

Perseverance

Staying the Course

Perseverance is more than endurance. It is endurance combined with absolute assurance and certainty that what we are looking for is going to happen.

—Oswald Chambers

And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap a harvest of blessing, if we do not lose heart.

—Paul to the Galatians (Galatians 6:9)

Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Swimming, swimming, swimming . . .

—Dory, in *Finding Nemo*

Getting Ready

The first PROMISE character trait, Perseverance, reminds us that our journey with kids isn't typically an *Around the World in 80 Days* adventure (though it may feel like it at times). Realistically, our journey is more akin to what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction."¹ To ready yourself for a deeper look at perseverance, read or review Chapter Six of *Children At Promise*.

Connecting

The chapter's statistics about divorce, suicide, and dropout rates, as well as the story of a hopeless HIV patient, express our tendency to lose heart. On the other hand, the accounts of perseverance through illness and loss show how our struggles and the comfort of community can build greater heart in us so we won't give up. What stories or ideas from this chapter moved you, humbled you, or captured your attention? Why?

Real Life: Where the Journey Begins

When I (Mona) was in elementary school, I somehow qualified for a district cross-country meet held on a foggy fall morning at Bear Creek Park. I remember nothing about the meet except that I cried in the parking lot and lied to my friend's mom who drove us there. "I can't run," I pleaded with her. "I'm going to throw up." Likely I *was* nauseated. Surely, I was fearful. The girl who went on to win my event was probably nauseated too. But I didn't know that then. I didn't know that nerves and fears plague competitors. I didn't know that even if I came in last, I would feel better than if I didn't run at all.

I don't recall where I sat while the other girls ran that day. I don't remember having to tell my parents that I scratched the race. All I know is that I got away with quitting. I learned to escape from struggle (and from perseverance) by running away—a pattern that continued into my adult years.

My lesson lost on that Saturday morning became a lesson learned over many years, in many starting gates, in different kinds of races. And though I never ran cross-country again, I like to think of the things I could do and say to inspire my daughter to see a finish line worth crossing if I were in that parking lot with her today.

Can you remember a time when you or your child ran away from a test that seemed too daunting or when you were tempted to bolt but faced a challenge anyway? What happened?

Digging In

Lest you think that perseverance is just a gimmicky word leading off a string of PROMISE character traits, let's look at it more closely. Did you know that the development of every other character trait in a child's life depends on the perseverance the child possesses? Perseverance is the gateway to character because as it grows, it gives kids the stamina to press forward until the character of Christ is formed in them: until they are "mature, complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).

Keep in mind, though, that obstacles and perseverance are inseparable. By definition, perseverance is the ability to bear up under trials, to continue though tempted to quit. To persevere is to persist in spite of counterinfluences, opposition, or discouragement. But endless trials alone won't necessarily lead our kids to persevere. As Cheryl says in *Children At Promise*, "Not every irritated oyster produces a pearl, despite its potential" (p. 93). Overwhelmed by an onslaught of trials, kids may be tempted to just give up, to lie down and call it quits—to stop taking their insulin, to quit searching for a true friend, to abandon their college dreams, or to run away from home.

That's why two other supports are required to keep kids in the race. First, the sustaining love of the Holy Spirit and of individuals who breathe enough encouragement and confidence into their lives to keep them moving forward and, second, a vision of a finish line worth crossing. These two things, supportive relationships and goals worth reaching, encourage perseverance in children.

Look closely at a New Testament passage like Romans 5:3–5, and you'll see that kids simply can't learn to persevere unless they struggle: "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Perseverance is the bridge that connects suffering and character in kids. The pylons on one end of that bridge rise out of painful experiences. From there, it spans a chasm of discouragement, fear, and

defeat to arrive at character on the other side. Try as we might, we can't reach character by any other route. And ultimately, this road leads kids to hope, because having faced tough times, persevered despite temptations to quit, and developed inner strength, kids realize that they can overcome things they once thought impossible to endure.

Unfortunately, many kids never build perseverance, and many parents sabotage its construction. Trouble strikes and kids tumble off a cliff, cursing their suffering as they descend. Parents and teachers look on in horror, ironically blaming adversity for all their problems, not realizing that pain is the launching point to the security and hope they long for their kids to experience.

The difference between At-Promise and at-risk thinking lies in this analogy. At-risk thinking anticipates that kids on the edge of adversity risk plunging into greater trouble. But instead of coming close, teaching kids to scan the horizon for hope, and helping them build a bridge toward it, at-risk thinkers engineer barriers to keep kids from the very pain they need to fulfill their promise. In the process, they inadvertently bar young people from perseverance, character, and hope—all things they need to bear out their calling in life. At-Promise thinking regards difficulty as a foundation on which kids can build the most enduring link to the future God has planned for them: perseverance.

Barriers and Breakthroughs

What are you doing right when it comes to modeling or encouraging perseverance? How are you teaching kids to hang in there and finish the work they've begun?

All of us can love, grow, and hope in spurts. The beauty of perseverance is that it helps us *keep* loving, *keep* growing, and *keep* hoping. What are some areas in your relationship with your kids in which you want to persevere even though your progress may be slow? (Examples might include persevering toward “soft answers” instead of “harsh words,” continuing to listen to your child's thoughts even though they con-

flict with your opinions, or believing that your daughter will trade in her rebellion for a tender and willing spirit one day.)

Do your kids tend to quit on relationships or tasks once they encounter challenges or struggles? What happens to them when trouble strikes? Think of some examples, if you can.

Beware of how your interpretation of events can lead kids to quit. Over the years we've heard parents tell their kids, "If I sat on the bench as much as you, I'd turn in my jersey. Why waste your time?" "We don't have to respect that decision. Let's transfer you out." At the first hint of opposition, which message do your kids hear? "Run!"? "Fight!"? or "Persevere!"?

We live in a quitting culture. We abandon churches, marriages, pregnancies, friendships, schools, associations, ideals, and beliefs—even cable companies and long-distance providers (in exchange for a discount on our first statement). What examples can you think of from your own life, family, or other relationships where quitting won over perseverance? Did it have to?

Do you think a person can succeed without perseverance?

Faith makes perseverance possible because it trains us to believe in unseen rewards, unseen victories, unseen fulfillment. Through it, we learn to continue without immediate gratification or blessing. “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Jot down your thoughts about how this statement might apply to your perseverance with kids.

Cheryl Bostrom, telling the Seattle half-marathon story in *Children At Promise*, recalls what sustained her running group during months of training: “When we suffered aches and fatigue, we anticipated the joy of completing the race” (p. 97). The runners didn’t know exactly what the race’s finish would look like, but they relished the thought of it and rehearsed the triumph in their minds. For any of us, kids and adults alike, it’s almost impossible to stick with any kind of training without a goal in mind. Do your children have goals? Hopes? Even little ones? What goal are they seeking that is worth facing obstacles and trials to realize?

Now pull a perseverance story out of your family history. It may be an account from your own life, your child’s, or another relative’s. Jot down some of the details, and then tell the story to your family, a friend, or your Breakfast Club. (If you can, tell how struggle, perseverance, character, and hope factor into the story.)

Striking the Flint

I (Tim), like many of you, saw Mel Gibson’s epic film *The Passion of the Christ*. In our local Red Rock Theater with two hundred of my high school students and faculty members, the story laid siege to my throat and my heart. I was a mess. In the midst of Christ’s torment, though, I was struck with one characteristic like never before—His perseverance.

Good and evil's ultimate destiny was to be determined at the cross. The fulfillment and completion of Christ's goal could only be accomplished by His ultimate sacrifice. At the same time, Satan's defeat would be sealed at the cross as well—and he knew it. As Christ made His way with the cross on the Via Dolorosa, soldiers, onlookers, and even Satan pounded Him with pain, ridicule, and opposition. Anything to keep Him from finishing His work. Anything to prevent Him from ending His race.

In His lifetime, Jesus often said to others, “My work is not yet done,” “My time has not yet come,” “My work is not finished.” But He took those steps to the cross with such resolve, suffering more than anyone in the history of the world, so that He could ultimately announce to us, “It is finished.” You see, perseverance “must finish its work” (James 1:4).

How could Christ endure such agony? What vision kept the staggering and wounded Jesus from abandoning His mission of love? One moment in Gibson's film gives us a glimpse of the “finish line” He saw, of “the joy set before Him.” A battered and bloody Jesus, barely able to rise out of the dust after crumbling under the weight of His cross, speaks seven visionary words to His mother. He says, “See, Mother, I make all things new!” Jesus saw beyond the bruising and the scorn to the hope ahead. To Him, hope was not only already fulfilled but visible, and He was walking in the newness of it.

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition . . . so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1–3).

Are you tempted to give up on anything important right now? Consider the example of Jesus, so you will not lose heart.

Cutting to the Chase: Frequently Asked Questions

Is it ever OK to quit?

It's true that “you gotta know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em.” Each of us has to listen carefully to our own heart and conscience when deciding whether to pull our kids out of a relationship, activity, or other commitment. But here are some good questions to consider as you do that:

1. Is my child being harmed by this situation? Or am I simply afraid of my child being hurt, disappointed, challenged or uncomfortable?

2. What lesson would my child learn from quitting right now? What legacy does he or she inherit by pulling out? (A sense of justice, righteous protection, and secure boundaries? Or a rescue from responsibility, effort, discipline, and personal investment?)
3. Are my expectations of perseverance age-appropriate, or am I asking too much of my child? If you set out on a six-mile mixed-terrain hike with a two-year-old, don't expect the child to persevere to the end. Along with any expectations for perseverance you must offer your child support. Kids will rebel against perseverance if they're abandoned to stick it out by themselves.

I can't imagine committing myself indefinitely to some of the kids I'm working with. I'm going to completely burn out. How do I persevere through tiring relationships?

First of all, maybe you don't need to commit yourself indefinitely to some of the kids you're working with (unless they're your own!). Perseverance is not a ball and chain. But as a busy parent, I (Mona) have been greatly helped by a simple sentence from Bob Ekblad, a social justice advocate and mentor to Hispanic immigrants, inmates, and residents in Washington State. He says, "Learn to love people in a way that you can love them for the rest of our lives." This statement says to us: love people in a way that makes it possible for you to *keep loving them*. It says to tend to the needs of your own soul: the need for pacing, retreat, recreation, boundaries, Sundays off—whatever it takes to keep loving, keep growing, keep hoping. Unrealistic expectations and a driving pace of investment that you can't sustain will only lead you to abandon kids when you can't keep up with your own agenda. Notice that these boundaries aren't to fortify (buttress, barricade) us *against* relationships but to fortify (rejuvenate, sustain) us *for* relationships.

Assessing Perseverance

Worksheet 7.1 gives you an indication of your child's level of perseverance in the face of adversity. The results should give you a sense of whether perseverance is one of your child's strengths or is an area in need of strengthening.

Have your child complete the worksheet now. (If your child is eight or younger, you may want to read the questions aloud or complete the assessment yourself on your child's behalf.)

Assessing Perseverance

1. When things get hard, I often feel like giving up.	Yes	No
2. I have a hard time finishing what I've started.	Yes	No
3. It is better to give up than to get hurt.	Yes	No
4. I am easily discouraged in the face of challenges.	Yes	No
5. I have a hard time setting goals for myself.	Yes	No
6. My goals are often too hard to reach.	Yes	No
7. I do not like thinking about the future.	Yes	No
8. My friends tell me that I quit too easily.	Yes	No
9. Sometimes I just want to stay in bed to avoid the day.	Yes	No
10. My parents don't make me keep going even when it is hard.	Yes	No

Worksheet 7.1.

Scoring: Simply add up the “No” answers to determine your child’s score. Record these results in the At-Promise Profile at the back of the book. A score of 6 or more suggests that your child is well equipped to persevere in the face of adversity. A score of 3 to 5 suggests a growing ability to persevere, and a score of 0 to 2 suggests a tendency to give up when facing challenges.

Growing Strong Through Relationships

Tell “perseverance stories” to your kids. When you hear or read about someone who persevered (or when you do), translate that story into language your kids can understand. The stories we tell communicate the values we prize.

Give your kids a “vocabulary of perseverance.” Phrases like “Finish what you started!” and “Stick with it until you’re done” or “See it through to the end” will start to guide your children when they’re tempted to give up.

Model perseverance. When you’re fighting to assemble a bookshelf or a barbecue in front of your kids, give yourself an audible pep talk. Let them hear you say, “I’m going to work on this until I get it figured out” or “I feel like quitting, but I can’t wait to see my favorite books lining these shelves. That keeps me going.”

Lend a hand. Initial attempts to persevere can be tough on kids. When you see them reaching for the “eject button” to free them from a miserable chore or task, gently come alongside and lend a hand. “Let’s get this job finished together.”

Observation Guide

What kinds of things can you look for in the next week that will deepen your understanding of your child’s perseverance? Begin by watching your child’s reactions to snags or obstacles in any activity. Whether opening the milk carton, getting a bike out of the basement, or carrying out a chore, what does your child do with complications? Does he or she immediately turn to you for help? Persist with the task? Look for alternative solutions and try them? Abandon the milk for the orange juice? A *pattern* of always (and quickly) looking for outside intervention might point to some degree of learned helplessness. A *pattern* of persistence and creative problem solving points to growing perseverance. A *pattern* of abandoning tasks in the face of difficulty suggests a lack of stamina and little perseverance.

Two more things to watch for are (1) the level of support you're willing to offer your kids when they are trying new or difficult tasks (don't confuse support with enabling behavior, but remember that it's much harder for your child to learn perseverance without you), and (2) how worthy goals affect your child's perseverance. Kids persevere better when they are working toward a valued goal. Use their goals to keep their eyes fixed on something worth struggling to achieve. (Ultimately, this will help them understand the spiritual perseverance that's described in Hebrews 12, quoted earlier in the chapter.)

Take time to trace your thoughts in your Observation Journal. As you write, new insights will likely emerge as well.

A Prayer for Perseverance

Are you feeling weary? Are you tired of believing good things will result from difficulty—with little to show for your faith? Are you ready to give up in certain areas where the struggle's been long and hard? In the space below, write a prayer that expresses your need for perseverance in a particular area of your life or with your children. Fix your eyes on Him, and let Him strengthen your heart to continue the race set before you. Christ encourages us to persevere in prayer, so don't hesitate to keep knocking, to keep seeking, and to keep hoping. He will answer.

