

My Heart's at Home

Jill Savage



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What Is a Home?

What do you think of when you hear the word home? What images and emotions come to mind? This is something to ponder, for these images and emotions have the power to shape your life, to give it meaning, to tell you who you are.

THOMAS KINKADE



My husband, Mark, and I walked through the well-lived-in farmhouse marveling at the size of the rooms. There was a lot of space: large kitchen and dining room, good-sized family room and living room, one bedroom for an office, a small bathroom—and that was just on the main floor.

Upstairs were five bedrooms! Yep, five bedrooms...and no bathroom. One small bathroom on the main floor for our family of six? Well, of course this house needed some work. What farmhouse wouldn't? And what would it take to add a bathroom upstairs? No problem. But that wasn't all. It was not only a perfect house, but it was in a perfect location: smack-dab in the middle of cornfields and yet only two and a half miles from Wal-Mart. What more could we want? Our dream to live in the country was going to finally come true.

We made several trips to look at this house with our Realtor. On the final trip, we were determining what we were going to offer the seller when another Realtor and interested party stopped by. They asked if we minded if they took a quick tour of the home, even though we were present. We told them to go right ahead. As the Realtor's client stepped through the entryway into the kitchen,

he said, “This place is a pit. I don’t want to see any more.” They walked out of the house and then Mark and I looked at each other and laughed. We didn’t see the liabilities of this old farmhouse—we saw its possibilities!

We signed the papers and, with the help of friends and family, set to work, determining to do most of the renovation before we moved in. Our four children ranged from ages twelve to nine months. We decided the best strategy was for Mark to work evenings and weekends at the house and I would get a sitter occasionally so I could help him, but ultimately I prepared myself for full kid duty twenty-four hours a day for however long this took.

It took four months.

We tore out all of the carpet because the entire house needed new floor coverings. We uncovered pocket doors that had been closed off years ago. We painted woodwork that was already painted and cleaned and stained woodwork that was still in its natural state. We washed and painted every wall and ceiling. We tore out the plumbing for the only bathroom because the floor had rotted and we feared someone might just sit on the pot one day and fall through to the cellar.

But that wasn’t all. We still had the “no bathroom on the second floor” problem, so we made a decision to tear off the entryway and a small enclosed porch, pour a new foundation, and add a two-story addition: a small room and an entryway on the main floor and a laundry room and a bathroom on the second floor. We also decided that because there was no garage, we would add an attached garage off the back of the house.

We didn’t hire anyone to do the construction work—we did it all ourselves with the exception of hiring an electrician and contracting someone to pour the foundation.

It was a lot of work.

I often think back to that time in our life nearly ten years ago. We had a dream *and* we had the vision to see the dream come true. When we looked at the house, we didn’t see it for what it was. We saw it for what it would become.

There was another construction project we were managing even while constructing and reconstructing our new home: We were building a family. We had a dream and the vision to see that dream come true as well.

Many of the home-building experiences we've had with our farmhouse have mirrored the experiences we've had building our family. Sometimes we've had to tear down an old structure that we carried with us from our families of origin and build something new and different. Sometimes we've had to start from scratch and build a completely new structure within our family because we have a vision for something different than either of us have ever known. In both cases we've had a plan, and we've carried out that plan with intentionality.

When we renovated, we drew up blueprints to help us visualize the new part of our home. Seeing the details on paper kept us on track and working toward the same goals. In the same way, we've needed a blueprint for our family. Similar to the steps in building a home, there are foundational elements we need to have in place so we can build a strong family structure. Once the foundation is poured, we begin to build the framework, and eventually we put on the finishing details.

But what makes a house a home? It's the family dynamics of the people who live in that house that makes it a home. When we value being home and recognize all the roles that home plays in our life, we can provide a secure, loving environment for each member of our family.

Home—there's a warmth about that word. It's associated with love and security. It's a place where we are known, accepted, and celebrated. But a house isn't what we are really drawn to—it's the memories, the feelings we experience that draw us home. And a house can't provide memories itself—it's the people, the family that draws our heart to home.

Our neighborhoods are filled with broken hearts and broken homes. Many of us came from broken homes and broken families, longing for something different for our own family but not quite

knowing how to get there. We know home is important because we can identify the qualities that we experienced or longed for as a child. Now that we have our own families, we need a blueprint to help us build and/or renovate our home and family.

My Heart's at Home is designed to help us understand all the roles that home plays in our life:

Home as...a safe house
 ...a rest area
 ...a trauma unit
 ...a church

Home as...a pep rally
 ...a research lab
 ...a school
 ...a museum

Home as...a playground
 ...a business office
 ...a hospitality house
 ...a cultural center

Home is central to understanding who we are, who we belong to, and what we stand for. It is hope, promise, and love. Home isn't about the structure we live in; it's about our connection to the people who live in the structure with us.

In this book you'll learn a lot about the people who live in my home, so I believe introductions are in order. My husband, Mark, and I have been married 23 years, 13 of them happily. We're a living example that two people can restore love to what eventually became a loveless marriage. Most of that story is found in my book *Is There Really Sex After Kids?* (Zondervan), but you'll hear snippets of it in this book as well. Our oldest daughter, Anne, is 22 years old. She's been married less than a year to Matt, the son-in-law we prayed for all of Anne's life. Our oldest son, Evan, is 19 and a sophomore in college. He's studying music business and hopes to someday make a

living with his musical talents. Erica is 16 years old and a sophomore in high school. She loves musical theater and fashion design. Kolya is the newest member to our family. He's 13 years old, but has only been a "Savage" for three and a half years. We adopted Kolya from Russia at the age of nine. However, you'd hardly know that now, as his transition into our family has been very smooth. Austin is our youngest. He's ten years old and in the fifth grade. Both Kolya and Austin love sports, and they are both learning to play an instrument in the school band (earplugs, anyone?).

I've been at home now for 20 years, and I consider motherhood my profession. I have a college degree (music education), and initially felt I was wasting my education, talents, and skills by being "just a mom." In time, however, my perspective changed, and I began to think of motherhood as a valid career choice. Once I thought of it as a profession, I pursued it with as much intentionality as I would any other career. Eventually I launched Hearts at Home (www.hearts-at-home.org), an organization designed to encourage, educate, and equip women in the profession of motherhood. This book is a Hearts at Home resource, one of many resources available to encourage women to mother with intentionality.

As you turn the following pages, you'll find vision to keep you focused for the long haul of parenting. You'll find encouragement that will keep you going every day. And you'll find perspective that will reframe your understanding of home and empower you to make a home for your family in more ways than you may have ever considered.



PART I
The Foundation



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Home as a Safe House

*The happiest moments of my life have been the few which
I have passed at home in the bosom of my family.*

THOMAS JEFFERSON



It was a hot summer day. We had torn off the enclosed patio and a small entryway into our farmhouse. Today was the day we turned the corner from demolition to construction. We were pouring the foundation of an addition on our “new home.” This foundation would support a two-story addition that would include a bathroom and laundry room on the second floor.

The foundation of a house determines how safe and secure the building will be. While the foundation isn't usually seen, it's the most important part of the house because everything else is built on top of it. Families are built the same way. The foundational elements of a family lay the groundwork for a positive, loving family environment. We may have a vision for the family and home life we dream of creating, but if we don't pay attention to the foundational elements that will support that dream, we'll find ourselves with a family environment that doesn't feel safe, isn't a refuge from the crazy world we live in, doesn't provide hope when life feels hopeless, and doesn't give us a place to heal from life's hurts. When we recognize the need for home to be a safe house, a place of restoration, a faith environment, and even a trauma unit, we are on our way to creating a firm foundation for a home environment that nurtures, loves, and encourages one another.

Let's begin to explore the foundational elements that turn a house into a home by first understanding the role of home as a safe house.

The Role of a Safe House

They say the house down the street from us was once a part of the Underground Railroad. It stands by itself like a ship amidst a sea of corn and soybean fields. Every time I drive by it, I try to imagine what it would have been like to move from one safe house to the next. I can almost feel the fear that would grip a heart moving from one unknown to another. Once an escaped slave had arrived and was welcomed and well hidden by the “conductor,” there had to be a sigh of relief and, for a brief moment, a sense of safety.

A safe house provides protection from the world in which it exists. It recognizes the dangers that lurk in every direction, shielding its inhabitants from their threatening surroundings. When home is a safe house, it provides a foundation of safety in family relationships. This safety is what is needed for us to securely and intimately attach to those closest to us. Let's take a look at what is required to construct a home that is emotionally safe.

Require Respect

Respect is the cornerstone of a safe family. When our thoughts, feelings, and emotions are respected, we feel secure. When our property, privacy, and individuality are respected, we feel protected. Respect speaks value, esteem, admiration, and appreciation.

If respect is so important, how is it that we so easily become disrespectful at home? Why do we treat the ones we love the most with such disdain? Often we show more respect to complete strangers than we do to our own family. This happens because home is where we let down the walls. It's a place where we feel we don't always have to be on our best behavior. And we don't. If home is going to be a safe place, it needs to be a safe place when we're on our best behavior and when we're not. However, sometimes we confuse being in a “safe” environment as having a license for disrespect.

That's when the pendulum swings too far, and we need to bring it back in balance.

Even in the early years of parenting we can establish respect. It starts with respecting other children's toys by teaching respect for property. If you go to someone's home and your toddler plays with their toys, require them to help pick up and put them away when you are ready to leave. When you are walking on a sidewalk and your preschooler wants to take off across the grass on someone's lawn, draw him or her back to the sidewalk and gently explain about respect for property. When your child needs to talk to you and you are in the bathroom or bedroom with the door closed, teach them to knock and share with them about respect for privacy. When you are in a crowded bus or train, talk to your child about respect for age, requiring that they give up their seat for someone older. These are foundational lessons for a lifetime of respect.

What about at home? At home, require respect. Establish a core value of respect within the family, and if that core value is disregarded, address the infringement immediately. In other words, discipline for disrespect.

My parents used to say, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Mark and I took that one step further. If a child was being disrespectful to a sibling or us, they lost their freedom of speech. Removing the privilege of speaking is one way to address disrespect within a family. Maybe one child is having trouble with his tongue while in the car on the way home from school. After asking the child if what he said was respectful and his admittance that it wasn't, a simple parental response is "Since you misused your mouth, you have lost your freedom to speak until we get home. After we get home, you'll need to go straight to your bedroom to think about the weight of your words. Then you'll need to make it right with your sister ('I'm sorry. Will you please forgive me?') before you have your freedom restored."

In many families brothers and sisters are downright mean to one another. In a home that requires respect, disrespect simply can't be tolerated. Don't threaten to do something when your offspring say

something mean to one another or to you; nip it in the bud right away. Don't simply say, "Don't talk to your brother like that." Let them know their behavior is unacceptable and give a consequence immediately. Dealing with this matter from day one lets them know you are serious.

If your kids are older and you have allowed disrespect, it's not too late to address it. Call a family meeting and explain that from this day forward this will be a home of respect, and if something mean is said to another, a consequence will be experienced (loss of privilege, loss of screens—TV, computer, video games, etc.). Establish the foundation of respect and then protect it fiercely.

Practice Grace and Forgiveness

There is nothing better in this world than to be celebrated for who you are. The natural place for that to happen is within the family unit. However, when you live closely with other people, it becomes easy to criticize each other's shortcomings rather than celebrate the differences. Introducing the concept of forgiveness and grace as well as healthy conflict resolution skills will help family members know how to manage the daily ups and downs of relationships.

Before we can teach our kids about it, we have to understand it for ourselves. I explored the concept of grace in my *Professionalizing Motherhood* book, so I'll simply include an overview of the concept here. Extending grace to someone is allowing them to be human. A family with grace in place allows a family member to make mistakes without being raked over the coals for their blunder. When God extends His grace to us, it means that there is nothing we can do that would cause Him to love us more and there is nothing we can do to cause Him to love us less. Can we say that experience happens in our family? When your husband fails to do what he said he would do, do you turn cold and angry or do you forgive him in your heart and extend grace? Or when your child spills milk on your freshly mopped floor, do you lash out in anger or do you make a better choice by extending grace? After all, we all make mistakes, right?

Most of the time when family members disappoint us, they mess

with our sense of justice. We feel the need to let them know that their mistake made life unfair for us or affected us in some way. We feel the need to punish those who do wrong. But God doesn't work that way. When we deserve punishment He gives mercy instead, and that's what's called grace. However, the pathway to grace requires a stop at forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the choice to let go of the hurt. It's a decision to let God handle the justice part of the equation. Forgiveness is life-giving to relationships and freeing to the soul. When you and I choose to live lives of grace, forgiveness is what gets us there. So when your husband fails to do what he said he would do, you are facing a very important Y in the road. You can get angry and lash out at him with condemning, wounding words, or you can have a conversation with God that goes something like this: "God, I do love that man, but right now I don't like him. He disappointed me, and his irresponsibility now has ramifications for me. As hard as it is, though, I choose to forgive him for what happened today." Whew! That's a hard conversation to have with God, but if you and I will learn to have more of those conversations, we will pave the way for loving, grace-filled relationships.

"If I have that kind of conversation with God, does it mean I can't talk to my husband about how his actions affected me?" you might ask. The answer is, "Absolutely not!" If it's a one-time incident and a bit uncharacteristic of him, you can certainly let it go and not mention a thing. That's called serving one another. However, if you feel a conversation is needed, you can certainly discuss what happened. Here's the key: If you approach the conversation with a forgiving heart, you'll more likely be able to resolve the conflict swiftly. However, if you approach the conversation filled with anger, you'll put your husband on the defense and make little progress in resolving the conflict. In fact, it will probably become bigger than it really needed to be.

Marriage isn't the only place conflict happens. Similar scenarios are played out every day with our children, our neighbors, and our friends. We have to learn to recognize the dozens of Y's in the road

we face every day living life with other people. Once we do we can begin to teach our children, both by direct instruction and by example, the beauty of living by grace. Each family member needs to understand the concept of forgiveness and grace to make home where we not only feel safe from criticism, but also celebrated for who we are—mistakes and all.

I'm still on the grace journey. I've come a long way from the anger and criticism in the early years of marriage and mothering, but I still blow it sometimes. You will too. When we do, we take a step back, clean up the relational mess ("I'm sorry. Will you please forgive me?"), and allow the incident to be a reminder to watch for the Y's in the road of life.

Intentionally Listen

"Mom, can we talk?" That's a question most of us long to hear from our kids. It's hard for a kid to ask that even in the best relational environment, but it's nearly impossible for them to ask that when they anticipate the response will be a lecture, a dozen ways to solve the problem, or out-and-out anger. As a parent, there are two questions we need to ask ourselves: "Am I a good listener?" and "Am I a safe person to talk to?"

Learning to listen is one of the most important skills in which a parent can grow. How we listen will determine whether a person feels heard, valued, and respected. Many years ago, four-year-old Austin was telling me a story while I prepared dinner. He sat at the island in the kitchen while I moved from the refrigerator to the sink to the pantry and back again. As Austin talked, I gave some verbal responses to let him know I was listening. But that wasn't enough. Finally he interrupted his story and said with frustration, "Mom, will you listen to me?" I told him I was listening and even repeated part of the story back to him. He responded with, "No, don't just listen with your ears. Listen to me with your eyes." Wow. There's nothing like a life lesson from your four-year-old.

We can remember the three keys to listening well with three words: Stop, Look, and Listen.

- STOP everything you are doing and turn your body toward the person talking.
- LOOK in their eyes to give value and affirmation as they speak.
- LISTEN intently and refrain from using your mouth except to encourage.

If they are facing a problem that needs to be solved, you might ask, “Are you looking for solutions or do you just need me to listen?” This helps clarify what your spouse or child is looking for from you as they vent. It also makes you a better listener and makes them feel you are a safe person to talk to.

If your child needs to cry, then hold them and let them cry. Don’t try to solve their problems. Pray with them. Comfort them. Let them know that you wish you could take away the hurt, but since you can’t, you’ll walk the journey alongside them.

If your child isn’t willing to talk but seems to be slipping into depression or withdrawing, find someone they can talk with. Don’t be offended by their difficulty in sharing with you. Show them you care by getting some help. One mom shared with me how her daughter was beginning to show signs of depression and was withdrawing from family relationships. She contacted a counselor and set up an appointment. At first the daughter didn’t want to go, but Mom gently persisted. In time the counselor’s office became a safe place and provided the daughter a place to talk during a difficult season of her teen years.

When home is a safe house, it is a place where we feel safe to communicate what we are struggling with or feeling without judgment, criticism, or ten easy answers to our problem. If I’m a safe person to talk to, my child can trust that I will listen to them, won’t explode or overreact, and will bite my tongue occasionally and refrain from trying to solve all their problems. This type of environment builds safety and trust in a family and makes home a safe place to be.

Increase Margin

When Dr. Richard Swenson wrote the book *Margin*, he likened certain areas of our lives to the margins—or white space—in a book. His premise is that society's fast pace has decreased the white space in our life to a level that is dangerous for both our physical and relational health. We'll explore this more in chapter 2, but I mention it here because adequate margins are needed for home to be a safe house. Home is a safe place to be when there is a balance between doing and being, work and rest, going and staying home.

Kids need balance in their schedules, leaving a large amount of white space for running, playing, and using their imagination. They also need adequate sleep and occasional naps. Margin is not only essential for kids, it's important for parents too. Pace of life has a lot to do with a mom's ability to offer grace and forgiveness. Both forgiveness and grace require emotional energy on our part. If we are emotionally spent, we're going to be far less patient, less forgiving, and less grace-filled than we need to be. If you are in the baby/toddler stage of life, napping when the baby naps may be a necessity to have the emotional energy you need for the remainder of the day. If your children are older, you may find it necessary to simplify your schedule or their schedule to allow for more positive family interaction.

Turn Sibling Rivalry into Sibling Revelry

In his book *Keep the Siblings, Lose the Rivalry*, Todd Cartmell tells us there are three reasons for sibling rivalry:

Reason #3: You have more than one child.

Reason #2: Your children live in the same house.

Reason #1: Your children's living-together skills are still developing.¹

There's not too much a parent can do about reasons 2 and 3, but some intentional strategy in approaching reason 1 is what will

turn sibling rivalry into sibling revelry and ultimately make home a safe place to be.

Strategy 1: Play Together

Every child longs to belong. When families intentionally spend time together, they increase the family bond, ultimately helping each family member feel a part of something bigger than themselves. As parents, we need to create a “we are a team” mind-set that casts a vision for each family member to be a part of a team designed to last a lifetime.

Strategy 2: Connect Individually

Children won't vie for your attention if they know they have it already. I once heard author and speaker Elise Arndt, a mother of five, say that one goal a mom should have is to occasionally make each child feel like an only child. Mark and I have found that to be a reachable goal, and we have worked to accomplish it by taking the kids out on dates with one or both of us, taking them school shopping by themselves, spending time lying on their bed at night talking, and making sure we are in attendance at any event they are involved in.

Strategy 3: Set Clear Standards and Expectations

Most of the time, kids will rise to the standard you set. When we deal with misbehavior, it is often because the child is looking for the boundary line. Let your family know that sibling respect is the standard in your family. Discuss what is expected of them in attending one another's extracurricular activities. You might want to occasionally call family meetings to set standards or call everyone back to a standard that seems to be slipping. You might also brainstorm as to how you can celebrate and support one another—letting the entire family help set the standard and come up with ways to carry it out.

Strategy 4: Model Healthy Conflict Resolution Skills

If Joey and Suzie see Mom and Dad yell and scream at one another in conflict, you can almost bet that, when conflict happens

between the two siblings, they'll be yelling and screaming before you know it. If you and your spouse don't resolve conflict in a healthy way, seek out help in developing conflict management skills that will take your marriage the distance and foster healthy family relationships.

Mark and I had to do this ourselves as we came from opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to resolving conflict. One of us raged and one of us tried to sweep things under the carpet. Neither method was healthy, so we sought out a marriage counselor who helped us find middle ground—a strategy that fostered communication, helped us feel heard, allowed for compromise and agreement, and brought closure and healing to places we had wounded one another in the process. We learned the value of a whole apology (“I’m sorry. Will you please forgive me?” “Yes, I forgive you.”) that needed to happen when we hurt one another.

Strategy 5: Teach Healthy Conflict Resolution Skills

Once Mom and Dad learn healthy conflict resolution skills, it's time to talk about it with the kids. Even if bad conflict resolution habits have invaded your home, it's never too late to apologize for being poor role models, explain what you've learned, and set new standards in place that will preserve relationships over the long haul. You might even do some role-playing with your kids to illustrate what needs to happen to make things right with another family member when someone has been intentionally or unintentionally hurt.

Make It Safe to Fail

“Failure is simply an indicator that a child needs more time to develop. If your child is going to fail—and roughly 100 percent do—you want him or her to learn to fail gracefully in the safety of your home,” says Dr. Kevin Leman.²

Kids need to know that taking risks and failing is a natural part of life. Failing doesn't define a person; it simply clarifies their skill level and indicates places they need to grow. We want our kids to

know that home is the safest place to fall because someone will always be there to help them back up.

An important key in making home a safe place to fail is for us, as parents, to realize that a child's failure does not define us as well. When Austin was four years old, he embarrassed me in public. I found myself shaming him for his childish behavior, hoping that I could bring about compliance so that I could look better. But God spoke to me in that moment and reminded me that my self-worth is not based upon my child's behavior. My value and self-worth are based upon my relationship with God. Once that truth moved from my head to my heart, I knew that a new level of safety had been created in our home.

How about you? Have you ever found yourself more concerned with how you appear to others than how you are treating a family member who has disappointed you or failed in some way? The only way you can keep from making the same mistake I did is to remember that your value and your self-worth are not dependent upon how you look or how your family looks or behaves. That's building your life on sinking sand.

What we have to do is build our lives on a Solid Rock—Someone who never changes and is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is only then that we'll be able to allow family members to fail in an emotionally safe environment.

A Foundation of Safety

This year on my birthday I received a priceless gift from my 15-year-old daughter, who was coming out of a very difficult and tumultuous year of her teenage life. She took a picture of herself and framed it with the following words:

Mom, I am so grateful for all the years you have invested into my life. Thank you...for so many hours spent with me when I was sick...for crying with me when I just needed to cry...for loving me even when it was incredibly hard... for being patient with me when you just wanted to yell at me...for spending time with me when I needed it the

most...for going to all my games and supporting me in my decisions...for listening to me when I felt like no one could hear me...for not giving up when times were hard.

You have shown me how to live as an amazing woman of God. Your life has become a stencil of Christ's love. May these words truly convey how much I love you.

Learning to be safe has been a 21-year journey for me as a mother. I still mess up sometimes, but I'm making progress—at least enough progress that Erica was able to feel loved, cared for, and essentially safe even during a difficult period of her life.

The foundational elements are relationship driven with the intention of establishing, preserving, deepening, and protecting family relationships. Healthy relationships set us on our relationship track for the rest of their lives. The relationships we have with our parents and our siblings serve as the foundation for all future relationships in life. It's far more important that children grow up in an emotionally safe home than it is that they have opportunities for lessons, sports, or other activities that are considered an essential part of childhood. We start by making home a safe house and then we build from there.

*When home is a safe house, I know
I feel safe and secure when I'm at home.*

