

# Parenting: The Art of Trying

## **Overview**

By Sharon C. Peters

For Elizabeth

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I started working with children when I was sixteen. I was the only teen teacher in the day camp of my small hometown, and all of the “difficult” campers ended up in my classroom by the end of summer. “You should do this,” a teacher in the camp told me as I ran around laughing with my rowdy brood. In retrospect, “this” is what I have done with much of my life.

For many years I happily worked as a reading and writing teacher in classrooms with children, teens, and adults who faced major academic and emotional challenges. I did consulting and staff development in schools and community organizations, as well.

Then, in part to help out a friend with a troubled teen, I began a support group for parents of adolescents. I had a fifteen-year-old at the time, so it was nice for me, too. I started writing an advice column for a local parent magazine, as well.

In 1996, I decided to sign a year lease on an inexpensive office that would provide a good space for my parents of teens group, create a quiet spot to write, and allow me to explore different ways of working with parents. I found that the idea of getting the regular opportunity to talk to and learn from other moms and dads seemed too good to be true, and fully expected to be back in a traditional job when the lease was up.

As a mother, I have experienced more soaring heights and bottomless lows than my 26-year-old self could have imagined when I began my journey. I started by getting to know my stepson, who had recently begun living with his dad and me. His sister visited often, and sibling tensions kept everyone on their toes. Then my son was born and three years later my daughter joined us.

Elizabeth was born with a manageable heart condition, but my life changed in every way possible when she unexpectedly died after corrective surgery at the tender age of four. Managing to live through years of unfathomable pain, I eventually adopted a foster child and a few years later went through the multiple hardships of marital separation and divorce.

As I look back on my life, it seems more than I can imagine but I am oddly grateful to have benefited from the rewards that momentous experiences can offer. It is my hope that some of what I have learned can be helpful to other parents as they grapple with their own challenges.

As a parent, I have come to believe that outside opinions from people I trust are invaluable, but no one knows more about my children than their dad and me.

As a teacher, I have tangible evidence that care and patience produce progress even under the most adverse conditions, when manageable next steps are tackled one at a time.

My work at Parents Helping Parents has strengthened these beliefs and solidified my opinion that parental actions, no matter how awkward or seemingly futile, always make a difference to a child.

If you are like me, the pressures of daily life make it difficult to consistently offer your children the patience, guidance, and care they deserve. There is a good chance that you already know most of what I've written down. My intention is to assist you by identifying practical ideas to help you keep things moving in the direction that you would like to go. Pick the ones that address your current challenges and let me know how it goes.

## How These Pamphlets Began

My writing about family life was given birth by tragedy. I began with a book about my daughter, "My Girl Elizabeth," and ended with these short booklets. My writing has taken countless forms in the many years in between. Here is a segment written at the start of the process that explains why I kept going.

I often drive on the highway that Elizabeth and I took to pick Stephen up at school. I pass through the tunnel with its city fumes and come out on the bridge with its sky-blue view.

Elizabeth and I had relished the bumps at the end of this road, driving over them as fast as we could to bounce up and down with every one.

"Here come the bumps," I'd yell. "One, two, three...wheee!" we'd scream, leaving our loudest "wheee" for the biggest one at the end. "More, Mom, more," Elizabeth would say before slumping down in her seat, her pouty expression saying she'd like me to turn around and go over this spot again and again.

I cried hard when the bumps were fixed, replaced by a smooth black road that takes me up the ramp that leads toward our home. It goes right past a cemetery, and if I turn my head at just the right moment I can see Elizabeth's grave for a second or two. On a hill, right near a tree, the site is much like the picture Stephen had of where his sister should rest.

If Elizabeth and I could visit this spot I would hear her say, "C'mon Mommy, let's run," and watch her get ready to go. Although needing my hand on an incline this steep, she still would manage to appear much faster than I, head erect, thin legs shaking with anticipation, arms bent at the elbows and ready to pump, her smile growing brighter when the wind hit her face.

On the day of Elizabeth's burial, I stood on this hill ready to leave and grabbed the hand of a friend who I knew would be able to run. I took off and I headed down, thinking of my girl and enjoying every step of the way.

Sweet Elizabeth, I plan to keep on running, carrying your joy of life with me as I go.

My heartfelt thanks are extended to:

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Everyone who has visited Parents Helping Parents, shared their stories, and generated these ideas.

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