

## **Parents and Parenting**

### **Becoming a Parent**

What would my becoming a parent have to do with the fourth workaround that will be presented in the next section? Everything. My fellow parents and I are the reason this book exists.

### **Center Babies**

When the Center was in its earliest days, more than half of our employees were part-time workers who came from three local high schools and West Valley Community College. Trisha, one of our high school part-timers, became pregnant when she was just sixteen. I learned of her pregnancy even before her parents did. Trisha told me that she and her boyfriend were definitely going to keep their baby. That meant that she would likely be a seventeen-year-old high school dropout when her baby was born. Not a great start for her future life.

Years earlier, when Mary and I were in Washington, D.C., giving workshops at a teachers' center, we noticed that the center director's baby was sleeping comfortably in a crib behind her desk. The baby's presence in that crib was not a one-time thing. That crib was her home away from home while her mother was at work. It had never crossed my mind before then that babies could be brought to work. However, when I learned of Trisha's pregnancy, I told her that if she ended up dropping out of school, we would switch her to full-time work at the Center, and she could bring her baby to work with her every day. Trisha initially declined my offer, but when her daughter, Ashley, was three months old, Trisha changed her mind, and the Center had its first baby at work.

I said "first baby" because what was true for Trisha would, of course, be true for any other female employee who might wish to take advantage of the Center's baby policy. One year later, Robin, who had been the Center's very first full-time employee, gave birth to twin boys. Aaron and Kyle did not wait three months to join their mother at work. They came with Robin as soon as she returned to work.

Whereas Trisha's pregnancy had not been planned, Robin's pregnancy was by design. Her very good reasons for becoming a mother before marriage will not be listed here. Robin was, in essence, a single parent. The boys' father did not live with Robin and offered little help in caring for his sons. Since Robin lived within walking distance of the Center, I would accompany her every day after work as she and I wheeled the twins' strollers from work to home. Once we reached Robin's house, I would help her with the boys for an hour or two before leaving.

When the boys were about six months old, Robin asked me if I would mind watching them for three days and two nights so she could take a little break from motherhood and go skiing with her brother. Before Robin left on her break, she wrote out a long list of everything I would need to know to care for Aaron and Kyle in her absence. When Robin returned from her days off, I said to her, "Taking care of babies is hard work! You need a break from doing this every single day!"



Me with the first three Center Babies

Even though I had been helping her for an hour or two after work each day, I had absolutely no idea how much effort was involved in caring for babies all day long. I told Robin that from that day forward, I would come to her house every Wednesday and care for Aaron and Kyle in her home, so she could have one normal day at work each week without having to add baby care to her workload. I would also come to her house every Thursday after work and take complete care of the boys for the evening so that she could have that evening out with her friends. Robin had named me as her sons' godfather at their birth. My Godfather's role was now in the process of expanding.

### **Kindergarten and The Little Yellow Bus**

My Wednesdays and Thursdays with Aaron and Kyle remained a weekly event until they entered kindergarten. I mentioned earlier that Robin lived within walking distance of the Center. She also happened to live just across the street from the elementary school her boys would be attending. The school's two kindergarten classrooms and their playground were directly across the street from Robin's house. Aaron and Kyle had seen the kindergarten children playing across the street from them for years and were looking forward to being kindergarteners there themselves.

When Robin took Aaron and Kyle with her to enroll them in kindergarten, the person in charge of kindergarten enrollment put the boys through a series of tests. At the tests' conclusion, Robin was told her sons were not yet ready for kindergarten. Instead, when school started, they would be picked up each day in a little yellow bus and taken to a special education class at another school. Two boys who had been looking forward to attending the kindergarten directly across the street were now to be told they were not good enough to join that group and were to be bused somewhere else instead. Not on my watch.

I asked the school the reason for the boys' supposed failure. What I was told was that they didn't know how to skip. I am not making this up. Failure to skip was their ticket to the little yellow bus. Aaron, Kyle, and I went shopping that day to buy them new shoes. I told the boys that their new shoes were skipping shoes. Once we were back at their home, the boys put on their skipping shoes and we went outside for skipping lessons. They could not skip when the school tested them because they had never had a reason to skip before. Neither Robin nor I had ever thought that skipping was an essential skill for school success. Anyone at the school could have taught the boys to skip as quickly and as easily as I had done, but not a single person there thought to try.

I informed the school that the boys could now skip, and they would not be boarding that little yellow bus. I then made sure they were enrolled in the kindergarten class they could see from their front porch. Robin and I agreed that, from that time forward, I would keep her company at any school or teacher's meeting she attended, including all the parent-teacher conferences that would be held. My reason for becoming a teacher was to change how children felt about themselves. As I was growing up, the teachers at my schools had either been indifferent or oblivious to the problems I was facing. (See the [Depression's Beginning](#) sub-section of the [College Sophomore Year](#) section of [The Book of Ifs Chapter 2 - My Path to Becoming a Teacher](#).) It was my role as a parent to make sure that neither Aaron nor Kyle would be made to feel bad about themselves because of anything teachers or administrators said or did to them at school.

### **The Elementary-Grades**

The skipping incident and its potentially disastrous effect on Aaron and Kyle committed me to being actively involved in their school lives. When the boys began school, my Wednesdays with them continued in a modified way. I would now pick them up after school and take them to my home for an overnight stay. Robin still had her one night off from parenting each week, but it was now just a day earlier. The school provided after-school daycare until about 5:00 each afternoon. I went to the daycare center at about 3:30. I would then play with Aaron and Kyle

and all the other children in daycare for an hour or so before leaving with them.

I joined the PTA, of course, and attended every meeting, most of which were held during school hours. My fellow attendees were, for the most part, stay-at-home moms. Raising their children was their day job. Until Aaron and Kyle's senior year in high school, I was the only male parent at any of the PTA meetings.

The students at the elementary school that Aaron and Kyle were attending would all be going to the same middle school for sixth through eighth-grade and then to the same high school. Unlike the schools where I had taught, Saratoga schools had very low turnover rates. When the other kindergarten parents and I got together for our first meeting, I knew we were in our first year of at least nine and probably thirteen years together.

There would be more of us in middle school since the middle school drew students from three feeder schools. Our nine years in elementary and middle school would be followed by another four years together in high school. As a teacher, I had taught at three different schools in three different cities. The only lasting teacher friends from any of these schools that I had were the teachers who had joined Mary and me at the Center. I was now looking forward to the opportunity of experiencing long-lasting friendships with my fellow parents, as we all grew closer through our children.

The teachers at Aaron and Kyle's school solicited parent volunteers as classroom aides for a few hours each day. I was turned down as a volunteer in both kindergarten and first-grade. The kindergarten and first-grade teachers told me that my connection to Math Their Way had them feeling a bit intimidated. It was not until the boys were in second-grade that my offer to volunteer was finally accepted. However, for all grades, volunteers were needed to drive children on school field trips. My driving groups of children did not intimidate anybody, so for both kindergarten and first-grade, I was allowed to be a volunteer driver.

I was a volunteer aide one day a week for the boys' second and third-grade classrooms. For both fourth and fifth-grades, my offer to teach math lessons in their classes once a week was accepted. When I taught in fourth-grade, the teacher spent my lesson time sitting at her desk correcting papers. Because the fifth-grade teacher actively participated in my lessons, I gifted her sets of the various manipulatives I was using, so that she could continue what I was teaching the other four days of the week.

In [The Year 1993](#) sub-section of the [Acceptance and Rejection](#) section of this chapter, I mentioned that when the State of California's test of mathematical understanding was first used, my godsons were takers of the test. Their school principal was impressed with how well the students in her school's fifth-grade class had done on the new test. When she asked the students where they had learned the mathematics the test was measuring, they all told her, "Bob taught us." That Bob was only in their class once a week. I got the credit, but their fifth-grade teacher did 80% of the teaching.

### **Center Summer School**

My seeing the baby in the crib at that teacher's center is what showed me that babies could come to work. My being a parent of children in school made me much more aware of the problems facing parents when their children are out of school for the summer. The summer following Aaron and Kyle's first year in school marked the beginning of the Center's Summer School for the Center employees' elementary school children.

The Center Summer School was created for the benefit of all of the Center employees' children who were in elementary school. The Summer School also gave me the opportunity to play a bigger role in Aaron and Kyle's education. The Summer School would place Aaron and Kyle in a school with a Ten-No's curriculum for three months a year. A school where everybody helps everybody learn and everybody learns without exception. This would be true even in our multi-grade, one-room schoolhouse.

Trisha and I put ourselves in charge of hiring two teachers each summer to serve as the school's staff. I would be teaching in the mornings there, as well. The mornings would be for academics. The afternoons would be for playing at the park across the street from the Center. Wednesdays would be for daytrips to different destinations every week. Places nearby like Great America, Giants baseball games, Raging Waters Waterpark, the beach at Santa Cruz, and eventually ice skating at a local rink. Ice skating was added because one of the applicants for one summer's teaching position had listed former Ice Capades skater on her resumé. For that summer, ice skating lessons were a weekly event.

The ice-skating lessons turned Trisha's Ashley into a figure skater. They also turned Aaron and Kyle into competitive ice hockey players from their fifth-grade year through their senior year in high school.

### **Images from Summer School**



### **Middle School**

The middle school teachers were new to us, but the parents and children from Aaron and Kyle's elementary school were still the same. There were



no longer any parents needed as classroom aides. There were, however, school dances in need of chaperones and field trips still needing drivers. Fieldtrips would now occasionally include overnight stays. Children in their eighth-grade year could even sign up for a week-long field trip to Washington, D.C., and New York.

I still attended PTA meetings regularly. At one middle school meeting, a PTA member brought her two-year-old child along with her. While the parents there were deciding who should serve in the leadership positions for the group, I volunteered to take the two-year-old outside and play with her while the leadership discussion was taking place. When I returned, I found that I had been elected to the Board.

In Aaron and Kyle's elementary school, teachers taught children. In their middle school, teachers taught subjects. There were seven periods during each day, which meant as many as seven different teachers for each student. I was actively involved in PTA as well as dance and field trip chaperoning. However, there were no parent-teacher meetings, so I had no involvement with any of their teachers. Near the end of Aaron and Kyle's seventh-grade year, Robin was notified that both boys would have to repeat seventh-grade the next year.

The boy's father was only occasionally in contact with his sons and was out of Robin's life completely. Robin was now married to someone definitely not the boys' father. When the boys were seven, they welcomed Zachary, the first of their two half-brothers. Half-brother Jacob joined the family when the boys were eight. Aaron and Kyle got along quite well with their younger brothers, even though they were not exactly impressed with their brothers' father. Aaron and Kyle asked me early on if I was also going to be the godfather for their new brothers. I said, "No, because Zack and Jake already have a father."

Because Robin now had two additional children in school, she was paying less attention to how Aaron and Kyle were doing in that seventh-grade year. Whenever she would ask if they had homework to do or any other school assignments, they would say they had completed all their work at school. Since there was so little communication between teacher and parent, Robin had no way of knowing her sons were not being truthful. Neither Robin nor I had any idea that the boys were failing until she was told they would be held back for the next school year.

Upon being told that Aaron and Kyle would be held back in seventh-grade, I met with the school's principal. I knew him through all the interactions we had through PTA meetings, school dances, and assorted fieldtrips. I told him that I definitely did not want Aaron and Kyle to be held back. I also said that even though they had not passed seventh-

grade, I personally guaranteed that they would pass every single class in their eighth-grade year. The principal accepted my guarantee, and the boys moved on to eighth-grade with their classmates. For their eighth-grade year, all their homework was brought with them to my house each day, and they graduated from middle school right on schedule.

I was one of a few seventh-grade parents assisting the eighth-grade parents in organizing activities for the party that would be held on the school's premises for all eighth-graders immediately following their graduation ceremony. The seventh-grade parent-helpers like me were there to learn about conducting the same party when our seventh-grade children became eighth-grade graduates. My assignment for the actual party was to sit in a room set aside for the eighth-graders to drop off any prizes they won at the party. I was to be the guardian of the prizes until they were retrieved at the end of the party. However, during the party, I only saw two students the whole evening, and that was just in passing. Those two students did not know what my room was for, and apparently, neither did any of the other students.

When the other parents and I were planning the graduation party for our eighth-graders, and we were again setting up that room for storing any prizes won, I stated that room's problem from the previous year. It was easily solvable. Traditionally, as each graduate entered the party room, he or she was given a bunch of tickets that were to be used to spend on various games at the party, for which prizes would be awarded. It was these prizes that were to be checked into that room. All we did was have the graduates start their evening by going to that room to pick up their tickets. They were also told that the ticket-pickup room was where they could store any prizes won during the evening.

The other parents on the party committee gave the room a name for reference. They called it "Bob's Room." At the conclusion of their ceremony, the graduates were told to start their evening by following the signs to Bob's Room. Yes, I was now a parent, however, all the other parents were always referred to as Mr. or Mrs. So and So. From kindergarten on, I had always been "Bob". I didn't know if any of Aaron's or Kyle's friends from any of their years in school or their eight years of playing competitive ice hockey ever knew my last name.

### **High School**

Aaron and Kyle's middle school students had come from three different feeder schools, all within the Saratoga Union Elementary School District. Even though their high school was in the Los-Gatos-Saratoga Union High School District, their high school's only feeder school was Aaron and Kyle's middle school. There was even less opportunity for parents to interact with school staff than there was at the middle school. Dance



and field trip chaperoning were now the sole responsibility of the teachers and school administrators.

I was still active with PTA, but our link with the school was mainly through meetings with the principal, a person who did not impress me at all. While there were many things I found about him to be annoying, there was one thing he said at a parent meeting that summed up his general attitude. He said that any student who was failing a class at his school shouldn't even be in high school. In essence, if a child was failing, get rid of that child. No blame for the teacher. All blame to the child. While I did not express my disdain to him personally, my one word view of his thoughts was "disgusting."

In Aaron and Kyle's sophomore year, the boys were having difficulty in their math class. The word on the street about that particular teacher was that he had developed his math curriculum early in his teaching career, including all his handouts and other assignments, and had not changed a thing in all the years that followed. I arranged an after-school meeting with him to discuss the problems the boys were having. During our chat, I suggested that he might test his students' understanding of math by asking them why, when they multiply two whole numbers, the answer is a number bigger than the two that were multiplied together, but when they multiply two fractions, the answer is a fraction smaller than the two that were multiplied together. He said he would not ask his students that because it would only confuse them. I could tell he couldn't even explain it. If you personally do not know the answer, there is an explanation in the [Fractions Patterns, Too](#) section of [Chapter 2](#).

After my meeting with Aaron and Kyle's math teacher, I decided I did not want them in his classroom. I met with the school's vice principal, and she agreed to let me homeschool them. She gave me the name of an extension course that covered the same topics. We then agreed to an end-of-year test administered on school premises by the vice principal. Their grade for the year would be based on that test. Aaron and Kyle then had a free-study period during the day, and I taught them math at my home after school. They each earned B grades in math for the year.

### **High School Parenting**

Parenting in high school was quite different from what it had been in the earlier grades. There was less opportunity to interact with the boy's classmates and their teachers. Less opportunity was not the same as no opportunity. Parent-teacher contact was limited. However, each class had a few parent advisors assigned to it by the PTA to work with that class's elected officers on any project for which the officers needed assistance. I was one of the freshman class's advisors. The only project I helped with that year was getting volunteers to work on the class's float

for the homecoming football game. As it turned out, my responsibility also included riding herd on the goofy boy volunteers (including my godsons) who were a potential annoyance to the much more responsible girls working alongside them.

My primary responsibility as the sophomore class advisor was to recruit sophomore parents to bake cookies to be served at the conclusion of the senior class's graduation ceremony in June. That was what tradition dictated, but it is not what I decided to do. I met with the other advisers, and they agreed to go out in the community and solicit coupons and gift certificates for things like movie passes, free meals, event admissions, and so on, from local businesses. Once we had prizes lined up, I met with the sophomore class officers and said that, rather than have parents make cookies for the day of graduation, let's have the sophomore boys and girls make the cookies instead. Anyone who turned in a batch of cookies would have his or her name placed in a bowl to be used for a prize drawing conducted by the class officers on the same day the cookies were due to be submitted.

Of course, parents could help their children make the cookies if help was needed, but the cookies were still to be turned in by the children. There were so many cookies made for graduation that June that cookies were served both before and after the graduation ceremony. Aaron's name was drawn as one of the winners. Not a problem, because even though I was at the drawing, it was the class officers who were the ones pulling names from the bowl, not me.

One of the assignments for the junior class advisors was to meet with the parents of the senior class, who were in the final stages of setting up that class's all-night graduation party. We were to learn from them the planning structure for our turn at planning next year's all-night party. We were also to arrange the guarding of the party's location when all the parents who had been working on it were attending their children's graduation ceremony.

What we learned from them was how terrible their experience had been. Their advice for us was to abandon the practice of having the party conducted at the school. We should hire a party hall and pay professional party-givers to set up the all-night party for us. The thirty or so parents working on the project had experienced trouble recruiting additional volunteers, and when parents who had already volunteered had to quit for whatever reason, there was no one to replace them. That meant the ones still there were burdened with even more work than before. In addition to the actual work on preparing the party venue, there was the additional workload of all the different cake-bake sales and similar fundraising activities that needed to be conducted to raise money

to cover the expenses not covered by the money raised through the tickets students purchased for admission to the party.

Once our children were seniors, as the now senior class advisors, we set up an evening meeting at the school for all the parents who wanted to be involved in planning our children's all-night graduation party. That meeting was a mini-reunion for all of us who had worked together for our children's eighth-grade graduation party, with a few new volunteers added. My assumption was that the head of our eighth-grade group would volunteer to head our senior group, as well. The parents at the meeting had a different leader in mind. They chose me to be the head of the party planning.

Once I was chosen as the leader, I had all of us discuss the problems that last year's senior parents had faced and what we should do about them. The parents in the room were evenly split on whether to hold the party at the school, as was the tradition, or move it to an outside facility. While we were talking, I had one of the parents record two lists on the room's chalkboard, one for what was good about using the school as the site, and one for what was bad. I also had us make a list of all the problems last year's parents had faced, like the absence of volunteers, and the continual need for fundraising.

Once our discussion had produced the lists, without asking for a vote, I told the parents that we would have the party at the school. I then promised everyone in the room that I would see to it that our group would not face any of the problems we had listed on the chalkboard that had confronted last year's parents. I would use the Back-to-School Night that was coming up shortly to recruit parent volunteers. I also said that the first thing we were going to do right now was to eliminate the need for all that time-consuming fundraising. I simply set the cost of the ticket to the graduation party at \$201.00. That price was quite a bit higher than had ever been charged before. It was also an amount that I had calculated before the meeting that would cover all the party's expenses. I also said that I would justify this year's price hike to all the other parents when I met with them at our Back-to-School Night meeting.

For Back-to-School Night, we reserved an empty classroom at the school and posted signs at the various school entrances announcing our meeting and its location. I had the school add chairs to the ones already present. I then posted separate signup sheets around the room for each of the subgroups that comprised our party planning team. The principal paid me a visit before it was time for the parents to start arriving. His one comment to me as he pointed to the room's setup was, "You won't need that many chairs." When the meeting began, the classroom was standing room only, with all the chairs occupied.

As the meeting started, the question I asked the parents was, “How many of you attended an all-night party at your school for your high school graduation?” Of the more than sixty people in the room, only three hands were raised, mine included. I was unaware until right then how rare such parties had been when I had been a high school student.

I told the parents that the reason parents hosted graduation parties for their children was to keep them safe. Far too many times in the past, there had been accidents, sometimes fatal, on graduation nights involving graduates who had gone out celebrating with their classmates and ended up in accidents while driving after drinking. That’s why parents began hosting these all-night alcohol-free parties on grad-nights. That’s the reason for parents to host the parties. However, students don’t love these parties because they will now feel safe. They pretty much already feel they are invincible.

I said that a senior class is made up of many different groups of students with many different interests. None of these many different groups is capable of drawing every other group together for a celebration that is meant to include every child in their class. Our children love these parties because we parents working together can do something that they could never do without us. They are an entire graduation class. However, their parents working together are the only people with the capability of creating a party for their class that includes every child. We parents are the only ones who can do this. The all-night party is our graduation gift to our children.

After explaining the reason for the party, I mentioned the reason for the \$201.00 price for attendance. This class was the Class of 2001. I said \$2,001.00 seemed like a bit too much to charge, so I eliminated one of the zeros. In past years, the cost of a ticket to the party was set so low that far too much time for the party volunteers had to be spent raising money to cover the cost of the event. I wanted every parent who volunteered to help with this party to actually be helping to create their child’s party. I also said that if anyone knew of any student’s family that could not afford the \$201, let me know quietly, and I would adjust the fee for that family. Not a single parent expressed concern about the new price to anyone on our planning committee.

At the end of my talk, I walked around the room pointing to each of the signup lists and stating which group that list represented. At the close of the meeting, I did not see any parent leave without signing up for something. On Saturday, September 30<sup>th</sup>, I made a list of the volunteers we had by that date. There were 291 Seniors in the Class of 2001. By that date, we already had a total of 113 parent-volunteers. The total

continued to grow over the coming months. That entire school year, we had only one committee leader who had to give up her assignment. At the time she told the rest of the committee heads of her departure, she brought her own replacement with her. Near the end of the school year, when it was time for the junior parents to meet with us, there was no longer any thought of conducting future grad-night parties anywhere other than at the school.

At the graduation ceremony in June, the senior class president announced the names of three parents the class had selected as having done the most for their class over their four years in high school. I was one of those three announced names. It seems they did know my last name after all. I gave the bouquet I received to the boy's mother. My reward was being able to attend Aaron and Kyle's all-night graduation party with them. We adults had to be there to run the party.

### **The Community of Parents**

In the first paragraph of the [Becoming a Parent](#) section, I asked, "What would my becoming a parent have to do with workaround number four?" My answer was: "Everything. My fellow parents and I are the reason this book exists."

All the many parents I worked with, from Aaron and Kyle's time in kindergarten all the way through their senior year in high school, were there for the same purpose that I was. We were all there to look out for the needs of our children. That was our job. That was our calling. I may have been better at the looking-out part than some parents because I could bring my teaching experience into the mix, and because I was used to getting my own way. However, my being better at some aspects did not mean I cared more than any of the parents with whom I worked.

A boy a year older than Aaron and Kyle, became their classmate when he was held back in second grade. I knew his family well. He was one of Aaron and Kyle's neighbors. His parents were no more pleased that he had been held back than I would have been if it had happened to either Aaron or Kyle, but they were not able to stop it. That same boy also failed to graduate with his and my godsons' senior class. What I could do for him, at least in that situation, was tell him that the Grad-Night Party was for their whole class, and not just for the graduates. He was welcome to attend, and so was anyone else from his senior class that he might know who was not graduating. He had a great time at the party.

Being a parent introduced me to countless other parents who cared as much for their children as I cared for Aaron and Kyle. Despite how much I knew we all had in common in caring for our children, it had not yet occurred to me that these same parents might be interested in my

thoughts on better ways to teach our children. The experience I gained by being a parent, combined with what I had experienced as a teacher, is what caused me to think of workaround number four – parent power.