Chapter One

At Promise: A New Way of Thinking

You have to do your own growing no matter how tall your grandfather was.

—Abraham Lincoln

Over coffee Larry reluctantly began telling his story. “I don’t know why you want to interview me. I don’t have any fuzzy stories to tell you about my youth. I barely had a childhood.”

He continued:

I was number five of eight children. My parents came through the Great Depression, which left an indelible imprint on their lives. . . . My father never got over the fact that he lost everything, so the rest of his life was dedicated to working. He was an electrician, a smart guy for sure, but he spent the rest of his life working himself to death. And that is what he thought the role of a father was. And my mother . . . never really liked kids, I guess . . . never put any time into her kids. So [my parents] didn’t have much positive influence in my life . . . hadn’t steered me in any particular direction.

“So what was the turning point?” we asked. The question surprised him. He looked at us as if we had caught him off guard. Then he said:

I remember [a defining] moment in my life. I was going into tenth grade. Up to that point, all through elementary school and early junior high and high school, I had heard the same thing from everybody: “As intelligent as you are, you ought to be able to make good grades—but you just don’t try very hard.” When football and baseball seasons would come around, I would raise my grades high
enough to stay eligible. But beyond that, I would make D-minus, just enough not to fail.

I had an algebra teacher named Dan Blackwell who asked me to meet him after school. And he said to me, “Larry, obviously you have the ability to do this math, but you don’t work at anything or apply any effort.” Then he said, “I’ll tell you what I am going to do. If you come into my room for one hour, two days a week after school, I’ll help you catch up on your algebra.” And he did. I met with him for the entire semester, almost half a year, twice a week after school for an hour. And he tutored me in math. It was the first time that anyone, any adult, had taken any interest in me whatsoever. He encouraged me, and we got to be very good friends. [With his help, I] raised my algebra scores from a D-minus to an A. Because I had learned that I could achieve, it changed my whole perspective.

From that point on, I don’t know that I made anything less than an A in any subject. It took a lot to catch up, obviously, but otherwise I would have never been able to go to college. It wasn’t a large amount of time [that Dan spent with me] when you think about it; he probably invested fifty hours in me, but [that relationship] just changed the direction of my whole life.

Larry’s story isn’t unusual. Millions of individuals could tell you their own versions, demonstrating again and again how adversity and relationship interact in people’s lives to propel them toward meaningful success. Larry’s experience, like that of so many others, exemplifies our premise that behind every truly successful individual is an At-Promise story: a story that involves adversity and at least one caring adult who participates in a child’s life.

An Overview

What is an At-Promise story? This chapter contains the At-Promise paradigm in a nutshell. Here we summarize the need to replace at-risk thinking with a hopeful new mind-set and vocabu-
lary, and we present At-Promise principles that answer that need. In later chapters we'll explain both the need for this paradigm shift and the principles one by one. Because the AT-PROMISE acronym outlined in this chapter gives you a road map connecting each principle, we recommend that you refer to these pages regularly.

Success Defined

Perhaps you read our opening story and said to yourself, “Well, Larry’s teacher wouldn’t have had the same effect on me. I wasn’t bright like he was. No amount of tutoring or encouragement would have raised my grades to an A average. I’d have been glad to earn C’s. You can’t tell me that adversity and relationship give everybody a shot at success.” You’re right. Some definitions of success exclude us. Not everyone can earn A’s. Nor will all of us be wealthy, talented, beautiful, powerful, or famous.

But what if we defined success differently? Is there a true, meaningful success that everyone can attain? At-Promise thinking depends on just such a definition. Therefore, from this point on, to succeed means to contribute positively to the moral and social fabric of society. That society consists of the communities (family, neighborhood, city, state, country, and world) in which we live. We believe this sort of success results from the development of character that can be produced when we positively interpret adversity in the context of a trusted relationship.

Larry succeeded not because of high grades or his athletic prowess but because he eventually used the lessons he learned through his painful childhood and through his relationship with Dan Blackwell. With Dan, Larry was learning more than how to achieve. He was learning to care by being cared for. Eventually, he used his skills to help families get out of debt. Today he has committed his resources to teaching people to manage their money wisely so that they can have more time and resources for things that matter—like relationships and helping others.
Has Larry Burkett succeeded? We think so, but not because he’s well known as an author and radio host. Larry has succeeded by contributing to the moral and social well-being of others, including those who listen to his broadcasts and learn from his books.

This sort of success is available to every child who experiences both adversity and wise, caring, trusted relationship. Every child has the potential, the innate promise to know the success that comes from helping others. Although we cannot guarantee that a child will choose success, we can have unquenchable hope for every child we mentor, because once a child has both relationship and adversity, true success is available to that child, should he or she choose it.

Your At-Promise Story

Each person’s life is marked in one way or another by relationship and adversity. Some grow up in relatively supportive, caring, and healthy environments; others recall childhoods devoid of support and blistered by difficult, adverse, or even abusive experiences. Many fall somewhere in the middle, knowing a good dose of both love and pain in varying degrees over a lifetime. Regardless of where we fall on this continuum, the intersecting points between our challenging circumstances and a positive, interactive relationship with someone who cared for us serve as catalysts for character growth in our lives. That character is foundational to true success.

As we saw with Larry, successful individuals who grew up in adverse situations inevitably point to a caring relationship as the key to their eventual success. On the other hand, successful individuals who grew up in nurturing and supportive environments point to the introduction of adversity in their lives as a key to their success.

We challenge you to take a look at your own life to see if this is true for you. If your childhood was more characterized by nurturing relationship, then we suspect that times of significant growth occurred when you encountered and dealt with difficulty. If your
childhood was more characterized by pain and adversity, then we suspect that your turning point resulted from someone stepping into your life at a particularly difficult time, believing in you, and offering you hope. This has certainly been the case for us.

A New Paradigm

As a society we often believe that we must avoid adversity. We have seen how pain can damage kids, and we recognize family and cultural upheaval that both spawns and results from pain-inducing choices or circumstances. Therefore, we erroneously believe that all pain is bad and that if we want our children to succeed, we must shelter them from it. Sometimes we consciously decide this. Other times, although we may intellectually acknowledge adversity’s usefulness, we still subconsciously try to shield children from the discomfort of trials.

Regularly we try to protect them in two ways. If we’re advantaged enough, we shower them with material or circumstantial provisions. We think that if they just have enough stuff or opportunities, they’ll be able to dodge much of life’s pain. Similarly, many educators, social services personnel, and parents call for more programs—which may not be based on trusting relationships—to protect children from the adversity of this world.

Adversity scares us! But when we give in to fear-based thinking, we attempt to protect our children from pain through either provisions or programs. Fear causes us to place our children on an enormous life-support system that hooks kids up to a complex network of either stuff or programs as though their very breath depended on them. We fear that without these support structures, our children cannot survive. There is one problem with this thinking: our children do not need a complicated life-support system; they need us!

The At-Promise perspective is a 180-degree shift from fear-based thinking that places a higher priority on provisions and programs than on people. It suggests that we need to develop trusting
relationships with children that can help them interpret adversity and use it as a building block for success. The At-Promise paradigm suggests that just as God uses adversity and relationships to mold and shape us, He also requires adversity and relationships to shape a child’s success. That’s right! We and the children we care about need both adversity and relationships if we are to experience more of our potential.

The Real State of Affairs

Our young people live in an imperfect, risk-laden world. At some point they will face people and circumstances that will mislead, discourage, hurt, harm, frighten, anger, defeat, or even victimize them, conceivably damaging their potential for future success. As much as we parents would like to, we cannot protect them from every possible pain, nor would we be wise to do so, because adversity is necessary to a child’s growth.

The At-Promise Paradigm Offers Deep Hope

On one hand, At-Promise thinking recognizes the fact that each and every child arrives in this world equipped with a flawed nature, a nature that sometimes will be attracted to unhealthy thinking and behavior. Anyone who has worked or lived with children would agree with journalist and author G. K. Chesterton, who asserts that original sin is the one observable Christian doctrine. Every child is indeed at risk and living in an at-risk world.

On the other hand, the At-Promise viewpoint finds its foundation in God’s design for life—and for those kids both He and we care about. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). He has good things in store for his children, even if they must go through pain to reach them. God will shape every kind of adversity—whether mild or horrible—into
something beneficial for personal and communal growth, if we, in love, trust Him to show us the route to that growth.

How? We choose to trust God to use the adversity we have endured to nurture our own promise character. Then we—with His direction and power—do our best to help young people do the same thing. Although we certainly can’t accomplish the transformation of behavior and circumstances in our own strength, God can. Romans 5:3–5 explains the pathway: “... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint . . . us.” This doesn’t mean we like the suffering itself, but it does mean that no matter how terrible the painful circumstance and no matter how long we have to wait, we can endure the pain and the delay because hope and success can eventually emerge from it.

This is a difficult concept to accept without a framework of faith. No amount of theory or research can convince us to sustain unqualified hope for children. Without faith, we will encounter a point of pain beyond which we are humanly incapable of hoping. At that point, without a formula that always works, we will give up on the children we care about.

Fortunately, At-Promise thinking is not a guaranteed formula. It’s better. It is a set of loving, faith-based principles supported by educational and psychological theory and research. It relies on the fact that we have a God who loves us, loves our children, and absolutely wants them to succeed. Fortunately, we do not have final say over the effectiveness of our mentoring. Fortunately, God’s reach, capability, and control extend beyond our own, and ultimately it is He who interacts with our children, on a timetable far different from ours. He understands their free will far better than we do. And He absolutely reassures us that we are not in control; He is.

Even so, God invites us to participate in extracting our children’s promise. We can apply principles He has taught us to help
the children we care about learn to choose behaviors and attitudes that can lead to success. Remember, our definition of success does not include financial wealth or widespread influence. Instead, we can help children develop the character that will compel them to contribute positively to the moral and social fabric of society.

So we choose to acknowledge the risks our children address as imperfect people in an imperfect world, then to redirect our attention to their promise, an identity that defines them more accurately than does any potential risk. We choose to affirm the perspective that acknowledges the at-risk nature of children and yet still declares every child At Promise.

Importantly, kids’ risk and their promise are not equally weighted. Because we believe that our children are designed to resemble their Creator, we have confidence in their varying degrees of ability to think, make decisions, understand good and bad, remember the past, envision the future, and love. Because they are made in God’s image, they have the powerful capacity for developing character like His, whether they are brilliant or mentally handicapped, athletic or palsied, emotionally secure or traumatized. That gives us hope in their capability to overcome and grow through difficulty.

God offers all children the power to rise above adversity and succeed not only in spite of it but because of it. To the degree to which they are receptive, He works within them, using all of life’s past, present, and future experiences and relationships—particularly the painful ones—to build character and success. We know that their promise is more indomitable than any challenges they may encounter.

When we concentrate on the promise in children and show them how to unfold it, the potential pain-causing hazards in their world can become character-building agents. According to Drs. Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi, who coined the term and extensively researched the concept of posttraumatic growth, such growth “is set in motion by the same sets of events that produce psychological distress and that can also place the individual at increased risk of psychological difficulties. . . . The trauma
typically leads to a questioning and reevaluation of many im-
portant assumptions previously held. . . . we see both distress and
growth coexisting in persons in the aftermath of trauma.”
Therefore, instead of expecting children to fall unless we keep pain away,
we expect children to encounter life’s adversity, then expect them
to grow and succeed because of it. Why? Because we will travel
with them and show them the way.

Nine Interacting Principles

For twelve months we interviewed many people in an attempt to
fully develop trustworthy At-Promise principles. During these
interviews we asked individuals from a wide range of backgrounds
to identify key factors that contributed to their success. Some of
these people are highly visible; others are known only in their
immediate communities. All, however, fit our definition of succes-
sful. The results of these interviews yielded recurring themes now
captured in the nine At-Promise principles, which form the foun-
dation for this book.

The acronym AT-PROMISE can help readers remember these
key principles, giving them staying power as we learn to apply them
to our relationships with young people. Two overarching principles
are represented by the acronym’s first two letters:

A Adversity provides a catalyst for a child’s character growth
and is essential to success.

T A trusting relationship with a caring adult helps a child
interpret adversity and develop promise character.

These two elements—adversity and a trusting relationship—inter-
act with each other to create a fertile environment critical for a
child’s positive growth and development. Children are better
equipped for successful, life-enhancing growth when they experi-
ence difficult trials in the context of a meaningful relationship
with a caring adult.
The remaining seven principles represent the character traits that grow out of the intersection of adversity and trusted relationship in the child’s life. Each of these principles can contribute powerfully to a child’s ability to succeed. We can remember them with the PROMISE portion of the acronym:

P Perseverance empowers us to endure adversity and sustain hope.
R Responsibility for our actions keeps us from blaming others and teaches us that our choices have impact.
O Optimism gives us lenses of hope through which we can see positive possibilities in the midst of pain.
M Motivation from identity inspires us to live as individuals created in God’s image, not as people labeled by our assets or deficits.
I Integrity guides us to live honorably even when no one is looking and even when life hurts.
S Service humbles us by shifting our attention away from our selves and onto the needs of others.
E Engaged play facilitates rest, healing, intimacy, and joy.

Without a caring adult, a child can be quickly overwhelmed by adversity. Without adversity, a caring relationship can indulge a child. Without developing components of a promise character, a child will not have the training to succeed. The absence of any of these principles—adversity, trusted relationship, or promise character—can delay maturation of a child’s potential.

What Can We Do?
The degree to which our children develop these traits will largely depend upon three factors within our control:
• The time a caring adult spends building trust with a child
• The number of promise character traits the adult can offer a child
• The way the caring adult chooses to interpret adversity to the child

The more time we can spend with a young person, the more time we have to build a trusted influence with that child. The more character we are cultivating, the more we can model character and offer wise counsel to that child.

We can’t control, however, the ultimate tenderness or resistance of a child—either to a caring adult or to God’s truth. In ways beyond our understanding, God allows each of us the freedom to trust Him and learn from Him or to mistrust Him and refuse His instruction.

Nor can we control God’s timing. Loaves of truth we place within a young heart may not finish cooking for twenty years or more! Just because we don’t see positive results from our time spent with kids, doesn’t mean they aren’t rising in that oven. They may take decades of adversity’s heat to finish baking.

Helping children grow exhilarates. It also hurts. We know both the joy and the pain as we live, work, play, and wait alongside the young people in each of our families. For both the Stuart and Bostrom children, who range in age from six to twenty, adversity is a fact of life. Even as we write this, we hurt with and for and because of our children. That hurting is part of growth, both theirs and ours, as we help our kids climb toward the fulfillment of their incredible promise.

A Call to Action

The At-Promise perspective is a practical, trustworthy, and hope-filled approach to fulfilling the deepest promise in children. This
perspective applies to all kids, ranging from those who are preschool-aged, home-schooled, or attending small private schools; to those who are enrolled in large school systems, attend college, or have already completed their formal education. It is a call to action and a vaccination against both hopelessness and an “epidemic of pessimism” among young people that Dr. Martin Seligman identifies in his book *The Optimistic Child.*

At-Promise thinking articulates a mind-set for seeing past pain to hope, as well as a framework for evaluating our own impact on and responsibility to the young people in our lives. This mandate asks each caring adult to step forward and to invest deliberately in the life of a child.

What are our children really up against? Let’s begin by looking at the risks that bombard them.

**Remember . . .**

- Behind every truly successful individual is an At-Promise story: a story that involves trials, adversity, and at least one caring adult who participates in a child’s life.
- From this point on, to succeed means to contribute positively to the moral and social fabric of society.
- When we concentrate on the promise in children and show them how to unfold it, the potential pain-causing hazards in their world can become character-building agents.