



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Our kids will follow our example, not our advice

Even when we think they're not watching, they're watching.

Even when we think we're not parenting, we're parenting.

The life of a parent is a classroom, a breeding ground for lessons. We can rattle off advice until we're blue in the face, but only when our kids see our advice in action does it hit home. Whatever we expect of them, we must expect of ourselves. To be better parents we must be better people first.

It's intimidating to be a role model but motivating, too. Since we're all creatures of habit, it's easy to get content and make excuses about why we're fine as we are. We've made it this far, right? But once we remember that young, impressionable eyes are on us — well, that gets our attention. That makes us rethink our ways.

Modeling good virtues is a big part of parenting but so is teaching our kids to handle life — real, hard, complicated life. At every age, life will throw them game-changing curveballs. Will the curveballs take them out or make them better players? How resilient will they be?

Often, we parents think our lives have been perfect for our children to learn appropriately, but really it's our adversity that stands to help them most down the road.

A mom once told me about a woman at her church who claims her greatest life lessons came from watching her mother go through cancer. Seeing her mom at her worst (physically speaking) yet handling it with strength, prayer, grace and dignity taught her how to persevere during difficult times. It instilled a reference point she'd draw on the rest of her life. Of all the gifts her mother gave her, these lessons top the list.

When I reflect on this story, I think about the mother. I bet she felt tremendous guilt over the time, attention and nurturing she thought she'd robbed her family of. I bet she lay in bed at night worrying about the effect on her kids. I bet she thought she was failing them as a mom.

But parenting is more than caretaking. It's also living our hard adult lives and making the most of any cards we're dealt. It's doing what must be done and trusting things to work out. It's taking our own advice to stand strong when we want to crumble.

When my kids were young, I thought 18 was the age I'm preparing them for. I thought if I nurtured them into kind, honest, self-sufficient, hard-working, faithful young adults, they'd be set for life, and I could quit worrying. But since I turned 40, my parenting perspective has broadened. For now, I see the difference between "Little League Stress" and "Big League Stress."

When we're young, we're thrown curveballs of Little League Stress. Dating. Friendships. College. First jobs. Careers. Marriage. But come mid-life, we're hurled into a new game of heavy-duty problems and curveballs that can take anyone down, even those kind, honest, self-sufficient, hard-working, faithful young adults whose parents thought they'd never have to worry again.

Welcome to Big League Stress.

Cancer. Divorce. Death of a spouse. Death of a child. The loss of our parents. Infidelity. Addictions. Job loss. Bankruptcy. Foreclosure. Surgeries. Health scares. Emergencies. Medical diagnoses. This list is endless.

I love being 40, for there's a freedom that comes with time and maturity. Still, I can't ignore the reality of intense suffering. Even if I'm fine, someone I love is hurting. And when they hurt, I hurt. We all hurt together.

Add to this the everyday stress of mid-life — kids, work, mortgages, bills, making time for a spouse, making time to enjoy life — and you understand the pressure cooker environment. It's enough to make anyone snap.

So instead of using 18 as my benchmark, I now think more about who I hope my kids will be at 40. I wonder how I can foster the skills they'll eventually need to handle Big League Stress because if they can handle that, Little League Stress will be a cinch.

This brings me to my original point: modeling. Because I'm 40 right now, I need to be the person I want my kids to be. I need to view every obstacle in my life as a parenting opportunity. When Big League Stress stares me down, I need to show my kids how it's done.

Do I wish I was a saint and that I never cowered under pressure? Of course. Then again, I'm glad my kids see me struggle, and fail, and try, try again. My fallibility is a gift — the gift of imperfection — and by embracing my humanness and acknowledging how weak I am alone, how strong I am with God, I hope to instill in them the courage to face the curveballs thrown into their life.

There are times our grown-up problems take away from our family or call us to make choices our kids can't understand (a mom going back to work; a family downsizing homes). But before we beat ourselves up or worry we're scarring them, let's ask if we're doing the right thing. Because if we live our life seeking truth and keeping the faith, our kids will benefit. Somehow, it'll all work out.

We'll never be perfect parents, but we can be persistent parents. We can stick with the game of life through every curveball of Big League Stress. Should we want to quit and never touch a bat again, we can remember that little eyes are watching in the stands. Our kids are always taking mental notes, getting permission to be the *exact* kind of player we are now.

If that's not motivation enough to improve our game and be the best we can be, I don't know what is.

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