

THE *TECH-WISE* FAMILY

Everyday Steps for Putting Technology
in Its Proper Place

ANDY CROUCH

With new insights and research from Barna



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years another form of transportation will make a similarly grand leap from tool-like to technology-like, from requiring skill to working all by itself, in the form of driverless cars (which really will be, finally, *automobiles*, things that go by themselves). In our grandchildren's era, travel by car—currently one of the most dangerous things you can do with your day—may become as safe and passive as air travel is for many of us today.

We are in the midst of the greatest revolution in easy everywhere the world has ever known. And it may just be getting started.

All that would be fine—in its place, actually, it *is* fine.

It's just not the best thing for our families.

Here's why.

What Is a Family For?

I want to suggest a pretty radical idea about what family is for.

Family is about the forming of *persons*. Being a person is a gift, like life itself—we are born as human beings made in the image of God. But while in one sense a person is simply what we *are* as human beings, we are also able to *become*—to grow in capacities that are only potentially present within us at first.

Family shapes us in countless ways. But I want to focus in this book on two crucial qualities that family forms in

us. Family helps form us into persons who have acquired *wisdom* and *courage*.

Wisdom is not just *knowledge*—mastering information about particular aspects of the world. Wisdom is understanding. It’s the kind of understanding, specifically, that guides action. It’s knowing, in a tremendously complex world, what the right thing to do is—what will be most honoring of our Creator and our fellow creatures.

This is why, in the psalms and the proverbs of the Hebrew Bible, the fool is the one who doesn’t know God, doesn’t understand fellow human beings, and doesn’t even really know himself. (“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion” [Prov. 18:2]—which also sounds a lot like social media.) A fool can know a lot of things, but a fool doesn’t really know what it is to be a *person*. And the fool certainly doesn’t know how to act in a way that will serve the flourishing of persons—even, in the end, his own flourishing. The fool may be well educated, but the fool does not understand. When he acts, the results are, sooner or later, hilarious and disastrous in equal measure.

Two great things happen in families—at least, families at their best. For one, we discover what fools we are. No matter how big your house, it’s not big enough to hide your foolishness from people who live with you day after day. We misunderstand each other, we misunderstand ourselves, and we certainly misunderstand God (when we remember him at all). In our families we see the consequences of all

that misunderstanding. Our busyness, our laziness, our sullenness, our short tempers, our avoidance of conflict, our boiling-over conflicts—living in a family is one long education in just how foolish we can be, children and adults alike.

And yet a second amazing thing happens in families at their best. Our foolishness is seen and forgiven, and it is also seen and loved. As the British writer G. K. Chesterton put it in his book *Charles Dickens*, this is the secret of “ordinary and happy marriage”:

A man and a woman cannot live together without having against each other a kind of everlasting joke. Each has discovered that the other is a fool, but a great fool. This largeness, this grossness and gorgeousness of folly is the thing which we all find about those with whom we are in intimate contact; and it is the one enduring basis of affection, and even of respect.³

Somehow, in the discovery that we are great fools, we also begin to develop wisdom. This happened to all of us as we grew up, from children who foolishly thought every toy belonged to us, to adults who are capable of empathy and self-sacrifice. It happens for parents, too, as we discover in the course of caring for our children just how self-centered and impatient we can be and begin to acquire a deeper capacity for love.

All the really important things we do as families involve developing wisdom.

In some cultures, marriages are arranged by parents on their children's behalf. The decision about whom the child should marry is the culminating exercise of understanding the soon-to-be-adult son or daughter, their role in society, and the most fitting mate for their gifts and station in life. It's the final great exercise of wisdom by parents, summing up years of observing and investing in their children. Arranging a marriage involves a lot more than just knowledge, and it requires a seasoned perspective on life that young adults are thought not yet to have.

In North America, of course, most marriages are not arranged by parents, and marriage often happens long after children leave their parents' homes. But there is another process that many families go through in North America that has taken its place, one last arrangement of a child's life that requires a great deal of wisdom and is even more expensive than a wedding! It's making a decision about college.

My family, with our two teenage children, is in the midst of navigating the college search, application, admission, decision—and financing—process. To navigate through that complex process requires a great deal of *knowledge* on the part of everyone in the family. But the ultimate decisions about college require something more than just lots of information about colleges, applications, and financial aid. It requires that all of us, including the college-bound son or daughter, summon up all the wisdom (and money) we can.

Knowledge, these days, is very easy to come by—almost too easy, given the flood of search results for almost any word or phrase you can imagine. But you can't search for wisdom—at least, not online. And it's as rare and precious as ever—maybe, given how complex our lives have become, rarer and more precious than before.

The Faithful, Scary Thing to Do

If all we needed were wisdom, that would be challenge enough. But it's not all we need. Because we need not just to understand our place in the world and the faithful way to proceed—we also need the conviction and character to act. And that is what courage is about. The older word for this is *virtue*, a word that has dwindled, in our common language, into something like “niceness” or, worse, a kind of goody-goody avoidance of bad behavior. But we can't afford to give up the word's older and deeper meaning, which is the habits of character that allow us to act courageously in the face of difficulty.

Life is difficult. In fact, if you do life properly—with wisdom—life gets *more* difficult as you go. (Eventually, it gets difficult for everyone, especially for the ones who try to avoid difficulty.) And even though it's incredibly hard simply to know what we should do, it's even harder to actually act on what we know we should do. Because almost all the time,

the most faithful, the most loving, and the wisest thing to do is scary, hard, and painful—even, in some ways, dangerous.

I knew—beyond the shadow of a doubt—that I was meant to marry my wife. That didn't stop me from lying awake long into the night before our wedding, praying through my anxieties and fears.

Later on, when we conceived our first child, we knew that our unborn child was a gift, but the months before his arrival brought excruciating sciatica for Catherine and the overwhelming challenge for me of loving my wife, who had been so healthy and fit and now was so limited and in so much pain.

At all the moments of greatest conflict in our marriage, and in our deepest friendships with others, the way of wisdom has been clear: stay committed, stay faithful, stay hopeful. To actually commit and keep faith and hope has sometimes asked more of us than we could imagine giving.

And we've been, on the whole, fortunate beyond belief in our lives so far. All of the hardest times are almost surely still ahead. We are old enough to understand that—we've seen friends walk through, and suffer through, all the heartache that life and death, loyalty and betrayal, can bring. We are wiser than we were when we were younger. But will we be able to bear whatever comes with the same grace and peace we've seen in others?

How can we become the kind of people who have wisdom and courage?

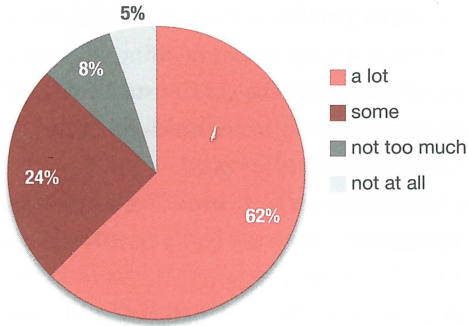
The only way to do it is *with other people*. We need people who know us and the complexities and difficulties of our lives really well—so well that we can't hide the complexity and difficulty from them. And we need people who love us—who are unreservedly and unconditionally committed to us, our flourishing, and our growth no matter what we do, and who are so committed to us that they won't let us stay the way we are.

If you don't have people in your life who know you and love you in that radical way, it is very, very unlikely you will develop either wisdom or courage. You may become smart, you might even become successful, but it is very unlikely you will have a deep enough understanding of yourself and your complex calling to actually become either wise or courageous. We just are too good at deceiving ourselves and think too highly of ourselves. The people who know us best see the truth about who we are, even as they also see more clearly who we could become.

Such people can be friends, to be sure. In adolescence, in particular, our friends play an important role in helping us develop wisdom and courage. But it is the very rare friendship that is extensive enough, intimate enough, and above all long lasting and committed enough to really uncover our deepest foolishness and cowardice and to draw out our deepest capacity for wisdom and courage. And the friendships that do make it to that level of honesty and commitment end up feeling an awful lot like family. Family, for almost all of

A Majority of Americans Say Family Is an Essential Part of Their Identity

How much does family make up your personal identity?



n = 975 US adults; February 2015

us, is the setting where we are known and cared for in the fullest and longest-lasting sense. Family was there at your birth. If you are blessed, family will be there at your death. At the most vulnerable moments of your life, you hope that family will be there.

The First Family

This word *family* is potentially misleading, because what “family” means to us in places like North America is itself shaped by quite recent developments in culture, and indeed in technology.

It’s only recently, and in a small corner of the world, that “family” has primarily meant a father, a mother, and their

biological children living together in a “single-family” home. That may describe your own upbringing or your current living situation. (It happens to describe the situation of my wife, Catherine, and our children, Timothy and Amy, for the last decade or so.) But it may sound nothing like your life right now; indeed, according to the US Census Bureau it describes less than 20 percent of US households as of 2012.⁴

Either way, this book is for you.

Because while not everyone lives in a single-family home with kids underfoot, everyone has a family—or at least, in the plan of God, everyone can.

As a Christian, I actually don’t believe the biological family is the main place we are meant to be known and loved in a way that leads to wisdom and courage. Jesus, after all, said some pretty harsh things about ordinary, biological family. He said that his way of wisdom and courage would divide children from parents and brothers from sisters—as it did in his day and sometimes still does in ours. When his own biological relatives came to one house where he was teaching and healing, trying to convince him to come home and stop being so messianic, he looked around and said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:48–50).

The first family for everyone who wants wisdom and courage in the way of Jesus is the church—the community of disciples who are looking to Jesus to reshape their understanding and their character. And the church is, and can be, family for

everyone in a way that biological families cannot. No matter whether your parents are still living—or whether they were ever loving—no matter whether you have a spouse or children or siblings or cousins, you have a family in the church.

Of course, not all churches live up to this ideal—any more than all families do—but as our first family, the church is the place we learn to become the persons we were meant to be. This is surely why the very first Christians, who were not biologically related to each other and in fact came from entirely different ethnic and economic communities, referred to one another as *brother* and *sister*.

But if the church is to be our first family, it cannot just be a friendly, weekly gathering. The first Christians met in homes, and those homes were not single-family dwellings but Greco-Roman “households” that often included several generations as well as uncles and aunts, clients, and indentured servants of the “*paterfamilias*.” The church too was a household—a gathering of related and unrelated persons all bound together by grace and the pursuit of holiness.

The house Catherine and I brought our son home to, nineteen years ago as I write, was not a “single-family” home. It was a three-story apartment that we shared with another married couple and two unmarried women, all of us brothers and sisters in Christ trying to be a little expression of the household of God in the city where we lived. Earlier, before we had children, Catherine and I had lived with other unmarried roommates; and before we married, we had each

lived in intentional Christian communities with other women and men. (In one household I lived in after college, all five residents shared the same bank account for several years.) All of these homes were expressions of the “household of God,” and all played crucial parts in forming us as persons.

So here’s the complicated, wonderful truth. If our families are to be all that they are meant to be—schools of wisdom and courage—they will have to become more like the church, households where we are actively formed into something more than our culture would ask us to be. And if our churches are to be all they are meant to be, they will have to become more like a family—household-like contexts of daily life where we are all nurtured and developed into the persons we are meant to be and can become.

We’ve always needed a community wider than the solitary, nuclear family to thrive, and we surely need it now. Almost none of the commitments in this book can be realized by that minimal family unit. For technology, with all its gifts, poses one of the greatest threats ever conceived by human society to the formation of wise, courageous persons that real family and real community are all about.

Hollow Fruit

Please understand: I’m not saying technology is bad. In fact, I would say it is *very good*. Christians inherit the Jewish

story in which the world is meant to be tended and developed by human beings, with their unique capacity for memory, reason, and skill. Once these image bearers were placed in creation, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Part of that “very-goodness” is the human capacity to discover and develop all the potential in God’s amazing cosmos. It took thousands of years for us to understand how electricity and magnetism work together, to learn how to efficiently harness the earth’s amazing reserves of energy, and to discover the properties of materials at tiny scales—but all that was there from the very beginning, waiting for us. Technology is the latest, and in many ways most astonishingly good, example of the fruit our image bearing was meant to produce.

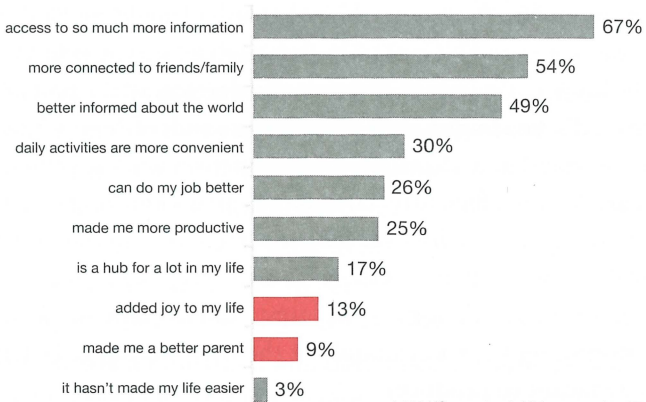
But technology is only very good if it can help us become the persons we were meant to be. Let’s honestly compare ourselves, and the society we currently inhabit, with previous generations who did not benefit from modern technology’s easy everywhere. Without a doubt, compared to human beings just one century ago, we are more globally connected, better informed about many aspects of the world, in certain respects more productive, and—thanks to GPS and Google Maps—certainly less lost. But are we more patient, kind, forgiving, fearless, committed, creative than they were? And if we are, how much credit should technology receive?

I know this much: I cannot imagine working as hard as my grandfather and grandmother, who were dairy farmers

Technology Has Made Life Easier but Not More Joyful

In what ways has technology made your life genuinely easier?

Select all that apply.



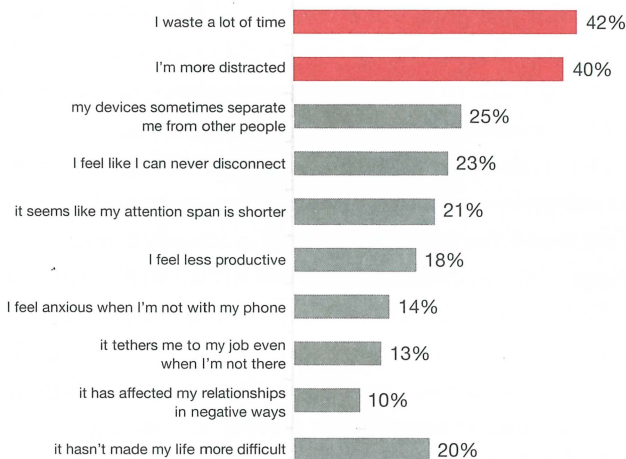
in western Illinois. They woke up before dawn every day and worked, for a sharecropper's less-than-minimum wage, nearly every day of their lives. Nor can I imagine being as thrifty as my grandmother on my mother's side, who went without luxuries and even necessities to save for the future, so that my college education (and my cousins') would be largely paid for.

In countless ways our lives are *easier* than our grandparents'. But in what really matters—for example, wisdom and courage—it seems very hard to argue that our lives are overall *better*. Perhaps, just perhaps, they are no worse. But this is exactly what we would expect if the things that really matter in becoming a person have nothing to do with how

Technology Has Made Life Harder

In what ways has technology actually made your life more difficult?

Select all that apply.



n = 1,021 US parents of children ages 4 to 17

easy our life is—and if they have a great deal to do with how we handle the difficulty that comes our way.

Technology's fruits are to be celebrated and delighted in. At this moment I am writing using a thoughtfully designed software program, displayed on a gloriously high-definition screen, powered by a refined and elegant operating system. On my ears are exquisitely balanced headphones that cost me just a couple hours' worth of wages, reproducing music that was created in part using advanced synthesizers and sequencers. It would be churlish to deny all the good that these

technological gifts provide, let alone the easy-everywhere reliability of electric power and natural-gas-fueled heat on a December evening.

It's not just good—it's very good. But does it make me the kind of human being who could contribute something of lasting value to my family, my neighbors, my society, and our broken world?

Here is the heart of the paradox: Technology is a brilliant, praiseworthy expression of human creativity and cultivation of the world. But it is at best neutral in actually forming human beings who can create and cultivate as we were meant to.

Technology is good at serving human beings. It even—as in medical or communication technology—saves human lives. It does almost nothing to actually form human beings in the things that make them worth serving and saving.

Technology is a brilliant expression of human capacity. But anything that offers easy everywhere does nothing (well, almost nothing) to actually *form* human capacities.

Since forming our capacity to be human is what family is all about, technology is at its best a neutral factor in what is most important in our families. But it is very often not at its best, because we are very often not at our best, maybe especially in our daily lives with those closest to us. In the most intimate setting of the household, where the deepest human work of our lives is meant to take place, technology distracts and displaces us far too often, undermining the real work of becoming persons of wisdom and courage.

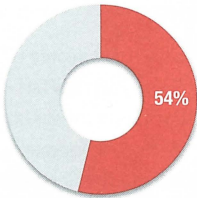
The Better Life

So here's where we have to start if we are going to live as flourishing families in an age of easy everywhere: we are going to have to decide, together, that nothing is more important

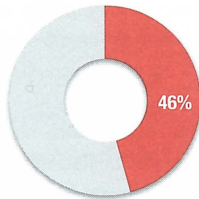
Decisions, Decisions

How do you make decisions about what your family does (activities, projects, commitments, etc.)?

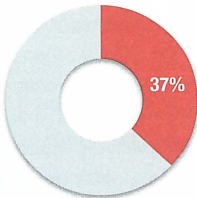
Select up to two.



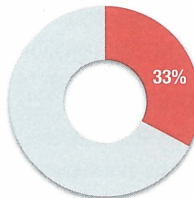
if it is good for developing the children's character



if it makes us/them happy



if it is good for the children's achievements in life



if it makes financial sense for us

n = 1,021 US parents of children ages 4 to 17

than becoming people of wisdom and courage. We are going to have to commit to make every major decision, and many small decisions, on the basis of these questions: Will this help me become less foolish and more wise? Will this help me become less fearful and more courageous?

We will have to teach our children, from early on, that we are not here as parents to make their lives easier but to make them better. We will tell them—and show them—that



Americans recognize the formational impact of family: the majority of Americans say their family is their main source of identity (62% say family makes up “a lot” of their personal identity, while 24% say it makes up “some”). With so much formative potential, how do parents approach goals and values in their family? The majority of parents (71%) agree that they have an explicit set of values guiding their family life, though few of them have written out a purpose statement or mission for their family (27%). Forming character in their children is a top priority for most parents: when faced with decisions as a family, the effect of the decision on their children’s character is the top deciding factor (54%), with happiness being a close second (46%). Additionally, the vast majority of parents say they discuss issues of character (self-control, friendship, work ethic, conflict resolution) with their children on a daily or weekly basis. Technological advances have dramatically impacted parents, kids, and the family dynamic. Yet few parents say these technologies have helped them with the character formation they so value: only 13 percent say technology has added joy to their life, and even fewer say it has made them a better parent (9%). Parents are most likely to say, in fact, that technology has caused them to waste a lot of time (42%) and be more distracted (40%).

nothing matters more to our family than creating a home where all of us can be known, loved, and called to grow. And then we'll have to make hard choices—sometimes radical choices—to use technology in a very different way from people around us.

Making those choices will require wisdom and courage. But the rewards will be amazing.

Crouch Family **Reality Check**

How well has our family done at putting wisdom and courage first, relationships at the center, and technology at the edges? Oh boy. I can't honestly say we've always done this very well. I, at least, have some awfully well-worn, comfortable patterns of growth avoidance. Some aren't technological at all—like my descent into exhausted inactivity on the nearest couch as a substitute for conversation with my family or with God.

Far too often, though, technology is at the center of my search for undemanding distraction. I find myself thumbing through Twitter or distractedly “liking” images on Instagram. Sure, there are other people at the end of those interactions, but they all too often substitute for my family. And then there are my one-hundred-plus nights of travel a year,

made possible by technologies of modern transportation. Travel provides fulfilling work and helps me serve a wide audience, but such a lifestyle also diminishes my day-to-day chances for connection with my family, our neighbors, and our friends close to home.

When my family has made progress in matters of character, it has often come through the acute stress of conflict—the moments when our comfortable patterns break down and we find ourselves dealing with one another’s overflowing emotions. I’ve been humbled into change by my children’s pleading—or, in later years, their resigned disappointment—and by my wife’s godly impatience with my passivity. (Is it just in our family that the male members seem more ready to use technology as a diversion, and the female members are more able to resist?)

I do believe Catherine and I are wiser than we were when we started our journey of marriage, and at moments I’m awed and thrilled to see our near-adult children making courageous choices informed by a gospel-saturated view of the world. But I sometimes wonder where we would be, and how much wiser and more courageous we would be, if we were not smothered so completely by technology’s easy-everywhere embrace.