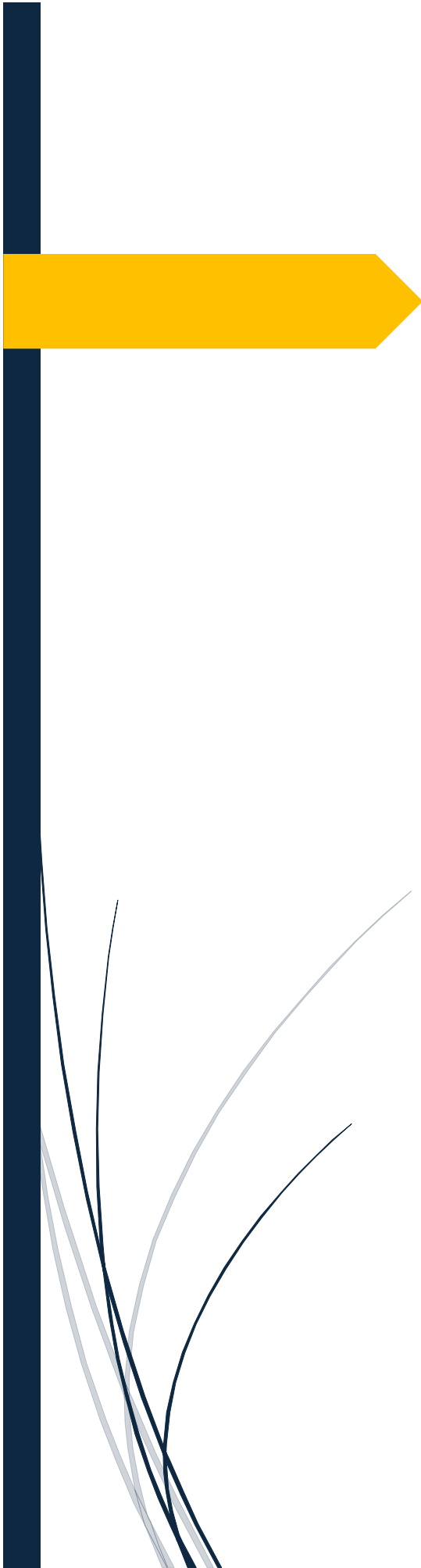




Parenting & Co-Parenting

Understanding the
Relationship System

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Becoming parents changes more than the size of a family. It changes the **system**.

Two individuals who previously had a relationship primarily organized around each other now have another person or multiple with needs, emotions, schedules, personalities, developmental stages, and increasing demands on the family's resources.

The relationship expands from: **ME + YOU** to: **ME + YOU + CHILDREN + LIFE**

Parenting introduces new roles:

Partner	Teacher	Driver
Parent	Coach	Problem-Solver
Provider	Disciplinarian	Emotional Regulator
Caregiver	Scheduler	Household Manager

And many others. The challenge isn't simply learning how to parent.

Partners also have to learn: **How do we parent together while continuing to function as individuals, partners, and a team?**

Parenting Creates a New System

A family is more than a collection of individuals. Everyone influences everyone else. A parent's stress can affect the couple. Couple conflict can affect parenting. A child's behavior can increase parental stress.

Parental exhaustion can reduce patience. Reduced patience can increase conflict. Conflict can increase a child's dysregulation. The child's dysregulation can create even more stress.

The system becomes circular.

Parent Stress → Couple Stress → Parenting Response → Child Response → More Parent Stress

This doesn't necessarily mean someone is doing something wrong.

It means: **The system is interacting.**

Instead of asking only: **“Who is causing the problem?”**

Try asking: **“What is happening within our system?”**

ME | WE | US | FAMILY

The ME | WE | US framework can be expanded when children enter the system.

ME

How am I doing?

Consider:

- My stress
- My capacity
- My parenting beliefs
- My triggers
- My needs
- My boundaries
- My expectations
- My family-of-origin experiences
- My relationship with each child
- My identity outside parenting

WE

How are you doing?

Consider:

- What is parenting like for my partner?
- What is consuming their capacity?
- What do they enjoy?
- What feels difficult?
- What triggers them?
- What support do they need?
- What parenting experiences did they grow up with?
- What do I understand or misunderstand about how they parent?

US

How are we doing as partners and co-parents?

Consider:

- Are we functioning as a team?
- How do we make decisions?
- How do we handle disagreement?
- How is responsibility distributed?
- Do we support each other?
- Do we undermine each other?
- Are we still connected as partners?
- What is working?
- Where is our system vulnerable?

FAMILY

What are we intentionally creating together?

Consider:

- What do we want our family to feel like?
- What values guide us?
- What traditions matter?
- What behaviors do we want to model?
- How do we handle conflict?
- What expectations do we have?
- How do we repair?
- How do we balance individual and family needs?
- What do we want our children to learn from watching us?

Parenting isn't simply about raising children.

It is also about intentionally building a **family system**.

We Don't Enter Parenting Empty-Handed

Every parent enters parenting with a history.

Long before we have children, we have experiences with:

- Parents
- Caregivers
- Siblings
- Teachers
- Coaches
- Religion
- Culture
- Discipline
- Rules
- Affection
- Conflict
- Responsibility
- Achievement
- Independence
- Safety

These experiences create beliefs about what parenting **should** look like.

We may consciously think: **“I want to parent like my parents did.”**

Or: **“I will never parent the way my parents did.”**

Both responses allow our history to influence the present. Sometimes we repeat what was modeled.

Sometimes we swing hard in the opposite direction.

Either way, our family of origin may still be driving the bus.

Explore Your Parenting Blueprint

Ask yourself:

- Growing up, what happened when I made a mistake?
 - How was discipline handled?
 - How were emotions handled?
 - How much independence did I have?
 - How much structure did I have?
 - How was affection expressed?
 - What happened when I disagreed with a parent?
 - What behaviors were rewarded?
 - What behaviors were punished?
 - What did my family teach me about achievement?
 - What did I receive that I want to continue?
 - What did I experience that I want to do differently?
 - What am I intentionally choosing rather than simply repeating or rejecting?
-

Parenting Exists on a Spectrum

Parents often become attached to labels:

Strict	Free-range	Relaxed
Gentle	Helicopter	Structured
Authoritative	Protective	
Permissive	Traditional	

But labels can oversimplify what is actually happening.

Instead of asking: “**What kind of parent am I?**” explore the dimensions underneath the label.

- **STRUCTURE** - How much predictability, routine, and organization do I provide?
- **FLEXIBILITY** - How easily can expectations change based on circumstances?
- **CONTROL** - How much influence do I expect to have over my child's choices?
- **AUTONOMY** - How much independence do I encourage?
- **WARMTH** - How openly do I communicate affection, encouragement, and emotional support?
- **EXPECTATIONS** - How high are my expectations around behavior, academics, athletics, chores, or responsibility?
- **CONSEQUENCES** - How do I respond when expectations aren't met?

- **EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION** - How comfortable am I with my child's sadness, anger, fear, disappointment, or frustration?
- **PROTECTION** - How much do I attempt to prevent discomfort, failure, disappointment, or risk?

Different situations and different children may require different combinations. The goal isn't necessarily to find the perfect parenting label.

The goal is to understand:

- **How do I naturally parent**
- **Why do I parent that way**
- **What does this child need from me?**

Protect vs. Prepare

One of the ongoing tensions of parenting is deciding when to: **PROTECT** and when to: **PREPARE**

Protecting can include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| • Providing safety | • Advocating |
| • Setting limits | • Intervening when necessary |
| • Removing unreasonable risks | • Providing developmentally appropriate support |
| • Offering comfort | |

Preparing can include:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| • Allowing manageable frustration | • Practicing difficult situations |
| • Encouraging problem-solving | • Teaching coping skills |
| • Allowing natural consequences | • Allowing mistakes |
| • Building independence | • Helping children tolerate disappointment |

Protection asks: “**How do I keep you safe?**”

Preparation asks: “**How do I help you become capable?**”

Children need both. Too little protection can leave a child unsupported.

Too much protection can unintentionally communicate: “**You can't handle this without me.**”

A useful question is: “**Does my child need me to protect them from this experience or prepare them to navigate it?**”

The Child in Front of You

Parents sometimes develop a parenting philosophy and then try to apply it equally to every child.

But children are different.

- One child may need: **More structure.**
- Another may need: **More autonomy.**
- One may need: **More reassurance.**
- Another may need: **More space.**

One may respond well to verbal processing. Another may become overwhelmed by too many words.

One may recover quickly from disappointment. Another may need more time.

Fair parenting does not always mean: **Everyone gets exactly the same thing.**

Sometimes fairness means: **Each child receives what helps them develop.**

Ask: **Who is the child in front of me?**

Not: **Who do I think this child should be?**

Different Doesn't Mean Wrong

Partners frequently parent differently.

One may prioritize: **Structure** while the other prioritizes: **Flexibility.**

One may emphasize: **Accountability** while the other emphasizes: **Understanding.**

One may move quickly toward: **Consequences** while the other moves toward: **Conversation.**

One may want to: **Protect** while the other wants to: **Prepare.**

One may experience a child's distress and think: **"We need to help."**

The other may think: **"They need to work through this."**

Neither response is automatically wrong.

The vulnerability often exists in the **interaction between the styles.**

Recall from Me | We | Us that differences in structure/spontaneity, emotion/analysis, closeness/independence, or directness/avoidance are not inherently the problem; the combination can create predictable vulnerabilities.

Instead of: **“You're too strict.”** or: **“You're too soft.”**

try:

- **“What are you trying to accomplish?”**
 - **“What are you concerned will happen if we don't intervene?”**
 - **“What does this situation activate in you?”**
 - **“What does our child need from us right now?”**
-

Parenting Conflict Is Often About Something Underneath

Parents may argue about:

- | | | |
|------------|--------------|----------------|
| • Bedtime | • Chores | • Driving |
| • Screens | • Grades | • Dating |
| • Homework | • Discipline | • Independence |
| • Sports | • Money | |
| • Food | • Friends | |

But underneath the disagreement may be different concerns.

- One parent may be protecting: **Safety**. Another: **Independence**.
- One: **Responsibility**. Another: **Connection**.
- One: **Future success**. Another: **Emotional health**.
- One: **Consistency**. Another: **Flexibility**.

The surface argument may be: **“Should they be allowed to do this?”**

The deeper conversation may be: **“What are each of us trying to protect or prepare for?”**

Get Upstream

Parenting conflict often happens at the end of the process. A child does something.

Both parents react. They disagree. They argue in real time.

Now the family is trying to solve: **The child's issue + the parenting disagreement + everyone's emotional activation** at the same time.

Get upstream.

Discuss predictable parenting situations **before** they happen.

Talk about:

- Bedtimes
- Screens
- Homework
- Chores
- Spending
- Curfews
- Driving
- Dating
- Sports
- Grades
- Consequences
- Technology
- Substance use
- Privacy
- Family expectations

Ask:

- **What do we agree on?**
- **Where are we different?**
- **What are our guardrails?**
- **Where do we have flexibility?**
- **What requires a conversation before either of us responds?**

Preparation reduces the number of decisions that have to be made while everyone is activated.

Don't Make the Child the Referee

When parents disagree, children can unintentionally become part of the conflict.

Examples include:

- **“Go ask your mom.”**
- **“Your dad won't let you.”**
- **“I would let you, but your mom said no.”**
- **“See? Your son is doing it again.”**
- **“Tell your father what happened.”**

The child is now positioned inside the disagreement between the adults.

This can create: **ME + CHILD vs. YOU**

Instead of: **WE addressing the issue together.**

Whenever possible: **Adult disagreement belongs in the adult system.**

Parents don't have to agree on everything.

But children generally should not have to manage the disagreement for them.

Don't Correct the Co-Parent While They Are Parenting

There will be times when you disagree with how your partner handles something.

Unless safety requires immediate intervention, consider whether the correction needs to happen **in front of the child**.

Public correction can create several problems:

- The child becomes focused on the disagreement between parents.
- The parenting issue gets lost.
- One parent may feel undermined.
- Defensiveness increases.
- Authority becomes a competition.
- The child may learn to navigate between parents rather than work with them.

Try: **Support now. Discuss later.** That doesn't mean blindly agreeing. It means choosing the appropriate system for the disagreement.

Later:

- “Can we talk about how that went?”
- “I think I saw that differently.”
- “What were you trying to accomplish?”
- “Can we decide how we want to handle that next time?”

The Invisible Work of Parenting

Parenting labor isn't only the tasks we can see.

Visible work may include:

- | | | |
|------------------|------------|----------------|
| • Cooking | • Bedtime | • Appointments |
| • Cleaning | • Homework | |
| • Transportation | • Laundry | |

Invisible work may include:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Remembering appointments | • Tracking school communication | • Knowing clothing sizes |
| | • Planning meals | • Anticipating schedules |
| | | • Buying gifts |

- Monitoring emotional changes
- Coordinating childcare
- Managing social calendars
- Communicating with teachers
- Remembering medications
- Thinking about what needs to happen next
- Planning activities

Sometimes conflict isn't about: **“Who does more?”** It is about: **“Whose mind has to hold more?”**

Both visible and invisible labor consume capacity.

Ownership vs. Helping

One common source of resentment is the difference between **owning** a responsibility and **helping** with it.

Helping means: **Someone else still owns the task.**

They remember it.

Plan it.

Notice when it needs to happen.

Ask for help.

Follow up.

Ownership means: **The responsibility lives with me.**

I notice.

I remember.

I plan.

I execute.

I follow through.

Consider the difference: **“Tell me what you need me to do.”** versus: **“I own this part of our family system.”**

A useful question isn't only: **“Who performs the task?”**

Ask: **“Who carries responsibility for making sure it happens?”**

Overfunctioning & Underfunctioning

Family systems can develop patterns where one person increasingly takes responsibility while another increasingly takes less.

The overfunctioning partner may:

- Plan
- Remind
- Monitor
- Correct
- Anticipate
- Rescue
- Take over

The underfunctioning partner or child may:

- Wait
- Depend
- Forget
- Avoid
- Resist
- Allow someone else to manage the responsibility

The more one person does, the less opportunity another person may have to develop capability.

This can happen: **Between partners** and **Between parent and child**.

Ask: **“Am I doing something because it truly belongs to me or because I don't trust someone else to do it?”**

and: **“What capability might another person develop if I stopped doing this for them?”**

Parenting Under Reduced Capacity

Parenting doesn't occur in isolation.

Parents are also navigating:

- Work
- Sleep
- Finances
- Health
- Relationships
- Grief
- Extended family
- Household demands
- Individual needs

The same parenting situation can feel very different depending on available capacity.

A child's repeated question after a restful weekend may be manageable.

The same question after five hours of sleep, a difficult workday, financial stress, and conflict with your partner may feel unbearable.

Before deciding: **“My child is the problem.”** ask: **“What else is influencing my capacity right now?”**

Sometimes the family needs a parenting intervention.

Sometimes the parent needs:

- Sleep.
 - Space.
 - Help.
 - Support.
 - Recovery.
 - Less load.
-

Regulate Before You Educate

When either the parent or child is highly activated, learning and problem-solving become more difficult.

A dysregulated child may not be ready for:

- A lecture.
- A lesson.
- An explanation.
- A consequence discussion.

And a dysregulated parent may not be ready to deliver one effectively.

Before asking: **“How do I make my child understand?”** consider: **“Are either of us currently able to have this conversation?”**

Sometimes the sequence needs to be: **Regulate → Connect → Understand → Respond → Teach**

rather than: **React → Correct → Escalate**

Children Borrow our Nervous Systems

Children learn emotional regulation partly through relationships. When a child becomes activated, the adult nervous system becomes part of the environment. A parent doesn't need to be perfectly calm.

But consider what the child experiences from:

- Tone
- Volume
- Facial expression
- Body language
- Speed
- Proximity
- Words
- Predictability

Ask: **“What is my nervous system communicating right now?”**

Sometimes the most effective parenting intervention begins with: **the parent's regulation.**

Emotion Is Not the Same as Behavior

Children can experience emotions without every behavior becoming acceptable.

A child can be:

- **Angry** without being allowed to hit.
- **Disappointed** without changing the boundary.
- **Sad** without the parent needing to fix it.
- **Frustrated** without abandoning the expectation.
- **Afraid** while still gradually developing capability.

This allows parents to communicate: **“Your emotion makes sense.”** AND **“The boundary still exists.”**

Validation does not require agreement. **Empathy** does not eliminate accountability.

Repair Matters More than Perfect Parenting

Parents will:

- Lose patience
- Misunderstand
- Overreact
- Miss cues
- Make poor decisions
- Say something they wish they hadn't
- Handle situations differently than they intended

The goal isn't perfect parenting. The goal is a family system capable of **repair**.

Repair may sound like:

- “I was frustrated, but I shouldn't have yelled.”
- “You didn't deserve the way I spoke to you.”
- “I misunderstood what was happening.”
- “I still agree with the boundary, but I don't agree with how I handled it.”
- “Can we try that conversation again?”

Repair teaches something important: **Relationships can experience mistakes without losing safety or connection.**

Don't Confuse Agreement with Alignment

Co-parents do not need identical opinions. Trying to reach complete agreement about every parenting decision can become unrealistic.

Instead, aim for **alignment**.

Agreement means: **“We see this exactly the same way.”**

Alignment means: **“We understand our differences and have decided how we will move forward together.”**

Alignment may include:

- “This matters more to you, so I'll support your approach.”
- “Let's try your strategy for two weeks and evaluate it.”
- “We disagree, but this is the boundary we're presenting together.”
- “We need more information before deciding.”
- “This child may need something different than our other child.”

The goal isn't: **One parenting brain.**

The goal is: **A functioning parenting team.**

Protect the Couple from Becoming Only Co-Parents

One of the most common system changes after children arrive is: **PARTNERS → PARENTS**

Conversation becomes:

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| • Schedules | • Meals | • Problems |
| • School | • Appointments | • Logistics |
| • Practices | • Chores | |

The parenting system becomes highly developed while the couple system becomes under-resourced.

Partners can begin functioning like: **Coworkers managing a household.**

Parenting is part of the relationship. It should not become the entire relationship.

Continue making deposits into the couple system through:

- Affection
- Play
- Humor
- Appreciation
- Encouragement
- Intimacy
- Shared experiences
- Conversation
- Curiosity
- Time together
- Follow-through

The Couples Manifesto emphasizes this kind of maintenance: stress, parenting, work, health and other life demands continually change what partners bring into the system, making regular attention to strengths, vulnerabilities, connection and resources important.

Ask periodically: **“Are we still partners or have we become mostly parents?”**

Protect the ME

Parenthood can consume identity.

Over time: **Who I am** can become: **What my family needs from me.**

Healthy family systems leave room for individual identities.

Each parent still needs some access to:

- Friendships
- Interests
- Capabilities
- Work or purpose
- Rest
- Movement
- Solitude
- Play
- Personal goals
- Individual relationships
- Time that isn't organized around children

Supporting the **ME** is not necessarily taking away from the family.

A more resourced ME can contribute to a healthier WE, US, and FAMILY.

Create a Family Mission Statement

Couples can benefit from a relationship mission statement. Families can benefit from one too.

Ask: **WHAT DO WE VALUE?**

Examples:

Kindness | Curiosity | Responsibility | Humor | Effort | Honesty | Connection | Independence | Learning | Adventure | Respect

In this House:

- WHAT DO WE WANT OUR HOME TO FEEL LIKE?
- HOW DO WE WANT TO HANDLE MISTAKES?
- HOW DO WE WANT TO HANDLE CONFLICT?
- WHAT DO WE WANT TO TEACH ABOUT EMOTIONS?
- WHAT DO WE WANT TO TEACH ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY?
- WHAT DO WE WANT TO TEACH ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?
- WHAT DO WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO EXPERIENCE FROM US?

A family mission statement doesn't create perfection. It creates an **orientation**.

When you're unsure what to do, ask: **“Which response moves us closer to the family we're trying to create?”**

Build Family Guardrails

Guardrails reduce the number of decisions families have to make during difficult moments.

Consider agreements around:

- **COMMUNICATION:** How do we speak to each other?
- **CONFLICT:** What isn't acceptable even when we're angry?
- **PARENTING DISAGREEMENTS:** When and where do parents discuss differences?
- **DISCIPLINE :** What approaches are consistent with our values?
- **TECHNOLOGY:** What expectations exist around devices and screens?
- **PRIVACY:** What does privacy look like at different ages?
- **RESPONSIBILITIES:** What does each person own?
- **REPAIR:** What happens after someone gets it wrong?

Safe Communication already emphasizes that difficult conversations work better when physical/felt, emotional, cognitive, environmental and inclusive safety are considered, including the right time and place for discussion. Those same principles apply to the family system.

The Parenting System Check-In

Don't wait until the family system is struggling to talk about parenting.

Periodically ask:

ME

How am I doing as a person and parent?

- What is working?
- What is difficult?
- What is consuming my capacity?
- What support do I need?

WE

How are you doing?

- What am I noticing?
- What do I appreciate about how you parent?
- Where might you need more support?
- Is there something I need to understand better?

US

How are we functioning as a parenting team?

- Where are we aligned?
- Where are we different?
- Are responsibilities working?
- Are we undermining each other anywhere?
- Is resentment developing?
- Do we need a new agreement?

FAMILY

How is the family system doing?

- What is working?
- Where are we vulnerable?
- What does someone need more of?
- What does someone need less of?
- What developmental change requires us to adapt?
- What do we want to keep doing?
- What needs attention?

Build Your Parenting System Map

OUR STRENGTHS: What do we do well as parents?

MY STYLE: What do I naturally emphasize?

Example(s) - Structure | Flexibility | Protection | Preparation | Connection | Independence | Accountability

YOUR STYLE: What does my partner naturally emphasize?

OUR VULNERABILITIES: Where do our styles tend to collide?

FAMILY OF ORIGIN: What parenting experiences are each of us bringing into the system?

OUR CHILD(REN): What does this particular child(ren) need from each of us?

LOAD: What external demands are affecting our parenting right now?

RESPONSIBILITY: Is visible and invisible labor distributed in a workable way?

CONNECTION: Are we maintaining our relationship as partners?

REPAIR: How well do we recover after difficult parenting moments?

ADAPT: What needs to change as our children and family evolve?

NEXT STEP: What is one adjustment that would improve our system?

Final Reflection

Parent + Partner + Team

Healthy co-parenting doesn't require two identical parents. Children can benefit from experiencing different personalities, strengths, perspectives, and ways of engaging with the world.

The objective isn't to eliminate those differences. It is to understand them well enough that they become **resources rather than recurring vulnerabilities**.

When parenting becomes difficult, ask:

- What am I bringing into this?
- What is my partner bringing into this?
- What is our child bringing into this?
- What is LIFE adding to the system right now?
- What are we trying to protect?
- What are we trying to prepare for?
- Does this child need protection, preparation, connection, structure, autonomy—or some combination?
- Are we responding to the child in front of us or to our own history?
- Are we aligned even if we don't completely agree?
- Are responsibilities owned or merely “helped with”?
- Are we regulating before trying to educate?
- Are we protecting the couple relationship as well as the parenting relationship?
- Are we leaving room for ME as well as FAMILY?

And finally:

What kind of family system are we intentionally trying to create?

Parenting isn't only about what we teach our children.

Children are also watching how adults: **handle stress, navigate differences, share responsibility, set boundaries, express emotion, make mistakes, repair relationships, support one another, maintain individual identities, and continue choosing the family they are building together.**

The goal isn't perfect parenting.

The goal is a family system capable of: **Awareness → Communication → Alignment → Support → Adaptation → Repair → Connection.**