



# How to Prepare Your Kids for the World

*by Susan Merrill*



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# Two Jobs, One Mom: The Wall and the Gates

When Megan, our oldest was in sixth grade she got her first invitation to a boy-girl party. The party was going to be hosted by a family I did not know and the entire grade was invited. At the time, there wasn't much in the way of social media because cell phones were truly mobile phones attached to cars and they weren't very smart. No one had a cell phone so, to these kids, a boy-girl party was about as exciting as it got.

Megan begged to go the minute she got home. I told her that Daddy and I would have to discuss it. And then, although she reminded me daily, I put it off for a week. Finally, Mark and I talked and agreed, we didn't feel comfortable with it. We called her in and told her that she couldn't go because we wanted to protect her from a situation that could get out of hand. We offered an alternative. She could have a friend from church sleep over.

Then we braced ourselves for the fight. It didn't happen. She looked relieved. I was perplexed, but I figured that whatever was being discussed about the party at school must have been outside her comfort zone. She simply was not ready for this gate to be opened.

The night of the party she had her friend over, and when I went in to tuck them in bed they were discussing the party. Megan was sad and explained that they would all be talking about the party at school on Monday, she would be left out.

I looked at her and said, "Megan, what if they did play Spin-the-Bottle and you had to kiss Will, your math partner? Wouldn't that be so embarrassing in class on Monday? How would you face him?" Her face flushed with horror at the thought. She was, again, relieved. But on Monday morning FOMO set in and she reluctantly went to school dreading feeling left out.

I picked her up from school prepared for the regret she may have about missing the party. But to my surprise she jumped in the car, looked at me excitedly and said, “Mom, how did you know? They did play Spin-the-Bottle and so and so had to kiss so and so and (insert lots of who kissed who). And they had to go in the closet together, alone, in the dark. I am so glad I didn’t go!” Megan was relieved.

I tell this story because it was a real lesson for me. From the time my children were born, I have been aware that I needed to protect them from falling, scissors, choking, stairs, strangers, drugs, etc., etc. As a mom, I am the wall of protection between my child and the world.

However, I had never really thought about being a gatekeeper. The one who thoughtfully trains her child for opportunities beyond my protection. My daughter was not ready to kiss a boy, and certainly not a random boy—one that she didn’t even like. Our children have so many opportunities, or gates, to good things like having a cell phone, driving, dating. As a mom we must know when they are ready and when to open that gate.

You are so many things to your child. You are a wall—the one who will vigilantly protect your child. And you are the gatekeeper—the one who will diligently train your child for a future beyond the wall. The wall is the foundation for protecting, and the gates are the opportunity to test your child’s readiness to live well outside the wall. Each gate is an opportunity for your child to explore and exercise his or her growing independence by temporarily leaving your protection and venturing out. For you, it affords the opportunity to observe and test your child, to see if he or she is prepared for the freedom the gate has to offer.

## ***The Gate of Opportunity***

Sometimes we think of gates as problems in the making. But in reality gates are a good thing. Let me explain.

Have you ever taught a class, or can you remember your classroom days? The teaching process begins with a lesson. When the teacher feels her students have learned one concept, she moves on to another, and then another. After a few lessons, the teacher pauses to gauge the depth of her students' knowledge by giving a quiz. The purpose of the quiz is two-fold. First, it will help the teacher better instruct her students. Based on questions the students answer incorrectly, she will know what they did not learn. Second, it will reveal to the students where they have a learning deficit. This will help them better prepare for the *big* test. Without the quiz, neither the teacher nor the students would be aware of knowledge gaps that could result in failing the class. The quiz, therefore, is a good thing. It is an opportunity to test.

The gates in the development of your child's life are also opportunities to test. For instance, let's say your son wants a cell phone. You agree that there would be some safety benefits to being able to contact him readily. So you purchase a phone. But before you allow him to walk through the cell phone gate, you give a lesson: the phone is primarily for safety, you teach him, and it should be used sparingly, no more than 20 minutes a day or 600 minutes a month.

Every month you check the bill to see how much your child is using the phone and if he is making wise choices in whom he is calling. If he is, then your son was ready for the opportunity and you may choose to open the gate wider by allowing texting or a smartphone in the future. If he is not handling the opportunity well, then you can try to reteach the lesson or close the gate for a while by taking the phone away.

## ***Five Gate Rules to Remember***

There are lots of gates in life. In this interlude we will cover ten common gates: choices, school, friends, free time, technology, cell phones, social media, driving, dating, and college. Before we evaluate the gates, here are some general rules that apply to all gates:



## **1. Gates Must Be Opened and Closed by Parents**

The concept of the gates comes from a story in the Bible that demonstrates the importance of not only building proactive walls around your children but also appointing good gatekeepers to allow your child to grow and flourish according to their maturity levels. Regardless of your religious tradition there is a good lesson for parents to learn through this story:

*After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers . . . were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. I said to them, “The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses.” (Neh. 7:1–3)*

## **2. Gates are Opened as Privileges, Not Rights**

A child should not be entitled to a privilege “just because.” A privilege earned will be treated with respect. It may surprise you that I consider gates such as school a privilege. After all, the law requires that children attend school . . . but there are lots of different ways they can do that. One of my children lived her first twelve years in a very small village. When we adopted her, we placed her in a very small school. She is really bright and she excelled there. But when she aged up to a larger middle school, despite her great academic ability, she did poorly. She had become distracted. I reminded her that this new school was a great opportunity but also a great privilege. But in time, the social aspects were too great a temptation, and she lost the privilege of attending that school. We homeschooled after that, all the way through two and a half years of high school—and my smart child finished fast without distractions.

### **3. Gates are Not Opened Based on Age**

Some children are ready for an opportunity at one age – others, years later. One of your children may be ready to drive at sixteen, and one may not. If you tell them at an early age that the privilege must be earned, they will not like it, but they will be more likely to try to be ready.

We tend to feel that we must do what the Joneses do. You will hear at some point from your child, “But, Mom, everybody my age has one,” or, “But, Mom, I am the only one my age who is not allowed.” And you may be tempted to believe it. Most often, though, if you investigate, you will find that your child’s statement is not accurate. There’s at least one other crazy mom who sees it your way!

### **4. Gates Opened Can Always Be Closed**

It is easy to get frustrated with kids who are not handling privileges well. If you find you are repeatedly asking them to put the phone away or leave the video game to come to the table, then close the gate for a time. It does get harder to close a gate the longer you wait, so close it sooner rather than later. Once closed, make sure that the child is really ready before you open it again. This is different from taking away a privilege as a consequence. With a consequence the object is usually taken away for a defined time period. When you close a gate, do not feel that you have to give a reopen date. You will find that a child will try harder if he knows he has to prove himself for it.

### **5. Gates Must Be Watchfully Guarded**

It is clear that Nehemiah never wanted the gates to be left unattended. There would be no opportunity for deeds done in secret. The gates were not opened until the sun was hot. They were shut at night by the gatekeepers and guarded by the residents. Oh, what a world it would be if all moms would band together to watch the gates!

Are you passionate enough to be part of a new generation of mothers who not only guards her own gates but will band together with other moms to help them guard theirs? If we all worked together, I really do believe we could change the world!

## ***The Golden Gates That Tempt Us***

The gates that beckon our children to independence are more golden than ever before! In fact, they are downright beautiful and are a temptation to even the most self-controlled adult. Who isn't wowed by the color and magical functionality of the iPhone? What eye cannot appreciate the lifelike experience and surreal engagement of Xbox or Wii? What mind can ignore the wealth of personal information that awaits your fingertips on the ever-evolving platform of social media? I confess: I love technology and the sleek efficiency of what that gate has to offer. Gates are opportunities, but if misused, any gate can be an enticing distraction. And technology is just one of them.

My friend Paige has very young children. When she shared the following story with me, I laughed so hard, and then it hit me: there is so much more moms have to perceive today! Paige and I are not even a generation apart, and yet the things that will tempt her children are already different from what mine faced. But whatever temptations are outside the gate, they must be mastered. This is Paige's story about her precious Finley, age three, who is not quite ready for the gateway to technology, or in this case, the "black present."

*The history of this story is that Finley calls the iPad her "black present" because it has a black otter box casing around it to protect it from drops and falls. Two weeks ago, at four thirty in the morning, Finley came running into our room, screaming, "Donald Duck is dead!" My initial response was, this is a dream. Then I forced myself to focus on the clock, and finally, I attempted to try to understand what my baby was babbling about. I had no clue. So like any good, exhausted mother of two children under the age of four, I ushered her into our bed and told her to go to sleep.*



*Morning dawned and the Donald Duck drama was pushed aside in the scurry to get the day going. Of course, mysteries have a way of presenting clues even when you are not looking. When I was dressing Finley, I noticed her panties were on inside out. Clue #1: she must have gone to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The closest bathroom to her room is the guest bath, so I went to do a little potty check to make sure there weren't any late-night accidents. That's when I saw clue #2: the iPad on the guest bed. I had left it on the kitchen counter the night before. My memory did an instant rewind of the 4:30 a.m. tale of a dead duck, and a new scenario began to unfold in my mind. It was a sweet little scene of Finley rising in the dark to go potty. Fully awake after her successful potty trip, she floated into the kitchen to retrieve the "black present." She then climbed up on the guest bed to watch her beloved Mickey Mouse clubhouse on YouTube until the iPad ran out of juice, or in her words, until "Donald Duck died!"*

*Needless to say, the black present became a lost privilege that Finley has not yet been given back. The discussion that followed the misdemeanor was a rich opportunity to talk about disobedience and sneaking and trust. Later that afternoon, in the car, I brought it up again and said, "Finley, when you disobey Mommy and Daddy, it makes us so sad."*

*And then my precious, honest little Finley said with a sigh of conviction, "But, Mommy, it makes me sooo happy!" I tried so hard not to laugh. When I retold the story to my husband, we were both amazed that a three-year-old could verbalize with such clarity the concept of temptation! She had nailed it on the head—it makes us happy, temporarily.*

## **Ten Gates that Lead to Independence**

### **Caution: Open Carefully!**

So just when you think you have the wall in place, your child discovers another gate she is dying to open. Perceive, ponder, and pray before you do. Every child should be individually assessed for "gate" readiness. And no mom should be afraid of closing the gate if the child proves unready. Your child will learn to take privileges seriously if you are unafraid to remove them when abused. There

were ten gates in the wall Nehemiah built. Here are the top ten gates I found to be the most important right now, and lessons I learned about how and when to open them.

### **1. The Choices Gate**

Every child must learn to make wise choices on the path to adulthood. Little children make little choices and are rewarded by being given bigger choices. But when little children are given the opportunity to make big choices or lots of choices—or worse, they contest a choice their mothers have already made—difficulties may arise. Here's an example:

MOM: Honey, we're going to the zoo, so please put your sneakers on.

CHILD: I don't want to wear my sneakers. I want to wear my sparkle shoes.

MOM: But we'll be walking a lot, and your tennis shoes are comfy.

CHILD: So are my sparkle shoes.

MOM: I don't think they are . . . and we need to go.

CHILD: But, Mommy!

MOM: Okay, okay. If you think you will be okay, wear them.

Two things could happen here. On the one hand, the child may end up with blisters and learn a lesson—that would be a good thing. On the other hand, the child may not have blisters, and her desire to challenge her mother's choices has been reinforced. Either way, Mom should never have opened the choice gate and allowed her child to override the decision she had already made.

Here's another:

MOM: Honey, would you like to ask Carter to come over and play?

CHILD: I want to have Ben over.

MOM: But the last couple of times you've played with Ben, things got out of control. And you got in trouble together at school.

CHILD: You just don't like Ben.

MOM: Of course I like Ben. I just thought it would be nice to have Carter over . . . but you can ask Ben, if you promise to behave.

Same situation. Both of these mothers knew what was best for their child. They just didn't assert their wisdom (and their authority). In the first example, the mom felt time pressure. She didn't want to battle in the interest of time. In the second example, the child was a little older, and knowing his mom well, he made her feel guilty by insisting that she didn't like Ben.

When a mom concedes, she is sending a message that may lead her child to believe that Mom doesn't really know what she is doing because she doubts herself and gives in. The child, in comparison, feels so strong that he becomes convinced that he knows what is best for himself.

When children are very young, concessions such as these can be harmless, but fast-forward ten years. These children have grown up believing that it is always their right to choose what's best for themselves—what they wear or whom they play with—and that their mother doesn't really know what is best or she wouldn't put up much of a fight.

Let's say the girl, now a teenager, comes downstairs to go out,

dressed in a skirt twelve inches above her knees and a top made of six inches of fabric. Her father takes one look and tells her to go put some clothes on. Her mom suggests a different top, and the teenager indignantly retorts, “Since when do you tell me what to wear?” She then drives off with a boy that neither parent has ever met, without bothering to say where she is going or what time she will be home.

### ***Guarding the Gateway to Choices***

Innocent choices for toddlers can mean trouble for teenagers. Those choices include every who, what, where, and when of their day—for example: who they play with, what they wear or eat, what they watch on TV, what games they play, where they go and with whom, when they wake, play, work, sleep—until they consistently demonstrate to you that they have wisdom to make the choice themselves. Most kids will have areas where they are really wise and make good choices, and other areas where they don’t. My daughter, for example, had great discernment in friends very early on. However, she was easily enamored with fashion, and it took time for her to develop the ability to say no to styles that were inappropriate. I was off the hook early as the friend gatekeeper but on duty as the “what not to wear” gatekeeper.

I hope this doesn’t sound controlling. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The goal is to slowly open each gate until you no longer have to guard it at all by the time your children graduate high school. They earn the right to choose by demonstrating the ability to choose wisely. Your gatekeeper job should diminish the older they get.

Pray for your child to make wise choices. This prayer is taken from 1 Kings 4:29:

*Lord, please give \_\_\_\_\_ wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.*

## 2. The School Gate

School is an amazing gateway to opportunity. It is also a growing responsibility with each year that passes. There is a lot of freedom in school. There is the opportunity for your child to choose friends and to spend time with them, void of your supervision. Different schools present different temptations for different children. The good news is, there are lots of options today: charter schools, private schools, even virtual schools. I confess I have done them all—public, private, military, Christian, home, and virtual school. Do not be afraid to explore options. Break the mold if your child doesn't fit in it.

### *Guarding the Gate to School*

The best way to guard this gate is to be involved with your child's school. Be the team mom, homeroom mom, backstage mom, or PTA mom! There is a volunteer opportunity for everyone whether you work or not. It does take energy, but the blessing will be that you will be at the gate when you are needed.

If the freedom a school offers is too much for your child, as it was for one of mine, do not hesitate to explore other options.

Pray for your children while they are at school. The following prayer is based on Hebrews 13:17:

*Lord, please give \_\_\_\_\_ confidence in his leaders at school, and help him to submit to their authority, because they keep watch over him as those who must give an account. Give \_\_\_\_\_ a desire to do this so that his teachers' work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to him.*

## 3. The Friendships Gate

Friends can be a sweet blessing. The ability to choose the right friends is a gift for some, learned for others, and an evasive skill for the rest. Friends are such a necessary, fun part of a child's life that we can think of them as benign. The contrary is true. Paul, a



great man of the Bible, profoundly stated that thousands of years ago: “Do not be misled,” he wrote. “‘Bad company corrupts good character.’” (1 Cor. 15:33)

### ***Guarding the Gateway to Friendships***

People are influenced by those with whom they spend time; therefore, this is a gate that requires careful monitoring. I came across a pamphlet during a time when I was really questioning my parenting ability. My child had decided, with friends, to pursue riskier and more “entertaining” ways to have fun. The pamphlet was entitled *Help for Distressed Parents*, from a lecture offered by Cotton Mather. This is what it said:

Be especially inquisitive what company they (your children) keep. If you leave them to be the companion of fools, they will soon be destroyed fools themselves. Wherefore, do all you can to rescue them from all the snares and haunts of all evil company. Oh, forewarn them and withhold them, as much as you can, from those knots of profane gaming, scoffing, drinking and unclean wretches that keep so many of our young people in the bond of iniquity forever. And the evening after the Sabbath, when, alas there is more villainy, they say, done among us than all the nights of the week besides, if they will then be singularly exposing themselves unto temptation don’t you consent unto it, but confine them with our own watchful eye at home upon them.

I shall say no more, but set before you Proverbs 29:15: “A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.” It seems the mother is usually most ready to let them have their wills; and, lo, she pays for it.

Mr. Mather gave this lecture in Boston on December 14, 1694—more than three hundred years ago. Now, I don’t know about you, but I was surprised to hear that teen trouble was a problem in the 1600s. And it seems it was a common problem. Where did “the wretches that keep so many of our young people in the bond of iniquity” come from back in the seventeenth century? There were no pornographic

websites, drive-through liquor stores, or online video games. As dramatic as Mather was, I love his gate-related points:

- Be inquisitive about the company your children keep. (Guard the gate!)
- Rescue them from bad company. (Close the gate.)
- Say no when they want to go out on weekends with bad company. (Close the gate.)
- The mom will pay for it if she lets them have their way. (She didn't watch the gate.)

The gateway to friendship is tricky and has been forever.

Pray for your child's friendships. Try these simple prayers:

*Give \_\_\_\_\_ friends who love at all times, and brothers born for a time of adversity (based on Proverbs 17:17).*

*Show \_\_\_\_\_ how to walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm (based on Proverbs 13:20).*

#### **4. The Free Time Gate**

Free time is a gate that is hard to supervise with a concrete plan. It starts off so innocently because young children play in their free time, and that play is developmental. As children age, they become attracted to things that may not be developmental or wise uses of their free time. Things like television, social media, gossip, and video games are all entertaining but not wise uses of free time. And if a child is left to choose, many will choose technology. We all need downtime, and to relax, some choice is necessary. The trick for a mom is to have structure and guidelines so that a little downtime doesn't become a distraction from worthy pursuits.

### ***Guarding the Gate to Free Time***

As your children age up, use perception to observe their natural selections for entertainment. If they always want you to play with them, social interaction with people may be important to them. If they always want to watch TV, then you may want to ponder how you will structure usage parameters for screen time. If they develop crushes at age six, you may want to have conversations about relationships with the opposite sex. It may sound silly at six, but some kids explore “going out” at nine and ten years old, and some parents encourage it. If you don’t plan on being in that category, start talking about it early, before your child starts talking about it at school.

Guarding the gate to free time takes perception, pondering, and planning. If your child has a natural tendency regarding how they use their free time, use it for good. If they like to play outside with balls, put them on a team. If they like to draw, find an art teacher, or supply them with paints. If you turn off the TV, computer, and other easy forms of entertainment, they will go find something else to do.

Pray for your child to wisely use their free time:

*Lord, help \_\_\_\_\_ to understand that you have given him much, and from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Help \_\_\_\_\_ to appreciate and use the time you have given him wisely (based on Luke 12:48).*

### **5. The Electronics Gate**

This gate leads to today’s most popular entertainments: television, computers, music, movies, video games . . . I have covered much of why this is a gateway privilege. Anyone, adult or child, can lose himself in electronics for hours a day.

Electronics are not evil. They are wonderful tools for learning and entertainment, but they do require wisdom and self-control. There

are good choices and bad to be made in what you allow your child to watch, listen to, and play. The stakes in the choices are getting higher. Television and movies are more explicit today than even ten years ago. The Internet is bigger and full of pornography. Music can be provocative, abusive, and encourage illegal behavior.

This is a gate that takes constant surveillance. The private and public sectors of our nation have released study after study on the dangers of explicit images and music. We are unwise as a nation in many ways. And as was true for Nehemiah, there are very few people you can trust to guard this gate, including Hollywood and the government. Many people will argue that it's "just" music or a movie, but the studies don't lie: music and movies do make impressions.

### ***Guarding the Gate to Electronics***

There are lots of things you can do to protect your child from the dangers of electronics and to prepare him to use self-control when given the privilege:

- *Stay ahead of your child.* Most parents are behind their children when it comes to the latest in technology. Kids today have social network websites, download music both legally and illegally, publish information about themselves that others can see, enter into online dialogue with strangers, and surf the Internet for the latest information, both good and bad. As a parent, you have to learn what's out there and how the system works. In other words, go where your children want to go before they do.
- *Keep all electronics in a public place.* Children should not have electronics in their rooms. The temptations are too great. The computer and television should be in a place where Mom or Dad can walk by and see what's going on.
- *Establish accountability.* Check up on your kids often. Look at the history of the sites they've visited. If they are erasing the history, then you can assume something is wrong; take action accordingly by installing monitoring software. Read the

messages they are receiving and sending. You don't have to do this secretly. Your child should already know that accountability is required for Internet use. Use a contract; you can download one at [iMOM.com/tools](http://iMOM.com/tools).

- *Install a filter, and password-protect the computer and TV.* Filters provide the safeguard of preventing access to offensive sites. Most filters allow you to choose the degree of filtering based on the age of the child. Password-protect the computer and television so they are only on when you want them to be on, and set channel parameters.
- *Set up family screen-time rules.* The needs, age, development, character, and maturity of each child should be taken into account as you set up guidelines for screen time. This doesn't just involve rules against visiting forbidden sites but also means rules that prohibit wasting time or being consumed by particular games or entertainment. Computer and video game addiction can start very young, so setting firm limits is essential for balance in a child's life. Set up appropriate boundaries for your children and a system for monitoring them. If the child is not being responsible in other areas of family life, is getting poor grades, or is developing some attitude issues, screen time may need to be reduced.
- *Review movie and music choices.* Many parents allow their children to see or listen to whatever they want. This can be a hard gate to monitor. At iMOM we heard about this concern from a lot of moms, so we developed tools for parents that can teach their children to think about the movies and music they want beforehand. Every movie has a colored graph that charts the level of sex, language, violence, drugs, nudity, and more. It is easy to read and gives a great jumping-off point for discussions of why the movie is or is not appropriate for your child to see. The song request form allows kids to think about the type of lyrics they are listening to and the reason behind each song. Sometimes, if your kids see the lyrics written in black and white, they will decide on their own not to buy the song!



## Confession

When my children were young, our cable company was supporting a local man who owned all the strip bars in our city. They had allowed him to have a lower channel for his programming. Our children were passing the channel every day, and my friend walked into her family room one day after school to find her young sons being entertained by pornography. My friend made it a fight with the city council, and we all canceled our cable in protest. She won the battle, but afterward we decided we didn't really miss the cable and left it off.

I had a good chuckle one day when I overheard my kids discussing the possibility that maybe we were the only ones without cable because we were poor! We used the cable money to invest in really good movies, and it didn't really bother my girls. Then my sons began to get older and a love for sports kicked in. We decided that if we wanted to watch games at our house, we had to get cable. We enjoy sports as a family, so it was a great addition; however, it was something I had to monitor with the boys, which I never had to with the girls. It is hard to hold the front on all sides as a mom when you keep adding sides. I confess that I let my standards slip as the boys became teenagers. You have to choose your battles with gates. But there were times when I wished I had not opened the gate to cable at all.

Pray for your child's protection:

*Lord, please guard \_\_\_\_\_'s heart, for everything he does flows from it. Keep \_\_\_\_\_'s mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from his lips. Let \_\_\_\_\_'s eyes look straight ahead; fix his gaze directly before him. Cause \_\_\_\_\_ to give careful thought to the paths for his feet, and help him to be steadfast in all your ways (based on Proverbs 4:23–26).*

## 6. The Cell Phone Gate

Most cell phones are now smartphones. And most smartphones

are everything a child could want in what could be considered the ultimate toy for all ages. In that tiny, boxy toy are a camera, thousands of games, music, video, Internet, plus the added value of unlimited, unrestricted access to friends via texting, FaceTiming or Skyping, posting, pinning, tweeting, snapping, Instagraming, and by the time this book is published, probably some other fascinating form of communication. Kids can hold the world in the palms of their hands. They don't hang out with family anymore. You see them everywhere in restaurants and malls, hanging out with their hands. They never look up; their eyes are fixed on their fingers as they glide and punch their beautiful, captivating toy phones.

### ***Guarding the Gate to Cell Phones***

More than 75 percent of teenagers have cell phones. That doesn't even include children as young as six who are getting phones. The pace of life demands that families simultaneously run in multiple directions: work meetings, soccer practice, piano lessons, tutoring sessions, dance class, and more. It's a wonderful convenience to be able to redirect or rearrange transportation on the fly with your kids through the cell phone. Other parents value the safety aspect of giving their children a phone. But you must weigh these pros against a growing list of cons when trying to decide if you are ready to open this gate. So consider:

- *Is your child ready?* Just because the majority of your child's friends have something doesn't mean that your child should. Has she demonstrated self-control and responsibility? How consistently your child obeys the rules regarding other types of technology to which she already has access (Internet, TV, video games) is a good indicator of how well she will respect and obey the rules you lay down for cell phone use. If you're constantly having to police and correct your child's use of other media, you'll have an even greater battle on your hands with the cell phone, because she'll be using it outside of your sight 99 percent of the time.
- *Are you ready?* You will have to monitor the phone, set

parameters, and guard the gate steadfastly. Are you ready for the responsibility?

- *Download a contract.* I love contracts because they ensure clarity. We have lots of them at iMOM. Here's the iMOM Cell Phone Contract. Fill it out, and go over the expectations you have for your child's use of the phone. If he does not meet your expectations, you will have clear recourse explained on the contract, and he will not have an argument for the consequences.
- *Start simply.* For safety and family organization, all your child needs is a phone with which he can place and receive voice calls; anything added to that is for entertainment.
- *Use parental controls.* Some phones have parental controls that you can set and password-protect. This is so important if your child has Internet access on his phone. It doesn't help to filter the computer in your house while allowing your son to run around town with unfiltered access to pornography on his phone.
- *Circle the wall often.* This is a privilege you will have to circle often to see for yourself if your child is handling it responsibly. As Nehemiah did, you may have to do it without permission if you suspect there is a need to. That means you should check the phone for inappropriate texts, music, apps, and games.
- *Stand firm.* You must have the backbone to limit its use and take it away if necessary. I have found it difficult to give up my ability to conveniently contact the child if I take her phone away. Only you know if you have the resolve to do what's best for your child— despite the tears and protests—if the phone becomes a problem. If you can't honestly say that you'll pull the plug and set limits, don't buy the phone.

Pray for your child's focus:

Teach \_\_\_\_\_ that time is short, Lord. If he buys something,

*help him treat it as if it were not his to keep. When he uses things of the world, like a cell phone, help him use it without being engrossed in it. Remind him that this world in its present form is passing away and that nothing he owns is of real importance (based on 1 Corinthians 7:29–31).*

## **7. The Social Media Gate**

Like the gates before it, social media can be addictive and requires a child (and me) to have self-control. A child must also be well-versed on what is and is not appropriate to post. One other warning: most social media contains elements of either gossip or self-promotion; neither of these adds to a child's character, and time invested in either can be detrimental.

### ***Guarding the Gate to Social Media***

- *Defer.* For as long as possible, do not allow participation in social media. You can use me as your mean example. My kids weren't allowed until their senior year of high school. And I relented then only because I wanted them to learn while at home so I could walk them through expectations.
- *Assess your readiness.* Are you ready to monitor? Do you have your child's passwords, and are you committed to checking often? Is your child ready?
- *Start simply.* Train your child about privacy and appropriate uses, and start with all of the settings on the highest level of privacy. To begin, you may want them to allow only family members as friends.
- *"Friend" and follow.* Make sure your child includes you in his online socializing so you can teach him how to use it safely. And have access to all his passwords so you can view his private communication.

Pray for your child to use discretion:

*Lord, give \_\_\_\_\_ the discernment to watch her ways and keep her tongue from sin. Help \_\_\_\_\_ put a muzzle on her mouth while in the presence of the wicked (based on Psalm 39:1).*

## **8. The Driving Gate**

Of all the things a mom needs to do to train her child, this is my least favorite. I would rather potty train ten children than teach one to drive! On so many levels this is a very heavy gate. A car is a weapon. This is a physically dangerous gate for your child and for every innocent person on any road with your child. The irresponsible use of a car can kill someone. The statistics are a reality, and teenagers have more accidents than any other age group. But we consider it a right of age because the law says you can get a license at sixteen. Cultural advancement has added to a parent's need to perceive the dangers of this gate just as it has in the technology and cell phone gates. Your parents did not need to train you to use self-control on the computer or smartphone. Yet you must train your child. The same is true with driving. There is more traffic in most areas of the country today. There are more gadgets to play with in cars today. And then there is that enticing phone, which most teenagers cannot resist looking at even when they are driving.

Lastly, driving is a giant step forward to independence, especially if your child owns a car. You must be able to trust that he is where he says he is and that commitment to abide by your rules is firm. Toward the end of the sophomore year of high school, most teenagers begin to explore with their free time. It is an age of experimentation, and having wheels greatly enhances their opportunities. It is a time when boundaries need to be clearly established.

### ***Guarding the Gate to Driving***

- *Talk about it.* Long before it is time to get a learner's permit, talk about your expectations for the privilege of driving. Ask your child these questions: (1) Can we trust you to do the right thing when we are not around? (2) Are you being responsible in all other areas of your life, such as grades? (3) Is your attitude respectful?



- *Train hard.* Take every opportunity during the permit phase to train for the responsibility. This is your time to be heard. Your child wants that license, so she will listen. Once she has it, you won't be in the car, and your opportunity to be heard is gone.
- *Use a contract.* Just like with the cell phone, having a contract that clearly spells out your commitments and consequences will help. If the child knows ahead of time what will happen if he breaks a commitment, he will think twice. If he breaks the contract, the consequences are clear and arguments about it are avoided.

Pray for your child's safety:

*Lord, keep \_\_\_\_\_ from all harm—watch over her life; watch over her coming and going both now and forevermore (based on Psalm 121:7–8).*

## 9. The Dating Gate

Does dating today seem to be synonymous with drama? Cell phones and social media affect many of the gates; dating is no different. Increased social awareness has hyped everything up to the point where you can become a star based on the drama you create in your relationships. I have conflicting emotions about dating. There are not many children who have the maturity for a serious relationship. And the point of exploring a relationship should be marriage. But children who are dating are not thinking of marriage; they are simply investing in relationships with the intention of ending them. The result can be self-inflicted heartbreak, drama, and distraction.

### *Guarding the Gate to Dating*

- *Talk about it early.* Decide if your family is going to allow dating; at what maturity level (not age, because not all children are ready at the same time); and what parameters you will have.

- *Defer it.* It will never hurt to make a child wait to date. When my children first began to chat about someone “going out” with someone in middle school, I interjected immediately that we do not “go out” when we can’t really “go out” yet. In other words, they were not allowed to declare a relationship without permission, and they knew that I thought it was strange that kids who can’t even “go out” without a parent taking them somewhere said they were “going out.”
- *Interview candidates.* Set parameters for the exploration of a relationship. One rule should be that you are required to meet the child—boy or girl. My husband interviewed the boys who dated our girls. The knowledge of the required interview got around, and my girls insist that is why they didn’t get to date much because the boys thought twice about it. I think that alone weeded out some unnecessary dating.
- *Discuss physical intimacy.* Self-control for anyone, let alone a teenager, is difficult in the midst of passion. Joe White is the owner of Kanakuk Kamps. He has an amazing way of communicating with teens that resonates with them. My kids attended his camps, and I was always amazed that they could remember his lessons with clarity. I asked Joe if I could share what he shares with the kids about self-control in physical intimacy. This is it, complete with discussion questions:

*Three unemployed truck drivers eagerly read the classified ad— “WANTED skilled truck driver to drive a truck filled with TNT through narrow mountain roads.” The president of the trucking company interviewed all three men. To each, the same question was asked. “When driving a load of TNT, how close can you get to the edge of the road without falling off the cliff?”*

*The first man boasted of his great skills. “I can get the rear wheels of the truck 12” from the edge. Never fell off yet.” The second driver was even more skilled. “I can get one wheel half-way over the edge and not veer off the pavement.” The third driver humbly replied, “TNT is a dangerous load. I’d stay as far from the edge as I can.”*

*Guess who got the job.*

*Kissing, heavy French kissing, petting over the clothes, petting under the clothes, laying together, sexual intercourse. An automatic transmission shifts gears between one step of sex to the next. That's how God built men and women for pleasure and procreation in marriage.*

*The first and second truck driver's pride described many kids who get hurt in a variety of ways sexually. The third truck driver describes those who walk the wedding aisle and stay faithfully married with no regrets.*

- 1. How do you feel about "the edge of the cliff" and how close will you go to the edge?*
  - 2. Why is sex like a truck loaded with TNT?*
  - 3. What did you learn today and how will you apply it to your life with the opposite sex?*
- *Get to know the date.* If your child is developing a relationship with someone else, and you have allowed it, you should be developing a relationship with that person too. Then you can observe whether the relationship is having a positive or negative effect on your child. This is your child, and anyone he or she associates with should be of interest to you. Incorporate your child's date into family activities so that everyone can get to know him or her. Some of the most unbiased observations about my children's "special friends," as my husband calls them, have been made by their siblings. Let the family weigh in.
  - *Create responsibility and accountability.* There are long-term consequences to physical intimacy that can affect not just your child's life but the lives of others. Relationships require self-control. People are to be esteemed and honored. If your child is not ready to show honor to others with self-control and selflessness, then she is not ready to invest in a relationship.

Pray for your child's relationships:

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give \_\_\_\_\_ the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice he may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (based on Romans 15:5–6).*

## **10. The College Gate**

College is a gateway to the American dream and sometimes an American idol. So much focus, pressure, and work are put into attaining acceptance to the college of your child's choice, or maybe your choice. Other areas of development, such as character building or spiritual growth, can be sacrificed to the academic dream. Much thought is given to getting there, but not much thought about what will be done there. So many kids change majors or graduate with a major that they don't know what to do with. Recently, I saw several creative and entertaining YouTube videos produced by nineteen-year-old boys from Britain as a part of their gap year project. In some countries a gap year is encouraged, usually taken before attending college. The purposes may include independent learning, problem-solving practice, career exploration, and training in internationalism. I think it is brilliant.

In the United States the majority of people would probably think there was something wrong with you if you didn't go to college right away, but not everyone feels that way. I know one young man who did not demonstrate a lot of responsibility in high school. His parents felt he was not ready to take college seriously, so he went into the military. After four years of service, he came back a different person and is taking full advantage of his college opportunity.

### ***Guarding the Gate to College***

This final gate, which leads to college, is like the ones before it—a privilege, not a right. When one is given a privilege, he should value it and treat it as treasure. College today costs a treasure! Children will value the opportunity more if you explain it to them early.

College is such a wonderful opportunity for huge steps of adventure, independence, and self-discovery. But it is also an opportunity for temptation. Everything you have taught your children up to this point will be challenged in college. Remember: by this age you have been slowly releasing your control as they have built responsibility and earned trust. They should know your expectations by now. They are adults, and the opportunity is theirs. We told our children that as long as we were paying for their support in college, we expected them to do their best academically and to honor God with their choices. That was all. It was very freeing and so sweet to see them take off!

Pray for your child's future:

*Lord, you are the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. You will not grow tired or weary, and your understanding no one can fathom. You give strength to the weary and increase the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Give \_\_\_\_\_ strength to soar (based on Isaiah 40:28–31).*

## ***Be the Gatekeeper***

You are the mom who will build the walls to protect your child and open the gates to test her. You are the passionate Mom whose job it is to train your child to wisely take advantage of everything life has to offer. Only you can decide when to open one of the gates in the wall and expose your child to what lies on the other side. Only you will ponder and pray with a mother's heart as your child experiences different aspects of the culture through the gate you have opened. You must guide your child in wisdom as he learns to navigate the culture on his own.

\*Most of this ebook was taken from Susan's book *The Passionate Mom*





## MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a hybrid of sorts. I majored in finance but I love people more than numbers. I left behind the corporate gray of banking for the colorful world of kids. I had three children and adopted two more. I am the very imperfect Merrill family manager and the founder of iMOM. I love to analyze life, ponder possibilities, and pray for opportunities, which makes for a very busy and messy house! I live in Tampa, Florida, with my handsome husband—Family First founder and author Mark Merrill—and two, or depending on the day, up to five of my children ages twenty-one to twenty-six. On those days, I happily forsake all other responsibilities to run a bed and breakfast and laundromat for my family.

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