The blessing conveys a special message of love through physical and verbal experiences.

If you're divorced, or your children's father is not present, do not worry. Children are resilient and just want to know they are loved. Mothers can accomplish the blessing just as powerfully as fathers can.

If you're a father, then take this job seriously. Your children yearn for your acceptance and your blessing. Daughters, especially, need this experience with you so they can have an easier time being confident in who they are as women and confident in whom they choose to date or marry one day.

The most important thing is to make sure that your children know how much you love them through your actions and your words. You can accomplish this by giving your children a blessing.

## Key Verses

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Proverbs 3:27

“Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it's in your power to help them.”

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.”

Romans 15:2

“We should please others. If we do what helps them, we will build them up in the Lord.”

1 Thessalonians 5:11

“So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.”

Galatians 5:6

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

## Discussion Questions

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- Did you ever receive the blessing from your parents? If not, how has that affected your relationship today? If yes, how has that affected your relationships today?

### TEACHING POINT

If you did not receive a blessing from your parents, there is something you can do about it. You don't have to be a victim of poor parenting. Forgiveness is the most powerful thing you can do to release yourself from the bondage of bitterness. We have encouraged clients in the past to utilize a Gestalt technique called the empty chair. It is a powerful experience where you set up two chairs, or three, and you pick one chair to sit in for yourself and then imagine your parents, or parent, sitting in the other chairs. Take this time to talk and share the feelings you were never able to share. Let them know how much they hurt you and tell them that, even though they messed with your life, you forgive them. I (Michael) have personally done this technique and found it to be powerful. It might feel goofy at first, but keep plunging ahead and you'll realize how real it can be. Before you finish, imagine your parents giving you the blessing as you will give to your own children.

- If you have a tough time with soft touching, then what are some ways to increase this in your relationship with your children?

**TEACHING POINT**

There is no excuse not to utilize soft touch with your children. If your father or mother had difficulty with soft touch, then you need to recognize that it will be difficult for you as well. But don't let this become an excuse for you not to use soft touch. It is crucial in giving the blessing and is a powerful vaccination against all kinds of emotional sicknesses. Force yourself to become a soft and gentle person, even if you have to start by practicing on a pillow or stuffed animal. Your kids need your physical touch and it will profoundly impact your own life as well.

- What are 3 things you appreciate about your children and how could you share those with them?
- Do you ever discuss the future with your children? If not, why is this difficult for you? If yes, how do you discuss the future with them?
- Do you ever dream with your children about what their life might be in 10 years, 20 years, and so on?

**Action Point Follow-up**

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Did you sit down as a family and discuss the ground rules for fair fighting last week? If not, please explain what happened to prevent this.

Did you type out the rules and put them in a prominent place in your home?

**Action Point**

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Make time with each kid this week and utilize each of the four steps to giving the blessing to your children. Repeat this action point day after day and week after week.