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June 1, 2012

Dear Patients,

Sabbatical: This comes from the word Sabbath the root of which comes from the word REST (lit. 'cease')!

Some of you have heard me talking about my little sabbatical this June. I will be taking one week off. I'll then be back a week. Then, I'll be gone for three weeks. A few of you have asked, "Are you coming back?" The answer is absolutely. Our church sent our pastor and his family on a three month sabbatical last summer. He came back refreshed, renewed and excited about the vision for our church. I told him that truth be told, I'm more jealous than excited for you. So, I have decided to take a mini-sabbatical. Some have said, "That is not a sabbatical. That's a vacation." Whatever you want to call it, I'm going to cease and be away from the office for 4 weeks with my family. I'll be a camp doctor for a week. We will travel through the Southeast for two weeks to see friends, look at colleges for my daughter, and celebrate our 20th anniversary. I'll spend the last week at Boy Scout camp in West Texas. I trust that these 4 weeks will help me to be a better husband, father and physician. My partner and friend, Dr. Josh Tardy, will be covering for me in my absence. And, my nurses and staff will be there, so the office will function as normal while I'm gone.

The Big Picture: Since I've got your attention, I thought I would take the rest of this letter to outline an 18 year plan I have for your children. The last few weeks have been fun and nostalgic as I have had several mornings where I have seen an 18 year old senior for his/her college physical and then gone to see a 3 day old first born infant. Now perhaps I'm more nostalgic as I now have a 16 year old and I'm thinking of the college thing myself, but as I've gone through those mornings I realized that this is the spectrum of my practice. Y'all know that I have this alphabet thing that has evolved from the 2Ls over the years and you know I'm going to ask your child what their two new foods are this year. However, I thought it might be helpful to know the big picture that I have in my head as I process seeing your child from birth to 18 years old (I know I do still have the privilege of seeing some of your college students from time to time too.).

Newborn: Change!!! It all starts with a dark thirty interruption into your hospital room (for those not born at Methodist, you miss out on the privilege of this 6AM [or earlier] wake-up call) as I meet your little one for the first time. I tell you that my goals for the next couple of days are to hold and love on that baby and work on feeding. As you leave the hospital, I tell you it may be a rough few nights as your baby adjusts to a new environment and learns how to eat. Hang in there, this is normal and there is light at the end of the tunnel. At the same time, we all know that your life has just radically changed. You are in for an adventure, the toughest but most rewarding of your life.

2 weeks: Sleep & Don't forget each other!!! I tell you there are 4 people I need to take care of today. When I see your baby is back to birth weight, I tell you before I even examine the baby that I'm happy with him or her. Next I tell you we need to take care of mommy and figure out how to get her a 3 to 4 hour stretch of sleep (that's where I bring in you dads). Then, I say I need to take care of dad. I'm glad dads want to be involved, but at 2 AM it needs to be divide and conquer. Then, I tell you I need to take care of both of you (that's the 4th person—mom and dad together). I challenge you to at least once a month put a date on the calendar and get out of the house without kids (even if there are 2 or 3 or 4 or more). If you don't schedule this, it just doesn't happen.

2 months: Enjoy!!! I bet this has been the longest and shortest 2 months of your life. Take mental notes and remember to enjoy your baby. Give yourself permission to not be a perfect parent. Our poor first child. We are trying to do everything perfect. If we are beating ourselves up for a bad yesterday, we are not going to have a



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good today. I know it's hard if you have a real colicky baby, but just hold and love that baby a lot. You can't spoil them the first few months. Remember it will pass. Take lots of pictures.

4 months: Sleep!!! Now I know that some babies are just good sleepers and some are not, but this is the time to start pushing (whether through solid foods or letting them cry) them to sleep longer stretches. We are learning so much about sleep and I'm going to keep talking about it from the 2 week visit (for mom and dad) to the 18 year old visit. Sleep, or the lack thereof, can create a lot of stress in children, families and marriages. It is much easier to address sleep when your infant is 4 months than 12 months or 18 months or 2 years or 5 years. We'll keep talking about this issue.

6 months: Discipline!!! This word really just means training and it begins between 4 and 6 months. This is where children learn that if I cry and I get what I want, I learn to work the system. Now don't get me wrong, your infant still needs to be held and loved on a lot. However, this is where they can learn to wait for a few minutes (even if they are fussing) while you finish up something in the next room. Infants learn to squeal because they like to make the noise. If you like the noise, pay a lot of attention. If you don't, turn your head before you laugh or cry.

9 months: Transition!!! This is where I tell you we are transitioning in food. We are going from your infant getting most of his/her nutrition from breast milk or formula to getting most of his/her nutrition from solid food by one year of age. You have spent the first few months doing everything for your child who is completely dependent on you. Now you will begin a 17 year process of teaching your child to be an independent, thoughtful, and responsible young adult. That's quite a task. But, remember we do this one day, one month, and one year at a time.

12 months: Food!!! Forget about food until your baby is 3 years. Don't really forget about it. I just mean don't stress about it. Just put it in front of them. Hunger is a good motivator; if they are hungry they will eat. It is the rare child who will wake up in the middle of the night because they are hungry. They wake up and eat a good breakfast. Toddlers will like a food one day and hate it the next. Variety is something from each food category every 3 or 4 days. Put veggies on their plate. If they never see it, they'll never pick it up. If you see my father, remind him that it is not too late to learn to eat veggies!!

15 months: More Discipline!!! It's so hard. The majority of toddlers do behaviors to get our attention. So, if you like the behavior, praise it. If you don't like the behavior, ignore it. By 18 months, children begin to understand cause and effect, so you can begin to implement consequences for those behaviors you really want to address. Discipline is such a balance. If we are too harsh, we crush their spirits. If we are too lenient, they rebel against that as well. I know this sounds crazy, but kids crave discipline. But don't expect consequences to work at this age, you are just introducing a concept. Reasoning doesn't come for most until about 2 ½ to 3 years. Stay calm (that is so hard for me)!! Remember you can't reason with a terrorist. Read, sing songs, wrestle, play outside, and say your prayers with that terrorist. It is a phase. I'm looking at a beautiful 16 year old as I type (with tears in my eyes I might add).

18 months: Enjoy that terrorist!!! I'm going to make you cry by encouraging you to read Let Me Hold You Longer by Karen Kingsbury (thanks cousin Chuck and Jennifer for making me boo hoo reading this book). It's a book about "lasts". Here's the hint, it ends with the little boy going off to college. What's the point? Remember these are phases. Yes, hard phases, but they will pass. Take time to enjoy and hold your child as it may be the last tantrum, or 2AM wake, or day with a paci, or skinned knee, or dirty diaper. Did I happen to mention that it's so hard? Trust me, take a step back, slow down, and spend time with your toddler. It's not quality time, it's quantity time. Google: "Race to No Where" and watch the YouTube clips. We are all going so fast and furious (I



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know I'm the pot calling the kettle black here and this is part of the reason for my sabbatical). If you don't slow the pace down now, you will have a freight train going downhill in a couple of years.

2 years: Toilet Training & Family Meals!!! Take your time. Don't ignore interest but don't push it either. Three of my four have been 3 or older. My 13 year old claimed he would be a "Daddy in Diapers"—he's not!! I don't know if this is wisdom or laziness or perhaps both, but it's easier to have a 2 to 3 year old in a diaper in a long car trip or airplane. Don't forget date night. Not only do couples need this, but your child needs to see you out with your spouse. Will your child always be happy when you go out? No!! But, it's good for them to see mom and dad leave, spend time together, and come back. This is also a great time to begin (if you haven't done so) family meals. Get in the habit of this at a young age. Studies show that family meals are associated with lower teenage pregnancy rates, higher grade point averages, fewer eating disorders, and lower risk of depression.

3 years: Food Again!!! What a funny age. Half are better and coming through the terrible two's, half are just entering. Yay, no shots at this well visit!!! You can begin to reason with your 3 year old. Not a lot, but a little. This tends to make consequences more effective and you can now remember FOOD again. This begins the 2 bite rule. If your toddler can take two bites of lots of foods and add 2 new foods a year, its 10-12 new foods before nutrition becomes more important on a meal by meal basis and its 30 new foods by the time he or she graduates.

Now I start my alphabet soup talks:

4 & 5 years: 2Ls!!! I start asking your toddler my questions at 4 (now I look at you through the corner of my eye to see your response to their answers). I want them to get used to answering questions about their health and well-being. It all started with the letter L: Listening and Loving. I encourage them to listen, honor and respect parents and all authority. If they don't, I tell them I think its right to get a consequence. I give them permission to not be perfect and encourage them to learn from their mistakes. I encourage them to love their family. I tell them I want them to use kind words, not hit/bite/push/yell/tattle/etc., be patient, and be quick to say you are sorry. If they have a sibling, I tell them it's normal to argue with siblings, but I want them to learn the above (prior sentence). If you have more than one child, when the youngest is 3 or 4, I'm going to encourage you to let them work/slug it out a little. If we are always so quick to go in and fix their conflict (I want to do this so bad as I love peace), they are never going to learn how to resolve conflict on their own. Often you parents are deciding about schools at this age. I love the question of what form of education do you favor. My answer is one year (at the same time) we had one in private, one in public and one at home. We often worry about the big bad world that we are throwing our kids into. It's right to think through these issues. But, let me give you a humbling question, "Who is going to protect your kids from you?" I know this sounds harsh. But, we parents truly are the toughest obstacle our kids will have to face. See advice below....

6 & 7 years: Say you are Sorry!!! Now your child gets the 2 Hs. It's Hard to listen and love all the time. When things are hard we practice. So, I tell them I want you to practice listening and loving in their home. That's the second H: Home. If you can listen and love well at home, I think you'll listen and love well outside the home too (so many things start at home like table manners, etc.). I know earlier I said stay calm. That's so hard (H is a letter for us parents too). Remember, at 2 months I gave you permission to not be perfect. When, you mess up and lose your cool, say you're sorry (just like I tell your child to do) and ask your child's forgiveness. I have said many times, "I hope my kids don't remember how many times I blew it as a parent. I do hope they remember that I was quick to say I'm sorry and tell them I love them." I will ask your child what kind of activities they are involved in. I really am interested to see what they are doing, but I also want to make sure they aren't doing too much. No activity I've heard of is bad, but too many can begin a recipe for disaster. This is the age you have to



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rein it in. If we don't learn to say "NO" in Kindergarten, our kids will never learn to say "NO" either. We need some brakes or that freight engine that we talked about at 18 months is picking up some pretty significant speed.

8 & 9 years: Some things are worth waiting for!!! I have a new letter for this age group, T. I talk about telling the Truth so that you will be Trustworthy (first point of the scout law—I have 2 Boy Scouts in my house now). I tell your child to get in the habit of telling the truth. If you lie and get away with it, it's easier to lie the next time. We talk about 4 things important for growing (and then maintaining when we stop growing): eat healthy, drink our milk (3 glasses a day or 1200 mg of calcium), weight-bearing exercise (4 or 5 days a week for 20 or 30 minutes), and sleep (10-12 hours right now, 9-10 as teenagers). We may also talk about money (whether from allowance or birthdays or holidays, etc.). You can do three things with money: spend it, give it away, or save it. We talk about learning to do all three. When I talk about saving, I say, "In life there are lots of things that are good, but some things are worth waiting for." We come back to that when they are adolescents...

10 & 11 years: Preparing for Adolescence. Are you ready for this??? The new letter is R: Rest and Responsibility. I've been talking to you since 2 weeks old about how sleep is so important. We grow when we sleep, our body heals itself when we sleep, and our muscles grow when we sleep. We know from High School studies that when teenagers get 30 more minutes of sleep four things happen: grades go up, headaches go down, anxiety goes down and depression goes down. I tell your tween that every year everyone is going to expect more of them. So, they need to learn to do the things they know they need to do before they are asked. Sometimes I answer my own children, "I'm not going to answer that. You can figure out the answer. Think about it and go do what you need to do." If we keep rescuing our children, they will never learn responsibility. Obviously there is a balance here, but when my teenager forgot his textbooks last week, we didn't run up to school to give them to him. It's time to talk to your child about SEX. Really conversations may have started as young as 3 or 4 or 5, but it's time for "THE TALK". I know this is hard and "awkward" as my kids would say. Really it's not "the" talk but the first of many. It's time to get the conversation going. Your kids will hear about sex somewhere. You need to be the first to talk to them so they will see you as the expert and keep coming back to you. I'll give you a resource list and you are welcome to my outline that we have used 3 times when we spent time with each of our older 3 when they were 10. As my OB/GYN friend will tell you, it's time to start standing in front of the mirror and saying, "penis and vagina" until you can say it without being red in the face. Is anyone blushing yet??

Middle School: Age of Opportunity!!! How many of us dread these approaching years? I love the book Age of Opportunity by Paul Tripp (distinctly a faith based book). How can we make these years a time of opportunity and growth instead of years of dread. I also encourage you to read Madeline Levine's Price of Privilege. I think this book pegs our culture. Parenting is a wonderful and challenging balance. If we spend all of our time and energy on our kids, they will become spoiled and feel entitled. Our kids need to see us involved in our community, but if we spend all of our time at work, in social events, in charity, or even at church, our kids will rebel and seek attention from other sources. Finally, fathers with daughters, I encourage you to read Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters by Meg Meeker. It's a must read!! It will open your eyes and challenge you. I talk to your child about 2 things that relate to their relationship with their parents. I give them permission to disagree, but the catch is they are to be respectful and remember mom and dad are the boss. I also encourage them to communicate with mom and dad, the good and the bad. They will need these two things, communication and respecting differences of opinions for the rest of their lives. They get three new letters: T, C, & S. I tell them that people will ask them to do things they know they aren't supposed to do for the rest of their lives. So, I encourage them to Think ahead. Anticipate what can happen before they are in a situation. Choose your friends wisely. An ancient Greek play said, "Bad company corrupts good morals". There is the concept of guilt by association. Finally, I describe the Solomon principle which means seek wisdom. We make decisions all day long. Though we can get wisdom from



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many sources, I suggest that your child will get the most wisdom from those parents that God gave them. I begin to spend some alone time with your teenagers. I challenge boys to guard their eyes. We talk about the prevalence and addictive nature of pornography. Ladies, you don't have to understand it, but boys are visually stimulated (video games rarely ends up on girl's activity lists that I start asking about at 4 years old). Therefore, I challenge your daughters to dress modestly.

High School: Passing the baton!!! My dad wrote a chapter in a baby book, **The Complete Book of Child Care**, called passing the baton. He wrote this chapter as he was passing the baton on to me. Now, I'm passing that baton on to my teenagers and you will be soon. At the two week visit, I looked at you most of the visit. Now you are in the waiting room for most of the visit as I visit with your teenager. Just like I'm "kicking you" out of the room, I know this is a time when it seems like your teenager doesn't want or need you around. Trust me, this is when your teenager needs you to be around the most. You have to be ready as you never know when all of the sudden they want to have a real heart to heart. It's often inconvenient, but take the time to listen. Dads, just like our wives, your teenager may not be asking you to fix things, they may just want you to listen. This is so hard for me. First, I love my schedule and getting my check list done. Second, I love to fix (see below). So, know that I'm working on this one with you. Your teenager now gets their last 3 letters: S, C, & P. I challenge them to become Self-aware. It's important to understand your strengths and weaknesses. We are all changing over time. It's important to remember who we were and who we are now. How did we get to where we are? How did our strengths and weaknesses contribute to who we are? I challenge him / her to be Content in their skin. Here is a thought provoking quote, "What you think about me is your business. What I worry that you think about me will kill me." Finally, I encourage them to Pray. Parents are constantly praying for the protection of their children. So, I challenge the teenager to pray for their protection just as their parents are. Next, I discuss your teenager's sexual health. Some may say why do you wait until 13 or 14 to talk to them about this when you told us parents to start talking at 9 or 10? That's because I want you to be the primary educator. I'm here to come along side of you. I'm going to tell your teen that I think it's the best health decision to wait until you are in a long term relationship, like marriage, to become sexually active. Why is waiting the best health decision? First, of course there is pregnancy. Second, I don't want them to get a sexually transmitted disease. National statistics say that 1 in 4 teens has an STD today. And, 80% of guys and 60% of girls don't know they have them. Condoms reduce risk (if used 100% and correctly) for HIV by 90%. For all other STDs condoms reduce risk by 50% or less. Lastly, we talk about the emotional aspect. We now know that oxytocin is released when two partners engage in any sexual activity. Oh note, this same hormone is released during pregnancy and nursing and bonds a mom and her child together. Psychologists are learning that the greater the number of sexual partners the greater the risk of an attachment disorder (difficulty developing emotional intimacy). What I want patients to know is the decisions they make now, can have long term effects (physically and emotionally) when they are older. I never want a patient to come back and say, "Why didn't you tell me these things?" Finally, I continue to encourage your teen to communicate and be respectful. At their 18 year well visit I encourage them to call their mom often while away at college and to talk about rules and curfews before they come home for the first time from college. So, my baton is passed to your teen.....

Summary: The business of medicine has changed over the years. That is what I'm looking forward to taking a sabbatical from. My favorite part of the day is when I come into the room and close the door with you and your children. I really do hate the fact that sometimes you wait twenty or thirty or even forty minutes to see me. Please know that you are waiting because I'm having one of the above conversations with someone before your visit. But, I truly hope you sense that when I come into your room, it's all about you and your child. My nurses laugh (or sometimes lament) that I don't have a catch up mode. You can see I have a vision of what 18 years of well visits will look like. Yet, I desire this to be our vision. Most of us know and enjoyed the cartoon, Bob the



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Builder and the popular refrain, “Can we fix it?....Yes we Can!” Well, really, Bob is wrong. We can’t “fix” everything, including our children. I’ve been trying unsuccessfully in my house for years. It’s actually freeing when we grasp this truth. So, though we can’t “fix” our children, we can love them, model for them, instruct them, correct them, spend time with them, pray for them, and point them to a healthier and better life. I know it doesn’t seem this way in the teen years, but study after study (even Teen magazine) continue to report that the number one influencing factor on our kids is.....**YOU**. We as parents telling our kids what we expect them to do and expect them not to do is critical and influential. I’m here to come along side you in this process. It’s my privilege and great joy to partner with you parents in this 18 year journey. I can’t wait for my 4 weeks away. Yet, I look forward to being back with you in July.

Gratefully Your Pediatrician,

John T. Fitch, Jr.