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Parenting is not a perfect science. It's more of an ever-evolving, never-ending art form. While awaiting the arrival of my first child, I ravenously read every parenting book I could find, convinced that in doing so I could avoid the pitfalls of the terribly misguided parents around me. Now 36 years in retrospect, I realize that this was akin to believing you could learn to drive a car by taking a correspondence course. Being well-read is important, but some things you can only learn by getting behind the wheel.

I discovered that parenting is a humbling experience full of paradoxical challenges: allowing our children the freedom to find themselves without abandoning the path to responsible adulthood; not being afraid to love our children equally, but differently; fiercely loving them when they don't like us or more importantly, in those moments we don't like them. These challenges are made more difficult by two things. First, every child is different; what works with one is not always transferable to another. Secondly, children are in a constant state of developmental change, forcing us to parent a moving target.

In our quest to be good parents, we try not to detonate personal land mines from our own childhood experiences. But sometimes, even with the best of intentions, we do it anyway—even planting a few new ones along the way. In the tough, tense moments of stressed parenthood, we tend to imitate in some fashion the conflict and coping styles of our childhood family, whether they be healthy or unhealthy.

No matter how hard we try, we will make mistakes raising our children. But we can work to repair the damage, make amends and teach them the life skills necessary to deal with these and other hurts that come their way. It is healing and healthy for us to share with our children what we would do differently if given the chance. The truth is that children can grow stronger through the acknowledgement of our missteps. This helps them embrace their own mistakes and develop corrective strategies so they will ultimately become better parents than we are.

And at some point in the journey, we will no longer be the center of our children's universe. This is how it should be. Our most important work is to prepare our children for the real world—our job is done only when they no longer need us to show them the way.

During the past year, I have been training our dog Jenny in preparation for certification as a therapy dog. Leash training has presented a challenge because Jenny's favorite pastime is chasing squirrels. Her entire body quivers with excitement and anticipation when a squirrel is within range and nothing can deter her as she attempts to joyfully pursue the furry, bushy-tailed beasts up a tree. Even after months of training classes, this mostly well-mannered canine can give chase without warning, dragging me across several yards in the process. I finally decided to forget the formal therapy dog certification, let Jenny work with children anyway, chase squirrels and just be a dog.

All of this caused me to reflect on the parenting of my children. If given the opportunity to do it over again, I would be less cautious, parenting with less fear of what would happen if I let go. I would allow my children greater rein, so they would have more freedom to pursue and discover for themselves who they are and what brings them joy.

Simply put, I would let my children chase more squirrels. And instead of resisting and being dragged along, I would eagerly join in the chase.