Things I Wish I’d Known
Before We Became Parents
Things I Wish I’d Known Before We Became Parents

GARY CHAPMAN
with SHANNON WARDEN

NORTHFIELD PUBLISHING
CHICAGO
To our spouses,
Karolyn Chapman and Stephen Warden,
with whom we have shared the joys
and challenges of parenting.
CONTENTS

PREFACE 9

INTRODUCTION 13

I Wish I’d Known . . .

CHAPTER ONE 19
That Having Children Radically Changes Your Schedule

CHAPTER TWO 31
That Children Are Expensive

CHAPTER THREE 45
That No Two Children Are Alike

CHAPTER FOUR 59
That Potty Training Is No Laughing Matter

CHAPTER FIVE 71
That Children Need Boundaries

CHAPTER SIX 85
That Children’s Emotional Health Is as Important as Physical Health

CHAPTER SEVEN 101
That Children Are Greatly Influenced by Our Model

CHAPTER EIGHT 115
That Sometimes Parents Need to Apologize

CHAPTER NINE 131
That Social Skills Are as Important as Academic Skills

CHAPTER TEN 147
That Parents Are Responsible for Their Child’s Education

CHAPTER ELEVEN 163
That Marriages Do Not Thrive on Autopilot

CHAPTER TWELVE 177
That Children Can Bring You Great Joy

EPILOGUE 191

NOTES 195

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 197

Copyrighted Material - Not Final Copy
A few years ago I wrote Things I Wish I’d Known Before We Got Married. I have been so encouraged by the response to that book. Many counselors and pastors have made it a part of their pre-marriage counseling for young couples. Many parents and grandparents have given it as a gift. I continue to believe that if we did a better job of preparing for marriage, we would be more successful in creating a healthy marriage.

I believe the same is true in rearing children. The better prepared we are, the more likely we are to be good parents. From the day that book was written, I knew that someday I wanted to write a sequel: Things I Wish I’d Known Before We Became Parents. As Karolyn and I struggled in our marriage in those early years, we also struggled in rearing our two children. No one told
us what to expect, and no one told us what to do. Fortunately, we did our best, and both of our children made it to adulthood and have established healthy marriages, and we now have two grandchildren.

When the time came to write the book you hold in your hand, I knew that I wanted to coauthor with someone who still had young children and could speak out of recent experience. When Dr. Shannon Warden expressed interest I was thrilled. A number of years ago Shannon was on staff in our counseling office. She returned to graduate school, earned her PhD, and for several years has taught counseling on the college campus, currently at Wake Forest University.

Shannon is married to Stephen and has three children: Avery, Carson, and Presley, whom you will meet in the following pages. She has learned how to balance marriage, children, work, and church responsibilities. She speaks not from the academic tower but from the trenches of real life. In the Introduction you will get to know Shannon’s journey to motherhood. She has experienced the trials and joys of pregnancy and rearing children.

I am grateful to have Dr. Warden join me in writing what I believe to be a much-needed book. Our desire is to share our own experiences, as well as what we have learned through the years, as we have counseled hundreds of parents. We encourage you to read this book before the baby comes, and then refer to its chapters again as you experience the joys and challenges of rearing children.

Gary Chapman, PhD
Introduction

Preparing for parenthood takes a lot of time and energy and often begins well before pregnancy. Couples may discuss the best time to get pregnant. They sometimes think about changes they need to make in terms of their relationships, work schedules, incomes, houses, cars, etc. In this introduction I have asked Shannon to share her journey to parenthood. I think her story will reveal why I asked her to join me in writing this book.

Stephen and I chose Avery’s name about three years before he was born. We were excited to think about and begin planning our family. We first conceived after nine months of trying, but I miscarried within a couple weeks of a positive pregnancy test. Stephen and I were already confused as to why it was taking so long to get pregnant, even though we had read that it can take as much as one year for approximately 10 percent of women to get pregnant. Although the miscarriage was an emotional setback, we did not give up on our dream of having a child.

When finally pregnant with Avery, we were hopeful and anxious. Hope grew as I did, and our attention turned from the anxiety of whether I would miscarry again to other attention-
getters that many moms-to-be experience—nausea, fatigue, swelling, difficulty sleeping, indigestion, hemorrhoids, moodiness, depression, anxiety. Information and support from medical professionals, family members, and friends were extremely valuable in dealing with these and other physical and emotional stressors. Soon the excitement of ultrasound pictures, baby showers, and fun activities such as decorating the nursery helped make pregnancy more bearable. Eventually Avery arrived, and we were overjoyed.

About three years after Avery was born, Stephen and I began trying to get pregnant with a second child. We did not know what to expect, but, based on our first pregnancies, we knew it might take some time. After a few months of trying, I got pregnant, only to learn at the ten-week ultrasound that I had miscarried, likely in the sixth or seventh week. Disappointed but hopeful, we then waited the recommended few months and began again working diligently to get pregnant— with no results for more than a year. We finally consulted a fertility specialist with whom I did some months of unsuccessful fertility treatments.

As time wore on, Stephen and I grew more discouraged and confused. The fertility specialist recommended in vitro fertilization, something I knew had benefited so many couples. But I did not want to go that route. I told Stephen, “I think God is saying, ‘I will give you a baby in My timing.’”

What I did not know, of course, was that He already had. I was pregnant with our son Carson at that very moment, as I would discover a couple weeks later when my pregnancy test read positive.

By the time Carson turned a year old, Stephen and I were feeling fairly successful in terms of maintaining work/life balance.
We felt successful enough that we decided to have a third child. Before making that decision, we consulted with friends and family who have three or more children. All said it was hard; all said it was worthwhile; and all said they would not have done a thing differently. Interestingly, this time around, Stephen and I got pregnant almost immediately with no fertility issues, and nine months later Presley arrived. We still marvel at how easy it was to get pregnant with Presley as opposed to getting pregnant with Avery and Carson. We count this as a reminder about life and parenting—that you can’t always predict what will happen, but you can always find hope in your circumstances.

Shannon and Stephen’s parenting journey is not atypical. However, every couple is unique, but always there will be joys and challenges. The same is true for couples who cannot or choose not to get pregnant but choose adoption instead. There certainly exists much need in the world for loving adoptive parents. Similar to birthing biological children, adoptive parents experience their share of uncertainty, stress, and joy through the adoption process. Here again, great intentionality, planning, and flexibility are required to be as prepared as possible to parent children, whether they are biological or adopted.

Although pregnancy can seem to last forever, the months steadily pass by, and it is time for your baby’s debut in the world. Of the various birthing options (e.g., vaginal delivery, delivery by Caesarean section, delivery in a hospital birthing center, home birth), all naturally seem at least somewhat complex and messy. Similar to pregnancy, women are wise to be both flexible and as informed as possible about the choices and challenges involved with childbirth. Even after being as prepared as possible, you, like many parents, will discover that television deliveries and friends’
stories will not fully prepare you for the birth of your own baby. Your story will, in fact, be uniquely yours—uniquely challenging and uniquely wonderful. The good news here is that, no matter the complexity, mess, and pain of birth, great joy awaits you just seconds after your baby’s birth—the joy of holding and kissing your precious bundle of joy for the first time.

Perhaps the joys and challenges of awaiting the arrival of your new addition will help prepare you for the joys and challenges that lie ahead. Wherever you may be on the continuum—contemplating parenting, trying to get pregnant, expecting your first child, exploring adoption options—it is our hope that the following chapters will remind you of the many pleasures and benefits of parenting and encourage you to remain hopeful and positive even in hard parenting moments and seasons.

You will quickly identify a central theme throughout the book—that parenting is worth it! It is worth the uncertainty and stress of getting pregnant, the discomfort and pain of pregnancy and childbirth, and all of the other stresses thereafter that parents face. We believe parents know this instinctively, yet we believe that encouragement and information can be a helpful resource to parents. So read for hope, for laughter, for reassurance, and for reminders of the little and big things that make parenting worth your time and energy.
I remember the Sunday morning our daughter was born. I woke up to hear Karolyn saying, “I’m having contractions.” “What does that mean?” I asked. “I think the baby is coming.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I think we need to go to the hospital.”

So I quickly dressed and we were off to the hospital. I had never experienced having a baby, nor had she. We were both excited, but more than a little naive.

We had been married three years and we were ready to have a child, or so we thought. We had always planned to have children. When we were dating, Karolyn said that she wanted to have five boys. (She was from a large family.) I was “in love” so I said,
“Whatever you want is fine with me.”

I had no idea what I was saying.

However, on that morning I was ready for our first one. We did not know whether it would be a girl or a boy. I know this is hard to believe, but this was before ultrasound machines. Until the baby came out of the birth canal, one never knew. I must confess this added to the excitement.

Another thing you will find hard to believe is that in those ancient days, husbands were not allowed to be in the delivery room. I think the nurses got tired of catching fainting husbands. So, it was deemed best if they stayed in the waiting room. In fact, the doctor said to me, “It is going to be several hours, so I think if you would like, you can go back to the church and preach your sermon and then come back; you will have plenty of time.” (He knew that I was pastor at a small church in town.) I was shocked at this suggestion, but thought, “Why not? I can tell the congregation about the good news.”

So I did. At the end of the sermon, I said, “I will not be at the door to greet you this morning because earlier this morning I took Karolyn to the hospital. The baby should be coming soon, and I am going back to the hospital.” I sensed that the ladies were upset that I had not stayed at the hospital, but after all, I was simply following the doctor’s suggestion.

At any rate, when I got back to the hospital, all was calm in the waiting room. Ten minutes later, the nurse burst into the room and said: “Congratulations, you are the father of a baby girl.” I followed her into the delivery room where I saw our baby lying on Karolyn’s stomach. She said, “It’s a girl, but I couldn’t help it.”
It is amazing what people say in moments like that. I said, “That’s fine, you’re the one who wanted boys, I’m happy with a girl.” The doctor said, “She will have him wrapped around her little finger in no time.” He was right about that!

Two days later we went home with our baby. That is when we discovered that having a baby and caring for a baby are two different things. All those late-night trips to the Dairy Bar to meet Karolyn’s craving for a banana split were much easier when the baby was in her womb. In fact, everything was easier when the baby was in her womb. Now, the baby had to be fed far more often than I had imagined. Karolyn chose to breastfeed for the first several months. I suggest you talk with your doctor, mother, and friends who have walked this road as you make this decision. Breastfeeding does seem to be nature’s way, but there are often issues involved. What you want is what works best for you and your baby.

Then, there is all that mess that happens at the other end of the baby’s body. That too happened far more often than I had imagined. In those ‘good ole days’ we used cloth diapers that had to be washed. Not a pleasant task. We opted for a diaper service. They took the dirty diapers and brought them back clean. Of course, now most couples use disposable diapers—much easier. However, it still takes time and the smell is not pleasant.

These are the basics: put the food in, take the food out. If you don’t do this, the baby will not live. While these two are necessary, there are all those other hours that must be devoted to the rearing of a child. We hope that as an infant, they will sleep several hours of the day and night. If this happens, you are fortunate parents. This will give you time to cook meals, wash laundry, mow grass, and all those other necessities for adult life together.
Our daughter slept much more than we had anticipated. Even so, we felt compelled to look at her while she was asleep to make sure she was still breathing. We did not know how good we had it until we had our second child, a son, who did not want to waste time sleeping. So he took much more of our time.

We knew the value of tenderly holding our baby. I had read all the research about babies that go hours without tender touch and how their emotional development is hampered. We wanted our baby to feel loved, so we held her often and talked and laughed with her. As she got older we read stories to her long before she understood our words, because we wanted to stimulate her brain with pictures and sound. We wanted to be good parents.

However, all of this took time—much time. In theory, we knew that a child would demand much of our attention, but theory and reality are very different. I wish someone had told us that we would have to change our schedules after the baby arrived.

We had already made one major decision before the baby arrived. Karolyn decided that she would like to be a stay-at-home mom. So we agreed that she would quit her job before the baby was born. With that decision made, I assumed that I would not need to make many changes in my schedule. After all, a “full-time mom” should be able to handle the baby, right?

I was in for a rude awakening. There is a reason why it takes a mom and a dad to create a baby. There is a reason why in marriage we commit ourselves “to love and to cherish” each other. Never will
love be more needed than when you have a child. All research indicates that the healthiest setting in which to raise a child is that created by a mother and father who have a loving, supportive attitude toward each other. My earlier book *The 5 Love Languages* has helped millions of couples create such a loving, caring, supportive relationship. With this kind of relationship, both are willing to adjust schedules to meet the other’s needs and the needs of their children.

Another important factor is recognizing our limitations. We cannot do everything. All of us have limitations. A father cannot work out in the gym two hours each day, hold down a full-time job, spend three hours at night on the computer, attend a sports event, or play golf every Saturday and be a loving husband and father. A willingness to admit limitations and adjust our schedule to include those things that are most important will keep you from feeling defeated or disappointed with yourself. Time, money, energy, and abilities are all limited. Achievable goals lead to celebration when accomplished. Unrealistic goals may lead to depression when we fail to reach such goals.

Important also is developing or maintaining a “we” mentality. Hopefully, even before the baby comes you have shifted from the “I” mentality which most of us have before marriage. This shift much be made permanent. Parents can no longer think in terms of what “I” am going to do, but rather what “we” are going to do. Parenting is a team sport.

Self-sacrifice is another required attitude in making scheduling changes. My co-author, Shannon, was doing a counseling internship as part of her doctoral training. She met a hospital chaplain who had a PhD degree and had taught at a local university for several years. She explained that she had loved being
a mother and intentionally slowed down her career during her children's childhood so that she could be with them as much as possible and still work. In higher education, this meant that she didn't climb up the tenure ladder as quickly as she might have. For her, parenting was more important than the professional ladder.

Whether it is at work or in other areas of life, parents often experience personal or professional sacrifice to some degree for the sake of their children. Sometimes this sacrifice feels more pronounced; other times parents would not even call it sacrifice.

Adjusting our attitudes and choosing how we will approach parenting is a worthwhile but challenging task. However, living with unrealistic, unachievable expectations and resulting disappointment is undesirable and unproductive.

Making it work
In addition to attitude changes, we also need to take practical steps if we are going to cope with the time demands of being a spouse and parent. Shannon and I have put together the following suggestions, which we feel will help you make needed schedule changes.

1. Get organized.

We know this is problematic for two reasons. First, not everyone is gifted with the ability to organize. This is one of the realities I discovered after I got married. I am extremely organized and my wife is the opposite. Second, it takes time to get organized, and time is one of the limitations we are dealing with in the first place.

However, there are small changes you can make that will pay great dividends. Take a look at your present schedule and ask: What do I anticipate that I might need to change after the baby
arrives? Or, if the baby is already in your home, identify the pressure points, and ask: How could I lower the pressure by organizing my time differently?

Maybe you could wake up thirty minutes earlier. Maybe you can work in a half-hour walk during your lunchtime. Maybe you can give your spouse a break by washing the dishes.

2. Get creative.

Your baby will not always be a baby. Sooner than you can imagine you will be doing creative things with them, such as playing pirates or having tea parties. Coloring books will again return to your life. These are just a few examples of the creativity that naturally happens in parenthood. Parents also have to call upon their creative thinking when faced with managing busy family schedules.

Multitasking can be creative, but it may not always be the best for your child. When you are able to take your child with you as you do a routine task such as grocery shopping, you are both accomplishing a necessary task and also exposing your child to a stimulating environment. However, when you are talking with your child while you are sending a text or doing some media-driven activity you are cheating your child of quality time.

3. Involve others.

Parents often cannot be with their children 24-7 and need the help of trusted others to care for their children. Some parents are fortunate to have family or friends nearby who can help with childcare. Quality nurseries, preschools, and grade schools also play important roles in the lives of some families. Parents may be reluctant to seek help with childcare, especially first-time parents who are anxious about leaving their child for the first time. All parents are wise to explore childcare options and thoroughly
evaluate the safety and trustworthiness of those options. With such effort, and as parents build trust in those caregivers, they gain not only a sense of relief but also a sense of freedom. As one friend said, “I love taking my kids to daycare!” She meant that both as a compliment to the daycare facility and as a personal expression of freedom to accomplish her other responsibilities. She, like many parents, knew firsthand that it truly is a blessing to have help in raising your child.

Shannon and Stephen were fortunate enough to have family nearby. Grandparents are happy to have time with grandchildren (as long as it does not get too long or too often). Karolyn and I did not have parents nearby. However, we had some wonderful friends who were willing to babysit for an hour or so while we did a task. Other wonderful single adult friends stayed with the children as they got older and allowed Karolyn and me to attend conferences and take short trips.

4. Simplify.

Any way you slice it, life with children gets hectic. And it gets more hectic as they get older. Once the ballgames and piano and dance recitals start, life can become a marathon. At some juncture you will need to simplify. What activities can be eliminated? Life should not be constantly pressured. The human mind and body need rest and time to be free to think, and enjoy the simple things like a sunset, a rainbow, or a bird. One parent said, “This is the first Saturday in a long time that we have nothing to do.” Strive for more Saturdays like that!

When our baby was little, Karolyn found that Sunday evening was a wonderful time to relax with the baby. As a pastor, I had Sunday evening responsibilities, but I encouraged her to stay at home. Did all of the congregation understand? No! But most of
them did because they stayed at home also. Culture, even Christian culture, should not control our lives. We are responsible to God and not to culture.

5. Celebrate what's working.

Look for opportunities to affirm each other. By focusing our attention and energy on what is going right, we not only encourage and connect with our spouses and children in more positive ways, we also have an improved perspective on what’s not working. We feel like our wins overshadow our losses, and we believe we can work through other challenges that we face.

This list of ideas is certainly not exhaustive. However, these ideas may serve as a useful starting point as you begin actively identifying your family’s schedule strengths and limitations. I wish someone had shared these ideas with me before we became parents.

**Talking It Over**

1. Have a conversation with a couple who gave birth to a child in the past six months and ask how the baby changed their schedule.

2. If both of you are currently working full-time, have you discussed whether or not you will make vocational changes after the baby is born? Have you made any decisions yet?

3. If each of you decides to continue your full-time vocation, what child-care options do you anticipate?

4. Make a list of the major activities each of you does with your “free time”—such things as golf, gym routine, video games, hobbies, Facebook, etc. Do you anticipate cutting back on any of these after the baby arrives?
5. Make a list of the normal household chores that are done on a regular basis and who presently does each of them. List such things as purchasing groceries, cooking, washing dishes, sweeping or vacuuming the floor, cleaning the toilet and shower, etc. Do you anticipate changing roles on any of these?

6. How willing are you to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of your child?