

THREE KEYS TO RAISING SPIRITUALLY STRONG
AND EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN



Unshakable KIDS

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Lauren Gaines, *Unshakable Kids*

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To my Nona, who laid a firm foundation of faith
in my heart at a young age and who showed
me what a joy it is to raise children.

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Introduction

Wonder filled my journey to motherhood. The anticipation was so captivating, and I dreamt of what life would be like with a baby for over nine months.

After my daughter's birth, as much as I cherished holding my precious child, the sleepless nights, poop explosions, and cluster feedings started to take some of the joy out of the experience. I had no idea motherhood would require so much of me.

As we added more children to the bunch, I started to feel overwhelmed by the reality of caring for children twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Motherhood drained me emotionally, physically, and mentally more than I could've ever imagined.

How can something so good be so hard?

One morning I snapped. My intentions started out good as I planned our morning devotions and sipped my lukewarm coffee. We had stayed home from church because my husband had to work for the seventh day straight and one of our kids was sick. Instead of attending church, I planned to be the stand-in Sunday school teacher. My new stickers and stationery boosted my mood as I created a beautiful-looking Bible lesson for my kids. I had no doubt our morning would be filled with abundant praise and divine touches from heaven. Mothers make kids' activities look

so easy on Instagram; how hard could it *really* be? We'd have a great time of family worship together at home.

Unfortunately, the morning didn't play out in real life like it had in my head. It started off okay at first. We turned on "Reckless Love," and the kids asked to bring out their instruments. "Sure, that's fine," I said.

"Hey! I had it first. Mommy! He's not giving it back!"

"No, I had it first! Ugh! You *never* share with me." *Stomp. Yell. Roar.*

My grand vision for our morning faded right before my eyes. Desperate, I redirected the kids, "Guys, there are plenty of instruments to play with. We need to take turns. Now, let's sing to Jesus." I closed my eyes, put my hands up in praise, and tried to ignore the tension in our home. But after a few seconds of peace, I heard more screaming and crying.

Without warning, I exploded, "That's it! I've had enough of your fighting. You guys are acting like spoiled brats! Give me that drum. No one is going to play with it if you keep fighting." I snatched the toy out of my daughter's hand, dramatically threw it on the couch, and finished my tirade by screaming, "WE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE PRAISING JESUS!"

All the kids started to cry. As soon as I saw their tears, I felt guilty for losing my cool. Earlier that morning, excitement had coursed through my body. Minutes later, I let my raging emotions burst forth and ruin the mood. What happened? It should've been easy.

Though it wasn't the morning I'd imagined, sadly, it didn't catch me completely off guard. Because if I'm being honest, it wasn't the first time something like this had happened.

Am I Ruining My Kids?

I used to let my emotions fester until they reached a boiling point and I could no longer control them. Sometimes I'd lose my

temper and yell. Other times I'd anxiously pace the house wondering what I should do next. Sometimes my kids provoked my frustration. Other times my unease came from the world feeling too dark and heavy.

Either way, I'd find myself lying awake at night staring at the ceiling and asking, *Am I ruining my kids? What if I'm doing it all wrong?* My job as their parent was to nurture and guide their little hearts, but I often felt unprepared to complete the assignment. What if I accidentally crushed them instead?

Parenting left me feeling flustered. There were so many decisions to make. What if I made the wrong one? Many nights I worried I'd made a mistake that day and hurt my child's chances of having a good life. My heart longed to give my kids good childhoods, ones they didn't have to recover from as adults. But in the everyday moments, my thoughts spiraled, and I'd react to stressful situations in unhealthy ways.

As a parent, I expected my kids to be respectful, grounded, and mentally balanced, yet my behaviors often taught them the opposite. Parenting exhausted me emotionally, and it often showed in my actions.

If I had such a hard time remaining levelheaded, how did I expect to raise children with sound minds who remained in control of their emotions? I hoped to give my children the tools to verbally, not physically, share their feelings, yet I wasn't sure exactly how to do that. I was lucky if I could get the kids out the door with everything they needed for school that day. Forget trying to raise a child who loves Jesus and is respectful, confident, and kind.

As I opened up to my friends about my experiences in motherhood, I quickly realized I wasn't the only parent who felt uncertain about exactly *how* to raise good, strong kids. As I walked with other moms in our neighborhood and talked with fellow moms in person and online, I noticed many similarities. We all wanted to be emotionally balanced women who felt confident

in our parenting, but every time the earth trembled, we started shaking too. We shook because we believed the lie that we could never be good enough parents or the world was too ugly to raise a godly, loving child in it. We felt anxious about the emotional health of our kids and stressed over *how* to raise spiritually strong children who wouldn't compromise to sin.

There had to be another way. I wasn't satisfied with worrying about my kids all the time. I had to make a choice: I could either stay stuck in my frustration or I could take action. I chose to do something about it because I realized if I didn't take up the responsibility to mold my kids' impressionable minds, someone or something else would. And I didn't like that option at all.

If you don't like the idea of sitting back and hoping for the best, this book is for you. You can parent with a sound mind and confidence. I know this because I spent years figuring out how to do it.

A Better Way

Before kids, I worked as a school psychologist in Baltimore City Public Schools. Every day I taught my students how to be mentally tough and cope with the stress of life. When I made the choice to find a better way to live and parent my kids, I reread all my textbooks from graduate school on human development and psychology. I spent hours researching the best parenting methods and discovering concrete strategies to help me build a firm foundation in my children. I found it was possible to raise emotionally healthy children who understood the power of the mind. My kids could learn to stand strong and live uncompromised lives in a world filled with compromise.

With God's help, I found a better way to parent. And in *Unshakable Kids*, I share the path forward with you. You, too, can go from meltdown mama to peaceful parent. The foundation you lay for your children will change their lives forever. Change

is possible for you and your family. You can raise God-fearing children who, using their heavenly perspectives, are able to spot the lies of the enemy. You can decide right now to intentionally train your children to flourish in a broken world.

Though I must warn you, the change may not come overnight. For me, at times, the progress felt slow—a little too slow. But as I embraced the resistance, I discovered key principles to help us thrive together as a family.

I no longer felt stuck in my frazzled, accidental parenting methods. The struggles still came, but I now had a plan and felt like it was possible to parent without losing my mind. The three key growth areas I discovered can help focus your parenting too. You can intentionally raise children who won't get flustered with every challenge they face and who can successfully handle life's stress using their toolbox of healthy coping strategies.

Made to Mother

Part of parenting with bravery and boldness is completely trusting God's plan for your family. Right now, you're going to throw all the doubts and fears out the window, including the voices that tell you you've made too many mistakes already or you're a lost cause because you weren't taught emotional health growing up. Those voices must go.

Will you make mistakes? Of course. There's no such thing as a perfect parent. But what if God put you and me in this generation for a specific reason? What if we were born to raise kids in such a time as this?

God gave *you* your children for a reason. Don't believe God is that deliberate? Look around you. God carefully and intentionally created our world. The majestic waterfalls, snowcapped mountaintops, and large blooming dahlias were not created by accident. The miracle of a child being formed in a mother's womb doesn't happen by chance. If God is so purposeful about making

every flower, animal, fruit, and beach, then surely He didn't make a mistake when He gave you your unique children. You were made to mother in this moment. And God intentionally created your children to be raised by a mother like you.

Parenting with purpose isn't about controlling our children's lives or never making mistakes as parents. It's about trusting the God of the universe and believing He gave us our kids to raise in this exact moment in time.

What to Expect

Unshakable Kids will give you the tools to raise kids with well-balanced minds who are confident and filled with self-control.

In part 1, we'll dive deep into the three foundational areas: our children's minds, hearts, and identities. To raise emotionally and spiritually healthy kids, we need to intentionally cultivate these three areas. Through the first section, we'll discover how to overcome unhelpful mindsets and encourage healthy neural connections in our children's minds. We'll find the best ways to win the hearts of our children and nourish strong, healthy identities in them.

In part 2, we'll take an inventory of our homes and learn how to build life-giving places that support the growth of positive neural connections in our children's brains. With whole minds and hearts, we'll uncover the best way to support healthy spiritual and emotional growth in our day-to-day lives.

Part of the learning process includes completing Brain Builder and Faith Former activities. Throughout the chapters, you'll find challenges and tasks to guide you as you lay solid foundations in your children's lives. These tools were intentionally designed to help you overcome mental mistakes, heal any lingering heart wounds, and strengthen your walk with Jesus.

Change often requires action. To get the most out of this book, set aside time to complete the tasks. This will encourage you to

help your children win the battle of the mind and live victoriously. As you read, mark up the pages, write in the margins, and highlight phrases that stick out to you. Make sure you take time to digest and reflect on what you read. Emotional and spiritual growth doesn't happen overnight, but you can shape your children's minds, hearts, and identities with time and intention, helping them become the people God destined them to be.

1

The Mental Game of Motherhood

One night when our oldest daughter was in kindergarten, all my exhaustion, anger, and frustration compounded into one awful, hard day.

I was in the kitchen chopping vegetables and encouraging our daughter to try her best when our son came running in screaming, “Adelyn just ate the kinetic sand!”

“WHAT!?! Why is the kinetic sand even out?” I yelled. As I quickly googled the risks associated with a one-year-old eating kinetic sand, I altogether lost it. I tore through the house, dramatically throwing the kinetic sand in the garbage and screaming at my children as the kitchen timer beeped in the background.

I had grown so tired of the mess. Tired of being pulled in a million different directions at the same time. Tired of the stuff. EVERYWHERE. Tired of feeling like I bore the weight of life by myself.

My mind spiraled downward, and nothing could stop the decline.

I thought to myself, *This is too much. Raising kids is exhausting, and I don't want to do it anymore. The house is always a mess, I can't catch a break, and the continual chaos in our home is making me anxious. Is life always going to be this hard?*

One more loud scream from my kids running through the kitchen was all it took for me to lose my cool. Suddenly I found myself releasing all the hurts and frustrations of the day.

"I'm tired of this mess! I'm always the one who has to clean up, and it's not fair. Stop acting so wild and start acting more responsible!"

My cutting words revealed my frustration boiling on the inside. I was overwhelmed and tired. The chaos had brought it all to the surface. As the joy was sucked right out of me, I started to feel guilty for yelling at my children. They were just being kids and hadn't intentionally done anything wrong. Yet I'd taken my frustration out on them because my thoughts weren't healthy.

Each challenging day brought a new self-defeating thought to fight against: *I'm not doing enough as a mom. I'm trying my best every day, yet I can't seem to stay on top of the housework. The constant whining and moaning from my kids must mean I'm doing something wrong.* My negative beliefs quickly turned into negative words, and the cycle of feeling frazzled in motherhood lived on. But one day as I read about the brain and how it shapes our thoughts and actions, God showed me something unexpected.

Here's the Truth

You bought this book hoping it would help your child, but here's the truth: to raise emotionally healthy children, we mamas need to focus on our emotional health first. I didn't realize how much my brain needed transforming until I started to research ways to help my children build their emotional health.

We can tell our kids to be strong until we're blue in the face, but actions speak louder than words, *right?* It's kind of scary how

quickly we, as parents, can become trapped in downward mental spirals. The negative thoughts are automatic, and the smallest inconveniences push us over the edge. We linger on questions about the future, we aren't confident in our decision-making skills, and we harp on everything we do wrong.

We quickly lose our temper more often than we'd like to admit, and our minds are overwhelmed by the thought that maybe we aren't parenting the "right" way. We want our children to be mentally tough, but what we really need is to learn how to control our *own* thoughts. How can we possibly raise worry-free kids when we feel anxious and frustrated every day?

We want to put on a brave face and show the world we have it all together as parents, but we know the truth: behind the scenes, we feel ill-equipped and emotionally exhausted. We slip into telling ourselves, *One day parenting won't be so hard*. But as each day of parenthood presents new challenges, we can't fathom how we'll get there. Something needs to change, but we don't know what or how. We "tried" harder, and it didn't work.

This is what I know: there's a battle raging in not only our children's minds but our minds too. In the mental game of motherhood, we're losing.

The good news is, no matter how draining parenting can be, there's still hope. Together, you and I can help our children develop healthy thinking patterns and strong neural pathways. It won't be easy, and you're probably going to face some doubts along the way, but don't let that stop you from finding a breakthrough. You can parent with confidence and clarity. Even in the midst of a storm, you can feel peace as a parent. When you prioritize your emotional and mental health, you're helping not only yourself but also your kids.

Lasting change in your family starts with you.

Let's stop blaming our circumstances for our instability and start fighting the true enemy. The devil doesn't want us to know

that when we take every thought captive, we free not only ourselves but also our children and our children's children.

Friend, we must fight for our sound minds. Not just for our own sanity, but for generations to come. The fight is worth it! When our minds are in check, we can raise kids who know exactly who they are and whose they are—children of God.

A Brain Can Be Retrained

Part of our journey together includes retraining our brains. We used to be taught that once a brain is formed, it cannot be altered. But new research shows you *can* in fact change the physical structure of your brain. It's called neuroplasticity. So even if your brain is systemically designed to think a negative thought, it doesn't have to stay that way forever. You can reshape negative neural pathways.

How? By thinking new thoughts. *New York Times* bestselling author Jennie Allen puts it this way: "When we think new thoughts, we physically alter our brains. When we think new thoughts, we make healthier neural connections. When we think new thoughts, we blaze new trails. When we think new thoughts, everything changes for us."¹

You can create new mental habits. New pathways are straight ahead. Are you ready for everything to change?

Maybe in the past you weren't intentional about your thought life or maybe you've made some mistakes in developing your child's social and emotional health. Please hear this: it's never too late. New neural pathways are built each day, and old habits, thoughts, and hurts can be replaced with new patterns and beliefs. A brain can be retrained.

In this journey, you may need to face some ugly thoughts. You may also notice that some of your habits and rhythms may need to change. Change isn't always fun, but it's better than staying stuck. You don't need to stay immobilized in your toxic thoughts. Your thoughts *can* be transformed.

Do you think God knew our brains were capable of change when He created us? I like to think He did. In Romans 12:2, we're given specific insight into this internal change when Paul writes,

Do not be conformed to this world (this age), [fashioned after and adapted to its external, superficial customs], but be transformed (changed) by the [entire] renewal of your mind [by its new ideals and its new attitude], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God, even the thing which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His sight for you]. (AMPC)

Being transformed by the renewal of our minds demonstrates that our brains can make literal changes in the forms or formulas of thought.² Old thought patterns no longer define us. Past mistakes or present pessimistic thoughts no longer bind us. We have the power to change how our brains think, and that's significant because our mental meditation influences our families every day.

Does that mean we should ignore our past mistakes? No. It can be helpful to process the hurts, hang-ups, and mistakes of old. But our past or current struggles shouldn't define everything about our future. It doesn't matter if we weren't intentional in our parenting previously or if we've started to pass down irrational fears to our kids.

God created us with the ability to change. God not only offers us complete transformation, but He also freely gives us new mercies every morning (Lam. 3:22–23). That means even if we get it completely wrong as parents, God is quick to offer His compassion. God's mercy frees us from any guilt or punishment we may deserve. How awesome that even in our failure, God freely shares His loving-kindness with us.

Not too long ago, I experienced God's transforming power firsthand.

"Hurry up! Get your shoes on. I don't want to tell you again. We need to leave or we're going to be late," I yelled at my kids

for the third time. It was 7:28 a.m., and we needed to be out of the house and on the road by 7:30.

Everyone finally had their shoes on and we rushed out the door. While I struggled to get my crying baby buckled into her car seat, my oldest child said, “Oops, Mom. I forgot my jacket. Can you help me find it?” I glanced at my watch. *Yup, we’re definitely going to be late.* As we finally drove down the road, my heart ached, and I told myself, *We can’t keep doing this every morning.*

Later that night I stood in the kitchen, tears rolling down my face as I told my husband, “I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard. I’m too tired, and I can’t imagine doing this for the rest of the school year. Darryl, I’m not going to make it.”

My heart felt discouraged and my mind overwhelmed.

Thankfully, my sweet husband recognized that my thoughts were spiraling downward and said, “Lauren, I don’t want you to be upset the whole school year, but I believe God can turn this situation around. Let’s pray about it and see what we can do to make it easier for you.”

Our oldest daughter had just started kindergarten, and every morning we needed to be out of the house by 7:30 to drive thirty minutes to her school. That meant every morning I needed to wake up, eat breakfast, get three kids dressed and ready, and nurse our baby all before 7:30.

I know that for some people, waking up that early doesn’t seem too bad, but I love my sleep, and waking up before 6:00 a.m. feels unnatural to me. Waking up early and rushing everyone out the door without losing my mind felt impossible.

My husband gave me a big hug as I continued to hold back tears, and he said, “Let’s pray right now.”

“God, in Your Word, You said Your grace is sufficient. That means it is enough for Lauren today. Your strength is made perfect in our weakness. God, give her the strength to do what she needs to do for our family and give her joy as she does it. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

To my amazement, in the weeks that followed, God brought peace to my overwhelmed mind and heart. Before I knew it, I no longer dreaded our morning routine.

God rewired my thoughts after I gave my mental meditations over to Him. As my husband and I prayed each morning, God transformed my perspective and made sure I didn't lose hope.

When I think back to the situation, I'm amazed by how my mind changed. I looked forward to the time with my children. God rewired my brain and changed my thoughts from "Driving my kids to school is a burden I don't want to bear" to "What a blessing it is to spend one-on-one time with my children each day in the car."

The quality time we spent together in the car will never be forgotten. We sang, laughed, and made memories we wouldn't have made if I had given up right away and never asked God for help.

When I first faced the challenge, I focused on the impossibility of the task before me. I tried to do it in my own strength, and I failed. Thankfully, God intervened before my negative thinking patterns could hinder my heart.

Now, I understand there will be times when we pray or try harder and our situation still doesn't change. It's okay to pivot if whatever we're doing just isn't working. In these situations, we need to ask God for wisdom and then follow His leading.

But if He encourages us to keep pushing forward, then we need to remember this: No matter what the challenge is, God is capable of transforming any negative thoughts we have related to it. He can change our minds.

God designed our brains to be flexible and malleable. That night as I cried in the kitchen to my husband, I didn't have one positive thought about waking up early and driving my kids to school. If I continued, I'd lose my mind, that was all I was certain of. But God had other plans. Through prayer and surrender,

God showed up and changed my hopeless thoughts to optimistic beliefs.

If you feel stuck in negative thought patterns or unhelpful beliefs, God can transform your mind too. You don't need to stay stuck in worry, fear, hopelessness, or discouragement. With the help of the Holy Spirit, you can leave behind your overwhelmed mind and instead take hold of a sound mind—one without worrying, questioning, or complaining. You can parent with intentionality and peace, not because your circumstances have changed but because your mind has been renewed.

Breakthroughs in parenting come when you understand that peace and confidence aren't contingent on your circumstances. Peace doesn't come from an absence of trial. It comes by making a conscious decision to take captive our thoughts each day. The moment you realize you're the one who holds the power to claim what you think about, the direction of your life changes.

If you can't seem to control your negative thoughts, don't panic. That's the first key principle we tackle in this book. When I took a step back and analyzed my own thought patterns, I realized many of them weren't helpful or even rational. My mental game was weak, but thankfully God's grace isn't dependent on our strength.

We don't have to live life on the edge. Our doubts and fears can be replaced by God's peace when we put our hope and trust in Him. We can control our minds instead of allowing our minds to control us. We can parent with confidence.

Get off the starting block today, friend. Take that first step. Push forward even when it feels uncomfortable. Find the time in your busy schedule to dig deep. Trust me, I've seen the reward—and you don't want to miss it.