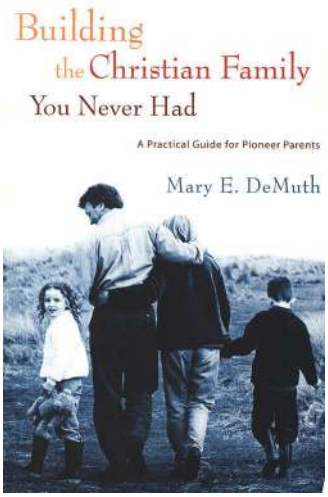

Seven Insider Tips

for Pioneer Parents

By Mary E. DeMuth

Adapted from ***Building the Christian Family You Never Had*** (WaterBrook, 2006)

Some of us grew up in stable, Christ-loving homes. Others did not. What happens when people from difficult upbringings want to raise their children in a Christian home? How do we pioneer a new path for our children?

Pioneer Parents are parents who don't want to duplicate the homes they were raised in. They share many common traits, the most common being fear. They ask themselves questions like:

- *Will the hurtful words my parents said to me fly out of my mouth in a moment of anger?*

- *Will I repeat my parents' mistakes?*
- *How will I parent if I've had no positive, godly example?*
- *Why, when I read Christian parenting books, do I feel like the author can't relate to me?*
- *How do I protect my children from possible negative influence of my parents without harming their relationship?*

As a Pioneer Parent, these questions have swirled around in my paranoid head ever since I birthed my first child. Thirteen years later, sometimes they still haunt me. How do we break free from harmful parenting patterns? How do we build a Christian foundation in our homes if we've had no example? Here are seven tips:

1. **Read parenting books with a caveat of grace**.

When I first became a mom, I read every Christian parenting book I could find, determined not to repeat my past. I highlighted words until the pages glowed yellow. Instead, with every book I read, I berated myself for not being a perfect Christian mother. Instead of letting the words encourage me to improve my parenting, I would shun myself for not parenting correctly. I didn't offer myself grace.

Eventually, I learned to see the books as kindly companions instead of angry Pharisees, pointing out my failures. I had to remind myself to be gentler toward me—a sinner in need of grace—and understand afresh that God delighted in me, sang over me. He was not watching me read parenting books and mumbling, "Well, I sure hope she bucks up and parents better after reading this."

No, God, as I've had to learn, comes alongside me, cheering me when I fail, and giving me confidence as a parent.

2. **Find or observe a parenting mentor**.

Of all the campaigns I've initiated to try to improve my parenting, finding a mentor has been the most effective. I have learned the importance of engaging parents who are raising stable, well-adjusted children. The most rewarding parenting-mentor relationship I experienced happened on walks with my friend Kathy. She had two grown children who were serving Christ full time. Pushing a double stroller as I walked a mile or two around the neighborhood with her, I peppered her with questions, she listening and praying and offering advice.

I'll admit it's not easy to find a mentor like Kathy. If you can't find one, remember that mentors can come in surprising packages. I've been "mentored" by kind mothers in the grocery store who answer my questions patiently, by grandparents who get on the floor and play with their grandchildren, by friends who share their trials and victories with me. The most surprising mentor in my life has been my eldest daughter who is now old enough to baby-sit. Watching her kind patience with toddlers inspires me to be a more patient mommy.

3. **Say, "I'm sorry."**

Pioneer parents—and all parents for that matter—make mistakes. We say painful words that we heard our parents say—words that once stung us, words that now sting our children. The best way to disarm sin is to admit it. No parents are perfect. Trying to appear sinless (particularly during a bout of anger) causes children to worry about how they "made" mommy or daddy be mean. Confessing our sins to our children and asking their forgiveness opens the door to

communication, de-escalates heated arguments, and shows children that even parents need the restorative forgiveness of Jesus.

4. Understand that parenting is not outside-in, but inside-out.

I used to think parenting successfully meant finding the "best" strategies and practicing them. Though good parenting strategies are helpful, particularly for Pioneer Parents, they lacked real power. I realized I could impose all sorts of methods from the outside, but my heart (where parenting starts) remained the same. To parent differently than how I was raised, my heart needed to be healed. David said, "What you're after is truth from the inside out. Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life" (Psalm 51:6, MSG). God is in the business of cleaning, healing and rejuvenating our hearts from the inside out. The greater the healing, the more authentic and effective our parenting will be.

5. Forgive your parents.

Jesus told us to forgive, plain and simple. Sometimes He even used impossible math: 70 times 7—490 times! Holding bitterness in your heart, shunning forgiveness, actually hinders you from parenting freely in the present. Forgiveness sets you free—free to love your imperfect parents, free to give grace to your imperfect self as you struggle to parent differently. It's not pretending nothing happened back there; on the contrary, forgiveness is a revolutionary, brave act.

How is forgiveness connected to pioneer parenting? Picture a thick iron chain around you and your family of origin. If you choose not to forgive, the chain keeps you connected to the past. It stifles your heart so that you cannot parent effectively today. Choosing to forgive causes the chain to fall away, setting you free to parent your children differently.

6. Stop the comparison game.

Few acts are more destructive than comparison. I've caught myself observing other parents not to glean pointers about parenting, but to chide them or myself. *I will never parent that way,* I think, which can either mean I don't want to be like that parent or I am an utter failure at parenting well. Jogging through my neighborhood one day, God taught me a comparison lesson. Each yard was different. Some sported "Yard of the Month" signs. Others hatched weeds. I realized that the sanctification journey is different for me, as my "growing up" yard may have had bad soil and not enough sun. Comparing myself to Yard of the Month parents, who may have had affirming upbringings, was unfair. God asks us to concentrate on our own yard, to pull one weed at a time, to revel in one flower planted.

Paul says, "That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original" (Galatians 5:26, MSG). A chapter later, Paul asserts, " But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another" (Galatians 6:4 NAS).

7. **Find support.**

My parenting skills increased when I found other pioneer parents who struggled just like me. When I've had a particularly difficult parenting day, I'll call a fellow pioneer parent and vent. Paul says that we are to "bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:4 NAS). Finding like-minded pioneer parents who are willing to share struggles lightens burdens. As I shared

my burdens, and listened to other Pioneer Parents share theirs, I realized I was a normal parent with typical struggles—with a big God who ultimately shouldered every burden. In the company of like-minded friends I'm able to laugh at my mistakes and continue down the pioneer parenting path.

Being a Pioneer Parent is no easy task, particularly when we're plagued by worry that we'll duplicate the homes we were raised in. In granting ourselves grace, seeking mentors, saying I'm sorry, seeking inside-out healing, forgiving our parents, eliminating comparison, and finding friends who bear our burdens, we will scale the difficult peak of parenting, by God's grace.